

# Realistic Living

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and historical forces over which we do not have control. Using our freedom to ask for some result is always accompanied by a necessary surrender of the results of our asking into the "hands" of that "Grand Mystery," the "Lord" of time. But this does not mean giving up or giving in at the first experience of opposition to our hopes. Persistent freedom does change things. Our choices do matter.

This freedom of assertive optimism includes trusting the Mysterious Profoundness we confront as the onrushing Reality coming toward us in time. Christian faith views this onrushing Reality as our "God" for "whom" all things are possible. Choosing to live in this optimism is a creative deed of living that can begin with our own bit of energetic, imaginative poetry that breaks through some familiar talk or some popular blind spots.

Our pessimism about some specific thing can be the "Word of God" to us only when there is proof beyond a reasonable doubt that the limitation in question is truly inevitable. Such court room-level

## Freedom and Hope

theologizing for now

by Gene Marshall

When we make our serious prayers and do our prayerful actions, we are seeking historical results for our timely concerns—we seek temporal results from the Almighty Ruler of Time. Every act of freedom is a hope for temporal results. Each act of freedom is an asking with our words and deeds for some historical result. Indeed, our energetic asking is the human force that bends history. Freedom itself is the human experience that can also be called "hope," a substantial hope that is not simply a passive wish.

But of course, our essential human freedom is a limited force operating within a great sea of natural



proof means that the answer is "No" from this "God" with "whom" we are in dialogue as praying persons. So any so-called optimism that we are holding in the

face of a such a solidly supported “No,” we are simply “called” to relinquish. Such false optimism we find in the claim that fossil fuels can be burned in an ever expanding way. But if there is no such “proof” for our pessimism, then our pessimism may be an estrangement from what is actually possible. If we don’t know that the answer is “No,” then the answer may still be “Yes.”

And any deep matter of change can indeed require time to envision the deeply hidden possibilities that do not at first appear to our consciousness. When facing big challenges, we humans are tempted to launch into a love-affair with pessimism, and not even test to see if our pessimism is justified. This is a typical temptation, because such a possibility requires a responsibility we resist.

In general, a love-affair with pessimism will not yield our best-case living. The realism of trust in Profound Reality requires that our choices be made within that “all-things-are-possible-for-Profound-Reality” optimism. It is arrogant dogmatism for us to be over-sure of our pessimisms. Then too, there are times when *not* engaging in some overwhelming task is the appropriate response, not pessimism. We may need to intentionally decide that it is not timely to engage in some given task. We may need to decide that our one and only life is required elsewhere.

### **An Optimism Heritage**

A radical optimism characterized the persistent faith of Abraham & Sarah, as well Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Mark, Augustine, Benedict, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Luther, Teresa of Avila, Søren Kierkegaard, and millions of others. The stories of these people are stories of persistent optimism—hope where no assurance of hope was obvious. They led their human culture of peers into the seemingly hopeless, rather than allowing their culture to lead them.

Freedom and hope are corresponding concepts in the Christian vocabulary. A prayer to the Christian God is a deed of freedom and also a deed of hope. Petitionary prayers for ourselves and

intercessory prayers for others are requests for specific results in the course of events. These acts of freedom may be answered, “Never” or “Not yet” by the Power that is Lord of history. If these acts of prayer are persistently expressed and personally lived, they may be answered, “Yes,” at a later time. Such acts of freedom, secret or open, change things in the way we respond to life. Such “prayers” also change the overall look we have of the challenges to which we are responding. Such prayerfulness is freedom, and such freedom is hope.

### **For Example: The Hope for a Climate Crisis Moderation**

Prayer for a moderation of the climate crisis is a hope that is very much in play for potentially all of us. This prayerful hope, if we are facing the true situation, includes taking in the fact that such prayer is also a hope for a massive energy-source transition and for an infrastructure that brings that energy to human needs.

### **Transition Fuels**

We 21st century Christian prayerful optimists are surely aware that for the sake of a life enhancing climate and the avoidance of a number of horrific catastrophes, we will need to pray for our culture, business leaders, and political office holders to begin viewing petroleum, natural gas, and coal as transition fuels. A prayer for this fuel transition must be included in any prayers we make for a moderation of the following outcomes: the disappearing low-lying islands, the drowning of coastal cities, massive forest fires, extensive floods, disastrous mud slides, crop-destruction, social chaos, and on and on and on. In order to moderate these coming disasters, fossil fuels must be phased out as soon as possible. We are already tardy in both our prayers and our actions. A prayerful optimism with regard to getting this transition moving is still missing in many reluctant lives. We might say that Profound Reality, our God, is waiting on us for more prayerful actions before granting us the results we seek.

An overwhelming percentage of our climate scientists hold that fossil fuel continuation leads to untenable catastrophes, and much sooner than we once believed. This truth means that fossil fuels must be viewed now as transition fuels. If we want to moderate the climate crisis and even explore a lasting form of society, non-carbon burning alternatives must be found! Nuclear power is a very dangerous alternative as well as a very expensive one, and one that, given Earth's shifting crust, lacks an adequate long-range waste-storage solution. These strong "No" answers to the nuclear energy direction are like commands to us to focus our praying hopefulness on solar, wind, and falling water for our major future energy sources. However puzzling and difficult even these directions may be, we have no better options than accessing these safer energy sources in a massive way and then distributing that energy to our needed uses.

This hope for climate moderation includes praying for a well-planned end to the further expansion of the fossil fuel industries—now, not later. Further investments in the fossil-fuel industries must be discouraged. All extreme extraction must now be viewed as criminal in every nation and in all the international laws we call treaties, agreements, or whatever.

Here are some obvious places to begin the fossil-fuel phase out: Canadian tar sands and their pipelines, deep ocean drilling, and all sensitive environments. This is surely the first step in a transition status for all fossil fuels. If so, these transitions must not be further postponed.

### **Solar Age Prospects**

We have a nuclear-fusion power plant located 92-million miles off the planet. In terms of any feasible future need for energy by the human species, the sun is beaming a boundless supply of energy to this planet. There are many ways of accessing that energy. Wind and water movement are indirect solar energy. Trees and other plants are quite good at accessing solar energy, and they power their access of solar energy with solar energy. Trees are an already in place "technology" for carbon

capture. And our work to capture carbon is not done in order to permit more burning of carbon. Phasing out all but a comparative trickle of carbon burning remains a necessity.

A forest turns massive amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> into tree trunks and oxygen every day. Let us pray for new rules governing all tree ownership and forestry practices planet-wide, such as: (1) cut down no tree that is doing more good alive than removed for any purpose, (2) harvest no fallen tree that is doing more good in decay than it would be in lumber or other uses. No other considerations expose more dramatically our need for a whole new attitude for human relations with nature. A hundred years ago, trees were a primary resource for human use. Now they are a primary conservation for human survival.

Humans have now developed three basic



humanly constructed ways of technologically accessing the vast power of these abundant solar beams: (1) direct heating and cooling of buildings and other spaces through architecture that absorbs and thus stores heat (passive solar heating), (2) electricity production obtained by boiling water with sun heat, (3) direct electricity production through solar-cell technologies. We have done basic experiments in these areas. We are more than "ready" to do massive expansions and seek more efficient ways of pulling that abundant sun energy into human play. This remains a technological challenge, but we have no scientific consensus or preponderance of evidence that this is impossible. Love of our own species and other species are challenging us to find a way to do this.

The creation, management, and disposal of these three technological means of energizing human society will require energy inputs. The energy inputs now used by these technologies must be significantly less than their useable energy outputs. Such efficiency is one of our key technological challenges. In these early phases of the overall transition, these energy inputs will continue to come from fossil-fuel sources, but as soon as possible the energy inputs used to create, manage, and dispose of the solar devices will need to be derived from solar energy sources alone. Let us never lose sight that our prayers are for the phasing out of fossil fuels to a mere trickle.

Though we must obey realism in carrying out this goal, we cannot afford pessimism about the long-range completion of this transition. Neither oil company reluctances to phase out their product nor populations clinging to familiar practices have any place in halting our responsible plans. Wherever “phase out” is not the policy-in-practice, that policy must be made imperative by the full powers of democratic government. We cannot wait for voluntary compliance. We cannot expect these big changes to take place without strong resistances from that powerful and privileged minority of unprincipled oligarchs who are accustomed to getting their way.

The temptation to pessimism also comes up in terms of the overwhelming task of organizing the population to promote full support for the needed rapid transition.

Another key temptation for pessimism is the economic exploitation and neglect of at least half the human population. People currently living paycheck to paycheck (or perhaps having no paycheck) are not going to support further hardship. Making life more difficult for the already challenged part of the population is not a viable solution.

Those who own most of the wealth assembled within the current system will have to use a large portion of that wealth to pay for the transition to an alternative system. This means that a democratic government representing all the people must be empowered to force these excessive wealth owners into financing this transition. The rulership of

wealth-owners over our democratic processes will have to be defeated. Our hope for meaningful climate moderation depends on this shift away from money-driving political power. A reasonable economic equity for all is a climate-crisis issue.

Billionaires will need to be asked to realize that well over three-fourths of their wealth has been earned, not by their clever management, but by the massive labor of the general public; therefore, this assembled wealth can be viewed as “owed” to the general public in taxation for the job of conducting this energy transition in a manner that costs nothing to the poorer half of the population. This means that the long-standing economic thinking about making bigger profits with cheaper labor must be relinquished in favor of building societies that are viable for every person.

### **How much energy does a family unit need?**

A large role can and must be given to the conservation of energy, replacing our current recklessly wasteful practices. The cost of heating and cooling buildings, big or small, can be cut in half, and perhaps more. Transportation devices can also be much more efficient. Electric cars and hydrogen-electric trains can yield huge energy savings compared to our current means of transport. With policies supporting these changes in place, the energy needs of the common household can be substantially reduced while serious energy transition kicks in.

Basically, our innovations for a viable future will need to include supplying each human being on planet Earth with three meals a day, a place to live, healthcare, heat and cooling as needed, education, public transportation, and time for communal associations and cultural opportunities. Can this be done with 8 billion humans? Probably not. Perhaps 4 billion should be our long-range goal. So, let us choose controlling births over killing one another with wars over limited resources. Having and raising big families was seen as a heroic service in the Middle Ages. At that time, a society depended on more and more babies to become its farmers and

soldiers. Now each society depends on eliminating grueling poverty within its scope of responsibility.

### **New Infrastructure**

The infrastructure for the storage and delivery of the solar sources of energy is a huge project, but its elements are already solved in principle. Nothing prevents its construction except the political decisions, and the political considerations informing them that release the economic resources to do so. Assuming significant conservation of energy, a combination of electricity and hydrogen tanks can deliver enough solar energy to meet human needs. The infrastructure for petroleum, natural gas, and coal can be replaced by a solar infrastructure and still have a viable society. No pessimism is relevant for this prospect. We simply need the will to do it and the determined work to get it done.

### **How, Not Whether**

The question of *whether* any replacement for fossil-fuel energy sourcing can be technologically achieved with solar technologies is an invalid question for the maintenance of our hope. Somehow, this transition must be achieved to avoid untenable disasters. Therefore, the only valid question appropriate for our busy minds is *how* this transition can be achieved. We must focus all our mental powers on the question of *how*, never *whether*. Of course, real issues must be faced, but never in order to deny the possibility of finding a way to do this technological shift quickly and completely. Giving up on this possibility is selling out to our status quo arrangements of ever-greater slavery to the status quo of oil-industry wealth. Here is a spirit teaching we need to claim: "Love will find a way!"

### **The Political Problem**

If finding viable technological and economic paths to this new solar age is difficult, finding the needed political solutions may be even more challenging. Democracy, for example, simply must

be preserved over authoritarianism. Democracy must be expanded, not torn down.

Politics is a study of the possible, it is never about the perfect. Political choices are always about the significantly better of the various betters, or the least bad of many bads. In other words, politics is always messy. This grim and messy truth must not be allowed to justify our dropping out of doing the necessary political thought and action. A flourishing democracy requires that everyone be challenged to do political thought and action. Not doing our democratic part is selling out to authoritarianism.

Political action has to begin each week and each year with the given whole situation and therein create the next steps that work. In order to succeed with our energy agenda, we must work within the awareness that the energy-transition issue is nested within a larger set of critical issues. For example, increasing the ease of voting for every citizen is a climate-crisis issue. Competent governing with learned and experienced servants who strictly adhere to science and to the rule of law is a climate-crisis issue.

### **The Larger Context for Hope**

If by "industrial civilization" we mean burning fossil fuels, overshooting our use of the planet, allowing billions more people than the planet can support, believing that perpetual overall economic growth raises all boats, and even tolerating the existence of billionaires who possess hundreds of times more wealth and political power than an average of the poorer fifth of humanity, then *the collapse of industrial civilization is inevitable*. Furthermore, on a global level, we cannot go back to a previous form of civilization, or to stone-age hunter-gatherer forms of societies or to village-agriculture forms of society.

Understandably, we ask if there is a future form of civilization that avoids or moderates the coming catastrophes and avoids the extinction of our species? "No" is the answer, because any future, planetary mode of society that corrects the downsides that define "industrial civilization" cannot be properly called a "civilization."

Some of the qualities of industrial civilization can endure, such as: a love of science and a science-informed politics, the empowerment of a planet-wide internet, a planet-wide transportation system, a planet-wide exchange system for goods and services, a planet-wide cultural exchange, and the increasing awareness and a growing respect for our vast cultural differences. But these gifts of civilization do not make a society a “civilization.” Some new name for a human society is needed.

In addition to the lasting gifts of civilization, a survivable future society will need to be extremely ecologically competent and fully democratic. Both of these qualities describe a post-civilization society. Rather than “civilization” I suggest naming such a society “Eco-Democracy,” by which I mean a mode of equitable society that can carry a smaller human population beyond the collapse of industrial civilization.

Hundreds of previous civilizations have collapsed, so we need not be surprised that industrial civilization will also collapse. Nevertheless, most of us have in our minds a postponement of that collapse beyond the near term. We are understandably shocked to learn that this collapse is already underway, and will inevitably be complete in less than 250 years. So what does hope mean when we face such grim circumstances?

Hope is simply the freedom to take into our present living the formation of an Eco-Democracy style of society. This includes taking on the creative dismantlement of civilization, rather than allowing a willy-nilly process of collapse. Hope is nothing more nor less than this freedom, for freedom is hope, however trying the circumstances.

## OONA AND THE DRAGON

a fairy tale by  
Joyce Marshall

Once upon a time there was a great athlete. She was a runner. Her yearly event was coming up soon. There was a big bazaar in the village and a celebration, the culmination of which was the marathon. Oona, the runner, was to light the

candle in the stadium, symbolizing health for all for the coming year. But Oona was in deep despair, for her own health was failing. Her stomach had been painning her greatly and now her skin was sallow and she had no energy. She couldn't even train for the race. It was all she could manage to get herself out of bed and try to figure out what to do to recover her health. She picked herbs and dug roots every day, trying different remedies that might give a boost to her depleted body. She felt very sad when she looked in the mirror and saw her pale, sagging face, and when she looked at her weakened muscles. She worried when she looked at the calendar and noted three weeks only until the race.

One night she was lying awake (she wasn't sleeping well, either) and she heard a rustle in the corner of the room. She lit a candle and saw there a mouse.

“Well, hello there, mouse,” said Oona.

“Hello yourself,” said the mouse.

“What are you doing?”

“Just nosing around looking for something to eat. What are you doing?”

“Oh, just lying awake worrying about my health. My usual night-time occupation.”

“I'm sorry to hear you're not well,” said the mouse. “I've had health problems myself, from time to time. I know how discouraging that can be.”

“Thank you,” said Oona, impressed with the mouse's capacity for empathy.

They silently looked at one another for a moment, then the mouse said, “You might consult with the dragon.”

“The dragon?”

“Yes. She's a good counselor. I talked with her when I had pleurisy last winter.”

“Does she know herbs and remedies?”

“Not exactly. She's more of a spiritual advisor.”

So the mouse set it up with the dragon for Oona to go for a session the next day.

Oona climbed the hill and found the cave just as the mouse described.

“Come on in,” the voice said.

## OONA AND THE DRAGON

It was dark. But the dragon glowed so that Oona could make out her form against the cave wall.



Drawing by Alan Richard

“So, what’s your problem, my dear?” asked the dragon.

“I’m so discouraged,” said Oona. “I’ve tried everything I know to be healthy and recover my energy. Nothing seems to work. Maybe I have some mysterious ailment. I’m about ready to toss in the towel. It’s not just the race coming up. I could miss that. Let someone else light the symbolic candle this year. It just seems I will never again be healthy or happy. How can I be happy when health eludes me?”

“Yes,” said the dragon. “I see your issue. Health and happiness seem to go together do they not?”

“Exactly,” said Oona.

“But, no,” said the dragon. “They do not.”

Oona looked up at the glowing dragon.

“They do not. You must find your happiness now, Oona. Now. Not tomorrow or someday when you feel better. Or when you see definite signs of improvement. Do you hear me? When you look in the mirror and see that suffering face, that drooping body, you must look with love and compassion. It is not health that makes one happy, but love, and love must begin for yourself. Instead of looking to see what needs to be fixed or improved, look with compassion on your dear suffering body. Give it care because of love, not to fix it. Love it as you’d love a child or a dear elder under your care. This you must do. Your health

may return. It may not. But love can always grow in your heart. Treat yourself with the tenderest of care. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Oona. “I understand.”

Then the dragon said, “Come here, my dear.” And she enfolded Oona in her dragon arms and held her against her soft belly and held her in love until Oona felt her own love rekindled.

“There now,” said the dragon. “You go home and rest. Come again if you need to.”

Oona left the cave, walked down the hill, went into her house, laid down, and slept. After that Oona’s health was up and down. She skipped the annual race, but her heart was renewed. She did not despair over her physical weakness. She lived each day, each moment, in contentment, in love. And when her faith flagged, she went to see the dragon.

## James Baldwin’s Witness

an antiracism dialogue  
by Alan Richard

James Baldwin was supposed to have become a pastor. Born in 1924, Baldwin was the stepson of a struggling Pentecostal preacher who made a meager living working at a factory, and who assumed that Jimmy, the oldest, would follow him into the ministry. Baldwin did take up the pulpit at the age of 14 after experiencing what Pentecostals call being “slain in the Spirit” and “receiving the gift of the Spirit.” Baldwin describes this emotionally-charged ritual in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, his earliest novel. He does so with an eye critical of the false moralistic pretensions that his father and other Pentecostal leaders of the period used to assure themselves that their Spirit-filled lives could shame the mighty. In the Holiness tradition, this power of spiritual resistance is aimed at activities commonly, if falsely, associated with the laboring castes: excessive intoxication and prohibited sex, sins of the body to be submitted to the disciplined mind. The adolescent Pastor James Baldwin observed the sanctified saints using this false public display of respectability to deny a common humanity they shared with the un-

sanctified and that they, by and large, silently indulged. The saints, in short, were pretending, and so was he. So, while James Baldwin was supposed to have become a pastor, he left both the pulpit and the church at age 17.

### **Baldwin the Witness**

When Baldwin left Christianity behind, he took up what he thereafter referred to as his call. This was the call of the witness. "Witness to what?" an interviewer once asked him. His answer: "A witness to life." Still later, he said that he had to leave the church in order to preach the gospel.

The call to write and to witness was both a continuation of his short career as a preacher and a decisive break from it. In his first novel, religion functions as a shield against life. The protagonist's preacher-stepfather is an angry and abusive man whose religious pride shields him not only from the memory of those he has harmed, but from the reality of the pain he inflicts continually on the people around him, on whom he looks down from lofty spiritual heights. It also, however, shields him from intimacy with others and himself. For the protagonist, forbidden desires and possibilities become life's insistent attack on the fresh and fragile shield the father has bequeathed to him.

The possibility of trusting life and the desperate attempt to shield oneself from it became the themes of every piece of writing Baldwin produced until his death in 1987. For Baldwin, life is risky and messy. No one can live life while remaining safe or innocent. So we use our imagination to create a false safety and a false innocence. We create a false self and pretend to be or to become that self. But we find that we have inherited this self rather than inventing it and, after multiple attempts, discover we can never become it but will always measure ourselves against it. So we double down on the performance of this false self, seeking to blind ourselves to the division within ourselves. Baldwin saw this spiritual false self's attraction in the moral superiority of Spirit-filled brothers and sisters in each other's holy presence, and saw its falsehood in their casual and discreet violations of this code behind each other's

backs. But he also saw the false self at work far from the church. In his second novel, he shows us how the false self syndrome overcomes a wealthy irreligious white American in Europe, and in subsequent novels, he depicts a diverse array of characters struggling with it in their own psyches, in their relationships, in the social habits surrounding them, or in all three.

### **The False Self and American Racism**

The false self syndrome, for Baldwin, is both a universal human experience and a particularly acute malady in America because of the practices of extreme cruelty and emotional distancing entailed in the enslavement of millions and the subsequent "management" of their descendants. American racism, for Baldwin, is an instance of an especially desperate and violent version of the false self.

White people, he argues, are "impaled" on a false self-conception that separates them from humanity at large, and even from the Black Americans who are, in spite of their denials, their own blood. This false self-conception does immense damage to Black Americans, since they become, in the white imagination, the repository for all the "disgusting" or "unthinkable" possibilities that white respectability excludes but that white people, being human beings, also are and know they are. Policing these things means policing Black people literally, but it also generates a metaphorical self-policing. White respectability is obsessed with sexual impropriety and intoxication, since these are the signs of a less structured rural way of life that each generation of immigrants left behind when it sailed into New York Harbor. The past left behind in order to become white is part of what those who are becoming white see when they see a Black person. But this past is not in fact left behind so much as it is rejected and denied. So white people are not so much projecting their own past onto Black people as projecting what they *tell* themselves is past but is actually present in them, and not only in suppressed desires but in actual behavior that they publicly condemn, privately need or enjoy, and never discuss. This is how respectability works, he argues.





Baldwin said he knew - "I'm certain of it" - that the addiction of American people to lies about their own lives and about their history "has something to do with the Puritan God," and with "a peculiar and absolutely bankrupt morality" fixated on the body's unruliness. Baldwin's essays and novels draw attention repeatedly to the bizarre sexual fantasies produced by American racism, traceable to this Puritan God and His morality. Baldwin knew that white men had fathered children through rape while maintaining respectability, knew that white people segregated themselves from their own kin, lynched Black men proudly, sexually fetishized male and female Black bodies in art, literature, and popular entertainment, and groped Black people while simultaneously feigning disgust at miscegenation. He knew that racist delusions, grounded in the denial of aspects of the self and their projection onto Black people, interfered with inter-racial intimacy even when the white partner was politically progressive and avant-garde. White people, in other words, didn't just suppress their sexuality in addition to believing manifestly false racist ideas.

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Racist ideas, with their inflated sense of self and distanced, body-obsessed image of the other, derive their emotional power from the fear of confronting any aspect of ourselves we have denied and crucified in our quest to become "white as snow," most especially our unruly senses and bodies.

Today, we can clearly see the dynamic of projection Baldwin describes at work in the lies that Donald Trump tells about his political opponents and his advisors who fail to do his will on this or that matter. In these lies, Trump almost always accuses his opponents of something that he has been doing himself. This, Baldwin suggests, is how white people tell the story they hide from everyone and perhaps from themselves, by attributing the rejected reality to the other and then showing it explicitly on that "screen." And this is why Baldwin insists that being white is a moral decision. It isn't that being white is immoral behavior, but that being white means fundamentally living a lie that then results in indifference, cruelty, and the like. Thus, Baldwin's work is concerned with a dimension of racism that Baldwin came to believe, like Frederick Douglass and the Black church before him, merited the theological vocabulary of sin, salvation, and damnation.

### **The Gospel According to Baldwin**

In his nonfiction essays and books, Baldwin accuses the American myth of race and American Christianity of being immoral because they shield white Americans from reality even when reality meets them up close and personal. Morality here is not about obeying rules. It begins with our response to reality's challenge to our expectations, assumptions, and beliefs about ourselves and the world. Baldwin writes:

The terms you have invented, which you think describe and define you, inevitably collide with the facts of life. When this collision occurs - and, make no mistake, this is an absolutely inevitable collision - when this collision occurs, like two trains meeting head-on in a tunnel, life offers you the choice, and it's a very narrow choice, of holding on to your definition of yourself or saying, as the old folks used to say, and as everybody who wants to

## JAMES BALDWIN'S WITNESS

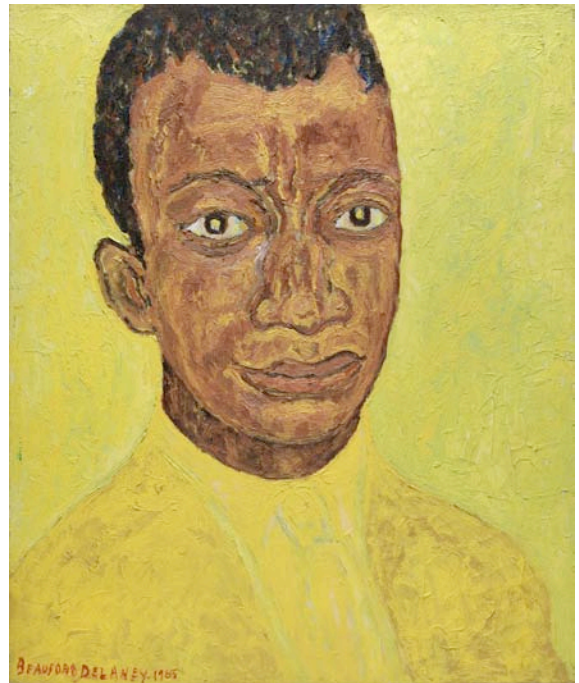
live has to say: Yes Lord. (James Baldwin, *The Cross of the Redemption* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010), p. 90.)

This, for Baldwin, is the human condition, not the American condition. The American condition arises from this condition, as Americans have repeatedly responded to such collisions with ever more elaborate and absurd systems of lies to justify continuing on a path that collides with reality. This response to reality is what, for Baldwin, counts as sin. Americans have built a wall or a cloak of such lies. And damnation, which he saw coming, is the final consequence of this strenuous effort. Salvation, as he argues in the above passage, lies in saying "Yes Lord," which in his final essay he calls "saying yes to life" and "trusting life."

Baldwin's gospel relates this yes-saying, this trust in life, to love. Love is not, for Baldwin, a pleasant or ecstatic head over heels feeling, a duty, or a madness. Love is unwavering attention to the connection with the other whom reality has put in your path and through whom reality gazes at you. One is stirred by love unpredictably, whether that be as lover, caregiver, or even stranger. "Love is," Baldwin concludes, "where you find it." Love is grounded in our fleshly being, our situatedness in space and time, our material connections, our mutual nourishment. But love is a struggle, a sustained argument, and a difficult exercise of freedom because it does not allow one to retreat into a narcissistic bubble. One must choose, moment by moment, either to love or to live in that bubble.

The decision to love is a decision to trust life, to be opened by and for the other. This being opened is the way in which, for Baldwin, love frees us through trust. So while being loved doesn't require faith, loving requires it continually. Love means laying down your shield of lies, exposing yourself. Americans have locked themselves out of love and out of life, their only possible salvation, by locking themselves in a cage of lies. But Baldwin believed that love, belonging as it does to our sensual, living, material being, interrupts such self-imposed imprisonment so that the possibility of saying yes is always present. The reality of our connection to all of life does not give up on us.

This is, in an admittedly simplistic nutshell, the gospel that Baldwin claimed he had to leave the church to preach. Baldwin did not declare that he had discovered a new gospel different from the Christian gospel. He knew this as the gospel proclaimed in the New Testament. But Baldwin did not regard himself as a Christian. As early as 1961 he counted himself among the witnesses against Christianity. Instead, he regarded himself as a witness to "the" gospel of sin, damnation, and salvation, the death of false innocence and false security, and the resurrection to life. This is the gospel Christianity had debased, the gospel one had to leave the church in order to preach. Baldwin himself continued to preach for congregations and for meetings of the World Council of Churches, but he did so as a critic of the church, as openly homosexual, and as a Black radical.



### Baldwin and Movement Leadership

Baldwin was an older contemporary of both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. But they were leaders of movements, and he was not. They were religious professionals, and he was not. In the late 50s and early 60s, known homosexuals were neither

## JAMES BALDWIN'S WITNESS

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clergy nor visibly the leaders of movements, but they could be and were writers and artists. Baldwin saw his status, an outsider even to the outsiders, as a stark choice between living a lie he saw as especially pernicious in order to preach and lead in that way, or to find another way to bear witness without lying. Baldwin was not a "gay writer" or a "gay thinker." He never used the language of identity to talk about his sexuality. Even later in life, he refused to identify as gay and was suspicious of the gay male movement, which he (accurately) regarded as hopelessly mired in anti-Black racism. But he was open about and valued his same-sex partners, and argued vehemently against stigmatizing or pathologizing deviations from heterosexual monogamy long before most who later identified as "gay" in the 1980s did so. So he could not have led a religious movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

But he could do something neither Martin Luther King nor Malcolm X could do. He could anticipate the future of the movement beyond his own death, and the future of spirituality as our deepest humanness beyond our religious institutions. He could become the radical theological prayer answered by Black Lives Matter.

Baldwin's witness broke through his own time to touch ours thanks to the prescient eye of prominent social psychologist Kenneth Clark, whose 1963 public television documentary "The Negro and the American Promise" featured Baldwin alongside Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, designating them as the three great contemporary leaders of the Black freedom struggle. The documentary was made in the context of police brutality and church bombings in Birmingham, which had highlighted the inadequate commitment of the Justice Department to racial equality. Conducting thoughtful interviews with these three figures, Clark left us a lasting documentary testimony to the very different ways they viewed a moment of crisis in a racist nation.

King is interviewed first. For King, the spiritual dimension of the struggle centers on a "love ethic" requiring a belief that nonviolent power is somehow sovereign power. Though this power is invisible, King believes he can see it in the eyes of the brutal

police and violent counter-demonstrators struggling to maintain their shield of anger and indifference. Malcolm X is then interviewed. For Malcolm, the spiritual dimension is God's separation of the oppressed people of God from the oppressors. He refers to the figure of Moses separating the enslaved Hebrew people from their enslavers and bringing them to their own land. He acknowledges that this requires a belief that history is guided by a purposeful power so that this is certain to come to pass. But for Baldwin, the spiritual dimension of the struggle cannot afford to rest on such beliefs. The struggle is entirely focused on a manifest reality he says we are desperately trying to avoid facing, not a hidden reality in which we must believe.

Baldwin thinks, moreover, that beliefs get in the way for the other two leaders. Though Malcolm X is the first religious leader in America to articulate Black suffering with stark honesty, the Nation of Islam has invented its own false history to counter the false history of white America. One must instead admit that we are "in" each other in that history, that we cannot separate ourselves from each other because we cannot separate ourselves from ourselves. As for King, he is a "rare and great man" because he is "a real Christian who really believes it," but his moral authority is collapsing everywhere before the obvious fact that "this country has always glorified violence unless the Negro has the gun." Baldwin worries that King's beliefs may blind him to the extent of the moral damage white America has inflicted on itself. He does not sense America's conscience stirring at the sight of nonviolent children under brutal attack. His meeting with the Attorney General, still raw, had convinced him the opposite was the case. In this interview, Baldwin's criticism of these two leaders, both of whom he knew and both of whom he greatly respected, rests on his insistence that reality must be faced, whether it brings joy or sorrow, and that reality offers us few guarantees.

After Baldwin's assessment of these "other Negro leaders," he offers his own view of America's spiritual landscape. Baldwin begins by declaring that "I cannot be a pessimist because I am alive." Pessimism, he says, requires one to step outside one's life and see it as an academic matter. When we are

living our lives, we are “forced to believe” whether we admit it or not “that we can survive whatever we must survive.” This does not imply belief in guarantees. The only real guarantees are that we are all in this together and that we cannot avoid deciding. We are confronting a reality America does not want but has on its hands. The Black revolt can no longer be contained because the young people involved in this movement no longer believe the lies that are told about them, and because the colonized all over the world no longer believe the lies of the colonizers. Instead of reconciling themselves to what reality itself is doing, the white people of America have decided to “become moral monsters.” Though “the Negro” exists only as an image and not in anyone’s reality, not even in the reality of the people who suffer from being confused with that image, white people insist on clinging to “the Negro.” The question white people alone can and must answer, Baldwin says, looking straight into the camera, is why America “needs a Negro at all.” The future does not even depend on whether they can answer that question adequately. “It depends on whether they can even *face* the question,” since doing so would mean facing themselves.

Baldwin’s spirituality is more modest than King’s or Malcolm X’s. It is, quite simply and, when understood, frighteningly, about facing reality and “saying yes to life.” And yet the statement of it that Clark captured in 1963 so powerfully anticipated the mood of this second decade of the 21st century that Raoul Peck used almost all of this interview in his 2017 Oscar-nominated film about Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*. Black Lives Matter already had a special affinity with Baldwin before Peck’s film. Soon after three young women launched the #Blacklivesmatter movement on social media, organizers began circulating quotes from Baldwin’s essays and interviews. But *I Am Not Your Negro* essentially proclaims Baldwin the posthumous preacher or theologian of the movement. Instead of a man with a white collar and a religious institution backing him, however, this movement looks to a Black queer prophet, born in poverty, whose radical witness amidst these clergymen shatters the church’s pose of innocence along with the culture’s. Many of

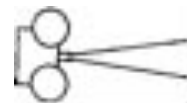
Baldwin’s talks from the 1960s have re-emerged online after decades of obscurity, and demand for his essays and fiction is at an all time high. But it is the Baldwin captured by Clark at that moment of national and personal crisis, struggling to articulate a way forward at a low moment when neither of the two religious leaders with whom he’d been associated seemed capable of saying anything new, who decisively addresses *this* moment.

Baldwin’s willingness to break with his religious tradition “in order to preach the gospel” and his use of that break as a lens through which to view the spiritual predicament facing individual Americans in their intimate lives and America in its collective life make him the most contemporary of the three leaders Clark interviewed in 1963. His affirmation of non-heterosexual intimacy contrasts with the religious abuse that LGBTQ people, Black and otherwise, have suffered at the hands of the church. More than this, he shows how the idol of respectability deceives, explains how it shapes our sense of self, helps us recognize our reliance on it, describes how the connections between us challenge its power over us, calling us to decide for or against “love,” and promises that, despite unavoidable risk and messiness, deciding for love is the only path to salvation. Like Black Lives Matter, he beckons us to abandon the path of false innocence and false security, the false self shared by church and society, for the sake of trust, love and freedom. For the sake of the gospel.

## ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

### MOVIES



**A Hidden Life.** I thought Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* was his best film. This 2019 film is right up there with it. The title is taken from this quote from George Eliot - “The growing good of this world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who

lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." It is a true story, set in the 1940s, of Franz Jagerstatter, a young Austrian farmer with a wife and three young daughters, who refused to swear an oath to Hitler. A Catholic, Franz was inspired by a priest who was executed for such refusal. He decided he was willing to go out the same way if it came to that. A slow-moving, continually thoughtful film that lingers with you long after.

**Just Mercy.** Gene and I read Bryan Stevenson's book in 2016 (reviewed in the November 2016 journal) and both of us were often moved to tears by his stories of those he represented on death row. His Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama has offered legal services, respect, solace, and compassion to their clients and families for three decades. In 2018 the organization created The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the Memorial for Peace and Justice dedicated to those terrorized by lynching—both in Montgomery. We hesitated to see the 2019 movie for fear that it would disappoint and not live up to the book. We highly recommend the film which also both inspired us and once again brought tears.

**Hobson's Choice.** This 1954 classic, directed by David Lean, starring Charles Laughton and John Mills, is funny and inspiring. Laughton is a patriarchal male, demonstrating unconscious entitlement in a disgusting fashion. He owns a boot shop, hiring boot makers who work in the basement. A widower, his three daughters manage the shop and his household. Mostly he hangs out with his cronies and gets drunk. His eldest daughter, who at age 30 he sees as unmarriageable, has other ideas. She lands a blow for feminism and to classism in one swoop. I love this film.

**3:10 to Yuma.** (The 2007 version of the 1957 film with Russell Crowe as Ben Wade and Christian Bale as Dan Evans) I reviewed this film the year it came out. We saw it again this year and I was even more affected by it this time. It is more than a great classic western. Evans has signed up to get Wade on the 3:10 train to go to prison in Yuma Arizona, probably

to be executed for his many exploits. On the complicated journey there the two become well acquainted. Ben connects more to Dan than to his robbing, killing gang, and Dan connects more to Ben than to his fellow law enforcers. I was thinking and talking about this film for days after seeing it. And still weeping.

**A Little Chaos.** I knew nothing of this 2015 film until a friend mentioned it to me recently. And what a treat it is. Set in France in the time of Louis XIV, it stars Kate Winslett as a landscape designer who participates in creating the Gardens of Versailles. A totally created story, it is wondrous in its depiction of this woman who is not caught up in the sycophancy about the king. Her simplicity of manner is a great model. Her relationship with the director of the garden project is based on mutuality of work and grows simply into love. She is a model of femininity, which seems like chaos to the status quo.

**Made in Dagenham.** I reviewed this 2010 British film in our June 2011 journal. We saw it again recently and it remains relevant and fresh. It is based on the 1968 event of women workers at a Ford factory in Britain going on strike for equal pay—and getting it! A delightful film, I cheered all the way through, perhaps even more loudly than the first time I saw it, given that the situation hasn't changed that much in the U.S. Other elements of delight are the British humor and the fine actors: Sally Hawkins, Bob Hoskins, Miranda Richardson, and Rosamund Pike.

**Departures.** This 2008 Japanese film won the Academy Award for best foreign picture. I reviewed it in this journal 10 years ago and want to mention it again now as it has worn very well. It is about a young cellist whose orchestra is disbanded. He returns to his home town and stumbles across work as a *nokanshi*, a ritual mortician who prepares bodies for cremation. It is a cleansing ceremony in the presence of family and close friends. The man who trains him is a presence of few words and deep insight and the young man eventually becomes caught up in the beauty and dignity of the work. It

## RECOMMENDED READING

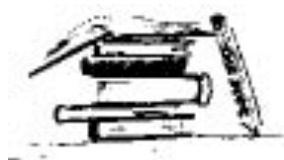
heals family relationships, including his with his wife and father. A very moving film.

In previous journals I have reviewed both **RBG** and **On the Basis of Sex**. Here I want to say only that if you haven't seen them they are must sees, and if you have, I suggest seeing them again. **RBG** is a documentary and **On the Basis of Sex** a drama, both about Ruth Bader Ginsberg and her phenomenal work on behalf of our freedoms. I wept through both, maybe more on the second viewings as she is gone now. May we never forget.

### RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall

*The Soul of America*  
*The Battle for our Better Angels*  
by Jon Meacham  
Random House, 2018



This book came about because, after the August 2017 events in Charlottesville, Virginia, the editor in chief of Time magazine asked Jon Meacham if he had anything to say about them. Presidential historian Meacham artfully reflects here on times in our history when presidents and other leaders acted beyond their imperfections and did the brave and the right thing. He quotes conversations, and speeches that inspire, he tells stories that bring tears. He notes that politicians are more often mirrors of public sentiment than molders of it. He notes that we lucked out when Joseph McCarthy did not become president; but that our luck didn't hold. He concludes thus: "For all our darker impulses, for all of our shortcomings, and for all of the dreams denied and deferred, the experiment begun so long ago, carried out so imperfectly, is worth the fight. There is, in fact no struggle more important and none nobler, than the one we wage in the service of those better angels who, however besieged, are always ready for battle."

*Rainbow Pie*

*A Memoir of Redneck America*  
by Joe Bageant  
Portobello Books, 2010

Our weekly group studied Joe Bageant's 2008 book, *Deer Hunting With Jesus*, some years back. He wrote *Rainbow Pie*, a coming-of-age memoir, before his death in 2011. The book is set in Virginia from 1950 to 1963 and features his Scots-Irish family, including Maw, Pap, and Ony Mae. Through them, it chronicles the journey of the postwar American rural underclass. I wasn't raised dirt poor but I was raised rural, and I deeply appreciate the gifts of that culture. One of the most moving stories is in the chapter called "A Culture of Shame." The chapter begins: "A fine old shotgun is an elegant thing." Joe Bageant goes on to describe all the qualities of such an instrument. His grandpa, Pap, had handed his Harrington & Richardson double-barrel bought in 1946 to Joe's daddy, assuming it would be handed down for generations. But in the winter of 1959 his dad had a heart attack and money was tight. That Christmas when the men of the family met on the porch at Maw and Pap's to go hunting, his dad was carrying a shotgun borrowed from an uncle. Nobody had to tell Joe how his and his siblings' toys had been paid for. Part of the necessity of gifts was to avoid the shame they experienced when the teacher at school had each one stand and say what they got for Christmas. Reading this book will add to your understanding of who we are as a country.

*Boundless Awareness*  
by Michael A. Rodriguez  
Non-duality Press, 2018

In this book Rodriguez draws on ancient wisdom traditions from India (Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism), Kashmir (Shaivism), Tibet (Dzogchen and Mahamudra), China (Taoism and Chan), and Japan (Zen), as well as mystical Christianity. But the book is not theoretical. It is a guide to self-exploration toward the discovery of your true self. The chapters are relatively short and include guided meditations and exercises, "visceral somatic practices" as he calls them, to ground the information in a journey from suffering to freedom.

## Realistic Living Mission Statement

Ordinary human consciousness focused on That which is most profound is an enlightenment that gives a viable and vital foundation for a next religious practice of Christianity, Buddhism, and other long-standing religions. A new Christian theologizing can view “faith in God” as a devoted trust in the Unconditional Ground of our Being.

**The core mission of Realistic Living is to clarify the essential Christian message and to promote and inspire a new Christian practice through small, intimate circles and their action as members of a local bioregion.**

We carry out this mission with many forms of research and event attendance. We write essays, books, journals, newsletters, and manuals. We maintain a website, a blog site, and other electronic ministries. We organize training events, Co-Pastor Circles, Zoom meetings and courses, political and justice participations, bioregional organizing, interfaith dialogues, and more. We create both solitary and group religious practices. And we offer each of these works as a homeopathic drop in the ocean of need.

### Ways You can Join Us

On October 3, 2020, we completed our first Zoom Online Seminar. Gene conducted ten sessions of discussions on texts from Part One of his new book, *The Thinking Christian*. Part One is on a description of the profound consciousness we seek with a good religious practice. In 2021 Gene will conduct Zoom Seminars on Parts One, Two, and Three of this important book. Part Two of this book is on Christian theologizing. Part Three is on Christian community and ethics. Contact us for more about this book and these Zoom Seminars.

We have a website with religious & social overviews, manuals, courses, books, and essays.

Just go here: <http://www.realisticliving.org/> and look around. There are courses on Bible, on theology and on ethics you can teach in your groups. There are solitary exercises you can use in your own nurture time. There are videos to listen to or use for discussion starters. There are study suggestions of all sorts. There are book reviews, communal life models, manuals, and suggestions. We have been collecting choice items on this website for 36 years.

We also have a blog site; go here: <http://realisticliving.org/blog/>. There you will find a series of essays called “Realistic Living Pointers.” There are eight hour-long video talks on Christian theology and practice. There is a whole commentary on the Gospel of Mark with complete text and discussion questions. There are study guides on a number of important books. And if you don’t find what you are looking for, please email us at:

[jgmarshall@cableone.net](mailto:jgmarshall@cableone.net).

### Realistic Living Finances

Financial gifts to Realistic Living go directly into needed services. We raise and spend a budget of **\$30,000 a year** on programing 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*.

Realistic Living is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation with no salaried personnel. The labor Gene, Joyce, and Alan provide is a gift to the movement. Your donations cover expenses for programming, electronic outreach, physical travel, and program attendance. An active 12-member board bears responsibility for the corporation. The board meets twice a year by Zoom, with Gene, Joyce, and Alan reporting to it and seeking its advice.

# Realistic Living

*is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."*

Check out our newly revised web site: [RealisticLiving.org](http://RealisticLiving.org)

Also, check out our Facebook page: [facebook.com/realisticliving](https://facebook.com/realisticliving)



## Our Bonham Circle Meets Now by Zoom

Here we are:

Alan, Paula, Don, Joyce, Gene,  
Faye, Scott, Joshua, Amariee, & Terry

Our 11th member, Pati, was babysitting grandchildren.

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