

Realistic Living

A Journal on Religion and Ethics

Contents of this Issue

July 2020

Issue 73

THE THINKING CHRISTIAN
a landmark publication by Gene Marshall

FAIRY TALES
stories that reflect our lives by Joyce Marshall

THE UNCANNINESS OF PROPHECY
in a time of slaughter by Alan Richard

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE
reviews by Joyce Marshall

RECOMMENDED READING
reviews by Joyce Marshall & Alan Richard

THE REALISTIC LIVING
statements of purpose
highlights of 2020
finances and board of directors

So Why Would You Want this Book?

Religion, not just your religion or mine, is an important part of human culture, more important that is commonly observed. This importance is not simply moral or doctrinal but more elemental to our humanness as a whole. This book takes on the topic of a viable and vital next Christianity in the context of this need worldwide for good religion.

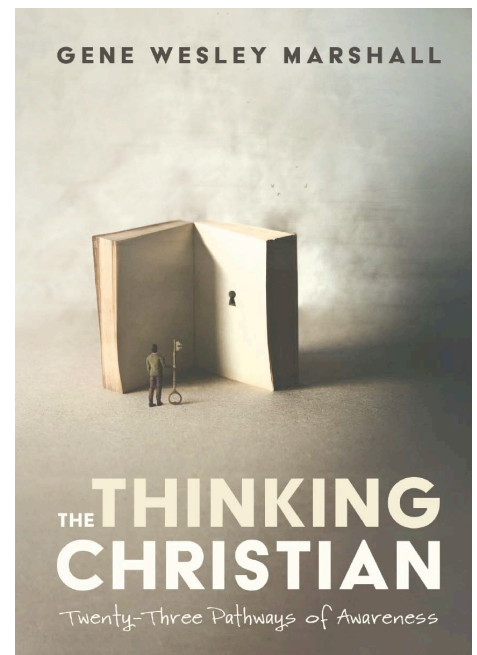
Part One of this book focuses on “What is religion?” and “Why does human existence necessitate the social appearance of religious formations?”

Part Two is about the basic proclamation of the Christian good news and the means of accessing the Christian scriptures.

Part Three includes ethical guidelines for our love of justice in the wide world, the Christian mission of witness and justice, and communal practices for our life together.

Following is the table of contents. The chapter titles give a sense of the deep content being covered.

A paragraph of commentary is then provided about the intent of each of the three parts of the book:



The Thinking Christian

a landmark publication
by Gene Marshall

On April 15, 2020 Wipf and Stock Publishers released *The Thinking Christian*, a book by Gene Marshall—three years in the making, it is a broad pull together of key edges worked on by the staff and constituencies of Realistic Living for the last 36 years. This book is not an anthology of old work; it is a fresh statement on these edge topics.

This volume began to take form when in December 2017 Gene started work on eight one-hour talks that were given at the Realistic Living Training School in June 2018. At the conclusion of that School and after the upload of the videos of those talks to the Realistic Living web site, work was begun on this more expanded book.

THE THINKING CHRISTIAN

Table of Contents

Part One: Profound Consciousness

1. Out of Your Mind—What is Mind?
2. Seven Swirls of Consciousness—What is Consciousness?
3. Creating Your Four Minds of Truth—What is Truth?
4. The Paradoxes of Being Awake—What is Profound Consciousness?
5. The Roots of Religious Practice—What is Religion?

Part Two: Christian Theologizing

6. The Death of Heavenly God-Talk
7. A Contentless Monotheism of Devotion
8. The Great Goddess and other Poetry
9. The Meaning of Revelation
10. Re-reading the Old Testament
11. A Doorway called Despair
12. Who Created Christianity?
13. An Inter-religious Trinity

Part Three: Christian Practices

14. The Friendliness of Trees
15. His-story, Her-story, and a New Story
16. Post-Civilization Christianity
17. The Dead End of Christendom
18. Witnessing Love and the Echo of Eternity
19. The Mind of Commonality and the Love of Justice
20. The Bioregional Parish of Responsibility
21. The Mind of Intimacy and the Co-Pastors Circle
22. Building a Network of Co-Pastors Circles
23. A New Public Face for Christianity

Part One: Profound Consciousness

This five-chapter philosophy of religion probes the roots of religion in human societies. This fresh definition of religion includes how good religion can be distinguished from its perversions. Part One is not an examination of world religions, but a secular effort to undergird the validity of the interreligious dialogue that has become so important in our time. Part One also lays foundations for the rest of the book, which focuses on a viable and vital next form of Christianity.

Part Two: Christian Theologizing

This is a fresh statement of the type of radical theologizing that has characterized Realistic Living for its entire 36-year history. The chapters of Part 2 • Realistic Living

Two pay special attention to thinking beyond the death of the heavenly realm metaphor and toward relevant religious thinking in this interreligious or secular era. Part Two also pays attention to how the Christian Scriptures, crafted in a very different cultural climate, can be translated into the metaphors of depth humanness that readily speak to our times.

Part Three: Christian Practices

This is an effort to fashion fresh Christian religious practices, ethical guidelines, and communal forms for a 21st Century Christianity and beyond. Part Three includes specific suggestions for a spirit movement in prophetic Christianity. These chapters imply shifts in religious practices that might be made now within the current establishments of Christian life together. Also, quite new social forms for the Christian religion are proposed for current exploration and future establishments. These chapters assume that we are facing a radical shift in the practice of the Christian religion.

This 400-page volume retails for \$39 plus postage. Gene has purchased with his author's discount 100 copies that enable him to send you a copy for \$28, postage included within the United States. Simply send a check to Gene Marshall at 3578 N. State Highway 78; Bonham, TX 75418. If living realistically is your calling, you need this book.

If you are living outside the United States, you can minimize your shipping costs by using one of these Wipf and Stock partnerships: James Clark & Co., Mosaic Books in Australia, Ingram, and Amazon.com.

Wipf and Stock has placed on Amazon.com the opening chapters of this book. Simply go to Amazon.com, then books, and then search for:

The Thinking Christian by Gene W. Marshall.

And here is the opening section of chapter 4.

Mary Jane Rubenstein has become my favorite philosopher on what I am calling "profound consciousness" or "being awake." Here is a quote from her book *Strange Wonder* with its wonderful

July 2020

THE THINKING CHRISTIAN

subtitle: *The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe.*

The double movement of wonder takes us out of the world, *only to put us back into the world*, dismantling old possibilities to uncover new ones, exposing as “wind-eggs” all we think we know in order to reveal everything as different—as more itself—than it had been before. Genuine relation and decision, then, do not depend upon closing off wonder into a momentary “spark,” but upon keeping it open. (Rubinstein, *StrangeWonder*. 60)

This “momentary spark” view of wonder Rubinstein referred to earlier in her book with this comment about Aristotle:

It is Aristotle who first proposed a remedy for wonder in the knowledge of cause and effect. He explained that while philosophy begins in *thaumaxein* [wonder] ‘it must in a sense end in something which is the opposite’ . . . Aristotle values wonder because it prompts the learner to find the causes of that which confounds him. (*StrangeWonder*. 32)

This view of the place of wonder persists in the scientific philosophizing of 2019. Wonder does inspire thoughtfulness to replace the wonder with rational order—cause and effect, probability patterns, and other means of giving human understanding to what was previously baffling.

But the deeper insights of Rubinstein and, she claims, of Socrates is that wonder can stay open. She further explains that wonder is both what is stunningly attractive and dreadfully repelling. This is why humans are motivated, in the first instance, to replace wonder with order.

Nevertheless, the whole order of any culture of humans might be pictured as a small boat on a vast ocean of wonder. Let us say that when we are born, we are living at the stern of this cultural boat with little sense that there is something more. As we walk toward full adulthood, we come to the prow of this boat moving into the wonder of a mystery that never goes away. We can then retreat into the body of the boat and forget that dreadful sight, or we can work with the possibility of making friends with

this permanent wonder—this opening of a wonder or awe before an Awesomeness that is our one and only Reality. This brings me to my fourth poem—this one about the fourth of Joe Mathews’ states-of-being charts: *The Sea of Tranquility*.

In the Land of Mystery
there is a Sea of Tranquility,
a place of Rest amidst the wild waters of life.
The waves may be high, our small boat tossed about,
but there we are with a courageous heart.
It is our heart that is courageous.
We are born with this heart.
We do not achieve it.
We can simply rest within our own living heart,
our own courageous heart that opens vulnerably
to every person and all aspects of that person,
to our own self and every aspect of that self,
to life as a whole with all its terrors and joys.
This is a strange Rest, for no storm can end it,
no challenge of life defeat it,
No loss, no death, no horror of being, no fear
can touch our courageous heart.
We live, if we allow ourselves to truly live
on this wild Sea of Everything in the Tranquility
of our own indestructible courageous heart.
To manifest and fully experience this Tranquility,
we only have to give up the creations of our mind
that we have substituted for this ever-present Peace.
We have only to open to the Land of Mystery
flowing with a River of Consciousness
and containing a Mountain of Care.
Here and here alone do we find
the Sea of Tranquility.
Here in the Land of Mystery that our mind
cannot comprehend, create, or control,
here beyond our deepest depth or control
is a Sea of Tranquility
in the Land of Mystery.

The courage to be what we actually are opens to us a deep rest or tranquility, because we have ended striving to be what we are not. This does not mean that we have ended the various ways we work to improve our knowledge, hone our skills, preserve our health, create our places, achieve our goals, and so on. But we have come to realize that none of these temporal achievements handle being our essential humanness. Our true authenticity or *presence* as a

human being does not open by simply changing our temporal qualities. This profound *tranquility* comes into play from a deeper level. Tranquility is a gift that comes with our courage to be the exact being we are being gifted to be by Being-itself.

Nevertheless, tranquility is not a flight from the putting-forth of our own life; rather, it is the strongest putting-forth quality known to human experience. We must embrace tranquility with the full might of our consciousness. Even though tranquility is not an achievement but a surrender to the gift of realism, tranquility is an intentional departure from the strong draw of living within our patterns of estrangement.

Fairy Tales
stories that reflect our lives
 by Joyce Marshall

In the early 1990s I read a book called *Losing a Parent*, by Alexandra Kennedy. I had recently lost my mother. Kennedy suggested an exercise to access the deeper levels of grief. You make five piles of small cards (about 12 in each pile) and draw one from each. One pile is objects (i.e., a pea, a sword, a mirror), one is places (the village, the forest, the sea), one is people (boy, girl, queen), one is animals (owl, wolf, cat) and one is magical beings (ghoul, dragon, unicorn). You write a story using all five elements. At that time the exercise helped me to discover some of the feelings and issues connected with my mother. Later I used the exercise in creativity workshops I led. Then I took a notion that I wanted to write a fairy tale every day. Each morning I drew a card from each stack and whipped off a story. I seemed to have tapped into an endless stream. The stories were an outlet that I needed. The stories seemed to write themselves. I drew the cards, began with "Once upon a time" and just looked to see what happened, listened to hear what was said. They were always a total surprise to me, not in my control in terms of figuring out what I wanted to say or what I wanted to happen. I wrote about 40 or so. In 1994 I published a collection from that group. (See below) In my recent rereading of my personal

journals I ran across a few additional stories that I wrote. The following one seems to speak to today.

THE OLD WOMAN AND THE EAGLE

Once upon a time there was an Old Woman. She lived alone on the mountain top where she could see far and wide. Well, not totally alone. The Eagle shared her mountain top. And sometimes the Wizard w o u l d mysteriously show up and have conversations with the Old Woman.



Drawing by Alan Richard

This woman was wise. She had lived through much—many experiences and much suffering. So she no longer fooled herself about life. She was detached from fantasies and present to the moment. She observed the life she saw in the valleys on all sides—the sad, sad state of the world: wars, violence, greed, hunger, grasping, and very little awareness. She wondered What, What, What could be done? How, How, How could ever things be made good and wholesome again? Was there Any, Any, Any possibility, any hope? Or was all lost? Must it be given up? The woman was old. Her physical strength was waning. What could she do?

One day she saw the Wizard climbing the path to her mountain hut. He carried with him a leather pouch—a small pouch of herbs which he handed her upon greeting. She hung it round her neck and grasped it in her hand. Ah! It seemed to rejuvenate her, increase her strength and energies.

"I've been so discouraged," she said.

"Yes, so I see," said he.

"What do you think? Is all lost with the Earth?"

"No, no," said the Wizard. "Your sensitivity to evil is a strain on your body. You pick up evil

vibrations quite strongly. There are awakenings going on. But even awakenings bring upheaval. People resist knowing what they know. They resist their freedom, their compassion. It is a very difficult time."

"Yes, yes," she said. "I see the struggle and I pray. The Eagle tells me of happenings I cannot see. It is so difficult to keep hope alive."

And just then the Eagle flew down from the wide sky and landed atop her little hut. The Old Woman and the Wizard looked at the Eagle, who turned its head and looked at them—first one, then the other, then flew to its nest on the crest.

"Well, he's back," she said. "Let's have some food."

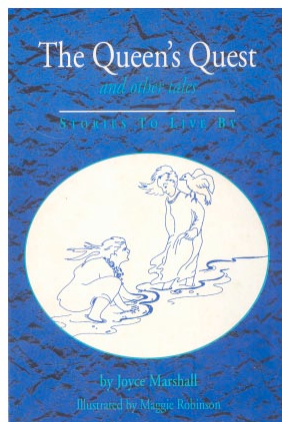
"That's a good idea," said the Wizard.

They ate and talked long and then they sat under the bright stars awaiting the moon, and in the silence, hope began again to arise in their hearts, and their own compassion flowed for their fellow humans.

It was many years after they died, but one day there was again a great awakening. And peace and love and justice flowed again on Earth. And joy and singing and dancing filled the land. It was so. It was so. It was truly so.

* * * * *

The Queen's Quest and Other Tales: Stories to Live By is a collection of 28 adult fairy tales by Joyce Marshall with illustrations by Maggie Robinson. **Reader Comments:** "Our support group listened to the first three stories one at a time and had an incredible discussion after each story." "This book has cheered me up immensely." "Brilliant and intuitive." You can order a copy from Joyce Marshall for \$10—sent to her at: 3578 N. State Highway 78, Bonham, TX 75418.



The Uncanniness of Prophecy

in a Time of Slaughter
by Alan Richard

On April 5th 2020, when the U.S. death toll from the novel coronavirus first discovered in China's Wuhan province stood at 8503, the nine of us began studying prophecy. We began studying how to relinquish and how to receive.

The Bonham co-pastor's circle had decided to read together Walter Brueggemann's *Hopeful Imagination*, a theological exegesis of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, in early January. This was before the first case of the novel coronavirus was identified in the United States. I had begun preparing a study guide in March, when the number of cases outside China surpassed the number within it, and cities began to shut down. We concluded our study on June 14th, five days after the murdered George Floyd's funeral in Houston. It was also the same day as the march for Black lives here in Bonham—the first march for racial justice in the town's history—organized by Bethlehem Baptist Church, the oldest Black Baptist church in our county, in Floyd's name. The U.S. death toll from the novel coronavirus on that day stood at 115,436.

There were moments during our three-month excursion with Brueggemann that bordered on what Freud called the "uncanny." "The uncanny" is present when processes we don't ordinary imagine as being alive or purposive appear to behave as though they were. Coincidental noises like thunder or falling tree branches during a prayer or a recitation can evoke a sense of the uncanny, as does the famous scene in the film *American Beauty* when a plastic bag appears to dance in the wind. The uncanny moments in our study tended to take the form of reading lines in Brueggemann's text that, though written decades ago, suited the present catastrophic moment to a "t." Scientists argue that this sense of the uncanny is a natural byproduct of

PROPHECY

our brain's tendency to attribute agency to ambiguous movement or change in the environment, a tendency that once helped us sense and evade predators. Experiencing the uncanny, however, isn't a matter of believing untrue things, or things that might not be true. The experience of the uncanny doesn't make me *believe* in hidden divine purposes behind events or its New Age counterpart, synchronicity. However, this experience does evoke the feeling, *beyond* belief, of the life our ancestors sensed when they heard trees talking to each other, that the fleeing Hebrews sensed in a cloud that seemed to lead them, or that Jesus must have sensed when he heard the words of ancient Scriptures speaking directly to *him* about what *he* must do in *his* time.

Our sense of the uncanny during the Brueggemann study was fueled by quite concrete coincidences. For example, while President Trump was denying the reality of the pandemic in multiple ways in hopes of restarting the economy, as if the economy could run independently of life, and when his devotees were speaking of a Democrat hoax, we were reading this together from Brueggemann's chapters on Jeremiah:

He watched his world dying and he felt pain. What pained him even more was the failure of his contemporaries to notice, to care, to acknowledge, or to admit. He could not determine whether they were too stupid to understand, or whether they were so dishonest that they understood but engaged in an enormous cover-up. He could not determine whether it was a grand public deception or a pitiful self-deception. But he watched. The dying seemed so clear, so inexorable. Yet they denied (p. 32).

Another example: while mega-churches were congregating without masks to demonstrate that going to church in person and supporting the president is so important that God will protect churchgoers, we were reading Brueggemann declare that "hope based in temple and dynasty reduces God to patron rather than sovereign (p. 81). We could "hear" Brueggemann warning about *using* God rather than *trusting* God at the very hour that

American nationalist churches were filling up with pseudo-patriotic displays of exuberant piety. Less than a month later, Brueggemann's words still ringing in our ears, we saw Donald Trump and his armed escort walk through the smoky waste wrought by his use of tear gas on peaceful protesters to a historic church and hold a Bible aloft, with this gesture proclaiming God as his patron in victory over his enemies.



Marc Chagall's The Prophet Jeremiah

Of course, the level of uncanniness we experienced varied from week to week during our study. But each week, we could feel that same cross-temporal reverberation between the text and the events around us. The parallels between text and present moment were partly, of course, coincidental. Coincidence wasn't the full explanation, however. At least two other things were happening that evoked the uncanny. They are both relevant to what prophecy is and why prophecy evokes the sense of the uncanny even though it isn't about predicting the future.

First, some periods and places in history really *are* periods and places of profound change. Multiple interdependent systems collapse all at once. Sometimes, new possibilities also become highly visible during these periods, though not always.

PROPHECY

Usually, however, collapse gives way to a time of suspended expectation, when we grieve what is gone without guarantees or any thought of resurrection. Life continues, but affective investment is withdrawn from it. Daily activities continue, but in an absurd and meaningless fashion.

It is at least possible that we are entering ever more deeply into one of those times of collapse and collective grief. For decades, we have been aware that a unique mix of ecological, economic, social, and political crises confronts us. Our civilization has barely responded to any of them and only discusses them in an uneven and halting way. Anyone with more confidence in their own eyes and ears and in the eyes, ears, and methods of scientific discovery than in the assumption that what was true yesterday will always be true tomorrow, or in the unsupported aloofness of their scoffing neighbors, senses that our way of life is collapsing. A prophet in the spring of 2020 who proclaims this collapse adds no content to what climatologists, economists, and social and political scientists have already told us about climate change, global conflict over resources, violent nationalist religious and racist extremism, and the resurgence of authoritarianism. A prophet adds a call to grief and renewal, holiness and hope, and memory and possibility, but no new facts. The facts themselves show us that we are living through a profound systemic crisis with multiple fronts. Not all historical periods are equally disruptive, equally chaotic, nor is any historical period equally so for everyone. The year 587 was a period of profound disruption for the tiny hill-kingdom of Judah, which ceased to exist as a kingdom but not as a people or a faith. The year 2020 is a period of disruption for many spiritual “exiles” in the United States, who are becoming aware of how intimately their own habitual identifications are being questioned, who are feeling parts of themselves they didn’t know belonged to their culture collapse along with aspects of their culture they have prayed would disappear.

Second, Brueggemann suspected that the sagging and the cracking he identified in the Reagan era’s cheery, confident façade were surface manifestations of founding self-deceptions at work undoing the Western Enlightenment’s entire cultural

system. If he was right, and if Americans have continued to neglect these underlying self-deceptions, then what we are seeing now aren’t coincidental parallels but developments of and variations on this sagging and cracking, which has deepened and broadened since *Hopeful Imagination* was published in 1986. In other words, Brueggemann can seem to be speaking to people living decades after he was writing because we now have entered a more advanced stage of the condition he observed then. In this book, Brueggemann argues repeatedly for reading the prophets as poets, and for regarding the poetic work of the imagination not as a flight from what is happening but as rigorous attention and engaged response to it. Today, Brueggemann’s own poetry stands as an example of how this work of the imagination evokes the uncanny.

Poetic sensitivity to the threat and promise of the present is a gift of our essential profound humanness that can bear fruit in any historical period. When it does so, that fruit will reverberate in an uncanny fashion across time. But there are also times when the prophetic word rings particularly true: times demanding grief and relinquishment, and times demanding promise and receptivity. We are still in a time of grief and relinquishment, and we will be in it for longer than most of us would like. We may also be entering a time demanding promise and reception, symbolized by the multi-racial George Floyd movement and its uncompromising demands to think outside and beyond the box of packaged reforms into the dismantling of racism’s core, white identity itself. Either way, the prophetic gift is not reserved for souls with special powers. It’s just another name for giving up the effort to *avoid* experiencing the jagged edges and dizzying possibilities inherent in any state of things. This vision-suffused relinquishment is also known as Holy Spirit, which in the Christian tradition was poured out on all flesh in the Jesus Christ revelation, so that now, our young ones see visions and our old ones dream dreams.

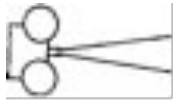
Uncanny but not supernatural, this always-available gift opens our eyes and challenges us to keep them open as our global empire falls further into collapse, and as the fragile forms of a new

possible worlds take shape amidst the ruins. What would it mean for us to trust Holy Spirit, to collectively grieve what is really going away forever, and to collectively acknowledge and embrace a promising but fragile strange newness coming into being? What would it mean for us together to “lean in” to what is happening and, like prophets, learn and teach how to relinquish and receive?

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

MOVIES



Five Documentaries that we found exhilarating

Hillary. This four-episode 2020 film available on Hulu is a beautifully realized historical piece. As one reviewer said, the film is not really about Hillary Clinton. Director Nanette Burstein approached it as a case study on the state of U.S. politics, looking at the history of contemporary feminism in the U.S. and the history of partisan politics. She explores how Hillary has been the object of extreme hatred and ardent adoration. And she also interviews Hillary present time throughout, in which she reveals mostly her sense of humor. The question Berstein asked herself as she made the film was: Can a woman ever become president? Still an open question, I think. But Hillary Clinton is clearly a heroine in blazing the trail for that possibility.

Grant. This recent three-part miniseries is available on the History Channel. A docu-drama, it alternates between historical material and dramatic vignettes. The film has placed Grant forefront in my list of American heroes. It reveals his amazing skill as a general which combined with his interest in simply getting the job done. He was empathetic toward his soldiers, yet never panicked. Do not miss this one.

Ken Burns’ Country Music. We have seen several of Burns’ documentaries and find him to be a true artist in this genre. We have now seen six of this eight-part series and are delighted. I don’t think of myself as a country music person, but I have been surprised at how very much my life and the country as a whole has been influenced by these artists. Episode six covers 1968-1972 so it feels very familiar what with protests in the news today. And though Kris Kristofferson has been a long-time favorite of mine, I did not know he was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford.

Pavarotti. This affectionate documentary of the great tenor’s life reveals what it is like for a somewhat ordinary guy to become famous and have a life of travel and performing. It reveals something of his childhood, his first wife and three daughters and his second younger wife and daughter. It reveals his kindness and generosity and his humanitarian work. But mostly it is an opportunity to see and hear him sing. And what a voice! There is something about the dramatic tenor voice that is unnatural and so wondrously moving. And to see the footage of the first performance of The Three Tenors, the group Pavarotti formed with Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras, and conductor Zubin Mehta. Wow, wow, wow! And, of course, the film ends with the most emotionally moving operatic piece of all, Puccini’s Turandot aria, *Nessun Dorma*.

The Biggest Little Farm. Married couple John, a documentary film maker, and Molly, a personal chef, had a vision of operating a traditional food-growing farm. They began “advertising” among friends their need for funding for such an operation.

They evidently found generous donors and this film documents the first eight years of their 200-acre Apricot Lane Farm in Moorpark, California. Under the guidance of Alan York, a biodynamic consultant, they (with many helpers) transformed a desolate, parched earth piece of property into a sustainable, gorgeous farm. Their story makes it clear that cooperating with the ecosystem is no easy operation. It involves paying constant attention to changes and making use of every plant and every animal species, some of which seem like enemies which should be

destroyed. The film is not only a lesson in farming, but in living.

Six Unusual Film Dramas

The Chambermaid. This film goes inside the life of Eve, a chambermaid in a high-end Mexico City hotel. It becomes tiresome as you go through the monotony of her work and the frustrations of her treatment. When Eve reaches total despair, you are enmeshed in her quandary. What do I do? Not a lot is said, but you are feeling with her, knowing her thoughts, experiencing her dilemma, seeing the narrow choice of options. The message is the experience. This is what it is like to be a lower class worker.

An Elephant Sitting Still. Manzhouli China sits on the border of Russia. There is a mythical elephant there who sits still, indifferent to the cruelty of the world. In this four-hour film, four characters are followed throughout one day's events. Even though this film is visually and emotionally dark and filled with many silences, it is amazingly interesting. The unusual cinematography draws you in, revealing only slowly and often unclearly. It somehow communicates that our understanding is never as pristine as we imagine. The main characters are all trapped in various ways and all have a longing to see the elephant. Their lives begin to intersect and though it is not a "happy ending" kind of story, I found it quite satisfying.

Beautiful People. There are several movies with this title. I refer to the 1999 film of Bosnian Jasmin Dizdar set in England during the Bosnian war. It is a delightful story of several British families affected by their interaction with Bosnian immigrants. It is funny, sad, awful, and touching. It shows the possibility humans have to let go of their preconceived notions and angry revenges, and simply connect warmly to those who are different.

Shawshank Redemption. I recently saw this film for the third time. I first saw it when it came out in 1994, then again in 2005. My recent viewing was

during the Christmas season in 2019. This fine mythic movie wears well for me. Set in life in a penitentiary in the 1940s, the villains are sadistic and the hero's triumphs unbelievable, but it works. Tim Robbins was never better and Morgan Freeman is perfect as his buddy. Andy Dufresne, sentenced to two life sentences for a murder he didn't commit, is a wondrous mythic hero who never becomes a victim. He always simply figures out his next strategy. A good model not unlike the hero in the Jesus story.

Regarding Henry. This 1991 Mike Nichols film still holds up well. Harrison Ford is an attorney whose ethics are bottom line success. He is doing well at work but he is not as successful with his wife (Annette Bening) and preteen daughter. Then he is shot in the head while interrupting a convenience store robbery. His recovery of movement and speech is assisted by a physical therapist named Bradley, whose skills are psychological as well as physical. Henry becomes a totally different person. Sorta sentimental, but it worked for me.

Midnight Run. This 1988 film is a delight. Robert de Niro plays an ex-cop turned bounty hunter who is bringing in Charles Grodin, playing an accountant who has embezzled from a mob boss. In their journey from NYC to LA—by plane, train, bus, car, walking, swimming—dodging police, FBI, and another bounty hunter—the two form a bond over their mutual unwillingness to be "bought." A really fun film. I gave it a standing ovation (in my living room).

Other older films

that we have seen or re-seen recently that stand up well—some of which I reviewed in the journal when we first saw them.

Camelot—The 1967 version of the Lerner and Loewe Broadway version with Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave is moving.

Cromwell—I liked Richard Harris so much in Camelot that I decided to check out the 1970 film, Cromwell, and he came through well. In both films his character is attempting to get a democracy. I

RECOMMENDED READING

found this attempt appropriate for our current U.S. struggle.

Moonstruck—This 1987 Cher and Nicolas Cage film has the best kitchen table scene in movie history.

Wit—It is hard to go wrong with Mike Nichols directing Emma Thompson. Had this 2001 film not been made-for-TV surely Thompson would have been in the running for an Academy Award. A disciplined English professor, her character is dealing with ovarian cancer. I laughed through the first half and cried through the rest.

The Station Agent—We have seen this 2003 film several times and never tire of it. A chance for Peter Dinklage to have a starring role and I love Bobby Cannavale in this story of what friendship is all about.

NOVELS



The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter
by Carson McCullers

Gene and I read this stunning novel aloud together. I rate it as the finest novel I have ever read. And the most religious, although not overtly so. I can hardly believe: that she wrote it at age 23 and in 1939; that she was white and could understand racism as if from inside black sensibility; that before World War I she clearly got Marxism and Nazism. But mostly, that she portrayed the simple, mostly tragic, lives of a half a dozen people in such a way that you are deeply moved by the wonder of their beauty.

Lost Children Archive
by Valeria Luiselli

This author combines the present day story of immigrant children with the “disappearance” of the Apaches through the road trip of a husband and wife and their son and daughter, none of whom are named beyond Ma, Pa, boy, girl. The couple met through their occupation of documenting and the novel itself is like a documentation of their trip across the country from New York City to southeastern Arizona to document the Mexican and

Apache stories. It is narrated by the wife and later by the son. I was born in Oklahoma, grew up in the Texas Panhandle and lived 10 years in New Mexico, so I am familiar with those areas. And this story seems to have really happened to some degree as the details are quite accurate. It is an intense story: the relationships within the family, their dealing with the cultures they run into on the road, and the stories of the immigrants and Native Americans.

The Monastery, The Abbot, & The Pirate
three novels by Sir Walter Scott

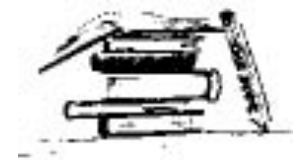
Gene and I continue to read and love Scott’s novels. They are a delightful way to learn the history of England and Scotland, Scott constantly surprises, and he writes some of the best one-on-one dialogues I have read. *The Monastery* features the battle between the Catholic Church and the Church of England for the minds of the people. It includes a fairy and two brothers competing for the love of a girl. *The Abbot* is its sequel and focuses on the imprisonment of Mary Queen of Scots at Lochleven Castle. *The Pirate* is set in the Shetland Islands, an area I knew almost nothing of except for Shetland ponies. Featured are the island’s version of Stonehenge (which I did not know existed), two love stories, a sorceress, and a group of pirates whom we get to know quite well.

RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall

MEMOIRS

Rereading my own personal journals has increased my interest in memoir. My grandmother Daisy (my father’s mother) kept a diary, sometimes on the blanks of those calendars that had a small sheet for each day. One of my cousins compiled some of them for us, creating a kind of memoir. Grandmother wrote daily every detail of her active life, visiting with the large



RECOMMENDED READING

extended family and friends, going to church, to the hair dresser, the doctor, canning and freezing vegetables, making jelly, planting flowers. She sometimes mentioned the weather, but not much on feelings. Her entry on Saturday, April 25, 1953: "Got message R.B. missing (my brother, whose plane was shot down in the Korean War). I got a letter from him Saturday morning. Melba and Ralph (my parents) stayed with us Sat. nite and Sunday. We were so glad to have them." My mother kept those small one-year diaries with a tiny space for each day. She recorded events and often her prayers. So I got the bug to write something every day from my female forebears.

I think memoir is an important genre. Mostly we are aware of those of well-known people. My grandmother's diaries tell a history of what it was like to be a woman in rural Texas in the 50s and 60s. Also, I see in her steadiness something I absorbed. When the memoirists are open and honest, I find memoirs useful for discovering how others navigate their lives, sometimes because I share much with them and sometimes because they are so different.

Incoming!
Memories of a Combat Medic
Growing Up Poor - Getting
Drafted to Vietnam-
Coming Home and Coming Out
by Larry Sanders
2019

I knew Larry and his partner Tom when we lived in Dallas, but I had no idea of his history. The book's subtitles summarize it. Many photographs enrich it. I found it hard to put it down. Larry is a good example of an honest and open memoirist.

Durations
A Memoir and Personal Essays
by Carolyn Osborn
Wings Press, 2017

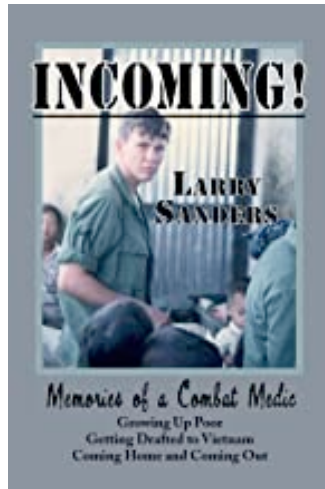
I sorta know Carolyn because I grew up in the same small farm community as her husband. With her book, I feel a great deal of connection as she is my age, female, and lived in some of my old stomping grounds. My family were farmers, but they did a bit of ranching, so Carolyn's experience with ranching was intriguing to me. I could relate to trying to figure out what to do with her father's gun collection when he died. My father didn't have 17 guns, but guns are familiar to me. Mostly I appreciated her willingness to share the painful aspects of her life in facing from a young child the fact of a mentally ill mother when psychological wisdom was not very advanced and no one talked to her and her brother about what was going on.

Plant Dreaming Deep
by May Sarton
W.W. Norton, 1968

Writer Sarton bought her first house when she was 46, in Nelson, New Hampshire. She tells how she decorates it, how she relates to the neighbors and the flora and fauna. I particularly enjoyed the description of one of the Town Meetings. There was a fury of discussion. Experienced moderator Fran Tolman had his hands full. Sarton says: "I learned something that day. I learned the amazing effect after so much emotion, of the cold, hard counting of votes. Everyone had had his say, and when the ballots were in, calm followed on the storm. People who, a few moments before, had flushed red with anger smiled again, even when their side had proved to be the losing one. This is a small instance of how the democratic way shows its true strength. I shall not forget it."

Becoming
by Michelle Obama
Crown Publishing, 2018

Michelle Obama, not surprising, grew up in a solid family. Not rich, but solid. She shares her growing up experience in a small apartment in South Side Chicago, attending Princeton and Harvard, working as an attorney in a Chicago law firm, in the mayor's



RECOMMENDED READING

office, and at the University of Chicago Medical Center. And, of course, as first lady for eight years. An example of the personal stories from that perch is that on a visit to London, she really hit it off with Queen Elizabeth. At a party, they chatted about their shoes hurting their feet. Michelle Obama's gift is lack of pretension.

Death: The End of Self-improvement

by Joan Tollifson

New Sarum Press, 2019

This book was written over a 20 year period when Joan moved back to Chicago to be with her mother in her final years. I put it in the category of memoir because much of it appears to be journaling she did during that period. Other events beyond her mother's death contributed to the book: she went through menopause, several close friends died, two of her teachers suffered illnesses and died, then Joan herself got cancer. She weaves her experience with aging and dying with spiritual awakening. She sees both as a stripping, disintegrative process as we lose our ability to think and function.

I was very moved by this book. Her stories of the deaths of those close to her brought up my own memories of loss. We read the book in our weekly circle group and it precipitated a lot of reflection and deep discussion. We talked about when we got the wake-up call that we ourselves will die; what fears we have about death; how we relate to the loss of the capacity to function; how we have tried to improve ourselves; our big regrets in our lives.

In the preface, Joan says: "Old age is an adventure in uselessness, loss of control, being nobody and giving up everything. That sounds quite dreadful when we have been conditioned to believe that we must be *somebody*, that we must strive to get better and better, that our lives must have purpose and meaning, that above all, we must be useful and productive and always *doing* something and *getting somewhere*. This book is here to suggest that the loss of all that is actually not bad news. It may even be immensely liberating."

Books that Loosen the Grip of Whiteness

reviews by Alan Richard



In America, those of us who inhabit a white identity are facing a challenging but unavoidable responsibility. The horror that whiteness has unleashed comes to our attention now and then, and George Floyd's murder at the hands of the police have foregrounded how Black bodies continue to bear the cost of white identity and how that cost is too high. If the United States is to have a future, that future depends on us being able to let go of whiteness. Here are some books that have helped me recognize how whiteness came about historically, how it's tied to chattel slavery and racism, and how we might begin to work ourselves out of it into a more authentic way of living in connection.

Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God

By Kelly Brown Douglas

Orbis

Black womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas is Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary and Canon Theologian at the Washington National Cathedral. She wrote *Stand Your Ground* after the killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent trial clearly revealed to an uncomprehending public how "stand your ground" laws function in a white supremacist culture like ours. Douglas's aim is to show how "stand your ground" culture is rooted in a flawed religious sense of self that came over with the Pilgrims, and to show how the Black faith tradition, born of the struggle to gain full humanity within a "stand your ground" culture intended to keep Black bodies chained or dead, may provide a path beyond it. Part One of the

RECOMMENDED READING

book examines the elements of “stand your ground” culture: the aforementioned exceptionalism, the designation of the black body as guilty by default, and an ongoing manifest destiny war of occupation. Part Two examines the prophetic testimony of Black Christianity as it relates to God’s freedom, God’s justice, and God’s time. The book concludes with a call for an ethics, rooted in moral memory, moral identity (or the courage to be), moral participation, and moral imagination, that Douglas argues can give us hope for a release from the repetition of America’s old story and the start something new.

White Over Black:

American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812

By Winthrop Jordan

University of North Carolina Press

I became aware of Winthrop Jordan’s 1964 masterpiece (re-published with a new Introduction in 2012) through Kelly Brown Douglas, who used it as a source for her historical argument in *Stand Your Ground*. Jordan first presented its simple but explosive argument in his 1960 dissertation, though the book itself would take another four years for him to complete and would cover a half century of early American history left unaddressed in that dissertation. It would take Jordan’s academic colleagues half a century to appreciate the significance of this argument, though Jordan’s literate but accessible prose and masterful historical sleuthing were appreciated from the beginning. Bringing together the scanty and scattered evidence of early African life in the English North American colonies during the period when American chattel slavery and American racism were coming into being, Jordan argues that they shaped each other rather than one of them preceding and shaping the other, but that they did so rapidly during the 17th century. Through Jordan’s patient eyes, we see how the economic predicament of the colonies dovetailed with the Cromwellian upheaval and English fable to produce them, and how, in producing them, English New World colonists were also creating a new identity for themselves. They were becoming Americans. This is the theme of *White Over Black*

that was passed over for so many years by scholars who saw it as “simply” a foundational text for African American studies. Yes, it was that. But it also makes the case that American identity itself came to be out of chattel slavery and racism. This case was not only too frightening for largely white academic historians to accept at the time, it was apparently too frightening for them even to see. We are only now catching up to Jordan’s sharp vision. To see our history through his eyes is to feel the scales falling from one’s own.

Learning to be White: Money, Race and God in America

By Thandeka

Continuum

Thandeka is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and a major figure in American liberal theology. She is also a colleague in the Westar Institute. In *Learning to be White*, she argues that no one is born white but that white racial identity was produced by specific historical conditions that each generation of “white people” has then reproduced, largely by manipulating the feeling of shame. Whiteness, she insists, is not an identity that just floats freely or exists only in language, but one that gets embodied in habits of thought and behavior. Each generation of immigrants to the United States since the 1840s have found themselves struggling to become white and in doing so to shed everything about them that doesn’t fit the impossible ideal of pure white identity. Similarly, children born into a world of whiteness learn to shed whatever of themselves is not white enough. But these rejected parts of the self are then projected onto Black people, uniquely cast within the world of whiteness as those who can never be white, so that white identity is both a condition for the possibility of racial hatred and a form of self-hatred. Throughout the book, she illustrates her points with cases of real people whom she has encountered in her ministry. *Learning to be White* is an excellent introduction to the social-psychological aspects of racist identity. It also begins to suggest possible social-psychological antidotes, which have become part of her “Love Beyond Belief” small group and workshop work exploring

embodied, intimate, and emotionally aware religious practice.

No Name in the Street
by James Baldwin
Vintage



In James Baldwin's 1963 *New Yorker* article, "Letter from a Region in My Mind," one of the greatest American writers of the mid-twentieth century provides an exquisite description of the powerful social-psychological mechanisms that reproduce both white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, fueled by a religious sensibility that sickens, though in different ways and to different degrees, on both sides of the color line. Yet in this essay, Baldwin still harbors hope that his home country may transcend these mechanisms. The 1972 memoir-essay *No Name in the Street*, written after the horrific events of 1968, leaves far less room for such hope. This book is as profound in its own way as *The Fire Next Time*, which came out of that earlier essay. In *No Name*, Baldwin gets caught up in the case of an ordinary black American friend in France, who is extradited on suspicion of a murder in the U.S. he could not have committed. The case rests on the testimony of a witness who has identified him based on a blurred and smudged passport photo. The brutal treatment of this friend is recounted along with Baldwin's assessment of the relationship of France to its own colonial oppressed and accounts of his encounters with Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Billy Dee Williams. The book ends with Baldwin's blunt perspective on the American encounter with the Black Panthers, at a time when his ordinary-man friend, convicted despite his obvious innocence, is serving a life sentence. The final chapter, which includes a long section on the history of police violence toward Black people and another on the earnest naivete of white allies unable to comprehend the cruel and relentless logic of domination fueling

the institutions they trust to defend and protect them, is the most timely in a book that is, overall, almost too timely to bear. *No Name in the Street* may be Baldwin's most neglected nonfiction work, and the neglect is unjust. I highly recommend it, especially now.

Realistic Living Mission Statement

While Realistic Living has been deeply engaged in the secular world, our core focus has been and remains to foster a viable and vital next Christian Practice.

The core mission of Realistic Living is to clarify the essential Christian message and to promote and inspire Christian practice through small, intimate group life and action.

We carry out research into the core challenges of our times. We write essays, books, journals, newsletters, and manuals. We maintain a website, blog, and electronic ministries. We organize training events and circles that meet weekly. We are involved in inter-religious dialogue, solitary religious practice, innovative leadership methods, bioregional organizing, and progressive social change. We offer these works as a homeopathic drop in the ocean of need.

Highlights of 2020

Since our November 2019 Journal, we have continued gathering and organizing the 36 years of Realistic Living journals, essays, courses, workshops, books, videos, study guides, training schools, research assemblies, website, blog site, and more to be passed on to posterity when our tour of duty draws to a close. In April Gene's new book, *The Thinking Christian: Twenty-three Pathways of Awareness*, was published by Wipf and Stock. This 400-page pull together of a philosophy of religion, radical theologizing, and Christian life together is an



important event that will figure strongly into our future programming.

Our weekly-meeting Bonham Circle has been meeting by Skype during the April, May June quarter. We have just finished studying Walter Brueggemann's *Hopeful Imagination*, a commentary on the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 2nd Isaiah. We also reflected on short poems from the Japanese Zen poet Ryokan. In the January, February, March quarter we studied Joan Tollifson's book, *Death*, and we reflected on quotations from Meister Eckhart. For the July, August, September quarter, we have begun a study of Part Three of *The Thinking Christian* and reflection on passages from Christian notables.

Features of our outreach impact include Alan Richard's presentation to the Bonham Rotary about his work on the Herman Ziering Holocaust exhibit, his participation in online sessions of Westar's Seminar on "God and the Human Future," and an essay on "What the word God means to me" to be published in the Westar magazine.

For more on our work, please visit our website: RealisticLiving.org. Notice the blog site link at the top of the main site heading. On the blog site you will find many recent articles, videos, course outlines, and downloads. You can also find on the main site: books, reviews, courses, course outlines, solitary manuals, and many other features.

Realistic Living Finances

Financial gifts to Realistic Living go directly into needed services. It is easy for us to spend our

budget of **\$30,000 a year** on programming that is useful to our constituency.

We send complimentary copies of this journal to new people for a temporary period of time. If you want to be sure of continuing to receive this journal, we ask for a minimum donation of \$20 a year.

We encourage you to join the increasing number of people who contribute on a **monthly basis**. Your bank can work out a way to send these contributions for you. If you are a customer of *Amazon.com*, you can set up through *smile.amazon.com* for a small portion of your Amazon purchases to be contributed to *RealisticLiving.org*.

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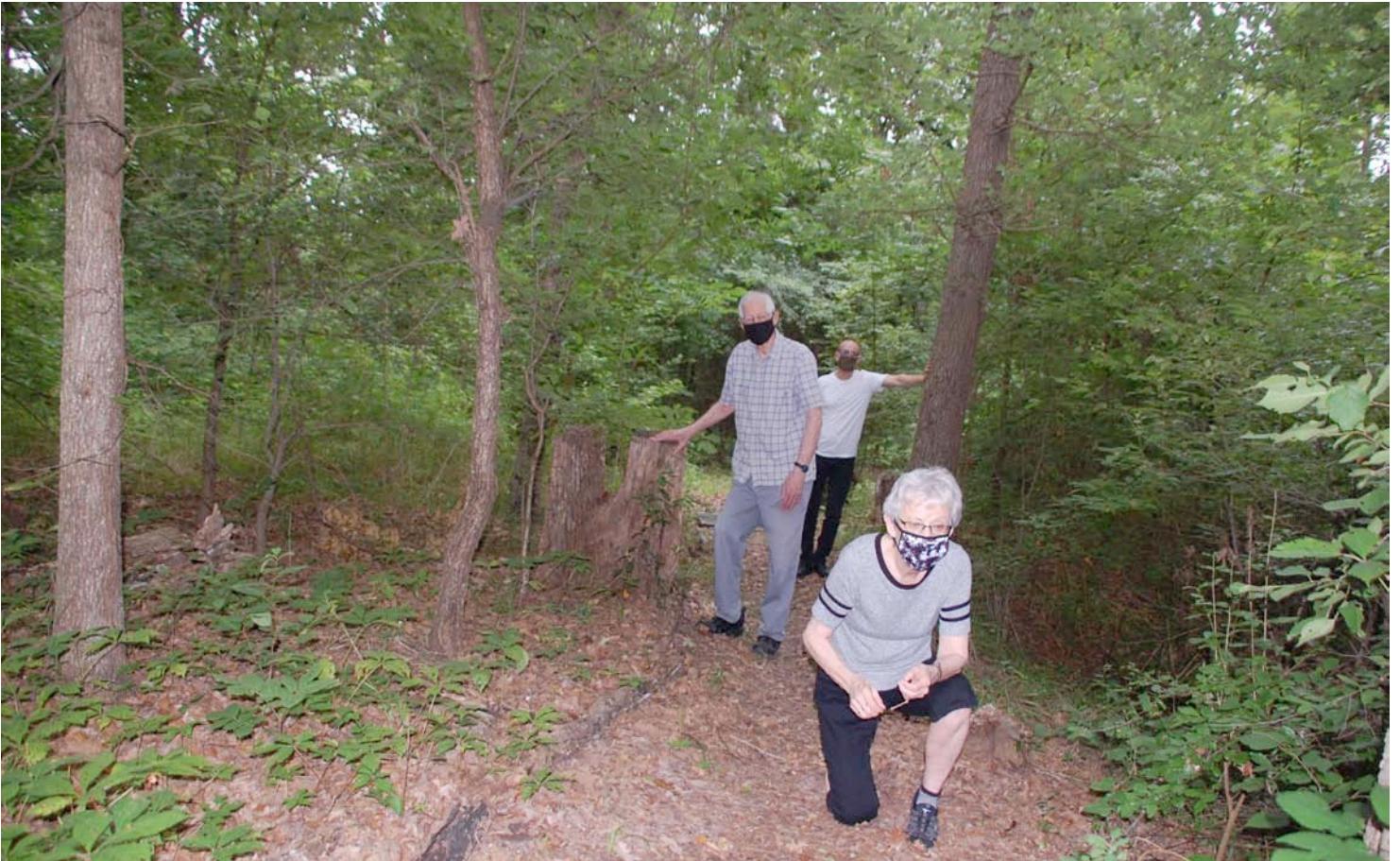
We thank you for seeing the worth of this long-range project of envisioning and building a viable and vital next Christianity.

Realistic Living

is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."

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