

Realistic Living

A Journal on Religion and Ethics

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Attenborough and Rockström examine nine deadly boundaries that humanity is pushing our planet to and beyond—boundaries that, once crossed, permanently end any sort of stable state of affairs for our planet.

These nine boundaries are: the familiar **climate crisis** caused by the CO₂ levels and other greenhouse gases that are over-heating the planet, **biosphere integrity**, **land system change**, **freshwater use**, **biogeochemical flows**, **ocean acidification**, **atmospheric aerosol loading**, **stratospheric ozone depletion**, and **novel entities** not yet quantified.

Breaking Boundaries

a review and a reflection
by Gene Marshall

“Breaking Boundaries: The Science Of Our Planet” is the name of a Netflix video in which David Attenborough and scientist Johan Rockström examine Earth’s biodiversity collapse and how this crisis can still be averted. This is a must-see video. It is the most moving presentation of this topic that I have seen. Here is the link

<https://www.netflix.com/title/81336476>

Science, when accurately and dramatically applied to our most pressing challenges, is a spirit experience, an ethical calling, a sanity restoration, and a grace experience, restoring us to Reality with a capital “R.”



Seeing that these nine boundaries must not be crossed is also seeing what can be done, if we act in time, to preserve a planet capable of sustaining human life. We have been hearing about these topics for some time, but the science is now coming together in a most convincing and rather hopeful way.

To meet these still surmountable challenges and thereby avoid crossing these deadly ecological boundaries, we humans will be required to break five

types of inherited social boundaries: political, economic, cultural, religious, and spiritual. I will illustrate all five of these sociological boundaries with United States illustrations, but this necessary type of boundary breaking is required of every nation on the planet, if we are to avoid wrong turns into the ecological doom of the nine types of planetary boundary breaking.

Political Boundary Breaking

We see in the news almost every day important political boundaries that the citizens of the United States are reluctant to cross. The January 6, 2021 insurrection on the U.S. capitol building and its occupants, joined with the actions of the Donald Trump forces prior to this event and actions of the Republican lawmakers after this event reveals without question that the Republican organization is now dedicated to the destruction of democracy and its replacement with a dictatorship dedicated to the preservation of white nationalist rule and other such evils. This anti-democracy must not continue to maintain power, if ecological doom is to be avoided.

A thin layer of Republican office holders still believes in forms of conservative politics that have meaning in a democratic context. These persons are relatively few, and most of them lack the courage to oppose Trump fully.

Therefore, the Republican organization has become a front group of sycophants for the anti-democratic Donald Trump cult. The Party of Lincoln is no longer a political party. A political party is a part of a democratic form of government. An organization that wants to do away with democracy or make democracy a mere veneer for a dictatorial style of rulership is not a political party in the true sense.

If a democracy can not purge such an anti-democratic and potentially violent movement from the processes of democratic political power, it will not be a democracy for long. So we must break through these dictatorial trends in as democratic and nonviolent a way as possible, but it must be done with violence if need be. The Trump forces are

certainly prepared to use violence to retain their illicit power.

Here is a second political boundary that we citizens of the United States need to become willing to cross: Honoring the facts of science is an imperative part of any democratic political discussion. Intentionally making up alternative facts that are then systematically taught to the public needs to be viewed as criminal. Democracy requires a well-informed citizenry. President Trump operated as a misinformers-in-chief and his lies were defended by most Republican office holders. The big lie about a second term being stolen from him was the final straw in this vast lie-telling. His many lies about the pandemic may have resulted in hundreds of thousands of needless deaths. And his constant tampering with the truth became a weekly scandal and the exploitation of a profoundly uninformed citizenry.

Perhaps his most deadly lie was calling the climate crisis a hoax, thereby excusing his administration from attending to the ever-rising CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and to the long emergency of the energy system transition. This piece of intentional lying will have consequences many times more deadly than his lying about the pandemic. The Trump cult of misinformation and outright lying is an attack on democracy itself—a dictatorial behavior of a criminal sort. The citizens of a democracy need to find ways to push beyond whatever political boundaries are preventing us from immediately interrupting such behavior with arrest, trial, and jail time. Further, a



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political party that supports such lying must be understood to be a domestic terrorist organization.

A third political boundary that democratic citizens need to break through concerns the taxation of billionaire wealth. Persons who control such economic power are able to avoid all but tiny bits of volunteer taxation. When wealth is being expanded through huge investments rather than through some sort of labor, the income tax system simply does not do the job of equitable taxation. A tax on wealth must be used if super-rich persons are to pay their fair share in the governing tasks. Also, billionaires, in both their investments and in their benevolent contributions are making huge political choices that need to be made by the populace as a whole. Billionaires along with other large pools of private wealth are buying elections and thereby managing what remains of democracy from their narrow viewpoints.

The huge public corporations have also accrued overreaching economic and political power and thus they too have become entities capable of destroying democracy and thereby destroying the possibilities to prevent our planet from crossing those planet-deadening boundaries of no return.

Economic Boundary Breaking

We now have in the U.S. and elsewhere powerful economic organizations that not only insist on managing our democracy in accord with their greed, but on not being regulated in any meaningful way by our democratic governments. For example, strong democratic nations and states must require oil companies to submit for government approval their plans to phase out their product in two decades. Any fossil-fuel company that fails to understand themselves as a transition fuel provider, required to cooperate with government plans to limit CO₂ levels must be severely fined, closed down, or whatever compels compliance with the needed planet-saving actions. These powerful economic players cannot be trusted to regulate themselves.

The huge economic players, who are insisting on managing our democracy in terms of their narrow monetary interests, find the idea of having a

powerful democratic government regulate big economic players to be an anathema. This reluctance must be broken through if we are to have an energy system operating in accord with our dire ecological challenges. Even forward-leaning polices that are less than full-speed ahead constitute a social boundary we must cross in order to prevent our planet from crossing those ecological boundaries that must not be crossed.

A second economic boundary that needs to be broken through is the notion of so many wealth owners that government tax dollars somehow still belong exclusively to their influence. This means that the millions of new jobs (needed for making the required ecological transitions) cannot be created by tax dollars. Big-business opposition to government-organized programs results in passing on to working people the bill for any ecological transition in order that big wealth owners do not have to pay for it. If those who own most of the wealth do not participate fully in paying for the needed ecological transitions, we will all end up paying for the resulting catastrophes double and triple what the transition would have cost us. So let us explain to our rich acquaintances that using tax dollars now for these emergency ecological transitions is a huge bargain for us all.

A third economic boundary that needs to be crossed has to do with developing the technology for a solar age. We humans who have just landed another complicated rover on the planet Mars, nevertheless, have among us many techno-pessimists who are educating us to believe that we cannot invent the technologies we need to access enough solar energy to create an efficient sort of industrially appropriate society. This amounts to a strange hatred for the possibilities that we are still coming to see clearly. We must break through this heavy haze of pessimism on the part of this conservative technological thought.

Cultural Boundary Breaking

The cultural norms that need to be broken through number in the hundreds in the United States alone. Planet-wide it is thousands. I am going to discuss four U.S cultural patterns that are most significant in

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blocking ecological progress. They are: defunding public education, a difficulty with truth, an absence of the universe story, and our reluctance to rooting out the caste system.

Defunding public education has been a conscious effort on the part of key conservative forces to dumb-down the population to a state of compliance with reactionary values and notions. A democracy cannot function well without an informed population. Strong, secular, well-taught, and free public education is a pillar of our democracy. This includes science and humanities, interpersonal savvy, and social wisdom. Herein is a first key cultural boundary we are required to cross and to do so now to avoid planetary doom. This downright hateful attitude toward public education is a serious barrier that we must break through.



A second cultural boundary we must break is our **reluctance to honor truth**. Crossing this boundary pertains to the quality of public education. It includes teaching students how to think for themselves, rather than what to think to fit into society or simply get a job. We all need to know the scientific method of truth seeking. We do not need to know the latest scientific truth in every field. We do need to know how, when, and why to trust the true scientists in health care, ecology, and every other topic that affects our lives. We also need to know that scientific truth is not the whole of truth. A biology or psychology that includes full attention to the reality of human consciousness has entered into the realm of inward-looking truth or contemplative inquiry. This sort of truth is present in the humanities, the arts, history, interpersonal relations, and social life in general. None of us can know all that needs to be known, but we can all know that each of us is a scientist, a contemplative, an interpersonal being, and a social change agent. Truth is a key human topic for everyone.

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A third key cultural boundary that U.S. citizens must break through is having a **working awareness of the universe story**. That narrative includes the story of the Big Bang to the birth of this planet, the origin of life on this planet to the dawn of the upright-walking primates, the evolution of homo-sapiens who possess a natural intelligence that includes language, art, and mathematics, and a rough outline of the history of this species of which we are members. We are not functional citizens until we can put all that we know into this vast overview.

A fourth key cultural boundary that U.S. citizens must break through in order to muster the energy to handle the ecological emergencies has to do with **rooting out the caste system**. This breakthrough will include full standing for women with men. It will include ceasing to view or structure any racial or ethnic group as lesser than our imagined universal or ideal world. And perhaps most difficult of all, it includes economic equity that effectively does away with economic class distinctions. This caste system is wasting the human energy that is badly needed for the ecological transitions we must make. White people, for example, become more alive by giving up wasting their energy trying to keep black people down. Welcoming every person's help with the real problems is a win/win direction. Black people are not competing with whites for the jobs and advantages that whites now have. Both groups have the same future that they can build together.

Religious Boundary Breaking

Religion is a cultural matter like every other cultural process, but most people are almost entirely without an informed philosophy of religion. Religion is both taken too seriously and not taken seriously enough. On the too-serious side, we are not sufficiently aware that religion is merely a social practice alongside politics and sewage disposal. For example, meditation is just a personal practice. Attending rituals is just a social practice. Theologizing is also a religious practice. Praying is a religious practice. The revering of religious icons,

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statuary, paintings or architecture is another religious practice. These religious practices do not cause the enlightenment of or activation of our authenticity. Such happenings are an accident (an independent happening of Reality) that religious practice make more likely.

On the “not taking religion seriously enough” side, we can notice that religion came into being along with language, art, and mathematics in order to link us humans with Reality of a basic and profound sort—Reality as a land of mystery—Reality as way beyond making sense. Humans have a propensity to imagine a false reality, rather than deal with the real possibilities of Reality. Healthy religion assists us to notice the overall Realism of which and within which our authentic humanity is an inseparable part. Religion is a medicine that sometimes, perhaps often, helps heal our spirit-sick states. Without religion of a healthy sort, our humanity descends ever-farther into the demonic pit.

We need effective religion that does the job of assisting our humanity to keep to the roadway of realism. Deluded people will not succeed in saving the planet from crossing those deadly boundaries we are already approaching because of our habituated actions. We will need the functioning of those “higher angels” of our authenticity, and we need the operation of that powerful freedom that our authenticity includes.

Spiritual Boundary Breaking

If “spiritual” has do with opting for the authentic or promoting the delusory, then all of us are spiritual beings with some combination of authenticity and spirit sickness. So understood, being “spiritual” is as down-to-Earth as mud. There is no “spiritual” that is the opposite of “material.” There is just a spiritual that is also fully material. And there is just a materiality that is also spiritual. Our deepest consciousness is still just a form of natural intelligence along with the intelligence of a worm and the intelligence of a cat. Our most profound consciousness is simply our natural consciousness being conscious of consciousness and of that Overall Reality that is indeed the Profoundness we are

meeting in every personal and historical event. Until we break through those barriers that keep us from our authenticity, we will not aid our planet toward retreating from the boundaries that a viable planet for humanity must not cross. We are well on our way to the cliffs of doom. And it is our choices, not some fate, that hold our hope. We might say that God waits to decide what the future will be until we decide who we will be.

The Cook, the Sorceress, and the Pig

a Fairy Tale

By Joyce Marshall

Once upon a time, a long time ago on a far away South Sea island there lived a Cook. As you might imagine, this cook was somewhat frustrated on this island because there was such an abundance of fresh fruit to eat year round that there was little need to cook. But fish—there were lots of fish of all kinds and he prepared them in a variety of ways: fried, broiled, fricasseed, baked, in seafood salads. But there was only himself to eat it.



One day he was totally absorbed in working out a new recipe for shrimp, singing a little tune to himself, when he became aware that he was being watched. He looked over his shoulder and there she was—the Sorceress. He had heard the island had a sorceress,

but never had he seen her. She wore a flowing garment in filmy greens and blues. Her eyes were very bright and clear and seemed to look through him. And beside her sat a Pig—for sorcery always needs an animal nearby to assist the magic. Oh yes—and in her hand was a tiny Bell—a silver bell, he noted.

The cook didn't quite know what to do or say, so he just went on about his cooking—peeling shrimp and cutting onions and herbs.

Finally she spoke.

"That smells good," she said.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I'm sure there will be plenty if you'd like some."

"Yes, I would, thank you," said she and rang her little bell.

Immediately a table and chairs appeared all set with dinnerware and napkins with setting for three. The pig climbed up on a chair and she sat down at one.

The cook was surprised, but said nothing. He served up the gourmet dish and the three set to eating. The woman ate little, he noticed. And slowly. But she was very appreciative, commenting on each taste she observed. And the pig also, contrary to his expectation, ate slowly and awarley. Obviously the pig's association with the sorceress affected his behavior.

Finally the cook said, "I've heard about you."

"Oh?" she said. "What have you heard?"

"Oh, just that there was a magical person on the island. A female."

"Ah!" she said.

"So, I see that it's true."

Um, hmmm," said she.

"I have a question," said the cook.

The sorceress turned her gaze on him, wondering what magic he wished of her.

"Would you, would you and the pig, please be my guests at dinner sometimes, say, once a week? It would please me very much."

And now it was her turn to be surprised. The sorceress flashed a smile that lighted up the entire island.

"Well!" she said. "Well, well, well. Most assuredly we accept your invitation, don't we, Pig?"

The pig nodded affirmatively.

So I guess you're wondering how all this turned out—down the road a few years. I don't really know. All I know for sure is that they began their weekly dates and that the cook was happy to have appreciative ones to cook for, the pig was pleased to have a gourmet meal every week, and the sorceress was delighted to have someone asking to do for her rather than asking her to do for them.

Sounds like happily ever after in my book.

The End of the Keystone XL Pipeline

**Standing Rock is Everywhere:
The Indigenous Heart of the Climate Change Fight**
by Alan Jay Richard

This is a story of victory for the earth and of the end of the Keystone XL pipeline. It also involves the Dakota Access pipeline and the Standing Rock Lakota reservation, indeed the entire world, all of which is threatened by our desperate last burst of fossil fuel exploitation. It is a story of what the dogged persistence and creativity of indigenous people and their allies can do against the kind of power we've been told is impossible to resist. But it's a story without a guaranteed ending. The ending depends on us.



In 2004, small indigenous nations living near the Alberta Tar Sands project, the largest unconventional

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oil extraction effort in the world, began reaching out for help. Not only was the project interfering with their water, fishing, and hunting infrastructure, but rare and unusual cancers were appearing. They contacted policy experts at the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in Washington, D.C., who met with them in 2005 and saw photographic documentation of the devastation. These experts began to gather data and to raise awareness in the United States, on whose special refineries the project relied. Experts focused on the unique risks posed by tar sands at every stage of production, including extraction, transportation, and refinement. It wasn't enough, but without the testimony and photographs supplied by indigenous people, experts would not have noticed for some time.

In 2008, approximately two dozen people from indigenous nations and environmental activist groups met to develop an overall strategy. The groups decided that the most promising activist target was the Keystone XL (KXL) pipeline, proposed by the giant TransCanada (now TC Energy) corporation to move the tar sands to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast. Stopping the pipeline would rob the Tar Sands project of financial justification. The unusually expensive techniques required for extracting, transporting, and refining tar sands made them unusable when the global barrel price was low, and any increases in the cost of production would make investors flee.

This small group of people had almost no support. Going up against the Keystone XL pipeline meant taking on the Republican Party, half the Democratic Party, the U.S. government, the Canadian government, and the entire oil industry. But with the presence of indigenous organizers in this group, they soon discovered they had something far more important.

Attendees at the meeting began spreading the word. Clayton Thomas-Muller, a climate activist belonging to the Columb Cree Nation of Manitoba and an attendee, noticed that the pipeline would be running through the Oglala aquifer, a route that, in addition to being an environmental scourge, also threatened indigenous sovereignty. He began using his existing connections from previous anti-pipeline

campaigns in indigenous nations to persuade tribal councils to pass resolutions opposing KXL, which they took directly to President Obama in 2011. Thomas-Muller continued to work on tribal organizing throughout the effort to stop KXL. By 2010, Jane Kleeb of Bold Nebraska became aware of the Keystone XL threat. She attended the first State Department hearing on the pipeline in York, Nebraska in May out of curiosity without even knowing what tar sands were. At the hearing, she noticed that over 100 farmers and ranchers spoke out individually against the pipeline project and the only person speaking for it represented a union of construction workers on the pipeline. Kleeb thought the pipeline could be stopped if she could persuade Nebraska's increasingly reactionary farmers and ranchers to join indigenous people and environmentalists. To do this, she relied on indigenous support. Including Muller's. As a result, 150 tribes from the United States and Canada met in her state to sign an agreement opposing pipeline construction. The indigenous people she worked with gave her good organizing advice, also spiritual advice. First, stay rooted in real, concrete stories, not abstract principles. Second, never give up. The latter was remarkable guidance, especially coming from people who have endured what indigenous people in North America have endured.

The pipeline rose to national awareness in 2011, when former NASA climate scientist James Hansen wrote an essay arguing that it would be "game over for the climate" if the Alberta tar sands were fully developed. After this, 350.org got involved. They arranged for scores of celebrities to engage in civil disobedience in front of the White House. Here in Texas, Cindy Spoon, a graduate student at the University of North Texas, co-founded the Tar Sands Blockade after the White House protests and, following Kleeb's lead, began organizing local pipeline resistance in communities along the Texas portion of the planned route. The Tar Sands Blockade, and the Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance that grew out of it, used bold, theatrical, and courageous tactics to block construction of the pipeline. Cindy also followed the guidance Kleeb had received from indigenous people in Nebraska, to stay rooted in

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stories and never give up. Tar Sands Blockade kept the issue in the news in Texas and Oklahoma, and occasionally in the national news, long after President Obama had already approved construction of the southern half. And Tar Sands Blockade cost TC Energy a lot of money.

Cindy Spoon personally recruited a friend of mine and fellow activist for an arrest-risking direct action effort. I attended a training camp she organized and eventually got myself arrested at a KXL pumping station under



construction in Seminole County, Oklahoma. Indigenous people were crucial agents in this experience. I and my colleague were thrown into what turned out to be the “Indian tank” at the county jail. The local Seminole men in jail with us that day were neither surprised to hear about the utterly unprincipled way power works in the United States, nor surprised to find us to be relatively naïve about it. But the men who spoke most freely with us also insisted on another kind of power. One guy wanted to form a circle and have each of us read something from the Bible that meant something to us and explain what it meant. During one of his turns, he quoted a verse from Matthew 19 about all things being possible with God. He looked at us and said, “This means you keep going, no matter what.” Stay rooted in real stories, and never give up.

For years after the intense efforts of 2011 and 2012, the fight against the KXL remained precarious. President Obama temporarily delayed it, but Trump attempted to accelerate it. Indigenous groups continued to resist, leading efforts against the northern half of the pipeline. And then indigenous people broadened the fight, linking it to the Dakota Pipeline resistance on the Standing Rock reservation, where the effort took on a more explicit indigenous spiritual context. Mornings, Lakota women walked to Cannonball River for a water ceremony. At dawn,

local people chanted in the Lakota language. At night, Lakota elders tended a sacred fire, saying “Water is life. Defend the sacred.” In December 2016, Chief Arvol Looking Horse, 19th keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe and Bundle, visited the camp where his son was a leader. Reminding those present of the

millions of attacks on the integrity of the earth community, he insisted that power lies in the common indigenous commitment to the sacredness of the physical world. He gave the same guidance Jane Kleeb had received from indigenous activists. Our struggle, he said, must be tireless and “prayer-filled,” rooted in stories drawn from experience, and we must never give up. He reassured them they would be victorious because, though people may believe this isn’t their fight, “Standing Rock is everywhere.” This sentence was, I have heard from friends who were present, the missing piece of the puzzle, exposing the unreality of indifference. Yes. It is everywhere. Nowhere on earth is safe from this threat, and we are all in the midst of it.

In January 2021, President Biden signed an executive order revoking the permit for the last phase of the KXL pipeline. By this time, investors had already been fleeing. The efforts of Clayton Thomas-Muller, Jane Kleeb, Cindy Spoon and indigenous activists across the pipeline route were bearing fruit. On June 9, TC Energy (TransCanada) abandoned the project. With the Keystone XL dead, the Alberta Tar Sands is likely to follow.

The Dakota Access pipeline, however, remains active. The sacred water on which the people of Standing Rock depend remains threatened. We can celebrate a genuine victory with the end of the KXL and it is appropriate to be grateful for the indigenous guidance responsible for this victory. Nevertheless, the struggle continues and it is our struggle, too, not someone else’s. We may be afraid to feel ourselves in the midst of it, but we are. The guidance remains true:

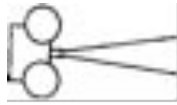
Stay rooted in real stories. Never give up.

Standing Rock is everywhere.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

MOVIES



The Two Popes. This interaction between Pope Benedict and Pope Francis is imaginary, but it might have happened and it is very pleasant to suppose it did. Certainly so with perfectly cast Jonathan Pryce and Anthony Hopkins.

Fisherman's Friends is based on a true story about a group of ten Cornish fishermen who also sing sea chanteys. So well, in fact, that they were actually signed by Universal Records and achieved a top 10 hit with their debut album. As soon as I heard the opening song I didn't care what the story was about. I just loved their singing.

News of the World. Tom Hanks plays a Civil War Veteran who is traveling about Texas with newspapers, making a meager living reading stories from them to groups, each of whom throws a dime in the hat. He comes across a young girl who was raised by the Kiowas and is assigned to return her to her blood relatives. Their adventures are heart-stopping and their eventual connection heart-warming.

Mulan (2020). This is the live-action adaption of the 1998 film based on the Chinese story Ballad of Mulan. In the US we would call Mulan a tom boy, with a touch of magic. To escape being married off and to save her old father from going back into battle, she disguises herself as a man and goes into battle. This is a fantastic (in manyways) feminist film.

Ophelia. If you are a Shakespeare aficionado you may not like this film, however, I love Shakespeare and I also love this more detailed rendition of the character Ophelia, Hamlet's love. Ah, she wasn't really crazy! It was ever so much more complicated than Shakespeare let us know. Written, directed and produced by women, it clearly has a feminist heart. And it will be much more fun and less confusing if you are familiar with Shakespeare's play, Hamlet.

St. Vincent. Maybe you saw this movie in 2014. Even if you did, you might want to consider seeing it again. I found that it wears very well. Bill Murray is a genius and this focus on every day saints will make you laugh and cry and appreciate all of us cranky ordinary people.

SERIES

Unorthodox. This four-part series is loosely based on a woman's 2012 autobiography of her rejection of her Hasidic roots. At 19, she runs away from her arranged marriage in Brooklyn NY to Berlin where her estranged mother lives. She bravely attaches herself to a group of students at a music conservatory which gives her a community from which to reconnect with her mother and disconnect from her ultra-orthodox family in the US.

The Queen's Gambit. This seven-part series is about a girl who was raised in an orphanage in Kentucky where she learned chess from the janitor. Her rise to becoming the world's champion is rocky, intriguing, and totally satisfying.

Anne With An E. This 27-episode series needed to go on even longer. I recall reading *Anne of Green Gables* (upon which it is based) when I was in grade school in the 40s. Like *Queen's Gambit*, it is also about an orphan girl—this time in Canada, on Prince Edward Island. At 13, she is adopted by an elderly brother and sister who really wanted a boy to help out on the farm. Talkative and imaginative, Anne deals with their initial lack of acceptance, and through the years with finding a place in the school and the community.

Bridgerton. So far there have been 8 episodes of this series, and at least one more season is expected. Set in the Regency era in London, 1813, I felt many of the upsetting events of this series to be unnecessary, nevertheless, the denouement was quite satisfying.

DOCUMENTARIES

My Octopus Teacher. This Academy Award winning documentary is a lovely example of how human beings can reconnect to the natural world. Craig

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Foster, naturalist and diver, at a time of crisis in his life, went back to the place of his early diving experiences off the coast of South Africa. He discovered in the underwater kelp forests there an octopus whom he visited and filmed daily for a year. A trusting relationship developed which healed him and those of us who share his experience through this remarkable film.

Becoming. This documentary is based on Michelle Obama's memoir of that name (reviewed here earlier). It follows her as she tours the country on her 34-city book tour, speaking at large venues and interacting with individuals at book signings. The film captures beautifully the character of the former first lady as she recounts the experience of becoming known the world over. I see her growing into that role with an amazing amount of grace and humility. Inspiring.

John and Yoko: Above Us Only Sky. This film explores the meeting and creative relationship of John Lennon and Yoko Ono. It clarified for me their mutual attraction and the whole Beatle story as it played out. Another inspiring film.

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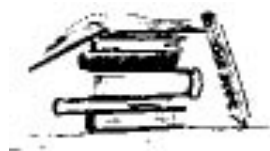
reviews by Joyce Marshall

Fragrant Palm Leaves

Journals 1962-1966

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Riverhead Books, 1999



These personal reflections from the famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist take place during the Viet Nam War. Thich Nhat Hanh came to America to study and teach at Princeton and Columbia in 1961. In Viet Nam he was experiencing disapproval from the Buddhist authorities and in danger of being arrested by police.

In 1963 he returned to Viet Nam to aid his fellow monks in nonviolent peace efforts. This book is a combination of details of his life in New Jersey, New York City, and Viet Nam and his internal happenings as he dealt with American culture and with issues in his home country. In these years he is in his 30s and

already a mature spirit whose stories of his personal struggles are inspiring. It is also useful to read his reflections on American life. Most of all I find the core of his Buddhist perspective to be deeply nurturing. Although this teacher has created monasteries in the US, Germany and France, today, at age 94 and having suffered a severe stroke, he has now been allowed to return to Viet Nam to live out his days.

The Perfume of Silence

by Francis Lucille

Truespeech Productions, 2006

This book is taken from dialogues with Francis Lucille in America, Canada, and Europe, between 1997 and 2002. In the foreword, Rupert Spira, Lucille's student who compiled the dialogues and who is himself a teacher, makes it clear that the book is not about concepts, but about openness—not about student and teacher but about friendship and love. In one of the dialogues, Lucille says, "It is always through giving up concepts and opinions that we make progress. It doesn't mean that there is no activity, that you accept everything passively. We can simply see the facts in any situation, without strong opinions, and take action." He goes on to say that "Honesty is always efficient and has long-term positive effects. Honesty, truth, and love never die. They remain alive in the hearts of people. Like a torch, they pass on from generation to generation. Of course, if you see a problem in society and there is something that you can do about it, go head and do it." One student asked him, "What is the true purpose of our existence?" Part of his answer was, "We are an instrument of celebration." This evoked in me the memory of one of my bioregional gurus, Thomas Berry, who died in 2009. It drew me to pull his books off the shelf and to discover that some of his associates wrote a biography of Berry in 2019.

Thomas Berry, A Biography

by Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim,

and Andrew Angyal

Columbia University Press, 2019

Actually, Brian Swimme wrote the book that the celebration line recalled to me. He wrote *The Universe*

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is a *Green Dragon* as a dialogue with Thomas who inspired Brian with his teaching. I reviewed that book in an earlier RL Journal. It is fine poetry that resonates with Francis Lucille's book. Thomas talks of allurements being the basic reality of the macrocosmic universe, the binding energy where love begins. Then he says that fascination and enchantment are our destiny as human beings, that a deep belly laugh might be our one true cry. And I always remembered this line: "Perhaps the entire natural world is a tremendous party, a festival, and we the long awaited champagne."

I remain grateful that I spent some time visiting with Thomas Berry personally at the first bioregional Congress in 1984 and when he spoke in Dallas later. Reading this fine biography is an opportunity to know him more fully.



Berry was born in 1913, the third of thirteen children to William and Bess, a Catholic couple living in Protestant Greensboro North Carolina who were progressive by the standards of the day. William developed a coal business to support his growing family. At his business, William hired African Americans, paid them a decent wage, provided dental care, and knew their families by name. He was also generous to the poor and passed on to his children his sense of social justice, all thirteen of whom earned college degrees.

There were also two doctorate degrees, three master's degrees, and one medical doctorate. Four of the thirteen entered Catholic religious orders, Thomas being one. Thomas inherited his contemplative bent from his mother, Bess. Thomas was not always supported in his thinking and teaching by his superiors in the church. He maintained that traditional Christianity failed to address the pressing problems of the modern world and that it overemphasized individual redemption. He called for "an interior journey to one's authentic

self, which would result in a newly awakened spiritual consciousness." He felt what was needed was a new story, *A Universe Story*. He used terms like Ecozoic era, Patriarchy, EcoFeminism, and considered himself a "geologist." He was affected by Thomas Aquinas (from whom he chose his religious name), Teilhard de Chardin, the religions of the East, and Native American traditions. He remained a Catholic priest in the Passionist Order which he chose, as he said, "because of the special devotion to the Passion of Christ, because of the missionary work which the Order does, and because of the strictness of the Order."

Berry was assigned to China, where he longed to return but could not get the assignment. He was a chaplain during the Korean War. Finally, he was assigned to teach, and in 1961 he did a seminar at Columbia on Oriental thought and religion. This biography includes his one to three sentence summaries of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Zen which I find right on the mark.

In the 70s Berry established the Riverdale Center for Religious Research where he lived and worked with graduate students for nearly 30 years. His library there contained 10,000 books. Berry traveled and led seminars and was amazingly active in his later years. He died in 2009 at age 94. I discovered that two books of his essays written from 1972 to 2001 were published in 2009, so I read them this past year. *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* deals with where Berry perceives Christianity got off track and how it might reverse direction and help avoid catastrophe on Earth. As Berry puts it: "We will obey the divine directions of the natural world or we will die. This is the ultimate imperative from which there is no escape." *The Sacred Universe* emphasizes how we discover our proper place in the universe. He speaks of combining our understanding of the Earth given by scientific inquiry with the traditional mythic symbols and rituals associated with the Great Mother.

I do want to mention as well his earlier books, which we reviewed here in earlier issues. They remain relevant today. *The Dream of the Earth*, has fantastic chapters on Patriarchy and Bioregionalism. In *The Great Work* Berry looks at the various institutions of our lives—corporations, universities, the petroleum

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industry, etc.—and how we re-invent the human to fulfill our unique task. *The Universe Story*, which he wrote with Brian Swimme, includes an awesome 10-page timeline—beginning 15 billion years ago and then listing when each happening occurred from supernovas to solar system to a living earth. For example, the first members of our species were about 2.6 million years ago, whereas early cats and dogs were up to 35 million years ago.

So I invite you to explore the writings of and about Thomas Berry, a modern saint in my book, for a dose of wonder and profound humility.

Mediocre

The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America

by Ijeoma Oluo

Seal Press, 2020

Oluo states near the beginning of this book that she is not saying that every white man is mediocre, but that white male mediocrity is a baseline that preserves white male power regardless of white male skill or talent whereas the achievements of women and people of color have been erased from our histories. She notes that the “patriarchal elevation of incompetence” has allowed us to see a “lewd, spoiled, incompetent, untalented bully as someone who best represents the vision of America.” Then she tells stories to illustrate how this has taken place. I had never heard the full story of Buffalo Bill and how “The Wild West stage show morphed into Western movies that glorified the tough and noble white man against racist depictions of Native and Hispanic people.” She goes on to George Wallace and the murder of “Negroes” and the use and abuse of women in the work place in World War II. She notes in ugly detail the ridicule and dangers heroic women like Shirley Chisholm, Lani Guinier, Hillary Clinton, and the Squad must face. She doesn’t let the “woke” bros off the hook either, the “good guys” who interrupt us in group discussions and tell us what we should read to become better feminists like them, and even takes on Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. This is a very readable and informative book.

Reviews by Alan Richard

The Sum of Us:

What Racism Costs Us and

How We Can Prosper Together

By Heather McGhee

One World Press (Penguin-Random House)

Heather McGhee became a phenomenon in left-of-center media circles after the publication of *The Sum of Us*, her book-length essay on the historical importance and destructive legacy of a “zero-sum” approach to power and resources to contemporary American political and social reality. She deserves the attention. McGhee’s book shows the author as an activist with grassroots organizing experience, a policy wonk, and a communicator with great journalistic chops. But it is more than a list of these qualities might indicate. It is essential reading for those seeking serious strategies for facing the challenges before us, from climate change to wealth inequality, because it addresses why building solidarity has been so hard, and how it can be done in spite of this.

McGhee argues that the genocide and torture characterizing the conquest of the American continent, with a death toll that “changed the amount of carbon in the atmosphere” in one century after contact, required justification. Turning first to religion and then creating race on top of it, Spanish and English courts and their colonial settler agents invented one. When England began importing the masses of landless poor squeezed out of its landscape through centuries of systematic persecution and power consolidation, it was filling its colonies with people desperate for someone to take their place on the bottom of a caste system in a society unusually dependent on zero-sum practices. And someone soon did. The slave, once distinguished from the indentured servant to prevent rebellion, provided newly “white” servants both tangible benefits (McGhee tells how parish churches sold the confiscated property of African slaves and gave the money to the “parish poor,” which didn’t, of course, include these slaves) and what WEB DuBois famously called a “psychological wage.” Eventually, freedom for people who were legally “white” came to be understood, not so much in relationship to the

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contrast between the former condition of one's parents in England as in relationship to the Black slave. Secure freedom, then, lay in ensuring that the Black slave did not move from where she or he was. Freedom could only be preserved the way it was gotten: by depriving someone else of something.

Today, the same "zero-sum" mentality underlies white resistance to shared social goods that would improve their own lives as well as those of non-whites, and endorsement of economic policies that make their own lives steadily worse. She uses an extended description of one example to drive this point home: the vanishing of public swimming pools after court-ordered desegregation. The stupidity of those who were manipulated into shutting down their own access to safe recreation, since for many in the mobs that forced these shutdowns, private pools were not an option, is so extreme it prompts self-examination: why do we let ourselves get bamboozled like this? For McGhee, though our bamboozlement isn't necessary, it's understandable. The people with the most resources have objectively benefitted from the maintenance of both the caste system and the false stories that prompt so many of its victims to align themselves with it against those frozen by presumably immutable characteristics at the bottom. Since the people at the top have the lion's share of the resources, they can buy the expertise necessary to surround us with new versions of stories that reach into those habitual zero-sum assumptions, prompting white voters to fear what would ultimately improve their lives.

McGhee's proposed solution involves policy changes, which she sees as strengthening solidarity and weakening zero-sum arguments. But these policy changes can only be achieved if at least some solidarity already cuts through the zero-sum story, so she also recommends the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) process. She argues that the zero-sum narrative of "the way things are" can only be countered when a new narrative is built up out of stories from the lives of individuals experiencing the way things really are for them, and when these stories are heard without defensiveness. This won't be a narrative about preserving something this country has already achieved, but about becoming

something it could be precisely because of the potential our zero-sum legacy excludes or extinguishes. Our potential is rooted, she says, not in any one group of us or any one individual, but in something more than any of them. The vivid stories she tells of people coming together in and connecting (despite the power of the zero-sum forces) both witness to this "something more" and express it.

Caste

The Origins of Our Discontents

by Isabel Wilkerson

Random House, 2020

In the July 2019 journal, Joyce reviewed and justly praised Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, about the Great Migration of Black people to northern cities, fleeing systematic campaigns of terror against them in the south. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* has the strong grasp of history and skillful storytelling Joyce admired in that book, and its scope is vast. In *Caste*, Wilkerson proposes and defends the thesis that the United States has a caste system that was already mature at its founding. She then compares our caste system to the one in India and the one that took hold in Nazi Germany. She shows how caste systems are "anchored," how they are reproduced through tacit habit which seems to reinforce but actually generates belief, how people are induced to align themselves with higher castes against lower castes almost everywhere on the caste hierarchy, and how caste categories shift and change while leaving the fundamental structure intact. Each of her points is illustrated with carefully researched historical examples presented with a sensitivity to life we are accustomed to associate with fiction. Her book concludes with stories that illustrate how caste barriers can sometimes be subverted through the shared vulnerability of our common humanity, and calls on us to attend to that shared vulnerability not just in the name of progress but in the name of our very survival. It is not an understatement to say that *Caste* is essential reading for every citizen.

Realistic Living Mission Statement

When ordinary human consciousness is focused on that Final Mysterious Reality that is making no sense to humans whatsoever, then we are alive in that profound freedom and that human enlightenment that gives motivation to practice any next religious expression, including Christian ones. A next Christian practice includes the practice of theologizing. In the Realistic Living version of that theologizing, “faith in God” means a devoted trust in the Unconditional Ground of our Being—an Absolute Mystery that has no rational ground at all.

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, and then sharing those findings and innovative practices. We write essays, books, journals, newsletters, and manuals. We maintain a website, a blog site, and other electronic ministries. We organize training events, Zoom meetings and Seminars, 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.

Joyce and Gene, in their advanced ages, are cutting down their services to a few priorities each. Alan and a number of other long-time participants in this movement of spirit exploration are taking up more of the teaching and traveling tasks that Joyce and Gene once did, as well as things never before dreamed. Over the thirty-six and a half years of the existence of Realistic Living, we have gathered together a huge collection of writings to study, study plans to consider, simple but deep courses to teach, and workshops and solitary exercises to do.

Go to our website <http://www.realisticliving.org/> and look over the material laid out there. You can be a student of theology and ethics and a teacher of the same with far less than a graduate degree. Theologizing for our own nurture and teaching theologizing to others needs to become the skill of every Christian practitioner.

Ways You can Join With Us

Zoom Training

Gene has now conducted five Zoom Online Seminars—two on Part One of *The Thinking Christian*, two on Part Two, and one on Part Three. Each of these Seminars was 10 one-hour sessions on successive Saturdays.

Beginning on August 7, 2021, Gene will facilitate two Zoom Seminars on Parts One and Three of this book. Then on January 15, 2022, Gene will conduct two more Zoom Seminars on Parts One and Two. Contact us for more information about this book and about these Zoom Seminars

Four more Zoom Seminars are scheduled for the rest of 2022. Each Seminar is an invitational event for five women and five men. These are not come-and-go programs. Each participant is also a teacher of the other nine and a student of all as well.

If you do not already own a copy of the Wipf and Stock published book, *The Thinking Christian*, we still have 12 bargain copies that can be shipped within the United States free of charge. Simply send a check made out to Gene Marshall for \$28 together with your name and postal address to 3578 N. State Highway 78; Bonham, TX 75418.

Part One of this book is a description of the profound consciousness we seek with a good religious practice, and what a good religious practice generally is and what a good religious practice is for.

Part Two is on the religious practice of Christian theologizing—a reflection on a life of faith that includes trust in Profound Reality, the profound consciousness of Trust, Love, and Freedom, and the embodied participation in living the resurrected Body of Christ that is also our human authenticity.

Part Three is about the Ethics of the Body of Christ, its mission, its nurture, its intimate communal life, and its appropriate new institutions of commonality for this potential new form of human habitation of the planet.

These are all basic ever-changing and expanding awarenesses that can be carried on long after the Realistic Living organization is no more..

Website Resources for Study and Teaching

Our website has 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 and look around: <http://realisticliving.org/blog/> There you will find a series of essays called “Realistic Living Pointers.” There are also videos—including eight hour-long talks on Christian theology and practice. There is a 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, consider:

An E-mail-Dialogue

We are open to assist you to understand these resources or to discuss any of these matters with you. Our new email addresses:

Gene: gwesleymarshall@gmail.com

Joyce: joycemarshal623@gmail.com

Alan: alanjayrichard@gmail.com

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.

This work is support for a movement of religious renewal that is primarily Christian, but also largely relevant to religious renewal in general and also fostering a religious ethics that is intentionally interreligious.

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*.

We do not pay salaries to our three staff members, but only expenses that sustain our programing, electronic outreach, physical travel, and program attendance. We have a 12-member official board who is responsible for our non-profit 501-C3 corporation and who are also an active working board, that now meet twice a year by Zoom. The staff—Gene, Joyce, and Alan—seek the advice of this board, and our finances are legally reviewed by them. The staff meet regularly, do many things together, such as this journal, and each have our own ministries as well.



Realistic Living

is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."

Check out our newly revised web site: RealisticLiving.org

Also, check out our Facebook page: facebook.com/realisticliving



Paula Brennecke took these photos and made this montage of our recent Circle Celebration

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