COMMONWEAL CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

A discussion guide for local communities

2024 – 2025

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Saving Democracy

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In nearly every part of the world, democracy is in decline. Right-wing populists and authoritarian strongmen from Ecuador to Hungary continue to advance their personal interests and silence dissent with unchecked power. A recent report by the advocacy group Freedom House found that civil liberties were widely diminished for the eighteenth consecutive year and, according to the nonprofit advocacy group Protect Democracy, more than one-third of the world's population currently reside in countries that are becoming less democratic.

The United States is not immune from this disturbing trend. Democracy is similarly in peril here—both from rising autocratic forces and a confluence of long-simmering cultural and political tensions, including the erosion of democratic institutions and increased polarization. Concerted efforts to overturn the 2020 election, which culminated in the violent and anti-democratic January 6 attack on the Capitol, laid bare these animating tensions and demonstrated just how precarious the tradition of self-rule in America has become. It's no wonder then that leading up to the 2024 presidential election nearly two-thirds of young Americans told Harvard's Institute of Politics that they have more fear than hope about the future of democracy, while 67 percent of all Americans said the upcoming election will likely decide whether or not democracy in America survives.

At the start of his reelection campaign, President Biden tried to define the upcoming election as a battle for the future of American democracy. On the eve of the third anniversary of the attack on the Capitol, Biden argued that the American people would have to answer the country's most important question: *Is democracy still America's sacred cause?* Following Biden's decision to step down as the nominee, it was left to Kamala Harris and the rest of us to consider this most important question. Answering it requires we look beyond the two candidates and their respective platforms and reckon with the cultural shifts and historical developments that hastened this moment of precarity. In his essay "Coming Apart?," James T. Kloppenberg discusses multiple dimensions of American political, economic, social, and intellectual history that have emerged since the mid-twentieth century. Under progressive policies in the 1960s, partisanship was less pronounced, Americans were more equal, and American culture was more inclusive—factors that allowed democracy to flourish. Though anxieties about the future persist, Kloppenbreg nevertheless argues that the promise of self-rule remains. Two recent profiles of political philosopher Robert Bellah and social activist Rev. William Barber provide lessons on how to counteract the anti-democratic trends Koppenberg outlines and help demonstrate that, despite our mounting apprehension, the renewal of democracy is still within our reach.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION

James T. Kloppenberg, "Coming Apart?," April 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/democracy-race-polarization-america-working-class-trump-kloppenberg

Gary Dorrien, "Born to Struggle," October 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/william-barber-gary-dorrien-moral-majority-social-gospel-mlk

Matthew Rose, "Serious Play," July/August 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/civil-theology-robert-bellah

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Kloppenberg names six dimensions of American political, economic, social, and intellectual history that have increased polarization. Can you offer examples of how you have personally experienced or witnessed changes in these dimensions in your life?

2. Kloppenberg laments the loss of "non-ideological parties" in American politics. How has ideology poisoned American politics? Can you think of any material effects of our two major political parties becoming more ideologically distinct?

3. Kloppenberg highlights the work of social scientists like Robert D. Putnam who studied the ways in which culture nurtures democracy and democratic institutions. Without shared experiences or a connected civic life, they argue, it's essentially impossible to come together as a community or rally under a common cause. How have you experienced community or participated in a shared civic identity in your lifetime? Why are local communities, familial bonds, and social ties so important to a healthy democracy? What do they foster? What do they help guard against?

4. Rose writes, "Robert Bellah was the last major thinker on the American Left to argue that shared religious beliefs are essential for democratic politics." He believed that religious traditions—and not conventional forms of activism, argument, or piety—were the only way for Americans to recover and reinvigorate a civic identity and find actual meaning in our lives. Do you agree with this assessment? Can a civic religion, or "a sacred center," bring together a country that has grown progressively secular in recent years?

5. Kloppenberg argues that before we can start to address political polarization, we must first address the concerns of Americans who feel threatened by calls for systemic change. Are these concerns legitimate? Or are they symptomatic of what Robert Bellah termed individualism, the misguided ambition of individuals to be free from all unchosen commitments? How much responsibility do we have to bridge the gap between individual concerns and the common good? Do you think this is even possible today?

6. A central question Robert Bellah asked in his research was, "How do you determine what is good and right in your daily life?" How would you answer this question? Does your answer involve the community, or is it primarily individual?

7. In his profile of William Barber, Gary Dorrien connects Barber's "coalitional, Gospel-based, social-justice activism" with the Black prophetic tradition, the touchstone of progressive religion and politics in the United States. What lessons in coalition-building did Barber learn early in his attempts at activism? How can we apply these lessons to developing local communities and ensuring the common good?

8. Another way to describe coalition-building is solidarity. Is solidarity an antidote to the kind of individualism Kloppenberg and Bellah warn against? Or does solidarity lead to the polarization and divisiveness we're experiencing today? How can we ensure solidarity doesn't become another form of alienation?

9. Dorrien quotes Barber as saying, "We can't find our way out of the mess we're in with a left focus or a right focus. We've got to refocus on those who have been rejected." What can Barber's activism teach us about starting to address the concerns of the Americans Kloppenberg describes as feeling threatened by calls for systemic change? How can we center every American, regardless of color, class, or gender, who feels rejected or left behind?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

Anthony Annett, "What Comes Next," April 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/theology-social-democracy

The Commonweal Podcast, "Saving Liberalism," November 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/saving-liberalism

The Commonweal Podcast, "Should Catholics Promote Democracy?," July 2022
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/should-catholics-promote-democracy

James T. Kloppenberg, "Hope Against Hype," September 2019
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/hope-against-hype

Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, "'The Good Society,'" July 12, 1991
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/good-society

Bernard G. Prusak, "Politics, Religion & the Public Good: An Interview with John Rawls," September 25, 1998
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/interview-john-rawls

Coming Apart?

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG

Respect. Dignity. Recognition. Non-domination. These words pepper the writings of Americans on the Left when they identify what our nation needs. Disrespect, disgrace, invisibility, and subordination have marked the experience of far too many Americans for far too long. Only dramatic systemic change will enable us to move toward liberty and justice for all. Women, African Americans, recent immigrants from America's southern borders, and members of the LGBTQ community have mobilized to fight oppression by white men. The surprise, at least to many Americans on the Left, is that many white men now hold an equally firm conviction that it is they who are now disrespected, disgraced, invisible, and subordinated. In a nation they once dominated so completely that their power went uncontested, many white men now insist they have been robbed of their freedom.

Understanding the lines of combat today requires confronting both sides of that divide. Those of us committed to what we consider social justice too seldom acknowledge the anger and resentment felt by those opposed to our efforts, for reasons they consider legitimate, or those left behind economically. Corporate offshoring of jobs and deskilling due to technology have undermined the self-respect of those who suffer from such developments. Our own self-righteousness can blind us to the perspectives of those who have dug in their heels to protect values they cherish. Their grievances, unintelligible to many on the Left, shape our contemporary political landscape. Only if we understand their perspective and its sources can we do anything about the bitterness that marks our moment. Much of the white working class, once central to the New Deal coalition, now enthusiastically, even angrily, identifies with Republicans. What happened?

Political polarization in the United States did not begin in recent decades. Struggles over how to understand American history date from the birth of our nation. Disagreements over slavery were so fierce that Georgia's and South Carolina's delegates to the Constitutional Convention threatened to bolt if the issue even came to the floor. Although the founders deprecated political parties as factions sapping commitment to the common good, hyperbolic attacks on domestic enemies nevertheless began soon after the Constitution was ratified. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson produced some of the most influential documents of the American Revolution and served together in George Washington's administration, yet as early as 1793 they were at each other's throats. The parties that formed around them were as bitterly critical of each other as Republicans and Democrats are today. Familiar images of dignified and bewigged American statesmen blur reality: fisticuffs sometimes broke out on the floor of Congress in the nation's early years. Newspapers were openly and viciously partisan. New Englanders and Southerners routinely derided each other as threats to the nation and pawns of foreign powers. Some doubted the new United States could survive.

Timothy Shenk, in his wide-ranging *Realigners: Partisan Hacks, Political Visionaries, and the Struggle to Rule American Democracy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $30, 464 pp.), locates the origins of the American party system in two rival strategies for maintaining white supremacy. As the Slave Power Conspiracy maneuvered to extend the reign of bondage across the nation, countless Black lives were sacrificed to perpetuate the power of pitiless Southern planters and their Northern merchant accomplices. As Michael Kazin makes clear in his outstanding book *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $35, 416 pp.), defending the privileges of Americans "whose roots lay in European soil" became Democrats' principal concern decades before the new Republican

Party named Abraham Lincoln its standard bearer. Excising the malignant cancer of slavery cost more than 600,000 lives before the nation could be reconstructed on what anti-slavery activists envisioned as a new foundation established by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Charles Sumner, among the few Northern politicians consistently committed to comprehensive civil-rights legislation and the focus of Shenk's chapter on anti-slavery activists, struggled heroically and lost repeatedly.

Even before the Civil War amendments could take effect, anti-racist "abolition democracy," to use the apt phrase of W.E.B. Du Bois, was stymied by terror. Black Codes, enforced by the Ku Klux Klan and lynch mobs, circumscribed the freedom of freedmen. Eventually, legalized forms of white supremacy almost as vicious and unrelenting as chattel slavery reappeared throughout the former Confederacy. Reuniting the nation on the backs of formally freed yet effectively subjugated Black people was a project shared by Northerners and Southerners of both parties. White Americans invented a "magnolia myth" of paternalist slave owners and their supposedly contented slaves, a fiction consecrated by professional historians who portrayed the Civil War as unnecessary, Reconstruction as ill-conceived, and strict racial segregation as a necessary accommodation for what they deemed Black inferiority. Not until the late 1950s and the 1960s did many whites join Blacks' century-long struggle to challenge laws enshrining institutionalized racism. It is a fantasy to think those efforts have succeeded in eradicating the assumptions that undergird practices of white supremacy.

The strident polarization of our own moment, then, is nothing new. Ever since the first Europeans dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their land and called it God's will, conflicts over race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and the distribution of wealth and power—not calm consensus or decorous debate—have marked American history. The exercise of white men's American freedom has meant murder, enslavement, theft, and the destruction of the natural environment, measures deemed necessary to fulfill our sacred destiny.

Democracy means struggle. Yet we ask ourselves why compromise has become a dirty word, why elected officials resist bipartisanship, and why so many Americans now don't want their children marrying a member of the wrong party. Explaining our condition requires looking at the multiple dimensions of American political, economic, social, and intellectual history since the mid-twentieth century, when partisanship was less pronounced. First, our parties have become more ideologically coherent. Second, our economy is more deeply enmeshed with global flows of capital and labor, which are accepted as inevitable according to the ideology known as neoliberalism. Third, the explosion of college education has blessed new winners and left out, both economically and culturally, many more. Fourth, our media landscape has been transformed by economic and technological changes. Fifth, our practices of active civic engagement, which have intrigued students of American culture since Alexis de Tocqueville visited in 1831, have withered into a craving for entertainment. Sixth and finally, our long-held national conviction that the future is brighter than the present has given way to anxiety, even dread, that our children will inherit environmental disasters and an economy that rewards only a lucky handful at the top.

In the mid-twentieth century, prominent commentators lamented the ideological incoherence of American politics. The Republican Party included cultural conservatives and innovative businessmen committed to free-market economics yet troubled by the oppression of Black people, immigrants, women, and the poor. Although the Democratic Party included New Dealers committed to using government authority and revenues to address inequality, its electoral base of white voters in the "solid South" kept Democratic presidential administrations from including Black people in programs designed to alleviate poverty. The party's rhetoric was egalitarian, but its policies ignored race and gender.

Sam Rosenfeld, in his fine book *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago, $30, 336 pp.), traces the efforts of activists within both parties to address this incoherence as early as the end of World War II. In 1944, FDR wrote that "we should have two real parties—one liberal, and the other conservative." In the same year, FDR proposed, and was reelected on, plans to create a comprehensive American welfare state. Because such universal programs threatened racial segregation in the South, however, neither FDR's "Second Bill of Rights" nor Truman's "Fair Deal" became law. While European Social Democrats and Christian Democrats allied to establish programs of social provision that underlay the postwar economic boom, both U.S. parties remained hodgepodges. In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a report urging greater ideological coherence within the parties. Yet pluralists praised what activists condemned: mixing within the parties reflected what Daniel Bell called "the end of ideology" and ensured the moderation that Daniel J. Boorstin called "the genius of American politics." Americans from Robert F. Kennedy to Richard Nixon thought non-ideological parties inoculated the United States against the pathogens of fascism and communism that poisoned European politics. Pervasive fears of totalitarianism, as Dorothy Ross has shown, led influential liberal intellectuals to abandon FDR's "mutualism" and celebrate "personal authenticity." Activists such as Walter Reuther and Michael Harrington nevertheless worked tirelessly to transform the Democratic Party into a liberal-labor coalition.

The story of the right-wing takeover of the Republican Party is familiar. While 1948 Republican candidate Thomas E. Dewey and President Dwight D. Eisenhower accepted the New Deal as a *fait accompli*, conservatives fumed and plotted. Barry Goldwater lost his bid for the presidency in 1964, but his partisans won the war to control the GOP. During the 1960s and '70s, when the civil-rights movement finally propelled segregationist Democrats to leave the party, conservatives' crusade to protect "freedom" from "collectivism" finally succeeded.

Movement conservatives rejected Nixon and Gerald Ford, moderates who sought bipartisan solutions. They pinned their hopes on a washed-up but charismatic actor, California Gov. Ronald Reagan. Embracing "supply-side" or "trickle-down" economics, donors including Joseph Coors and the Koch brothers worked quietly to create a Republican Party allying free-marketeers with Evangelicals and other social conservatives. Shrewdly declining to put all their eggs in the Reagan basket, they also poured money into state and local elections.

In *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (Penguin, $18, 368 pp.), Julian E. Zelizer shows how Gingrich, first elected to Congress in 1978, became the most transformative figure in congressional politics by demanding a no-holds-barred oppositional strategy and strict party discipline. Historians Rosenfeld, Zelizer, Bruce Schulman, and Kevin M. Kruse maintain that American politics changed in the 1970s, before the presidencies of Reagan and the two Bushes, when moderate Republicans were purged and naked partisanship embraced.

We still live with the long-term consequences of Ronald Reagan's tax-cutting, anti-union, and anti-government ideology—the bundle of ideas that Gary Gerstle examines in his spirited book *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (Oxford, $27.95, 432 pp.). FDR succeeded in consolidating support for the New Deal order so thoroughly that by the fifties it set the terms of debate. When that order collapsed in the late seventies, from causes including exhaustion from the multiple crises of the sixties, the deindustrialization of America's heartland, the stagflation coinciding with the oil crisis, and partisan realignment, it opened the door for the neoliberal order. The so-called Reagan Revolution meant a shift from Keynes to Milton Friedman. It demonized government and sanctified the hardy individualism that Coors, the Kochs, and their allies had celebrated since the 1950s. Neoliberals exchanged earlier conservatives' reverence for

tradition with the "creative destruction" of unchained market capitalism.

An equally long campaign transformed the Democratic Party. Most post–World War II Democrats in Congress resisted the Left's demands for change, agreeing with John and Robert F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson that a clean ideological divide would threaten bipartisan deals. Post-war Democratic Party leaders backed away from labor radicalism. The 1950 Treaty of Detroit secured impressive benefits for members of the auto workers union, but it sapped support for the universal programs FDR proposed.

Bipartisanship had its virtues. Liberal Republicans made possible LBJ's landmark achievements, including the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Equal Opportunity Act, and the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act. The New Deal alliance of white ethnics and Blacks, however, began fraying even before the Democrats finally endorsed the moderate wing of the civil-rights movement. The electoral landslide of 1964—even bigger than the one FDR achieved in 1936 when he defiantly welcomed the business community's hatred—seemed to ensure that Democrats at last would tackle not only racial but economic injustice. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. endorsed Bayard Rustin's Freedom Budget, another call for universal programs to eliminate slums, unemployment, and poor schools not just for Blacks but "for *all*."

Various kinds of unrest, including urban riots, antiwar protests, and second-wave feminism, all opened cracks in the Democratic coalition. White Southerners and many rural Americans fled first to the segregationist George Wallace, then to the Republican Party. So did many union members, who shelved earlier notions of solidarity with the poor and adopted instead "law and order," a slogan that signaled resistance to demands for racial justice. Hubert Humphrey ran in 1968 on a platform that was consistent with the most radical proposals of the late New Deal, the Freedom Budget, and the programs adopted by postwar European social-democratic governments. But Humphrey's party was coming apart over the issues of war, race, and federal authority. In his study of Wallace's home county, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (Basic, $19.99, 512 pp.), Jefferson Cowie illuminates a crucial dynamic: for many white Americans, liberty means opposing all challenges to white supremacy. No Democratic presidential candidate since Humphrey has won a majority of white voters, and the party has never again challenged the prerogatives of organized capital as boldly as Humphrey did. After Watergate delivered another solid Democratic congressional majority in 1976, President Jimmy Carter veered away from universal health care and full employment bills and instead deregulated the trucking and airline industries.

Progressives within the Democratic Party had been struggling for decades to seize control of it. Jesse Jackson and other veterans of the civil-rights movement, former student radicals and antiwar activists who had rallied behind Robert F. Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern, women fed up with second-class status, and consumer activists led by Ralph Nader all battled against what they considered the Democratic establishment. To use Rosenfeld's terms, "moral insurgents" with "an expansive social democratic vision" propelled a range of sixties social movements. These reformers finally ripped control from insiders and empowered a new generation of activists committed to racial equality, democratic deliberation, women's rights, environmentalism, and economic reform. Like Goldwater in '64, McGovern lost the presidency in Nixon's '72 landslide yet won the war for the party apparatus. Progressives would remake the party as thoroughly as movement conservatives had remade the Republican Party. The difference, however, was that whereas Republicans such as Gingrich insisted on, and were able to enforce, party discipline, the new Democratic Party remained only a constellation of disparate interest groups with too little in common to form a united front.

Radicals' efforts, moreover, had a paradoxical effect. Activists on the Left fueled changes within the Demo-

cratic Party while at the same time intensifying many young radicals' disenchantment with government and alienation from public life. Paul Sabin, in *Public Citizens: The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism* (Norton, $26.95, 272 pp.), points to the ironic consequences of many leftists' disillusionment with the New Deal order. Outrage drove Ralph Nader's consumer-rights crusade, and personal emancipation was the promise of NOW feminists and disparate radicals such as Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Mario Savio, and Stewart Brand. But emancipation was also the promise of the jocular, grandfatherly Reagan. Since many sixties radicals shared neoliberals' interest in breaking free from constraints, lines stretched not only from the New Left to Reuther's social-democratic labor movement but also to Ayn Rand's libertarianism. "If it feels good, do it" could authorize free love, blue jeans, and rock music. It could also authorize the offshoring, job cutting, union bashing, and deregulation preferred by freewheeling financial-services firms, automakers, and new-economy entrepreneurs and enterprises such as Apple, Google, Amazon, and Facebook. The ideals of solidarity and obligation were collateral damage in the campaigns waged by the counterculture and neoliberals against stodgy neo-Victorian morality. Consecrating liberty empowered the powerful and tightened the screws on almost everyone else.

Bill Clinton came to embody both the promise and the perils of the new Democratic Party. He and his wife, Hillary, proudly endorsed their generation's rejection of what preceded them; his presidency promised renewal. The legacy of Clinton's two terms, however, boils down to three notorious proclamations: "The era of big government is over"; "End welfare as we know it"; and "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." Defeated in his attempt to overhaul health care and chastened by the '94 election, when Republicans took control of the House for the first time since 1952, Clinton changed course. Kazin and Gerstle note that the Democratic Leadership Council had been advising the party to get over its New Deal obsession and adopt neoliberal policies. Government, which Reagan famously labeled the problem rather than the solution, should shrink. Welfare should be "reformed" and the budget balanced. Banking and communications should be deregulated and NAFTA ratified, freeing global flows of capital, information, and people. Together with European social democrats such as Britain's Tony Blair and Germany's Gerhard Schröder, Clinton Democrats embraced the "third way," or "triangulation" between conservatives and their own party's left wing. Economic reshaping through downsizing and offshoring was inevitable. Echoing Margaret Thatcher's acronym "TINA" (there is no alternative), Clinton called globalization "the economic equivalent of a force of nature, like wind or water."

Craig Calhoun, in *Degenerations of Democracy* (Harvard, $29.95, 368 pp.), a brilliant book co-authored with Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Charles Taylor, offers incisive analysis of the neoliberal turn. Unleashing the economy from government oversight and taxation meant more capital for investment bankers, increased pay for corporate executives, and fewer jobs, with reduced benefits, for everyone else. Although government-funded research made possible the high-tech revolution, those it enriched offered neither acknowledgment nor payback. Clinton celebrated diversity and tried to persuade white Americans to do the same. His endorsement of multiculturalism and other controversial changes, though, together with his private behavior and public lies about it, so outraged Republicans that their ceaseless charges of corruption still clung to Hillary Clinton years later.

President Clinton embraced the neoliberal strategies of deregulation and free trade, which antagonized Democratic progressives such as his own Treasury Secretary Robert Reich but won him reelection. By the end of George W. Bush's presidency, however, the costs of Clinton's initiatives had become apparent. The financial crisis of 2008 resulted from financial chicanery made possible by repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act,

which had regulated the banking industry. Clinton's crime bill accelerated mass incarceration and devastated Black communities. Even though Clinton instituted an earned-income tax credit and raised the minimum wage, most blue-collar workers found themselves falling further behind the ever-rising incomes of the elite.

The salaries of CEOs in the 1960s were, on average, twenty-five times those of their employees. They are now more than three hundred times as large, a bountiful harvest of the neoliberal seeds planted in the 1970s. State legislatures as well as the federal government cut taxes on the wealthy and cut programs designed to help everyone else. As "austerity" became the norm, "lean" strategies, sold as liberation from costly regulations, benefitted those at the top. Although I agree with Jedediah Purdy when, in his jeremiad *Two Cheers for Politics: Why Democracy is Flawed, Frightening—and Our Best Hope* (Basic, $17.95, 304 pp.), he calls neoliberalism "perhaps the shallowest worldview ever held by a modern elite," this ideology somehow penetrated both parties, hollowing out public services while enriching slivers of the private sector. The super-rich now funded Democratic as well as Republican campaigns, earning elected officials' gratitude, securing their preferred policies, and removing economic inequality from legislative agendas.

The gulf in wealth and income has continued to grow under the Democratic administrations of Barack Obama and Joe Biden, just as it did under every Republican president since Reagan. Charting the top marginal income-tax rate in the United States tells the tale. For families filing jointly, in 1920 it was 73 percent for income over $1 million. During the roaring twenties, the top rate dipped to 20 percent. Under FDR, it rose from 63 percent to 94 percent and remained there until 1964, when it dropped to 70 percent for incomes over $200,000. Reagan Republicans lowered the top marginal rate to 50 percent, then to 38.5 percent, where it has hovered ever since. The top marginal rate today for joint filers making under $329,000—all but the top 4 percent of Americans—is 24 percent, less than a third of what the wealthiest paid from the 1940s to the 1970s, the years of the "Great Compression." These were also the years of the fastest economic growth in U.S. history.

The gap separating the economic status of Black and white Americans—the wealth gap even more than the income gap—has likewise changed little in recent decades despite the emergence of a new elite of highly educated Black professionals and highly visible Black athletes and artists. The murder of George Floyd prompted a nationwide outpouring of anger and activism from white as well as Black Americans. In some quarters that outrage persists. Most of the recent changes, though, have been cosmetic. More attention paid to books, articles, films, and performances focusing on race, valuable and overdue as it is, has not lowered the social and economic obstacles facing most Black Americans. Like Obama's presidency, our current insistence on more inclusive terminology has had a negligible impact on race relations.

Why has so little been done about social and economic inequality? There are multiple hypotheses. The commitment to freedom, after all, means that within the capacious boundaries of the law, no one should prevent anyone else from thinking, saying, or doing whatever they like. That sensibility helps explain not only skyrocketing salaries and lower taxes but also how a mendacious serial swindler could become president of the United States, incite a mob to sack the nation's Capitol, and (at least so far) pay no price for it. If freedom now trumps every other value, then solidarity and social obligation are for suckers. If only a lucky few can feast in our less regulated economic environment today, so much the better for them. If others are starving, say neoliberals, they should become entrepreneurs and get rich.

The problem, of course, is that the ideology of self-help is no more tied to reality now than it was during the first Gilded Age. Millions of Americans work more than one minimum-wage job or try to stay afloat as "independent contractors" in the gig economy, while

others cruise ahead. False as its promise has proved for most Americans, neoliberal ideology has seeped into every part of our culture. The top 1 percent, those at the pinnacle of our economic pyramid, attract so much attention and criticism from progressives that less has been said about the top 10 percent, the segment of professionals and denizens of the new "knowledge economy" whose household income is more than $212,110 a year. Such upper-class Americans (who often consider themselves merely upper-middle-class) once voted Republican. Recently they have become, along with nonwhite voters, the backbone of the Democratic Party. Since the New Deal coalition fractured during the 1970s, the party now depends on a different set of voters.

This is a global phenomenon. Thomas Piketty, Amory Gethin, and Clara Martínez-Toledano at the World Inequality Lab (WIL) in Paris have studied voting across fifty democracies since 1948. The evidence in *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities* (Harvard, $39.95, 656 pp.) shows that, whereas less well-educated voters in blue-collar and low-skilled service jobs voted consistently for social-democratic parties in the postwar period, they have now gravitated to conservative parties. Parties on the Left now rely on a core of highly educated voters who work in the knowledge economy. The standard explanation for that phenomenon in the United States has stressed cultural backlash against racial unrest, the counterculture, and feminism. But the shift of less-educated voters toward conservative parties in Europe predates by decades the mass immigration of non-Europeans often cited as its cause. The class-based party cleavages of the twentieth century, in short, have been replaced by "multi-elite party systems." Conservative parties represent high-income and low-educated voters; liberal parties "have become the parties of higher-educated voters."

In the spring of 1787, Madison argued in "Vices of the Political System of the United States" that democracies can fracture along multiple lines, of which class is only one. Among other factors, Madison also identified religion, region, occupation, culture, and the irrational attachment of some voters to individual leaders. The WIL group's evidence confirms Madison's analysis. Class is now one among other divisions, including "collective beliefs" concerning tradition, cosmopolitanism, authoritarianism, and the adequacy of neoliberal reliance on market mechanisms. In a recent working paper, "Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right," Piketty argues that left parties have abandoned redistributionist programs thanks to near unanimity on the adequacy of capitalism. Moderate left parties' acceptance of neoliberal ideas has made cultural conflicts more prominent, especially the resentment felt by the less educated toward the more educated.

By adopting the cosmopolitan worldview that, thanks to our education, seems to us self-evidently correct, we members of the college-educated elite have distanced ourselves from the cultures of those who lack not only tertiary education but also the privileges such education brings. Forgetting the advantages that the well-educated usually enjoy growing up, including intact families that prioritize schooling and instill self-discipline, we have consciously or unconsciously embraced the idea of meritocracy. Our preferred politicians, from schoolteacher McGovern and engineer Carter to technocrats Michael Dukakis, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and Obama, hold not only bachelor's but also graduate degrees from the nation's most selective universities. Culturally, these people inhabit a different world from the rough-and-ready cowboys Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush—even if they were only fake cowboys—and the celebrity wheeler-dealer Donald Trump, even though he was only a bankrupt con man. Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham noted evidence of increasingly "polarized cultural conflict" in the United States as early as 1970. The battle lines have since become much more deeply entrenched. As Carlos Lozada showed in his exhaustive study of the books published during Trump's presidency, *What Were We Thinking* (Simon & Schuster, $17, 272

pp.), four years of listening to the president's unhinged harangues only intensified progressives' bewilderment over his election. Four years of listening to Trump's critics belittle his voters as ignorant dupes or racists only intensified their resentment.

Democratic presidents, while in office if not before or after, have shown no greater interest in the economic condition of struggling Americans than have Republicans. Millions, especially but not exclusively in the heartland, have watched their middle-class lives—and those they envisioned for their families—vanish along with the well-paying jobs that, between the Depression and the oil crisis, secured that status. Republicans tell voters that cultural elites are to blame for their situation; Democrats give them little reason to disagree. If an unstoppable "force of nature" reshaped our economy, as neoliberals have claimed for half a century, and if one party loudly endorses American traditions of patriotism, self-reliance, Evangelical Christianity, and white male supremacy while the other party makes fun of all that, then the choice for many voters will be clear.

Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor borrow terminology from David Goodhart, who contrasts "somewheres," whose lives are rooted in particular—and often decaying—places, with "anywheres," whose cosmopolitan experiences and preferences shape their very different sensibilities. Joan C. Williams has been pointing out for decades, most recently in *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Harvard Business Review Press, $22.99, 192 pp.), that those who provide service work and "care work" for the young, the old, the sick, and wealthy midlife professionals are understandably tired of elites' condescension. Unctuous expressions of gratitude do not make up for long hours and lousy pay. Preserving your self-respect is hard when the entire culture undervalues your work while overvaluing those who, as John Adams put it, do nothing but push money around.

Wealthy Americans once voted Republican because they preferred low taxes and an unregulated economy. Evidently, despite their redistributionist rhetoric, so do most Democrats, whose tepid reforms offer "somewheres" little of economic value while supplying them with a steady stream of scorn. For that reason, Alan Abramowitz has argued, promises of economic redistribution might not persuade less skilled manual workers and service workers to return to the Democratic Party. We won't know unless the party at last delivers FDR's Second Bill of Rights or Rustin's Freedom Budget. Even before Trump was elected, Larry M. Bartels and Christopher H. Achen provided evidence in *Democracy for Realists* (Princeton, $29.95, 408 pp.) that most people vote not on "issues" but on their personal situations, which have not improved for decades, and on their social identities, defined for millions of Americans by educational elites' disdain.

Few Americans at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder even bother to vote, as Jan-Werner Müller points out in *Democracy Rules* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 256 pp.). We are witnessing what Müller terms a "double secession" of the rich, who have escaped the world of public services for private enclaves, and the poor, who understandably feel excluded and ignored. The failure of Democrats and Republicans to take seriously the problem of intergenerational poverty helps explain why. Perhaps the answer, as E. J. Dionne Jr. and Miles Rapoport argue in *100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting* (The New Press, $23.24, 224 pp.), is to follow the two dozen nations where citizens are required to vote, or to follow states such as Oregon, which have instituted citizen-led initiatives to foster participation. Sadly, neither party seems interested in reforms to address the disengagement that plagues U.S. politics.

Beyond neoliberals' upward channeling of profits from labor to capital and the role of tertiary education in distancing a new elite of cosmopolitans from other Americans, two more factors help explain our current condition.

The media landscape has been transformed by technology, by the blurring of reality through disinformation,

and by the paradoxical consolidation of the sources providing information. Everyone understands how the internet has created echo chambers in which Americans find their own perspectives confirmed, amplified by passion, and intensified by endless repetition. When the "primary criterion of truth" is what "those on my side believe," Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor write, partisanship becomes "almost epistemological." Trump's lies were central to his presidency, delighting his loyalists while outraging everyone else. The 24/7 news cycle of our political entertainment complex requires ever more sensational stories, or at least ever-renewed outrage at the other side's perfidy. Before the 1949 Fairness Doctrine was killed by Reagan in 1987 and the libertarians at *WIRED* magazine succeeded in making the digital world a new Wild West, nearly every community had its own local newspaper focused on local concerns. Most mid-century big-city newspapers either aspired to "objective" news coverage or had a competing newspaper to balance their perspective. Because most local papers have shrunk or vanished, many Americans now know less about community issues that really matter to their lives. Filling that vacuum, Müller argues, are obsessions with the largely symbolic, highly charged issues of the culture wars.

The presentation of competing points of view, which the Fairness Doctrine codified at least as an ideal, has been replaced by hyperbolic denunciations of the other side's idiocy or wickedness in outlets on both the Left and Right. With fewer newspapers and radio and television stations aspiring to neutrality, and more owned by conglomerates concerned with increasing "shareholder value" rather than citizens' understanding, sensationalism and polarization are unsurprising. In *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (Basic, $19.99, 688 pp.), Darren Dochuk shows that our hyper-partisan mediascape originated in mushrooming independent AM radio stations funded by southwestern wildcatters who gave thanks for their instant wealth by broadcasting the gospels of Evangelical Christianity and free-market capitalism. Even more dispiriting than the partisanship of our media is the decline of civil debate among people who disagree with each other. Because democracy is by nature conflictual, providing opportunities to persuade—and to be persuaded by—other citizens is not a luxury but a requirement for a healthy civic sphere.

"A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it," Madison wrote to a friend in 1822, "is a prologue to a Farce, or a Tragedy; or perhaps both." When Tocqueville visited the United States, he traced Americans' remarkable political engagement to their newspapers almost as much as to their proliferating voluntary associations and their service on juries. Alert to warnings about the dangers of an uninformed public, New Dealers created the Federal Communications Commission to regulate the airwaves, preserve the autonomy of local stations, and prevent the consolidation of power in a few media monopolies. By contrast, when the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was debated, Gerstle points out that neither Republicans nor Democrats "dared suggest that the broadcast/cable/satellite spectrum was a public good owned by the American people." Cassandras such as *Newsday*'s Marvin Kitman predicted that monopolies, not Naderite consumer sovereignty, would result, but such warnings went unheeded.

Although U.S. news media have always been profit driven, technological advances have made things worse. A century has passed since Walter Lippmann worried that the mass media's filtering of complex information through easily digested "stereotypes" would facilitate the manipulation of public opinion, which he had learned to do during World War I. Sophisticated and cynical commentators now use simple slogans and images to gin up audience anger, then perform that anger on air, not to educate the public but to boost ratings and sell advertising. Demagogues perform the same trick in exchange for votes. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the*

New Frontier of Power (PublicAffairs, $38, 704 pp.) shows how online platforms use ever more sophisticated algorithms to manipulate their users. As bots improve, AI rather than charismatic talk-show hosts might one day tell us what to think. Meanwhile, the pieces of our already segmented democratic populace drift further apart from each other. Citizens might know even less about complex issues but, thanks to our media entertainment complex, many are furious much of the time.

Oddly, one of the casualties of this transformed media landscape is public engagement. Feeding our partisan passions nonstop offers the illusion of involvement in civic life, and participation is so much easier on the screen, from the comfort of one's living room, than in the messy endlessness of town meetings or party caucuses. Paolo Gerbaudo, in *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (Pluto Press, $24.95, 240 pp.), contends that parties in the United States and Europe have exchanged the time-consuming legwork of organizing for the more predictable results of focus-group-tested media blitzes. Paul Pierson and Jacob S. Hacker have aptly termed the elite manipulation of manufactured popular passions "plutocratic populism." Party membership has shrunk to the use of checkbooks and credit cards rather than human interaction.

My book *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (2016) traces the arduous, millennia-long developments that made possible the consolidation of self-government in the North Atlantic world. Besides institutions such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, and constitutional government, and beyond sustained commitments to the values of autonomy, equality, and popular sovereignty, I argue that democracy rests on cultural predispositions, the premises of deliberation, pluralism, and an ethic of reciprocity. Without those hidden pillars, which have taken centuries to establish, democracy can, as the ancients feared, devolve into anarchy or oligarchy. Only if citizens are willing to engage with each other, tolerate differences, and lose to their worst enemies in an election can the institutions of democracy and the commitment to equality survive. Mine was the argument of a historian studying change over a very long time, but it dovetails with the arguments of social scientists analyzing our current predicament.

Robert D. Putnam has devoted his career to tracing the ways in which cultures nurture democratic sensibilities and practices of civic engagement, as in early modern northern Italian city-states, or allow them to atrophy, as in the United States since World War II. In a seminal article of 1995 and his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, $17.12, 544 pp.), Putnam examined the bonds that once connected Americans in civic life, worship, and recreation. He showed that those bonds were fraying as Americans became increasingly isolated from each other and inclined to value their personal preferences over solidarity or obligation. The German social theorist Jürgen Habermas has long warned against what he calls "the colonization of the lifeworld," the tendency of market strategies and economistic values to intrude into interpersonal relations, where ethical considerations should outweigh self-interest and efficiency.

In *Degenerations of Democracy*, Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor focus on exactly those issues. Democracy, they insist, is more than institutions. It "is guided by ideals" and involves "commitments and aspirations; it is defined by purposes even if they are never perfectly met." Democracy "degenerates when citizens no longer treat each other with basic respect and recognition and when citizens refuse to accept that they really belong together." When all goods are seen as individual goods, the idea of a public good disappears—the worst consequence of neoliberalism. In the book's concluding pages, they summarize the problems we face: "Declining citizen efficacy, weakening local communities, fraying intergenerational bonds, evaporating small-scale economic opportunity, and eroding social ties that had once knit citizens together across lines of difference and fostered solidarity."

Is democracy failing? Self-rule is certainly under siege in many places, particularly where it has shallow roots, but hyperbolic predictions of democracy's global demise do no good. More than nine hundred of the January 6 rioters are in jail or on trial. Although too few Republican officials have repudiated the insurrection, polls have found that most Americans were and remain disgusted by it. Remember that Trump won the 2016 Republican nomination with votes from 6 percent of the electorate and the presidency with the votes of only 28 percent. His victory hardly constituted an authoritarian wave. It is a mistake to inflate his narcissism into a political program. Müller quotes Trump's strategist Steve Bannon admitting, when asked about a philosophy of traditionalism, that he was "just making it up as I go along." So was Trump.

Yet anxieties about the future persist. The undeniable evidence of climate change sparks worries about the earth's future habitability. Equally undeniable evidence of narrowing economic prospects for young Americans fosters a different fear. Upward mobility, like economic growth, has slowed since the mid-seventies. For the first time in U.S. history, Raj Chetty has found, young Americans can no longer expect to live as well as their parents. If the three decades of unusual quiet from '45 to '75 were made possible only by the sacrifices required by a world war, the unprecedented economic explosion that followed, and the subordination of women and minorities, then it would be folly to expect or even want an echo of that era. Americans tempted by the Far Right, although far fewer than some hysterical accounts suggest, are being egged on by cynical, irresponsible Republican officials. So, should we despair?

Perhaps against the odds, almost all the authors I've discussed, as well as some of the most important Black scholars writing today, agree that the renewal of democracy is within reach. In his most recent book, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster, $19.99, 480 pp.), Putnam traces the rise of communitarian reform energies from the Progressive Era though the New Deal until the 1960s. Americans then "took their foot off the gas," and progress toward racial justice and women's rights ground to a halt. Individualism and laissez faire emerged as alternatives to the progressive strategies that had made Americans more equal and American culture more inclusive. If Americans now want renewed commitment to progressive reforms, they must forge coalitions for change. That strategy comes at a price: we must surrender our self-righteous insistence that others share our views and cooperate to achieve piecemeal, moderate reform, which requires humility and patience as well as tolerance. Dogmatism and purity tests obstruct Americans' ability to work together across lines of difference.

Purdy, notwithstanding his sharp critiques of the un- or anti-democratic aspects of the U.S. Constitution, cautions against nihilism with the same buoyancy he showed in his first book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999). No source of power exists in our political system except the people, just as James Madison and James Wilson insisted in 1787. Americans need only to marshal our energies on behalf of social democracy. Purdy calls for a new "patriotism of responsibility" that firmly restores equality alongside freedom in the American pantheon.

Gerstle's title announces the *fall* as well as the earlier *rise* of the neoliberal order. He is as frustrated as many on the Left by Obama's presidency. He is heartened, though, by Biden's election and by the breadth of resistance to Trump. He interprets the incoherence of Trump's policies as evidence that neoliberal orthodoxy is coming apart. Americans can now decide whether what comes next is even more authoritarianism or a renewed democracy. Shenk's acerbic history of the deal-making centrists who have shaped party politics might suggest cynicism about the future. In the end, though, he describes coalition building, repeatedly criticized in the book, as "a practical necessity and a moral obligation." If Kazin still sees the future through the lenses of particular

interest groups rather than a shared common purpose, he does find signs of democratic renewal in widening support for racial and gender justice and a rejuvenated labor movement. Gerbaudo argues, in *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic* (Verso, $21.56, 288 pp.), that we already have the template of "long-abandoned social democratic ideas" such as social care and solidarity, meaning the equal sharing of benefits as well as costs up and down the economic pyramid.

Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor likewise call for a "new solidarity." We must work to establish alliances, not deepen animosities. If we are to reverse degenerations of democracy, they argue, those experiments must include small-scale private enterprise. Some on the Left treat all business, whatever the scale, as the moral equivalent of rapacious monopoly capitalism, a "specious" as well as counterproductive equation. Many forms of life can contribute to democracy. Only when all goods are seen as individual consumer goods do we lose sight of the public good, the ideal that animated Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Wilson. The "expressive individualism" sometimes extolled by the Left as well as the Right encourages selfishness and undercuts commitments to rebuild democracy, a never-finished "telic project" that, like a horizon, we can approach but never reach.

We need local experiments that nurture interaction, in civil society as much as in politics, just as John Dewey argued in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), his spirited and still-convincing reply to Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922). Only if we encourage inquiry, experimentation, and cooperation from early childhood onward, Dewey counseled, can citizens learn to internalize the practices as well as the ethic of democracy. Central to Müller's *Democracy Rules*, as it was to his earlier book *Contesting Democracy* (2011), is Dewey's conviction that uncertainty, open-endedness, tolerance, and community are the heart of democracy, an argument Müller bolsters by citing many anti-dogmatic European political theorists. Müller adds two nonnegotiable rules, still sadly denied by many Americans: people cannot have their own facts, and no citizens can be denied equal standing.

Having long been denied just that equal standing, Black Americans could be forgiven for despairing about racial justice. Many Black writers and artists have expressed doubts that white Americans will ever surrender their inherited racism. But not everybody. The distinguished philosopher Danielle Allen argues, in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry's fine collection *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harvard, $35, 464 pp.), that King called for integration rather than desegregation because he wanted not simply legal rights for Black Americans but ethical regeneration for all Americans. If members of all races and ethnicities were to adopt the principle of "nondomination" and see each other as ends rather than means, as Jesus (and later Kant) urged, the neoliberal me-first ethic might no longer poison interpersonal relations.

If Americans were to understand the "non-sacrificeability" of positive as well as negative freedom, the freedom *to* rather than merely the freedom *from*—a distinction Dewey inherited from Aristotle and that King employed in his most important speeches—they might see the need for solidarity as well as liberty. King had in mind legally unenforceable duties "to recognize and enable," in Allen's words, "the equal capacities of all to deliberate, decide, and take responsibility." King realized that the United States could approach its ideals only if all citizens internalized such ethical imperatives. As a Baptist preacher powerfully influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, King appreciated the difficulty of that challenge. Yet as King understood, legal, social, and even economic equality remain necessary but not sufficient conditions for both a culture of integration and Dewey's ethic of democracy.

In his new book, *The Third Reconstruction: America's Struggle for Racial Justice in the Twenty-First Century* (Basic, $27, 288 pp.), Peniel E. Joseph contends that we have now entered a new stage of American history. The first Reconstruction followed the Civil War, *Brown v. Board of*

Education inaugurated the second, and the third began with Obama's presidency. Despite the disappointment felt by those who imagined, naïvely, that Obama's election would usher in a post-racial America, and despite the continuing nightmares of intergenerational poverty, police murders, and mass incarceration, Joseph sees encouraging signs. The swearing in of Obama, Kamala Harris, Raphael Warnock, and Ketanji Brown Jackson and the dismantling of "ancient memorials to racism" across the nation signal a long-overdue reckoning with Lost Cause mythology and racial injustice.

Both earlier Reconstructions ended prematurely. Americans today, Joseph concludes, can complete the Third Reconstruction by choosing "love over fear, community building over anxiety," and "equity over racial privilege," thereby nurturing the culture of encounter envisioned by Pope Francis. Despite the obstacles identified in the works discussed in this article, I share the determination expressed in Joseph's closing words: "We have a grave political and moral choice to make. I choose hope."

On Sundays during this liturgical year, Catholics will read the Gospel of St. Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers the wisdom we need. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed too are the merciful and the peacemakers. Those who would follow him, Jesus instructs his disciples, must love their enemies. Those words, too often defanged by familiarity, issue a challenge for all Americans interested in redeeming the promise of democracy.

Born to Struggle

GARY DORRIEN

The Black prophetic tradition remains the touchstone of progressive religion and politics in the United States, but it takes several forms. Many of its leading voices do not sound like Martin Luther King Jr., or evoke his memory, or speak in his idioms. But the standout figure in this prophetic tradition today is unmistakably a throwback to MLK.

William Barber stands out today as the symbol of the coalitional, Gospel-based, social-justice activism of the Black social-gospel tradition. Though a throwback, he is forward-looking. He sees no reason why churches cannot mobilize as they did between 1955 and 1965, if only they fix on Jesus and build some good organizations. Barber is earnest, eloquent, relentless, eager to preach, and didactic, often riffing at length on political history. He wears black suits with a white clerical stole reading "Jesus Was a Poor Man," or full-robed sanctuary regalia, in both cases with a magenta shirt marking his episcopal status. He speaks in carefully parsed sentences, always leaning forward, a visible sign even to those unaware of his story that he has suffered much along the way.

He was born to the struggle, two days after King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Barber's father, William Barber Sr., was a physics teacher who settled in Indianapolis after graduating from Butler University and marrying a local government clerk. Just before Barber started kindergarten in an integrated Indianapolis public school, his father got a call from his old friend E. V. Wilkins, an educator and civil-rights activist in Plymouth, North Carolina. Wilkins asked Barber Sr. to move back to North Carolina to help in the struggle. The NAACP needed Black teachers and their children to integrate the schools. A year later the Barber family moved into Barber Sr.'s boyhood home in Roper, North Carolina, where his mother still lived.

Barber Jr. cherished his paternal grandmother, who had Mother status in her congregation and was the spiritual anchor of her family. Every Sunday, she visited shut-ins after church. For years, Barber thought she mistook the word "hope" for "help," as in: "We'll be back shortly. We've got to go and hope somebody." Later, he realized that "hoping" others in Christ was precisely how his grandmother survived, contradicting a white society that despised her. Barber's early impression was that his grandmother was singularly extraordinary. As he grew older, he grasped that his father was much like her, except with two master's degrees.

William Barber Sr. was the real thing, like his mother and son. He could have taught at a Northern university but answered the call to integrate public schools in the South. He could have been a big-steeple preacher, but preached on the side in tiny rural churches of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Coming home to Roper meant that Barber Sr. chose a life of poverty, humility, and service. He rode around in a beat-up pickup truck, bringing his son from one community meeting to another, and everyone called him Doc. When people asked why he brought his kid, Barber Sr. said, "Leave the kid alone; he's learning." A conversation at the house about an injustice done to someone would lead to a meeting in a church basement or barbershop. Barber grew up watching his father look out for people, gathering little groups to address their problems, "hoping" them any way he could.

His father preached revivals in small churches across eastern North Carolina, and wherever he went he spread the Gospel *and* expanded his organizing network. Barber Sr. loved to tell the story of the Disciples of Christ, which fused two early nineteenth-century movements that sought to reform the church by restoring it to the model of the New Testament church. The Barton W. Stone strand derived from a 1901 revival in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. The Thomas and Alexander Campbell strand came from Scotland. Barber Sr. stressed that Black and

white Disciples worked and worshiped together, co-founding the Fusion Party after Reconstruction, which united freed slaves and poor whites across North Carolina. There were episodes of heroic moral faith to recount, but this was a sad story, even in Barber Sr.'s revival version, because integrated religion and fusion politics were crushed in the Jim Crow South.

Barber Sr. exhorted Disciples to live up to their early history, without much success. People looked away or turned him off, especially in white congregations, objecting that he asked too much. Barber Jr. recoiled at watching the same reaction over and over. He never doubted that God existed or that his father embodied the ideal, but he didn't want to be his father, a minister who wasted too much of his spirit on the church. Barber Jr. majored in political science at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), aiming for a law career. He aspired to serve the public as a credentialed big-city professional, scaling up from his father's world. In his senior year he organized a group that marched to Raleigh to demand more funding for historically Black colleges. The march won ample attention, revealing to Barber that he had the family gift for organizing. Boston University School of Theology offered him a scholarship and Barber nearly accepted it. He still didn't want to be a minister, but following King to Boston University was hard to turn down.

His grandmother prayed about it, returning with a verdict—Barber didn't need to go to Boston. A few weeks later he reluctantly consented to her decision. Years later, when Barber told this story, he recalled that St. Paul wanted to go to Spain, but the Spirit prevented him. Going to Boston would have taken Barber away from his North Carolina family, world, and story. In 1984, Barber met an NCCU classmate, Rebecca McLean, at a Jesse Jackson campaign event. After they graduated and married, he enrolled at nearby Duke Divinity School, where he met William C. Turner Jr., a legend at Duke who specialized in pneumatology and Black church spirituality; on the side, Turner served as pastor of Durham's Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church. To Barber, Turner was a godsend—a friend, mentor, and spiritual father who helped him remember why he was at seminary. Upon graduating in 1989, Barber accepted a call to Fayette Street Christian Church in Martinsville, Virginia. His first plunge into social activism as a pastor was chastening. A group of workers at a local textile factory asked him to support their efforts to start a union. Shortly afterward, the president of the company hosted a breakfast meeting for Black clergy at his corporate office. All it took was an hour of schmoozing and a few reminders of the company's token philanthropy to get the ministers to oppose the union. A stunned Barber asked himself a seminary question: What would Reinhold Niebuhr say we did wrong? This question practically answered itself. Working for justice in the real world requires real political power. If you don't have any power, you can't achieve gains for justice.

Barber vowed never to enter another fight for justice without knowing who had his back. But learning a Niebuhrian lesson and being a Niebuhrian were different things. Reading Niebuhr in seminary, Barber had not accepted his claim that the test of faithful action is political effectiveness. If Christian social ethics reduces to Niebuhrian realism, why become a minister? Barber thought of Psalm 94, God asking who will rise up before the wicked. That was biblical faith to him—"leading people who had lost a fight but still knew that the Lord was on their side." He thought of William Lloyd Garrison, nearly lynched by a respectable mob in 1835. Garrison had no plan or power; all he could do was rail against slavery and hope to find some allies. Barber also thought of Justice John Marshall Harlan of Kentucky, casting the only vote in the U.S. Supreme Court against *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Harlan was routed in 1896, but the NAACP cited his words for decades, all the way to the *Brown* decision.

It occurred to Barber that Niebuhr might have developed a better Christian realism had he remained a pastor in Detroit instead of moving to Union Theo-

logical Seminary. In Detroit, he had allied with working class whites and Blacks. In New York, consorting with academics and Leftist professionals, Niebuhr's blind spot about his white privilege grew worse. Barber questioned whether he had a similar blind spot. His negative feelings about white people were justified, weren't they? Naturally, he trusted Black pastors and workers over white ones. How could it be otherwise? Barber had an inkling of the answer, which worked on him: if he had some white allies, his feelings might be different. Moreover, the Black pastors of Martinsville had folded over one breakfast meeting. If Barber's mission was to work for justice, he needed all the friends he could get.

He stayed for three years in Martinsville, forming an interracial group against toxic-chemical dumping in a Black neighborhood, which won a small victory, "the crash course in moral leadership that I didn't know I needed." Barber returned to North Carolina knowing something about environmental racism and interracial organizing. E. V. Wilkins, still a force in his life, recommended Barber to chair Gov. Jim Hunt's Human Relations Commission. Barber took the job and enjoyed the work, much of it dealing with employment discrimination and fair housing. He preached on the side while Rebecca Barber worked as a nurse in Durham. In June 1993, Barber preached at Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, seventy-eight miles west of Durham. He was not seeking a pastoral call, and definitely not one this far from Durham. Greenleaf members told him he was wrong: God had led him to them.

Barber tried to resist until mid-July, when he relented. Two weeks after he accepted the call, he woke up at home and could not move. Barber's legs and back were paralyzed. He cried out incredulously to Rebecca, who called an ambulance. The diagnosis was ankylosing spondylitis, an extreme form of arthritis that fuses one's bones in place. Barber's neck, hips, and the base of his spine had locked simultaneously. There was no cure; there was only the hope that with intense physical therapy he might regain some mobility.

The pain was excruciating. Barber recoiled at needing constant doses of pain medication to get through a day. His daily trips to the gym were torture, and seemingly futile; when therapists bent his knees, it felt like he was being stabbed with a knife. He fell into depression, spending many nights "just crying in my bed." Barber could barely speak to his congregants when they visited and could not imagine being their pastor. They urged him to hold on; he was their pastor and they would wait for him. For weeks it was unimaginable to him that he might resume his ministry. The doctors told him he would never walk again; the pain and depression were overwhelming; and he lost the will to get out of bed. One night a woman in a wheelchair visited him. A double amputee, she rebuffed his plea that he couldn't talk to anyone. She had come to tell him that God was not done with him; God still had work for him to do. The woman prayed for Barber and wheeled herself out. The next morning Barber asked if his mother might be allowed to play hymns in the hospital lobby; maybe he could sing with her. Also, could they tell him the room number of the double amputee? Barber wanted to thank her. The nurses knew of no such patient and could not find one after checking. Barber called her "my amputee angel."

He learned how to use a walker, and his growing family and congregation rallied around him. Barber left the hospital after three months, commencing his ministry at Greenleaf with a tag team of drivers. His family had already weathered one health crisis, his daughter's brain surgery for hydrocephalus. This time, his wife and five children forged a new life revolving around Greenleaf Church and Barber's resolve to bring people together for the work of justice. The pain stabbed him constantly, except in the pulpit. For twelve years he got to the pulpit on his walker, swung it behind him, and leaned on the lectern to preach. Barber savored the irony that Greenleaf was the kind of community he had tried to flee—a small congregation in a small military town consisting of tight-knit families and groups with long local histories. Now the communal closeness worked for him,

enabling him to restart his ministry. He often thought of his seminary ethics professor, Stanley Hauerwas, appreciating more than ever the Hauerwas maxim that the vocation of the church is to be the church. What matters is to be faithful to God's peculiar politics. The only way for people to see that another way is possible is for the church to be the strange, nonviolent, nonconforming community of Christ-followers it is called to be.

But that was only the starting point of Barber's ministry in Goldsboro. The church does not exist only for itself and it cannot do the work of justice by itself. Barber led Greenleaf to consider what the good news of the Gospel would look like to the poor of Goldsboro. The answer included a community-development corporation called Rebuilding Broken Places that Greenleaf cofounded with other community groups. They enlisted local businesses and secured grant money to build senior housing units, single-family houses, and a freedom school academy. Barber preached that the Spirit blows where it will, through and beyond the church. God inspires ministries serving the entire community.

In 2005, twelve years into his ministry at Greenleaf, Barber awoke one night and walked to the bathroom. He was standing there before it occurred to him that he hadn't used his walker. Walking back to the bedroom, he asked Rebecca to pinch him; was he dreaming? They laughed out loud at discovering that his body had been healing without their noticing. It happened while Barber was absorbed in nursing their little community from sickness to health. That morning he bought a wooden cane, and never relinquished it afterwards, politely declining nicer ones that people bought for him. The cane was his testimony, like the mat of the man told by Jesus to take up his mat and walk.

Barber scaled up. What if they built a statewide coalition on the Goldsboro model? Running for president of the North Carolina NAACP in the summer of 2005, Barber warned that the NAACP no longer *advanced* people of color; it had become just the National Association for Colored People, specializing in nice banquets. North Carolina schools had resegregated and 12 percent of North Carolina's total youth population had no health insurance. Why did the NAACP respond with self-congratulatory nostalgia? Barber offended the banquet luminaries and won the election, appointing a white civil-rights veteran, Al McSurely, to be his legal redress chair. He confirmed that it meant something to pick a white lieutenant; the NAACP had to go back to being seriously activist and interracial, as in its glory days. Barber enlisted Greenleaf in his NAACP work. He had to be driven everywhere, and his brand of ministry did not work if he did it by himself. He never believed, however, that reenergizing the NAACP would be enough to change North Carolina. The NAACP presidency put him in a position to create what was needed: an organization uniting all the social-justice organizations, a new iteration of fusion politics.

The perennial dream of the American Left is to unite all the groups that struggle for social justice. It never was, or is, hard to imagine. What if we all banded together? Every Farmer-Labor-Progressive-Socialist coalition tried to pull it off. Barber thought of Ezekiel, not the Farmer-Labor saga, when he described fusion politics. Ezekiel dreamed of Israel's divided tribes uniting in Jerusalem; henceforth, the Lord would be there. Barber listed fourteen "justice tribes" of North Carolina, calling them in December 2006 to a meeting in the state capital. Representatives of *sixteen* organizations showed up and told each other: *there are more of us than of them; let's change the narrative by working together.* The group formulated a fourteen-point agenda, organized a People's Assembly in February 2007 at the state capital, and adopted the name McSurely had suggested, the Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ). Barber fretted that this name might sound like an exaggeration until five thousand people turned out. Barber stressed that HKonJ was not liberal, conservative, Democratic, or Republican. It was for all that is good and right, such as voting rights, criminal justice, labor rights, health care, and immi-

grants' rights. In 2007 it went all out on one issue that impacted all the others: voting rights.

For a while the new coalition was quietly effective. The North Carolina NAACP and HKonJ worked closely together, being led by the same two people, Barber and McSurely. They won a crucial victory when the state legislature expanded early voting and allowed same-day registration, just in time for a thing of beauty in the 2008 election: "Souls to the Polls." Black churchgoers were driven to early-voting sites after worship services ended. Souls to the Polls rode on the excitement generated by the Obama candidacy, playing a key role in turning North Carolina barely blue in the presidential election. The expansion of voting rights in 2007 added 185,000 new voters to the electorate in a state that Obama won by just over 100,000 votes. That ended Barber's quiet days of power-building. The backlash against Obama and Barber was furious, incredulous, and determined. How the hell had North Carolina gone for Obama? Why had they treated this Barber character as a buffoon?

Barber went swiftly from being derided as "Reverend Bar-B-Q" to receiving death threats. He told friends it was a measure of how strong they had become. In January 2010, the political Right won a colossal victory in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled by 5 to 4 that corporations and special interests have a "free speech" right to pump as much money as they want into elections in complete secrecy. The fallout in North Carolina was devastating. Art Pope, a right-wing kingmaker who inherited a retail chain from his father, played the leading role in turning North Carolina's state legislature flaming red in the 2010 midterm elections. "Big government" was vilified for coddling the "undeserving poor"—always code for Black and brown people. Barber noticed that much of the right-wing money went into culture wars funneled through foundations. HKonJ did win a few more victories during the early Obama years, most notably a Racial Justice Act guaranteeing an appeal to every death-row inmate victimized by racial bias in the sentencing process. But there was no denying that the Republican Right was winning.

The winter of 2012–2013 was the nadir of the Obama years in North Carolina, where Obama lost the state despite winning reelection. HKonJ convened its seventh coalition People's Assembly in February 2013 with a battered but defiant spirit. It confronted right-wing efforts to block the expansion of Medicaid to half a million poor North Carolinians, overturn the Racial Justice Act, require photo ID for voting, and eliminate same-day voter registration. The group responded by forming the Forward Together Moral Movement in North Carolina, advocating a five-part platform of economic justice, educational equality, universal health care, criminal-justice reform, and voting rights. On the evening of April 29, 2013, a Monday, it staged a protest outside the doors of the North Carolina state legislature on Jones Street. Barber said they opposed the "avalanche of extremist policies" being debated by the legislature, and they had written numerous letters demanding to be heard. The time had come to put their bodies on the line. Seventeen protesters were promptly arrested for annoying the legislators and the Moral Monday campaign was launched.

The following Monday, several hundred people showed up to demonstrate and thirty entered the state legislature building to get arrested. Barber said the Forward Together Moral Movement already had a legal strategy to challenge the new policies in court, and an organizing strategy to work across the entire state. The Moral Monday witness had its own work and purpose: to respond to the crisis of American democracy with acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. Moral Mondays struck a cultural nerve. The crowds grew and the media showed up to cover the ritual of protests and arrests. The fourth Moral Monday, on May 20, drew a thousand protestors and fifty-seven got arrested. The following month, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the U.S. Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, claiming its coverage formula was based on outdated data.

North Carolina's Republican legislators, no longer restrained by the Voting Rights Act, threw all their voter-suppression ideas into one bill. The Moral Monday crowds swelled to five thousand people per week. After the legislature passed its voter-suppression bill, it went home, but the demonstrations kept going through July. Barber declared on the twelfth Moral Monday, July 22: "The whole world can see through your lies, legislature. The whole world can see through your lies about voter fraud and voter integrity. We know what you are up to. Maybe you are stuck in the nineteenth century, but we're not. Maybe you are stuck in Jim Crow and the Old South, but we're not." This fight, he declared, was on.

Sometimes Barber had to police the "moral" in Moral Monday: "We don't have to curse people to be right." In a moral movement, he said, you aim to make friends of your enemies. All great movements arise from a deep moral wellspring, not from attacking people. Barber knew why his listeners were angry, depressed, and hurting, because he was, too. He said he wanted his sons to realize why he was constantly on the road, trying to change the world. He wanted them to believe it was still possible.

Moral Mondays was a spectacular success. It grew week by week, operating in revival style, replete with evangelistic sermons and an altar call. The revival format did not stop it from feeling interreligious, with sermons by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clerics who took turns inspiring the crowd. Barber had to bring his own A-game every week just to compare favorably with a slew of very able preacher-orators. When reporters asked where this movement was heading, Barber explained that Moral Mondays was a revival witness and civil-disobedience campaign, not a movement. Forward Together was the movement.

They kept Moral Mondays going for thirteen weeks, culminating with rallies across North Carolina on July 29, 2013, which served as a kind of dress rehearsal for a mass march in Raleigh the following February. Barber said they were trying to birth a Third Reconstruction. The First Reconstruction led to interracial fusion alliances that were viciously attacked by white backlash movements. The Second Reconstruction was the civil-rights movement. The Third Reconstruction must aim higher than the expansion of voting rights achieved by the Voting Rights Act, winning a constitutional amendment that guarantees the same voting rights in every state. In 2014, Barber established an educational center called Repairers of the Breach to equip leaders for state-based coalitions. It teaches organizers to conduct grassroots statewide campaigns and to use moral language to frame policy issues.

After Trump was elected in 2016, Barber insisted that no single defeat changes everything. He said it in January 2017, speaking at Washington Hebrew Congregation: "We will never, never, never turn back. One election can't turn us back. A loudmouth can't turn us back." In 2018 he launched the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC). It took up the unfinished business of its namesake, fifty years later, building toward "Forty Days of Action" in May and June of 2018. Barber teamed up as codirector with white Presbyterian minister Liz Theoharis, a New Testament scholar who earned her PhD at Union Theological Seminary in 2014 and directed Union's Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. Barber and Theoharis aimed to build a network of locally focused chapters led by poor people themselves, which ruled out partnerships with national progressive organizations. Barber and Theoharis reasoned that they couldn't call it a grassroots movement if they linked up with national labor unions, think tanks, and advocacy groups. The new PPC kicked off a national tour in Marks, Mississippi, and proceeded to Detroit, Selma, Harlan County (Kentucky), Central Valley (California), and Grays Harbor (Washington), building up to forty consecutive days of action in twenty-five state capitals and other sites. Sometimes they drew encouraging crowds and sometimes they were brutally disappointed.

At Union there was constant anxiety about the size of the crowds and whether PPC was taking off.

The Forty Days of Action was up-and-down, like the buildup tour. In 2019, Barber and Theoharis changed their strategy, planning a big march in D.C. for the following year, which required alliances with national organizations. Cosponsors came aboard, including major unions such as AFSCME, the American Postal Workers Union, and the Association of Flight Attendants. When COVID-19 struck, Barber and Theoharis revamped the march as a virtual rally on June 20, 2020. Driven online, it boasted 248 cosponsors and attracted over two million livestream viewers, calling for racial justice, single-payer health care, worker rights, free tuition at public colleges, an assault-weapons ban, and criminal-justice reforms.

The PPC rally provided the strongest evidence in years that the religious Left is still out there to be gathered and mobilized, even as Barber and Theoharis refuse to put it that way. They stick to a Christian Gospel message fixed on the poor. Barber accepted the tradeoffs of moving from a focus on North Carolina to a national stage. Then, in December 2022, he accepted the directorship of the new Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at Yale Divinity School, an educational ministry enterprise funded by the Ford Foundation and the Fetzer Institute. He retired from Greenleaf Christian Church but continues as president of Repairers of the Breach and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign.

Barber's core sermon pairs Psalm 118 and Luke 4—the rejected stone has become the cornerstone, and Jesus was anointed to preach good news to the poor. The Gospel, he insists, is about lifting up the poor. The soul of America cannot be saved without remembering what the Gospel is about:

> I believe right now that the soul of America is at stake. The soul of the nation cannot be saved, cannot be sturdy, cannot be properly put together unless the rejected lead the revival and become the chief cornerstones. This has always been true at the heart of our story. There is no way to mend the flaws of the nation and be one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all unless the rejected are at the center. We can't find our way out of the mess we're in with a left focus or a right focus. We've got to refocus on those who have been rejected.

Serious Play

MATTHEW ROSE

Robert Bellah was the last major thinker on the American Left to argue that shared religious beliefs are essential for democratic politics. In an era that saw liberalism grow progressively more secular, he defended views that dissented from elite opinion and the models of reality on which it rested. He argued that secularism is impossible, individualism is an illusion, and religious worship is inescapable. He made these arguments in best-selling books that combined learning and civility with a zeal for the ideals of democratic socialism and a dread for the practices of managerial capitalism. Bellah was the most celebrated American sociologist of his time, and it might seem absurd to suggest he was ignored. Presidents, clergy, scholars, and community leaders all sought his counsel. But if they had listened to him closely, as Bellah privately doubted they had, what would they have heard?

By the time he completed his final book, two years before his death in 2013, Bellah had concluded that America stood at the bleak end of a civilizational epoch. In its coming "time of trial," as he called it, Americans would realize the values that had created their culture had also impaired their ability to understand or control it. Bellah's writings over seven decades offer a unique interpretation of this paradox. They span his work on American history, his pioneering studies of Asian, Islamic, and Native American traditions, and a concluding magnum opus on the history of religious evolution. Bellah consistently denied that our ordeal could be solved through conventional forms of activism, argument, or piety. It can be survived, he claimed, only through a painful reckoning with how our most cherished values created the very systems that now enslave us—and how they can be repaired only by learning from religious traditions we presume to have left behind.

In 1961, Bellah was living in Japan on a Fulbright fellowship, unaware that his next lecture would become a major academic controversy. He had turned to the study of East Asia as a graduate student at Harvard in the early 1950s out of frustration with the shallowness of American consumer culture and a growing fascination with traditional societies. The lecture had been inspired by an encounter with a group of Shinto priests years before. During a visit to Cambridge, they pressed the young Japan specialist to explain why the Allies had required their country to privatize the Yasukuni Jinja, a shrine for the war dead, in accordance with the separation of church and state, while Arlington National Cemetery was allowed to operate under the federal government. Bellah's lecture was his attempt to explain to his Japanese hosts the role of religion in American civic life.

When it was later published in 1967, "Civil Religion in America" sparked intense debate. The article was written as Americans began to question the belief that their nation had charted paths—in economics, politics, culture, and religion—that other modernizing nations were destined to follow. Bellah acknowledged that America was in several respects the most modern of societies. But in other ways, he suggested, it was not so different from even primitive societies. This was especially the case in the relationship between religion and politics, where he saw clear evidence that America endowed its civic traditions with sacred significance. Bellah strongly disagreed that America's lack of an established church and its freedom of religion made it a secular society. America was and remained a country with a sacred center on which the legitimacy of its ideals and institutions depended.

Bellah called this America's "civil religion." He defined the term sociologically. It described the rituals, symbols, and language of civic life, not the private beliefs of individuals. He interpreted American history through the lens of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who

argued that all societies—even those that seemed most secular—express their identities in religious symbols. For Durkheim, the nonobservant son of a rabbi, the truth of a religion is not found where both believers and unbelievers often assume it to be—in its official dogmas—but in the practices that promote group solidarity and commemorate social bonds. Bellah maintained that, when viewed from this perspective, America clearly possessed a national cult. It had its own civic rituals, liturgical calendar, and holy documents, as well as its own saints, prophets, martyrs, hymns, and pilgrimage sites. Bellah insisted that this national cult's celebration was not purely ceremonial. Nor did it worship what sociologist Will Herberg had dismissively termed the "American way of life." "The American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation," Bellah wrote, "but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality."

Bellah was raised Presbyterian. He was a descendent, he later joked, of "those dreadful people who march around Northern Ireland." As a teenager he experienced a conversion to the Social Gospel, and apart from a brief Marxist phase, he was outspoken about his faith during his four decades at the University of California, Berkeley. His 1967 article appeared at a moment when thinkers like Harvey Cox and John Rawls were proposing visions of the "secular city" that left little place for religion. Bellah's critics accused him of sacralizing politics and idolizing the nation. He responded by noting that "a pure liberalism is a reductio ad absurdum and a sociological impossibility." But he also denied that America was a "Christian nation," even if its civic life was suffused with biblical symbols and themes. America's civil religion was its ingenious solution for religious pluralism, allowing people of different traditions to unite in pursuit of shared purposes. It did not settle political disagreements, of course, or prevent injustices. But according to Bellah, it provided the moral grammar through which Americans of different backgrounds and faiths could discuss the meaning of their common life.

America's civil religion was therefore the core of its national identity—a fact, Bellah lamented, to which contemporary scholars were usually blind. Its celebration in speeches, holidays, and elections held together a diverse people, joining, though never fully harmonizing, the different values and traditions that informed the country's founding. How did it do so?

Bellah's interest in theology was unusual among sociologists. He credited the work of Paul Tillich for rescuing his faith during a period of religious doubt, and for decades he advised students at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. America's public theology, he explained, was neither sectarian nor systematic. It was doctrinally vague, culturally pervasive, and legally invisible. It could not be found in the nation's laws or in its Constitution. It had no official text or clergy, and its interpretation was left up to politicians, poets, and preachers. But it served the essential dual purpose of both legitimizing American institutions and providing grounds for their criticism.

Bellah's "Civil Religion in America" was an unexpected turn for a scholar whose previous work had ranged from Apache kinship systems to the history of Tokugawa Japan. He later regretted that his "Babylonian captivity" to American studies had delayed his long-planned book on the evolution of religion. But it established him as a leading interpreter of American religious life. He wrote the article believing that civic religion had inspired the best of America, including the progressive causes he ardently supported. But almost as soon as it was published, Bellah began to doubt the ability of America's civil religion to solve lingering problems of economic and racial justice. He also came to question the character of a country whose values it enshrined.

As America emerged from the upheavals of the 1960s, Bellah turned to examine the religious impulses beneath its social unrest. He did so not by reflecting on the latest trends in theology, but by returning to the earliest questions of sociology. Bellah had entered his discipline when it was imbued with a belief in scientific

and political progress. Its prestige in the postwar era reflected confidence in its power to solve social problems at home and to project American values abroad. Bellah shared the ambitions of sociology to offer a master explanation of human behavior, and his reputation as a "universal scholar" was well deserved. But his style of sociology, which preferred history to statistics, aligned it more closely with questions in the humanities than with the methods of the hard sciences.

What makes modern culture so different from the cultures that came before it? How did individualism, capitalism, and critical rationality come to transform human life? And why did modernity promise freedom to all but deliver oppression to so many? Sociology began in the nineteenth century as an attempt to understand the shattering transition from the settled patterns of traditional society to the disruptive revolutions of modern life. Its founding thinkers wanted to ameliorate the worst aspects of modern life—its loneliness, exploitation, moral chaos, and perceived meaninglessness—by showing how human beings are rooted in the structures of their societies. For a time, Bellah believed Karl Marx best answered these questions. He even joined the Communist Party—a decision that would later imperil his career. Though he always remained a man of the Left, he eventually broke with Marxism because he concluded that human behavior could not be explained entirely by material or economic factors. "Modernization," he countered, "is always a moral and a religious problem."

Bellah regarded religion as the central category for understanding human life. "The analysis of modern man as secular, materialistic, and in the deepest sense areligious," he wrote, "seems fundamentally misguided." He possessed a remarkable knowledge of the history and variety of religions. By "religion" he did not mean only one's personal beliefs about God or the supernatural, as Western thinkers have sometimes assumed. Bellah was sharply critical of the idea that individual beliefs defined religion more properly than "embodied, nonverbal practices." For Bellah, it is nonverbal language—the silent languages of gesture, body movement, and even facial expressions—that convey the most complex religious meanings. Taking the "deep history" of humanity as his guide, he therefore understood religion as the way that human beings construe the world through symbol, myth, and ritual. He called his theory "symbolic realism," and refined it throughout his career. As Bellah saw it, everything that we do as human beings—our ability to think, speak, imagine, create, socialize, or play—is possible only through the symbolic forms by which we understand our place in the world:

> We have not begun to understand the full implications of religious language and symbolism. Social science has not begun to fathom the deep insights into human motives and human action that the religious tradition contains. But we do know that religious symbols are the way man has related himself, from the beginning of his existence as a cultural being, to the conditions of his existence. Through religious symbols man has symbolized to himself his own identity and the order of existence in terms of which his identity makes sense. These symbols are not "made up" by the human ego or deduced by rational reflection. They are born out of the tragedy and the suffering, the joy and the victory of men struggling to make sense out of their world. (*Beyond Belief*)

When Bellah applied his theory to 1970s America, what he saw alarmed him. His 1975 book, *The Broken Covenant*, described a nation being undone by its own symbols. The severity of its criticisms and the direness of its tone surprised many. Published on the eve of the nation's bicentennial, the book examined the dominant moral traditions in American history from the colonial period to the present, concluding that they could no longer be united in a common democratic purpose. "Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell," Bellah announced. His most unsettling

suggestion was that Evangelical Protestantism and Enlightenment liberalism, widely thought to be antagonists in the drama of American political life, had spawned an ideology that was undermining American institutions. What Bellah critically termed "individualism" was not the creed of self-governing citizens. It was the misguided ambition of individuals to be free from all unchosen commitments and the symbols that expressed them.

Bellah's concerns about American moral decline echoed those of a rising generation of American conservatives. He scorned the idea that society exists to liberate individuals from the burdens of nature and history, enabling them to achieve what they have the right but not the means to accomplish by themselves. But if Bellah was suspicious of liberalism, he was even more suspicious of conservatism—and not only in its libertarian forms. For one thing, he thought that religious conservatives often amplified the worst aspects of individualism. The Protestant emphasis on personal belief, he claimed, tended to absolve believers of communal responsibilities and blind them to social injustices. For another, Bellah was eager to learn from non-Western traditions, including those that harshly criticized American folkways. He was especially interested in the new religious movements emerging from the California counterculture, seeing in them glimpses of "a culture of imagination and not calculation," as he wrote in his 1970 book, *Beyond Belief*.

Bellah's openness to experiments in living was not limited to New Age spirituality and Bay Area religious movements. In the prefaces to his books, he often reflected on the personal experiences that influenced his scholarship, wondering whether his consuming interest in religion was a way of coping with the childhood trauma of his father's suicide. Bellah reserved more private thoughts for his diaries. As Matteo Bortolini revealed in an excellent biography, *A Joyfully Serious Man*, in the 1970s, Bellah experimented cautiously with LSD, an open marriage, and sexual relationships with men. His life had been turned over by the sudden and tragic loss of two daughters in a span of three years, and the decade was one of personal anguish and professional disappointment. Bellah had met Michel Foucault during the French scholar's visits to Berkeley, but in Bortolini's sensitive telling, Bellah's explorations of the Castro District had little of Foucault's transgressive spirit. Bellah told his wife, Nancy, that he was not gay—merely a pretend "bigamist" with unresolved confusion about his personal identity.

How was individualism changing American life? In search of an answer, Bellah undertook the only significant fieldwork of his career. Over a period of five years, he and his team extensively interviewed more than two hundred people. His subjects included business executives, stay-at-home mothers, activists, clergy, nurses, and union members. Some of them, like "Sheila," who revealed that she had created her own religion of "Sheila-ism," became among the most famous research subjects in the history of sociology. Bellah and his colleagues were interested in responses to a single question, which they posed in searching ways: How do you determine what is good and right in your daily life? They wanted to learn about the deepest sources of moral motivation and purpose—not as theorized by academics but as experienced by average people. Bellah set aside the writing of sociologists to listen to the voices of everyday Americans.

The resulting book, *Habits of the Heart,* became his biggest professional success, quickly selling nearly half a million copies and being named a Pulitzer finalist. Published in 1985, when Bellah was fifty-seven years old, it was celebrated as one of the most important works of sociology since David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). The book offered vivid portraits of Americans living amid what Ronald Reagan had recently called, on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, "the age of the individual." *Habits of the Heart* was eagerly embraced by leading Democrats, including Walter Mondale and Jerry Brown, who hailed it as an indictment of the policies of the reelected Republican president. Bellah

was a committed Democrat and had been an advisor to Jimmy Carter, who brought Bellah to the White House before writing his notorious "malaise" speech in 1979. But the book avoided partisan debates, made no policy recommendations, and was welcomed by more than a few conservatives, including Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak.

Habits of the Heart was fundamentally a study of the impoverishment of moral language. It explored the dissonance between the way Americans lived their lives and the way they talked about them. It made two acute observations. The first was that virtually all Americans, no matter their religious background or political persuasion, spoke a single moral language. Bellah called this the "first language" of individualism. When people explained how and why they made moral choices, Bellah discovered that they used a narrow ethical framework. They explained their decisions in terms of their own idiosyncratic preferences—saying that what is "good" is what they found personally satisfying or rewarding. Americans spoke highly about happiness, citizenship, and success. But they justified these values almost entirely in terms of their subjective preferences, rather than how they connected to higher obligations or a higher good. The important thing, they explained, is to be true to one's interests and sincere in expressing them.

The book did not, however, depict Americans as decadent or narcissistic, even if it noticed ominous trends in budding solipsists like Sheila. Bellah's second observation was equally penetrating: the way Americans justified their moral choices was often refuted by how they actually lived. He observed that Americans spoke as if they were "arbitrary centers of volition"—as if their moral impulses had no deeper foundation than their passing personal desires. Yet their actions suggested they sought enduring social commitments and binding civic obligations. They often gave generously, served their communities, and honored those who put the common good before their own. Bellah's conclusion was striking. The shallowness of the dominant moral culture prevented Americans from plumbing the depth of their own lives. The "first language" of individualism impaired their self-understanding, making their lives "sound more isolated and arbitrary than they actually are." Bellah lamented that Americans lacked the "secondary languages" of biblical religion and republican virtue, which earlier generations were able to draw upon.

Habits of the Heart portrayed a people suffering from a crippling case of moral mutism. Stripped of the ideas, narratives, and symbols that could express a richer vision of life, Americans were inarticulate about what mattered to them most. The book's most haunting sections showed people struggling to explain even the real sacrifices they had made for their families and spouses, describing their genuine self-giving as calculating self-interest. Bellah argued that the language of individualism had the effect of making people opaque not only to each other but also to themselves: "There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism." His deepest fear was not that Americans were morally confused but that, as they became habituated to the attitudes they expressed, their innermost identities would be altered as well—a degradation of character following a deterioration of language. "The irony," Bellah concluded, "is that just where we think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs in our culture."

Bellah's book saw into a future that is now our present. Its worries about the creeping loneliness and aimlessness in American life would be confirmed decades later by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. Bellah offered few practical solutions to the crumbling of community life, saying only that Americans needed to preserve "communities of memory" that engaged in "practices of commitment." He spoke as well of the need for an Aristotelian ethics of virtue, aligning himself with communitarianism, an intellectual movement that criticized liberalism for its neglect of how human identities are shaped by culture and history. Bellah was returning with renewed fervor to the questions that had inspired

his career, and to the monumental book he had always hoped to write. If America was to survive its time of trial, he concluded, it would have to look beyond modernity, beyond Western culture, and even beyond written history for religious guidance. "Perhaps the truth," he suggested, "lies in what most of the world outside the modern West has always believed."

If Émile Durkheim helped Bellah understand American ideals, the German sociologist Max Weber helped him confront American realities. Bellah's deepest criticism of individualism was that it undermined the very conditions that make it possible. Its vision of human beings as free to choose their own identities and commitments had not brought about a more creative or reflective society. It had resulted in people who were lonely, disoriented, and servile to the power of markets, states, and public opinion. Weber called this condition the "iron cage" of modernity. It was a "masterless slavery," he explained, because it was enforced through the power of impersonal rules and bureaucracies that fused state and market into a single system. But it was also a world of our own making—indeed, as Weber demonstrated, the "iron cage" was built on the values of bourgeois individualism.

In the last two decades of his life, Bellah explored ways to escape this ideological prison while still preserving democratic values. The great question of our time, he proposed, "is whether we can control the very economic and technical forces, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us." In a controversial 1998 article, "Is There a Common American Culture?," Bellah argued that American culture was threatened by a "monoculture" that diminished its ability to imagine alternative ways of life. Its embrace of "diversity" promoted the just treatment of minorities, but it also concealed the hegemony of a technocratic liberalism that strips us of any shared morality other than that of market exchange. Weber himself believed the "iron cage" could not be escaped, finding no tenable place for virtue ethics in an amoral world of power politics and capitalism. He saw no solution to the tragic paradox that the highest achievement of Western culture, its all-embracing rationalism, was also the source of its fatal disenchantment. Bellah did not share Weber's fatalism, but he did share his interest in archaic religion. It was there, in the remote prehistory of our species, that Bellah found guidance for the future.

Religion in Human Evolution was the book Bellah lived to write, and he died not long after it was published to wide acclaim in 2011. It stands as his final and most expansive interpretation of the problem of modernity and religion, which had first drawn him to the study of sociology in the 1940s. The eight-hundred-page work is impossible to summarize, impossible even for a single reviewer to competently evaluate. It is best understood as belonging to the genre of modernity criticism, and best read alongside Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. This might seem odd advice about a book whose history ends in the fourth century BC, and which expends enormous scholarly energy in imagining the vanished worlds of religions for which we have no written records. But Bellah's "autobiography of the human race," as he called his big book, was not simply a work of historical reconstruction. Its ambition was to offer a new interpretation of modernity, by viewing it from the longest historical perspective possible.

By evolution, Bellah did not mean simply biological evolution. He also meant the evolution of culture, the process through which human beings actively cooperate in their own transformation. As Bellah told it, the history of our species is the story of its expanding capacities for language and culture, capacities that enhanced our ability to cooperate with and learn from one another. Human beings are uniquely "self-domesticating." Not only did we evolve in ways that improved our fitness for survival and reproduction. More astonishingly, we nurtured capacities that freed us from selective pressures, allowing us to form families, societies, and eventually institutions that offer shelter from the grim competition for life and

resources. The key to understanding our species, Bellah argued, is found in our ability to create these "relaxed spaces," where distinctly human abilities—for reflection, love, creativity, and play—have the freedom to flourish.

At the heart of *Religion and Human Evolution* is an account of how our species evolved to live in "multiple realities." What Bellah called "everyday life" is the world of work and survival, in which we understand reality through our immediate biological and material needs. Although this dimension of life might seem uniquely real, it is not. Bellah's most important claim was this: *no one can live in the world of everyday life all the time*. Essential to every human life and society is our capacity to escape this brute reality—to transcend the domain of animal immediacy and instrumental reasoning. We leave the world of everyday life whenever we enter spheres of life that are not dominated by evolutionary pressures, and we do so frequently. Beginning in infancy and ending only near death, our lives are punctuated by "play." Games are play, but so are conversations, social rituals, novels, songs, paintings, and religion. "In some important sense," Bellah wrote, "we never leave childhood."

Bellah's picture of history is shaped by his claim that religion emerged from what historian Johan Huizinga called "the primeval soil of play." To say that religion is the highest form of play does not mean religion is unserious—it simply means it is the opposite of work. *Religion and Human Evolution* chronicled the emergence of religion in tribal and archaic societies up to its transformation in the Axial Age. Drawing on work in archeology, anthropology, and evolutionary psychology, Bellah contended that at each stage of cultural evolution, religion integrated societies into an ordered unity. In its most primitive stages, it did so not by priestly rule or by prescribing beliefs about gods or God (features of religion that developed only later, Bellah speculated). Instead, it did so by ritual, the founding action of the first human societies. Ritual makes society. In ritual, we transcend everyday life by participating in an action expressed in common symbols and gestures. We enact a vision of the social world as it is "meant to be," overcoming, if only for a moment, group envy, competition, and strife. "Only ritual pulls us out of our egoistic pursuit of our own interests and creates the possibility of a social world."

The great thinkers of the Axial Age fundamentally altered archaic religion, marking a watershed in cultural evolution. Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Mencius, Buddha, and the Jewish prophets—Bellah's sprawling book shows how each of these figures introduced a radically new element into cultures previously governed by the holy repetitions of ritual and myth. The "birth of criticism" enabled human beings, for the first time, to put into serious question the authority of traditional ways of life. Stories, laws, and rituals could now be judged from a higher and more universal order of values. Human beings also began to develop second-order thinking skills, eventually coming to see themselves as having identities and agency of their own. Bellah's ambivalent verdict on the Axial Age set the stage for his interpretation of modernity. He praised Axial thinkers for raising human moral consciousness and for opening archaic societies to rational evaluation. But he also lamented its long-term influence on Western culture, which began to uproot human rationality from its embeddedness in relationships of trust and dependency.

Bellah saw modernity as an attempt to free human knowledge from its primordial basis in ritual, symbol, and narrative. He never denied its advances, but he feared that they had come at heavy costs, both to our humanity and to the natural environment. In Bellah's telling, modernity's story was tragic. We built the modern world for purposes that we had consciously chosen: for peace, for comfort, for efficiency, for a reduction of suffering, and, above all, for an expansion of individual autonomy. But in working to make that world a reality, we lost control over the institutions and ideas that sustain it, suffering degradation by the very system that was supposed to empower us. Bellah argued this is as much a cultural

catastrophe as an economic or environmental crisis. Human beings find meaning only by living in "multiple realities," flourishing in those human sanctuaries where thought, creativity, friendship, love, and worship are nurtured and expressed. But today we are mentally trapped by the logic of competitive life, living as functionaries in a world where it seems nothing is leisure, everything is work, and the boundaries protecting the sacred from the profane are being erased every day.

Though Bellah preferred the language of sociology, he often described this condition in a Christian idiom. Our inordinate desire to possess and control, our *libido dominandi*, has been "externalized into structures that take on a life of their own, become like monsters, and are no longer servants of our wishes but dominate, control, and subjugate us." In his final years, Bellah's theological views subtly changed. He spoke less often of Paul Tillich and the Social Gospel movement and more frequently of postliberal theologians like George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. He agreed with the former that Christianity is a "cultural-linguistic" system into which believers are initiated through practice and imitation; he affirmed with the latter that Christian life bears witness to a radical form of community. Bellah's postliberal turn explained the advice he routinely gave to secular students when they asked him for religious guidance. "I say not to worry about believing in God," he recalled. "I tell them that if they become part of the life of the church they will begin to see how the word is used and what it means."

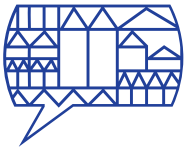
Bellah's writings cut across academic disciplines, historical epochs, and religious traditions. But they always carry the paradoxical message that human beings cannot reach the deepest sources of truth and value through abstract reason. Today we often assume that knowledge requires theory, theory requires abstraction, and abstraction requires separating cognition from outside influences. If this method is essential for grasping the laws of nature, Bellah believed, it has proven a failure for guiding the higher life of humanity. His critique of modern life was that it had inverted the proper hierarchy between reason and ritual. It had wrongly assumed that ritual actions are an impediment to reaching the highest truths rather than the royal road to them.

Bellah believed that we stand at the end of an epoch, now two and a half millennia old, that has been relentlessly anti-ritualistic. This impulse was expressed in the Axial Age, quickened in the Reformation and Enlightenment, and valorized in the ideals of Western individualism. Bellah excelled at showing the many ways that rituals and symbols continue to suffuse American life. But what our culture conspicuously lacks, he argued, are those rituals that humanize any society—rituals that interrupt everyday life, break up mundane patterns of perception, and elevate us above the profane world of survival, rivalry, and acquisition. Bellah had little interest in traditional theological debates and often said that non-Christian traditions were also worthy of belief. But he placed his hope in religious communities, both Christian and non-Christian, that preserved a truth as old as society—that there are truths so transformative that they can be understood only by being enacted.

Bellah envisioned two possible futures for America. In one, the intertwined systems of market and state will continue to colonize what remains of the human "lifeworld," leaving Americans with diminished capacities to transcend the secular structures over which they have little control. In another, Americans will awaken again to the multiple realities of human life and commit to building protective bulwarks around the "relaxed zones" of culture and cult. Bellah placed little hope in progressive activism, which he thought was too much influenced by a deconstructive attitude of critique. "Criticism alone cannot give us solidarity or meaning," he wrote. Human beings need to do more than demand the freedom or power they are individually denied. No less than their earliest ancestors, they need meanings found only by relinquishing the desire to control or possess. For Bellah, this kind of community was enacted in a ritual of the most intense symbolic realism. As he put it in a sermon delivered on All Saints Day:

I want to remind you that it is in the Eucharist that it all comes together: with all the company of heaven, the communion of the saints, and of all souls, all enfolded in one time, time out of time, all equally present—past, future, and to come. Nunc stans, the eternal now. That is what happens in that moment when the sacred is embodied in human community.... It is in and through the Eucharist that we can understand the real meaning of time and death, of those who have gone before us, those who are with us now, and those who are to come.

Women's Ordination



CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

Women's Ordination

Women's ordination is a sticking point for many Catholics who want to be faithful to the Church but are uneasy about exclusion based on sex. A 2024 Pew survey found that 64 percent of people who self-identify as Catholic believe that women should be allowed to become priests. Those who don't show up in the pews tend to be more supportive of the ordination of women than those who do; while 56 percent of those who attend Mass weekly support the ordination of women, that number jumps to 71 percent of Catholics who don't. The Pew study isn't proof that people don't attend Mass because of their disagreement with the Church on women's ordination, but it could be one factor among many pushing them away.

This is true, at least, for several authors who have written about women's ordination for *Commonweal*. As part of a symposium on women's ordination, Alice McDermott writes that participation at Mass has come to feel like "collusion" with a Church that sees women as "[l]ess complex, less moral, less valuable, less intelligent, less worthy, less human." In numerous ways from a young age, even as women were being promised that they "could do, could become, anything they set their minds to," she received the message that in the Church women must defer to men and that women's roles should be defined by men. The all-male priesthood is a sign of sickness in the Church, "an outward sign of inner corruption."

In the same symposium, Jane Varner Malhotra insists that the exclusion of women from ordination is "the most important issue facing the Church today because it results in so much pain." It is a "system of supremacy that needs radical removal" to allow the Church "to fully hear the cries of the poor" and to experience the unique ways that women reveal God's image. "We are depriving ourselves of the divine as embodied by women," she writes. "How much more fully would we express the sacraments if women were administering them too?"

Thirty years earlier, Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, which declares that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful." That year, *Commonweal* published six responses to the letter—some in agreement, some uneasy, and some in opposition. The responses grapple with the arguments against ordaining women—that women's ordination is in fact impossible because a woman can't image Christ in the way a priest does, and that it was Jesus' clear intention for priests to be men because of his choice of all male apostles. Many of the responses convey a sense of betrayal, of no longer feeling at home in the Church or even trusted by it. One respondent questions her ability to receive Communion given her dissent. But even in their disagreement, all of the responses demonstrate a faithfulness to the Church, a desire to determine the will of God and to serve God's people.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

Alice McDermott, "Why Not Women?," May 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/why-not-women

Jane Varner Malhotra, "Women at the Altar," May 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/women-altar

Avery Dulles, Regina Plunkett Dowling, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Fleming Rutledge, Robert P. George, and Sara Maitland, "Women's Ordination: Six Responses," July 1994

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to "image Christ"? Do you agree with the arguments that women's ordination is impossible because women cannot image Christ in the way priesthood requires?

2. McDermott discusses misogyny in the Church: the idea that women are less worthy, less valuable, and less like God than men are. Do you agree that women's exclusion from the priesthood is misogyny? Pope Francis and others insist that women have other roles to fill and different gifts to offer—this is sometimes called complementarity. Is there anything true about complementarity, and, if so, how do we talk about the differences between men and women without falling into misogyny?

3. How has discussion of women's roles and rights changed over your lifetime, in both the Church and in broader society? Do you observe any differences in approach between the articles from 2024 and the articles from 1994?

4. There's a risk that ordination can be seen as a "right" that the Church is denying women. But as one author notes, no one has a "right" to ordination, and it is not, consequently, a women's-rights issue. Ordination is "obedience to a call or it is nothing." What is the risk of seeing it as a women's-rights issue, and how can proponents of women's ordination avoid that framing? Can religious truth and secular justice be in opposition?

5. Avery Dulles seems to be walking a fine line: on the one hand, he wants to affirm Church teaching and insists that we must adhere even to "hard sayings." On the other hand, he says we should acknowledge

women's reasonable feelings of pain and marginalization. If one agrees with Church teaching on women's ordination, how do we do both? If one disagrees, how should we engage with current teaching?

6. Several authors point out that the use of the word "definitively" indicates that, as Robert P. George put it, "dissent is illegitimate" on this issue. Yet many in the pews, as well as many academic theologians, question the teaching or openly argue against the ban on women's ordination. Are they wrong to do so? Should advocates for expanding women's roles focus on a different goal?

7. Malhotra mentions the Synod documents, which prioritize expanding women's roles in the Church. How can synodality help expand roles for women in the life of the Church? Can it help bridge differences of opinion about women's ordination?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Mary Douglas, "A Modest Proposal," June 1996
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/modest-proposal

Susan Bigelow Reynolds, "Are We Protagonists Yet?," December 2022
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/women-church-synod-francis-catholic

Phyllis Zagano, "Women Deacons?," July 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/synodality-francis-diaconate-women-clericalism-grech

Charlotte Allen, "A Such-As-It-Was Church," September 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/why-womens-ordination-doesnt-get-traction

Why Not Women?

ALICE MCDERMOTT

Otto Preminger's film *The Cardinal* was released in 1963, when I was ten years old, so I guess it was some years later that it appeared on TV. I recall watching it with my mother. I watched many movies with my mother.

Early on, there's a scene where a young priest tells his pregnant sister's doctors that they must let her die in order to save her unborn child. I turned to my mother in disbelief. Would that really happen?

"Oh yes," my mother assured me, placidly enough. "That's the rule in the Catholic Church. The baby's life comes before the life of the mother."

Until then, I'd always pestered my mother about having another baby. I was the youngest of three and the only girl. I wanted a sister. But after seeing *The Cardinal*, I prayed she would never again take that risk. I knew I needed her far more than I needed some imagined baby sister. Her life was the life I cherished above all others, the life most essential to my own. I suppose I was too young at the time to realize that the pregnant sister who must die could, someday, be me.

This, then, was my first encounter with the diminished value my Church assigns to the lives of women. Not the last, of course.

In those days, I could not be an altar server, as my brothers were, simply because I was female. Throughout my grammar-school years, I watched the middle-aged nuns who taught us—formidable, dignified women—bow and scrape and even giggle whenever the parish priests, some of them mere twenty-somethings, deigned to visit our classrooms.

In my all-girls Catholic high school, we were challenged by our female teachers to read widely, to know world history and Church history, to understand economics—and not just home economics. We were encouraged to debate cogently, whether our subject was politics or poetry or Plato's cave. We were assured that the big news of the era was true: women could do, could become, anything they set their minds to. And yet we were able to celebrate Mass or line up for Reconciliation only when a local priest agreed to fit us girls into his busy schedule.

Years later, my own daughter asked Sr. Nina, her fifth-grade teacher, why there were seven sacraments for Catholic men, but only six for Catholic women. Sister's reply? "Good question."

Our all-male clergy is no big deal, I've been told over the years by Catholic men and many Catholic women. Just a small matter of custom or ritual, a harmless tradition. Jesus was a man, the old argument goes; how confusing it would be to the faithful if Christ were represented on the altar by a non-man, a woman. Of course, we don't worry about that confusion when we make references to Mother Church with all her feminine pronouns.

"Oh, come on," a smiling cardinal replied with a wink when I pressed him on the issue of women's ordination. "It's you women who really run the Church." In a similar discussion, a laughing monsignor assured me that his priests were "terrified" of the Mothers' Club at his school. "Talk about power," he'd said. All in good humor.

But how to separate this "small matter" of an all-male clergy from the insidious effects of ritual misogyny? In his book *Turning Point*, Robert McClory tells the "inside story" of the Papal Birth Control Commission of the early sixties. The commission, which included married Catholics, found an overwhelming desire among faithful Catholic couples to be able to use birth control—for the good of their marriages but also for the health of the women in the marriage, too many of whom knew the toll of multiple pregnancies, miscarriages, or husbands who must be denied. These were faithful Catholic couples who requested access to birth control in order to protect the very life and physical well-being of Catholic women. We all know how that turned out.

In the early part of this century, I had dinner in Boston with a group of Catholic-school teachers, all women, some of them nuns or former nuns. The abuse scandal had just broken and their collective cry was one of opportunity missed. They could have protected these children from priestly predators, they said, if only the male hierarchy had told them which priests to look out for. If the male hierarchy had shared what they knew about those "troubled men," the women were certain they could have run interference whenever a suspected priest called a child out of their classrooms.

These women didn't want to change the power structure in the Church. They weren't particularly interested in ordaining women. They didn't even want to see the scandal exposed. They simply wished the cardinal and the other male pastors had trusted them, confided in them, enlisted their help for the good of the children. They wished they had been treated as equals, worthy of full participation in the life of the Church, even in its cover-ups and its failings.

Over the course of my adulthood, I have watched our Church abandon any sincere attempt to confront the complex moral issues that pertain to reproduction in exchange for a simplistic legal solution: overturn *Roe*. I've seen the leadership of the Catholic Church reject the challenge to convince, to counsel, to comfort, or to discern, in favor of promoting secular laws that will only coerce.

All the while, as one war followed another, Catholic men were told by their priests that joining the military and taking up arms is a matter of conscience. Each should follow his own understanding of just war, what counts as morally acceptable self-defense or justifiable homicide for some greater good. They were told military service is a personal, prayerful choice.

I recall another conversation with a charming bishop, who listened sympathetically when I described a young friend's tragic experience of the in-utero death of her infant. "We who are pro-life need to keep such circumstances in mind," he said kindly. But then he added, "What I object to are these women who have abortions simply because they want to go on holiday." I told him I called this the Jezebel defense of abortion bans. He said he didn't consider these women Jezebels; he thought them hardly human.

I attended Mass the Sunday after the *Dobbs* decision. I love the Mass. I love the Eucharist. For all the anguish my Church has caused, in the world and in my own heart, I have never been denied the peace, understanding, and renewal of hope and love that the celebration of the Mass has always afforded me. But on that day, I saw my presence in my own church as a kind of collusion—collusion with misogyny, with hypocrisy, with the conviction that to be female is to be the other, to be lesser. Less complex, less moral, less valuable, less intelligent, less worthy, less human.

As Catholics, we are aware of—we celebrate—the outward signs of inner grace. Our rituals are built on the importance of those signs and symbols, and our Church, our spirit, thrives on them as a source of good. But if there are outward signs of inner grace, then surely there are outward signs of inner corruption, signs that betray our faults, our sinfulness, our blindness, our failings. The all-male priesthood of the Catholic Church, my Church, has become for me just such a sign. And so I persist, with varying degrees of hope. I ask and ask again: Why not women? I pray for change.

This article is adapted from a presentation at the Georgetown University conference in April 2023.

Women at the Altar

JANE VARNER MALHOTRA

On Thanksgiving in 1975, my aunt Anne stopped by our home in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, on her way to a conference in Detroit. I was intrigued about the event she helped organize, which focused on women and Catholic priesthood. As a seven-year-old girl preparing for First Communion, I had wanted to become an altar server and ring those little bells someday, but the role was limited to boys. In International Women's Year, there was reason to be hopeful.

That first Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit was attended by two thousand people and helped shape the conversation on inclusive priesthood for decades to come. Altar serving opened to girls about ten years later. Changes were afoot, but embarrassingly slow in my view, so as a young adult I drifted from Church involvement.

But my aunt, Anne E. Patrick, SNJM, theologian, author, and religion and women's studies professor at Carleton College, kept up a gentle nudging. She recognized my desire to nurture a close relationship with the divine and to share God's love with others. She supported and counseled me as I raised my children in the Church. She encouraged me to accept a job at Georgetown University, and later wrote my recommendation for grad school.

By her lived example of sticking by the Church—*in* the Church—while trying to reform it, she showed our family a way to respond creatively to injustice. Her life is what I have come to understand as the kind of life Jesus himself led. He didn't abandon the imperfectly practiced tradition of his family, but offered guidance on how to put love at the center of how we treat one another, even when it means breaking unjust rules.

I learned more about the 1975 conference only recently. Participants traveled from forty-five states and overseas to explore the possibilities for a renewed, inclusive priesthood. Renowned theologians including Margaret Farley, RSM, Anne Carr, BVM, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza presented at the conference. Attendees and public endorsements came from most major orders, many theologians, and other university faculty and Catholic leaders. In other words, this conversation was happening in the mainstream. But this open, visionary dialogue was silenced by the Vatican in the years to come, and today, most Catholics have never even heard of the assembly.

Why does this matter so much? For me, the exclusion of women from ordination is the most important issue facing the Church today because it results in so much pain. It's an age-old system of supremacy that needs radical removal—taking it out by its roots, literally. Until women are at the table in large numbers, the Church can't begin to fully hear the cries of the poor, the young, the disabled, the abused, and the marginalized whom the Church claims to prioritize. As creators who have the potential to give birth, women are agents of the sacred, with unique experiences and perspectives that must be shared in order to know a fuller picture of the divine. We, too, reveal God's image.

At sacred assemblies at Georgetown, I've witnessed women chaplains of other faiths singing and praying and preaching, and every time I felt a pang of sadness that the Catholic Church is missing out on this. We are depriving ourselves of the divine as embodied by women. How much more fully would we express the sacraments if women were administering them, too?

In April 2023, hundreds gathered in person and online from around the world to tune in for "Faith, Feminism, and Being Unfinished," which I co-organized. Angele White, a health minister and founder of the Black & Women's History Ministry at St. Martin of Tours parish in Washington D.C., spoke of the history of dis-

crimination against Catholics since the founding of this country. "Change takes time," she noted. "And it takes determination, strategy, risks, patience, compassion, and passion." If people didn't stick with imperfect institutions, they would never be transformed. "There would probably be no women in positions of power to make meaningful changes, with the exception of ladylike, wifely, or motherly duties designated by men. And there would be no Black Catholics in the Church!"

Last October, I traveled to Rome to join the activities surrounding the Synod. These included a global lay-led synodal assembly with the group Spirit Unbounded, which is dedicated to human rights in the emerging Catholic Church. Speakers offered more than a hundred powerful testimonies from forty organizations working on Church reform. In her presentation, Ally Kateusz described a fourth-century ivory box which clearly depicts a man and woman concelebrating the Eucharist at the altar in Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. This is one of the oldest images of early Christian liturgy. The significant location is identifiable by the unique spiral columns given by Constantine and represented today in Bernini's altar, with the original buried below.

On my final day in Rome, I went inside St. Peter's for the first time in twenty years. I was surprised how moved I felt, and my heart was drawn to the stunning *baldacchino*. No service was going on, so I walked up close and soaked it in, then took a selfie with it behind me, with a combination of smirk and prayer: "How long must women wait to be on this altar, O God?" I sighed and wandered away. A few minutes later, I looked back: lo and behold, a woman stood on that altar. An elderly sister in her habit, she held a spray bottle and rag and was wiping down the table. I shook my head and chuckled—God has a wicked sense of humor! And then I realized, God's not joking.

Women have been at this altar all along, God was saying. *You are my daughters, my queens, my caretakers, my coworkers, my companions.* Soon women will be fully restored to our God-given leadership roles in places of worship, including this one, with all the challenges and blessings that will bring.

Not long after I returned home, the Vatican's synthesis document was released. It described the working questions, reflections, and findings for this closing year of the Synod on Synodality. I noted the first two words in Italian and refer to it that way. *Care sorelle* ("Dear sisters") offers some useful thoughts, but continues to fall short where women are concerned. Until we are welcomed by the Church fully into every role that God calls us to—including bishops, deacons, priests, and pope—this "hot-button issue" of inclusive ordination should not only be on the table but at the altar. It is indeed sacred to polish the chalice and ring the bells. But, assembly of women, shall we consider sharing all our gifts again in the co-responsibility of Christ?

Women's Ordination: Six Responses

AVERY DULLES, REGINA PLUNKETT DOWLING, CATHERINE MOWRY LACUGNA, FLEMING RUTLEDGE, ROBERT P. GEORGE, AND SARA MAITLAND

AVERY DULLES: The question of women's ordination, unavoidable though it was, became acute as a result of recent changes in Protestant and Anglican polity. John Paul II, to all appearances, wants to prevent the Catholic church from being torn apart by this issue as the Anglican communion has been. He may also be anxious to reassure Anglicans who are thinking of leaving their own communion over this issue that the Catholic church is not likely to follow suit. Ecumenically, he is concerned with cultivating closer relations with the Orthodox, who reject any feminine priesthood. And of course he has strong convictions about the nature of priesthood and the roles of men and women in the church.

For these or similar motives the pope issued a short apostolic letter, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, dated May 22, 1994. Here, in virtue of his ministry of "confirming the brethren," he declares "that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the "church's faithful." Following Paul VI, John Paul II relies primarily on arguments from authority: the example of Christ in choosing his Apostles, the constant and universal tradition of the church (not only Catholic but also Orthodox), and the recent teaching of the magisterium. He mentions also that the Apostles, imitating Christ, chose only men as their successors in the ministry. This final argument depends somewhat on one's interpretation of the New Testament data, but it seems to hold regarding the offices of bishop and presbyter, which are here in question.

The pope alludes in passing to "other theological reasons." Very likely, he has in mind the "iconic" argument that only men can properly represent Christ at the altar, acting in persona Christi. In *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988) he treated the anthropological and ecclesiological aspects of the question in the perspectives of a rich theology of creation and redemption. Such reasoning, based on the very nature of priesthood and human gender differences, can help to show that the action of Jesus and the tradition of the church were not dictated by sociological factors but belong to the permanent constitution of the church.

These theological arguments, intended to give added intelligibility to the evidence from Scripture and tradition, do not preclude all possible objections. It would be excessive to demand apodictic proofs for the church' s teaching on this, or other, matters. Few, if any, doctrines of the faith can be ultimately confirmed without reliance on arguments from authority.

A few critics have expressed regrets that the pope did not choose to speak in unison with the bishops. But the pope is always free to exercise his ordinary magisterium as successor of Peter and pastor of the whole church (*Lumen gentium*, 22). I have no doubt that some consultation with bishops did precede this statement. The development of a common statement from the universal episcopate would have been a long and cumbersome process.

In *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* the pope refrains from proclaiming a new dogma, as he might have done had he felt it opportune. Instead he confirms by his apostolic authority a tradition that he takes to be already binding, for the reasons mentioned above. He accordingly declares that his teaching is "to be definitively held"--an expression normally used since Vatican II (*Lumen gentium, 25*), and presumably also in the present document, to designate the kind of assent that is owed to irreversible Catholic teaching.

From the pope's assertion that the reservation of priestly orders to men pertains to the divine constitu-

tion of the church, one may infer that he regards it as contained in the deposit of revelation and as pertaining to the apostolicity of the church, which we confess in the creed. But since the doctrine has not been clearly defined by an infallible exercise of the magisterium, those who deny it are not to be accused of heresy (canon 749, #3). Even if revealed, it ranks relatively low in the hierarchy of truths.

Can Catholic theology treat the question as an open one? In view of the supreme teaching authority of the pope and the forcefulness of the present declaration, I would judge that theologians are no longer free to advocate opposed positions. While legitimate questions can be asked, Catholic theology cannot responsibly contradict the official teaching on this point.

The recent pronouncement has provoked dismay in some circles, in which the ordination of women is regarded as a matter of justice and equality. Conscious of this difficulty, the pope devotes three paragraphs of his short letter to the reaffirmation of his unwavering position that men and women have equal dignity before God and that the role of women in the life and mission of the church is absolutely irreplaceable. Since the letter was issued, a large number of bishops in the United States and Canada have echoed this concern. Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, dissatisfied with current solutions, issued a moving *cri de coeur*, asking how he can communicate the present decision to women who feel marginalized in their church. He puts his finger on a pastoral concern that should be taken with the utmost seriousness. (Archbishop Weakland' s response is printed in the June 17 issue of *Commonweal*. It may also be found, together with six other statements by North American bishops, in the June 9 issue of *Origins*.)

It would be futile and counterproductive for Catholics to react with bitterness or weary resignation, although such feelings need not be denied where they exist. Believers recognize that Christian faith involves the acceptance of "hard sayings," contrary to what they might have thought if left to their own devices. It is a blessing to have in the Catholic church a divinely instituted authority that can settle contentious issues and dispel false expectations.

The effort to find new channels for the abilities and energies of dedicated women should be encouraged. Scripture and church history testify to the creative ideas and exploits of many holy women, powerful in word and deed. The example of their loyal service can inspire new initiatives appropriate to our own age and culture. *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, besides putting an end to some recent debates, can be a point of departure for building new relationships between women and men in the church. This process must now begin.

REGINA PLUNKETT DOWLING: I can remember asking my father, one summer day when I was little, why there were so many clam shells left smashed on the road by the beach. (Since I collected shells, I mourned all these poor broken pieces.) My father told me that the seagulls liked to eat the clams, but they had no way of prying them open, and so they carried them up into the air and dropped them from a great height, trying to smash them open.

When I first read the news of the pope's apostolic letter, all my carefully guarded emotions and carefully arranged thoughts broke apart and scattered. I remembered then the broken bits of clam shells on the road, and thought, I have been dropped from a great height.

Here, then, are some few fragments, gathered if not yet made whole:

1. *Root and Branch*. The pope effectively lays the axe to the very roots of the flourishing debate over women' s ordination. By locating the ban on women's ordination in the will of Christ himself, a will transcending "the sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his [Jesus'] time," the pope intends to rule out every conceivable challenge to the teaching. Questions of historical reconstruction, the theological function of narrative and metaphor, the

practice of the early Pauline churches, or the pastoral theology of Paul himself: All are implicitly ruled irrelevant. To cite one example: were we to unearth tomorrow a papyrus letter from Paul to a woman church-leader, giving her instructions on the proper way to run the Lord' s Supper in her house-church (not an outlandish possibility at all, given the active ministries of women like Prisca and Phoebe), even this apostolic witness would not be allowed to count against the pope's teaching, because it stands in contradiction to the will of Christ.

2. *The Teaching Problem*. Having spent an entire semester training students in the exacting techniques of exegesis, the teacher of Scripture will be hard pressed to reconcile the pope' s transparent reading of the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper with the methods patiently inculcated throughout the course. Delicate judgments are required, particularly when distinguishing between the historically conditioned elements of the written tradition ("the words of men," as Vatican II had it) and the Word itself. The well-trained student would be led to ask, quite properly, "Why is it that Jesus' choice of twelve Jews for his disciples is somehow historically conditioned, but his choice of twelve men is not?" (I expect similar problems will confront those teaching Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology.)

3. *Gotcha*. The American bishops have been considering a set of guidelines intended to extend their authority more effectively into the theology departments of the Catholic colleges and universities. Until now, it has been hard to pinpoint a particular issue that would serve as a rough-and-ready test of orthodoxy. I think the bishops have been handed their litmus test.

4. *Mother of God, Pray for Us*. The Blessed Virgin has been regularly enlisted by both sides of the ordination debate to shore up this or that position; yet it seems to me, now, that we would do better to have recourse to her in prayer. The Body of Christ is riven by anger and suspicion and mistrust. May she who cradled the broken body of her Son at the foot of the Cross turn her merciful eyes to us. May she who received her Son' s Spirit at Pentecost pray God to illumine our darkened minds and sluggish hearts with the living flame of love.

CATHERINE MOWRY LACUGNA: Recently I spent a few days in England with some Anglican women who just this past April were ordained to the presbyterate. By their account, what moved the Anglican church finally to approve the ordination of women was the public discussion, in print and electronic media, of theological reasons for and against such ordinations, and the discovery in the process that there were no compelling or coherent theological reasons against ordaining women. Although it is unlikely that such a debate would be sustained by the American media, discussion is taking place nonetheless in all quarters of the church and in wider society, despite the pope's desperate efforts to foreclose debate. Does the pope not realize that debate and dissent are enemies only for an administration or government or ideology that is on the brink of losing control? A large voice, but not the only voice, in this debate is that of women: the thousands of Catholic women who are active in the ministry of the church and know their ministry to be sacramental, and the hundreds of Catholic women who have been trained as theologians, experts in detecting specious arguments.

Let us be clear about what the document asserts. The pope repeats the argument of *Inter insigniores* regarding "the constant practice of the church" (he means only the Roman Catholic church) not to ordain women. This theological principle is at least worthy of discussion, but only if pursued in light of the experience of the Anglican, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and so many other churches that have ordained women. Since the pope believes it is "God's eternal plan" not to ordain women and that this belongs to "the church' s divine constitution," what would he make of

the practice of these other churches? When the pope writes that he also embraces the "other theological arguments" of *Inter insigniores*, it is unclear whether he means to include the assertion in *Inter insigniores* that women are not and cannot be *in persona Christi*: since women cannot bear a natural (sexual) resemblance to Jesus Christ, women cannot be a sacramental sign of Christ. I have written elsewhere of my suspicion that the authors of *Inter insigniores* might wish they had never made this argument, since it is patently inconsistent with the church's own sacramental theology and prior tradition. It is also the argument that has generated the greatest amount of pain, frustration, and cognitive dissonance for so many Catholics. My undergraduate students, heating this argument after spending three months learning about the riches of the doctrine of the Trinity for theological anthropology, were dumbstruck and deeply dismayed. Given the deliberate continuity of the pope's apostolic letter with *Inter insigniores*, does the Vatican intend to claim still that women are not *in persona Christi*? If not, this would be a very significant correction to *Inter insigniores* and should be made explicit. But if so, then the Vatican is still declaring that it is God's will for women that women may never sacramentalize Christ, never represent Christ, never stand in the person of Christ, at the Eucharist.

The pope's conclusion that the church "has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" seems to imply that other churches' ordinations are not valid, and that there is no possibility for development in Catholic tradition and practice. This rather negative assessment of the identity and mission of church and the freedom of the Spirit to animate it creates a sense of hopelessness in the reader, especially if the pope intends to perpetuate the *in persona Christi* argument.

FLEMING RUTLEDGE: In the nineteen years since I was ordained, first to the diaconate and then to the priesthood of the Episcopal church, it has never ceased to seem extraordinary to me that I should have been ordained at all, that any human being should be entrusted with (to quote the apostolic letter) "the mission of the Incarnate Word himself." A stance of wonder and amazement is always appropriate with regard to holy orders. Uncounted women over these two millennia have served our Lord without being ordained. For those of us in this first generation of Episcopal clergywomen, our astonishment at what has happened to us in just two brief decades has not receded. The newness of it is still pronounced. I for one am willing to suggest that it continues to be an experiment.

But what an experiment! All over the United States, ordained women in the various Protestant denominations are finding themselves being used by the Holy Spirit. There are fruits to demonstrate that this is not merely a self-serving personal opinion. These fruits will be the best evidence, over time, that Jesus' choice of the Twelve was a choice of twelve people, not twelve men. John Paul II seems to have little or no understanding of this experiment. Perhaps it is too much to expect of him. No one person can operate successfully on every front at once. This pope has made massive, indeed unprecedented, contributions toward the repair of Jewish-Christian relations. He has played a unique role, not only in strengthening the Polish resistance, but also in emboldening the church to stand against tyranny all over the world. Many examples could be given of his absolute dedication to human rights and human dignity, to religious liberty, to social justice, to scientific research, to the redressing of ancient wrongs.

The intransigent tone of the apostolic letter is indeed a bitter disappointment. Apparently the hour has not yet struck for Catholic women. The letter is in character, however, for a man who has always been uncompromising in his assertion of the faith over against claims of the world. While women hope for the kairos to arrive in a subsequent pontificate, it is still possible to be thankful for the achievements of this one. An ordained Episcopal woman recently wrote, in another context, "I am more

comfortable with those who oppose my ordination out of loyalty to their understanding of God's will than those who cheer me on out of loyalty to a humanistic social agenda. Ordination is not a women' s rights issue. It is obedience to a call or it is nothing" (quoted in *The Living Church*, June 12, 1994). We will be in trouble whenever and wherever we start thinking of ordination as a right to which we are entitled, rather than an unmerited and unexpected gift of God' s mercy. Paul the Apostle speaks for us all: "I am the least of the Apostles, unfit to be an Apostle...but by the grace of God I am what I am" (I Cor. 15:9-10). Steady pressure through a clear witness to our calling, combined with love and patience, is the way ahead.

ROBERT P. GEORGE: *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* reaffirms the teaching that "the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women," and declares that this judgment "is to be *definitively* held by all the church's faithful." Does the pope's use of the term "definitively" imply that he has defined this judgment *ex cathedra*? No. The pope is not here proposing the judgment infallibly. The term "definitively," in this context, plainly refers to how the judgment is to be held by the faithful, not to how it is being proposed by the papal magisterium.

Does this mean that faithful Catholics may legitimately dissent from the pope's teaching on the reservation of priestly ordination to men only? No. In light of the church' s firm and constant teaching on the obligation of Catholics to give religious assent to the judgments of the ordinary magisterium--a teaching explicitly reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council--it is clear that dissent, even from papal teachings that are not *ex cathedra*, can be legitimate only where assent is impossible; and assent is impossible only where someone (1) is aware of some factual error on which the teaching of the ordinary magisterium is based, or (2) has knowledge of a superior source, i.e., Sacred Scripture or the church's tradition (as manifest, for example, in a defined doctrine), whose teaching is plainly inconsistent with the judgment proposed by the ordinary magisterium.

It is true that *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* only sketchily defends the judgment it proposes. One may or may not be persuaded by the reasons given by the pope. As a logical matter, however, the truth of a proposition does not depend on the persuasiveness of the arguments offered in its support. And, however one evaluates the pope's arguments, the judgment he proposes is neither based on some factual error nor plainly inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture or the church's tradition.

Hence, religious assent is required. Dissent is illegitimate. Much of the debate over women's ordination has assumed that the church has the authority to ordain women. Proponents of women's ordination have argued that the reservation of priestly ordination to men is unjust, a violation of women's rights, inappropriate to the modem age, and so forth. In light of Ordinatio sacerdotalis, however, these arguments are beside the point. The pope has gone to the more fundamental issue of whether the ordination of women is *possible*, and reaffirmed the teaching that *it is not*. It cannot be unjust or inappropriate to decline to do (or, more accurately, to decline to purport to do) what it is in fact impossible to do.

Of course, it is far from clear, just from the available data, whether the ordination of women is possible. The answer must therefore be implicit in Scripture and tradition, and the task of

the magisterium is to determine what is implicit and to explicate it. Now that the pope has rendered a judgment on the matter to be held definitively by faithful Catholics, theologians must

work to explicate the teaching more fully so that all of us can understand why priestly ordination is reserved to men. As a model of how this work of explication can be done, I would encourage readers to consult Father Benedict Ashley' s article entitled "Gender and the Priesthood of Christ" in the July 1993 issue of the *Thomist*. Here, Ashley argues for the superior coherence of the

church's traditional position on women's ordination with central themes of both the Old and New Testaments.

More work of this quality is needed. I began by observing that the teaching of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* is not infallibly proposed. Let me conclude, however, by suggesting that it soon might be. As Vatican II teaches, when the bishops scattered throughout the world, but in communion with each other and with the Holy Father, propose the same teaching on a matter of faith and morals as to be held definitively, then they teach the doctrine of Christ infallibly. It is entirely possible that the bishops will now unite in virtual unanimity in affirming the pope's teaching. Although, for the reasons I have stated, such a development is not necessary for this teaching to bind faithful Catholics in conscience, it would provide welcome assurance that the teaching is certainly true.

SARA MAITLAND: The "definitively" is the problem, of course. No one really thought the Holy Father was, abracadabra, going to announce the admissibility of women to priestly ordination all of a sudden this summer. But it is a big problem. "This judgment is to be definitively held by all the faithful" is not a directive as to practice but as to conviction. What am I meant to do? I tried this problem out on a parish priest--not a particularly progressive one (I try not to cheat).

"Father," I said, "I am not able to accept the teaching in the pope's letter to his bishops."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean I don't think it can end the debate; I don't think it will end the debate; and, most importantly, I don't think it should end the debate. I cannot accept it as the last word on the mat-

ter; I cannot accept it as the church's definitive statement on the subject. What should I do?"

"What?" he asked. I thought he was looking plaintive.

"Does this mean I should withdraw from membership in the church, or at least from Communion?"

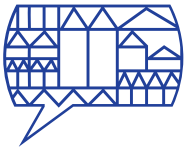
"Consult your conscience," he said most properly.

"I have, and believing it to be well informed, I'm not planning to do any such thing. But now that I've told you what I believe, would you refuse me Communion?"

"Sara," he said, "don't be so stupid."

Would any priest, would any bishop, exclude from Communion someone in my position--that is, someone who consents to live with the present but not to foreclose her mind on possible development and further theological enlightenment in the broadest sense? If not, the whole thing is apparently definitively binding but totally meaningless. That seems pretty stupid to me. It is an excessive and therefore wrong use of the word "definitively." It is disrespectful to the intelligence of the people of God. It exposes once again the gap that exists in our theology around the whole issue of the sensusfidelium, and the process of the reception of teaching. It is rude (to Catholics, to women, and to other denominations). If Saint Paul is right, courtesy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Does such a marked absence of courtesy permit us to question the presence of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in this letter?

The War in Gaza



CONVERSATION
STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

The War in Gaza

Tensions between Israel and Palestine have periodically bubbled over into violent confrontations, mostly at the expense of civilian lives. Following Hamas's brutal attack on Israeli civilians on October 7 and Israel's ensuing war in Palestine, there has been a heightened need to understand and reflect on the history of the region. Throughout its history, *Commonweal* has confronted the intricacies of this fraught relationship perpetuated by ideological purism and U.S. interests in the Middle East. In 1930, Pierre Crabitès reflected on a moment of conflict between the Abrahamic religions in what was then British Palestine:

> These Christians and Moslems are not bloodthirsty. They are fighting for something more precious than life. And their Jewish adversaries are equally sincere in their stand. Good faith is fighting good faith and ignorance is keeping guard. This cannot go on indefinitely. It would be intolerable if more Jewish lives be sacrificed. It would be monstrous to continue to drive Arabs to desperation.

Today, the Middle East is at the same impasse. The United States has only inflamed good-faith grievances through its support for Benjamin Netanyahu's extreme government. Navigating the past seven months of war, *Commonweal* editors critique the United States' lack of "moral clarity" in their policy toward Israel. One of the most inconsistent claims from the Biden administration has been their hollow commitments to "Palestinian people's right to dignity and self-determination," despite continuing to provide military aid used to directly undermine that right, and despite their long indifference to Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The shared history between Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, which is integral to the social fabric of Jerusalem, has been put at risk because of the ensuing war. Santiago Ramos's article "Fragile Bonds" examines how everyday citizens related to one another in the months following the attack. Despite political and religious tension, Jews and Arabs in Israel had long found ways to "keep focused on what binds [them]." These relationships between workers of different backgrounds and faiths, which offered a hopeful perspective on how to move away from conflict and toward cohesion, have been sorely tested since the attack and invasion. Without the concrete experience of seeing the other, people often forget the humanity of people across the border.

In the United States, too, we must remind ourselves to see the other a world away. When Regina Munch wrote her article "Birth Doesn't Wait" in March 2024, the al-Shifa hospital was barely still standing. It has since been entirely destroyed. She emphasizes that while the Israeli blockade stopped food, water, and electricity from entering the NICU, nothing can stop birth. Pregnancy and motherhood become harrowing experiences when a

mother is most concerned with how her baby will die, rather than how they might live. Munch argues that Israel needs to stop its war not only for those currently living in Gaza, but also for those still unborn.

The documented disasters in Gaza are unending, sparking massive protests around the world. Campus protests across the United States and the world gained traction, with students demanding their schools divest and call for a ceasefire. Ariana Orozco argues these protests are a result of students finding "neighbors" in those suffering in Gaza. This embodiment of *Evangelii gaudium* is imperfect, yet it is joyful: "Even among the ruins of shattered buildings and tents in tatters, photos continue to pour in of Palestinians, smiling and welcoming their new neighbors." However, for many Jewish people, the protests have revealed the latent antisemitism in Western life. Viva Hammer contends that pro-Palestine protests in Sydney, Australia, have been a "frightening and puzzling" display of antisemitism. Of course, there is truth in both these accounts, much as there was in Crabitès's assessment nearly one hundred years ago. There is violent Islamophobia and antisemitism which stoke domestic dissent, and legitimate concern for Palestinian life and culture in the Middle East. Each day, while more and more civilians, mainly Palestinians, die, every other outcome of this war remains murky. It is the job of the compassionate reader to maintain empathy for both sides and to ensure that human life remains the utmost priority in geopolitical conflict.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

The Editors, "'Moral Clarity'?," November 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/israel-gaza-airstrikes-hamas-palestine-biden-netanyahu

Santiago Ramos, "Fragile Bonds," December 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/israel-peace-palestine-gaza-ramos-cooperation-pizzaballa

Regina Munch, "'Birth Doesn't Wait,'" March 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/new-mothers-gaza

Ariana Orozco, "Rejoice in Revolution," May 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/rejoice-revolution

Viva Hammer, "Antisemitism in Paradise," June 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/antisemitism-paradise

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Pro-Palestine activists have criticized the United States' relationship with the Israeli foreign government, especially the use of American tax dollars to fund the Israel Defense Forces. Many protest chants condemn U.S. institutions and citizens as complicit in the deaths of Gazans. How do you reflect on our nation's proximity to the conflict? Do we have special obligations to Palestinian and Israeli people because our governments are entangled? What is the line between allyship and complicity?

2. Many college students have repeatedly condemned military support for Israel as deeply unethical. However, Israel is the United States' greatest ally in the Middle East and Jewish students have also expressed fear about the rhetoric used in protests. In this battle of wills, how should educational institutions respond to citizens' objections? Are there proper ways to protest? Does a protest lose its validity if some of its participants use inappropriate rhetoric? How should universities and the government respond to disruptions caused by campus activism?

3. The editors note how U.S. foreign policy has been exceptional toward Israel, from providing weapons to supporting them in international bodies. Despite Netanyahu crossing the red line Biden established, there has been little shift in the countries' dynamic. How should foreign policy reflect moral considerations? Does Israel deserve special treatment? If so, how far should that special treatment extend?

4. Over the past eight months, the history of the Levant has been repeated and debated. From disputes in British Palestine to the 1948 Nakba to October 7, this history is often applied pessimistically to highlight the alleged impossibility of Israeli and Palestinian relations. Are there other moments in history, either in the Middle East or elsewhere, that offer glimpses of hope? What are models for when great strife has ended in reconciliation? What sparks movements toward peace and justice rather than war?

5. As Munch suggests, human experiences are destroyed in times of war, but nothing can stop birth. Reflect on the way life is unstoppable even amid death. Do we think about life that is born in such horrific circumstances differently than our own? How do we imagine familial bonds forming in times of war?

6. What does Ramos's piece reveal to us about the potential for collaboration across ethnic lines? Is the best way to heal the divides is to "not discuss the conflict" as the oncologist Abu Sini claims? Do you believe people can overcome ideological differences through everyday projects? Can that description of life in Jerusalem be applied on a broader scale?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Santiago Ramos, "Suicide as Protest," April 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/suicide-protest

The Editors, "Advent in a Time of War," December 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/advent-editorial-gaza-israel-peace-marx-netanyahu

Tzvi Novick, "Gaza and Jewish Memory," March 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/gaza-and-jewish-memory

Alexander Stern, "Whitewashing War Crimes," June 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/whitewashing-war-crimes

‘Moral Clarity’?

THE EDITORS

In joint statements about Hamas’s October 7 attacks on Israel, which left more than 1,400 people dead—including more than a thousand civilians—both U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu used the phrase “moral clarity.” Netanyahu called it “the first prerequisite of victory” in the coming war, while Blinken invoked it in a call for everyone to “unambiguously condemn” the attacks.

Blinken is right, of course, that Hamas’s leadership and fighters—who shot infants, raped women, burned bodies alive, beheaded soldiers, murdered 250 innocent concertgoers, and took more than two hundred hostages—deserve unequivocal condemnation. The celebrations of the attack by some Western leftists as an act of self-defense or “decolonization” display deep-seated moral confusion and, in the worst instances, anti-Semitism.

But “moral clarity” should extend beyond Hamas’s actions, both to the wider context in which they took place and to Israel’s ongoing response. Later in his remarks, Blinken said, “We democracies distinguish ourselves from terrorists by striving for a different standard.... That’s why it’s so important to take every possible precaution to avoid harming civilians.” President Biden has similarly urged that Israel abide by international law and “protect civilians in combat as best as they can.” But these admonitions ring hollow without an acknowledgment that Israeli forces have *already* flagrantly disregarded civilian life and international law, both in a decades-long occupation that deprives Palestinians of basic human rights and in the ongoing bombardment of Gaza.

In the first six days of airstrikes, the Israeli Air Force dropped six thousand bombs, nearly as many as the United States dropped in an entire year during the war in Afghanistan. Israel, which withdrew from Gaza in 2005 but still controls its borders, also cut off water, electricity, and fuel. On October 13, it ordered more than one million residents in northern Gaza to evacuate, initially giving them only twenty-four hours to comply. Some evacuated families were later killed by Israeli airstrikes within the southern “safe zone.” Many others have refused to leave, fearing another Nakba (Arabic for “cataclysm”), the 1948 expulsion of seven hundred thousand Palestinians from what is now Israel.

International efforts to create an aid corridor at the Egyptian border were stymied for twelve days amid Israeli concerns that weapons might be smuggled in. As of this writing, according to the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health, over five thousand Palestinians have been killed, nearly half of them children. Meanwhile, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for a humanitarian pause in the fighting (though the Biden administration has since changed its position and is now calling for one).

Hamas’s attacks ended a period of relative calm in Israel. Biden has said that they were likely spurred in part by his administration’s negotiations to establish diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel. These talks were an extension of the “Abraham Accords” negotiated by the Trump administration, which saw Israel gain recognition from Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco. Like Saudi Arabia, these states had previously refused to recognize Israel without a path to Palestinian statehood, but economic partnerships, arms deals, and a mutual interest in countering Iran’s regional influence convinced them to sideline the Palestinian question. Though Saudi Arabia was demanding much more than the other Arab countries had, including NATO-like defense guarantees from the United States, the Saudis and Israelis appeared close to a deal before Hamas’s strike. Biden had hoped normalization with Saudi Arabia

would better integrate Israel into the Middle East, while promoting stability and countering China's efforts to become a force in the region by brokering a pact between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

By taking the Palestinian question off the table, these deals allowed Netanyahu's far-right government to facilitate new settlements in the West Bank and further cripple the prospect of a two-state solution. Israel's border with Gaza was so poorly protected partly because soldiers had been redeployed to protect West Bank settlers engaged in clashes with Palestinians, including a riot against a Palestinian town that an Israeli general described as a "pogrom." Netanyahu's explicitly stated strategy has been to strengthen Hamas at the expense of the more moderate Fatah, which controls the West Bank: "Those who want to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state," he said at a meeting of his Likud party in 2019, "should support the strengthening of Hamas and the transfer of money to Hamas." Biden claimed the United States remains "committed to the Palestinian people's right to dignity and self-determination," but he has thus far failed to restore a State Department policy, reversed by the Trump administration, that treated Israeli settlements as a violation of international law.

If the United States really wants stability and democracy in the Middle East, it should promote Palestinian self-determination and leverage its influence to curb Israel's Far Right instead of brokering pacts between authoritarian states and the deeply compromised Netanyahu government. To his credit, Biden seems to be discouraging an all-out Israeli ground invasion that would likely create even more resentment and extremism. It will take further diplomatic efforts to prevent the war from spreading north to the Lebanon border, where skirmishes with Hezbollah have already broken out. Whatever happens in the days to come, one thing is already clear: U.S. policy with respect to Israel has long lacked "moral clarity" and is due for reexamination.

Fragile Bonds

SANTIAGO RAMOS

A few weeks after the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, a shipping container from Europe arrived in the coastal Israeli city of Ashdod. Its final destination was the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem's Old City. Vincenzo Zuppardo, an Italian architect and preservationist managing the transfer of the container to Jerusalem, ran into an unexpected problem. The Jewish driver hired to bring the container from Ashdod to the Old City now refused to do so. The Terra Sancta Museum is located in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, and the Jewish man was afraid to enter an Arab part of town. Eventually, Vincenzo arranged for the driver to drop off the container in a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. But once it arrived there, the Palestinians hired to unload the container also refused to do their job. They were afraid to enter a Jewish part of town. "'Fear' is the right word for what we are going through," Vincenzo says.

The journalist Chris Hedges once wrote that small acts of decency during wartime are important because they "make it impossible to condemn, legally or morally, an entire people." For decades, cultural institutions (like the Terra Sancta Museum) and religious organizations (like the Franciscan friars, who sponsor the museum) have hoped to bring peace to the Holy Land by building networks of cooperation and friendship. Today, as the museum-container episode suggests, those hopes are evaporating.

Hamas's brutal October 7 attack on southern Israel and the ensuing Israeli bombing and invasion of Gaza have destroyed thousands of innocent lives and displaced many more. In other parts of Israel and Palestine, the war is also destroying those same networks of friendship and cooperation that were once seeds of hope. The Gaza War is renewing the deep distrust between ordinary Palestinians and Israelis, making small acts of decency all the more difficult. This tragedy has been clearly described by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem: "After this crisis…it will be really difficult to rebuild not only the destroyed buildings…but the trust and relations between Israelis and Palestinians, which is a true necessity, because Israelis and Palestinians will still be here after this [war], and will have to deal with each other, whether they want to or not."

The three million Palestinians who live in the occupied West Bank are not citizens of Israel and cannot enter Israeli territory without a permit. The voyage from the West Bank into Israel involves crossing through one of several military checkpoints that monitor traffic across a nine-foot-tall concrete separation barrier. Neither do Palestinians enjoy complete freedom of movement even within the West Bank. They are often restricted by flying checkpoints and roadblocks, and some roads are forbidden to Palestinian vehicles. Travel out of East Jerusalem is less restricted but still fraught with difficulties. In the past, the labor markets have found a way around all these obstacles. In 2022, around 150,000 Palestinians worked legally (with a permit) in Israel, including seventeen thousand Palestinians from Hamas-controlled Gaza. Most work in construction and come from Bethlehem and Ramallah in the West Bank.

With the outbreak of war, however, all work permits have been indefinitely suspended. The small hope that commerce might lead to mutual understanding between Palestinians and Israelis is disappearing. For now, the labor gap is being met in part by migrant workers arriving from Southeast Asia, including Thailand and the Philippines. One source in Jerusalem reports that many Palestinians, seeing this influx of foreign workers, now fear that they have been permanently replaced.

The war has also affected another source of income for Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike:

tourism and religious pilgrimages. The holy sites are empty, and poverty and hunger are short-term possibilities. A friend writes that Jerusalem "is like it was during the Covid lockdown." Christian pilgrimages in particular are a unifying industry. A Christian pilgrim will want to visit Jerusalem (split between Israelis and Palestinians), Nazareth (majority-Arab but inside Israel), and Bethlehem (behind the separation barrier in the West Bank). The tourism industry always has an interest in overcoming the divisions between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, especially in the West Bank. But the tourists are gone, and they may not be coming back anytime soon.

Inside the West Bank, European- and American-funded NGOs have for decades supported development projects designed to generate a Palestinian civil society. But while non-Palestinian NGO managers are still able to cross into the West Bank, their work is stalled by Palestinian labor strikes. The economic development of Palestine cannot, the NGOs reason, be forged by foreigners crossing Palestinian picket lines.

Around 21 percent of Israel's population is Arab—about 2.1 million people. But while Arab Israelis have full political rights, relations between them and Jewish Israelis are often complicated, especially in the last two months. A Catholic Arab Israeli named Hussam Abu Sini recently made headlines when he and his wife decided to have their daughter baptized earlier than they had planned to, immediately after the start of the war. This was a sign of both faith and alarm. Abu Sini, an oncologist, works in a hospital in Haifa with colleagues who are both Muslim and Jewish. The best way to heal the divide, he argues, is for Jewish and Arab Israelis to continue to work together and not discuss the conflict. "Of course, there is always someone asking that a position be taken. But the important thing in this moment is to keep focused on what binds us: the care for life and our mission as doctors. That is the point of encounter where we discover our common humanity."

Vincenzo, the Italian architect, has a similar story of work leading to peace. For a restoration project—an old monastery just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem—he hired Palestinian workers from East Jerusalem. But the project required a special type of cement, so he hired a small cement company run by Jews. "I saw that when we were working on a common goal, to do something well-done, to preserve something beautiful, all the prejudice and ideas that all of us may have disappear. This was possible, even in this mess."

‘Birth Doesn’t Wait’

REGINA MUNCH

At the beginning of Israel’s invasion of Gaza, the world had its eyes on dozens of premature newborns in the NICU at Al-Shifa hospital. The babies were crowded into the incubators that kept them alive but could fail if the hospital lost power. In the end, thirty-one of the newborns were evacuated, but five died due to “a lack of electricity and fuel,” according to the United Nations. The reason the hospital didn’t have power, of course, was Israel’s blockade of Gaza, which did not permit most food, water, medical supplies, and fuel into the territory.

As the war enters its fifth month, a slower crisis has been unfolding. The conflict has been particularly cruel to pregnant women and newborns, who are acutely dependent on adequate nutrition, medical assistance, and safe conditions. Around fifty thousand women in Gaza were pregnant at the beginning of the war, and about 180 births occur there every day. As a result of a lack of vital resources, miscarriages and stillbirths have increased, babies are being born prematurely and underweight, and women and children are dying from preventable complications.

The deprivation can be seen at every stage of pregnancy and birth. Pregnant women lack access to prenatal care because most health facilities have abandoned non-urgent visits so they can treat people wounded from the war. Some hospitals have been destroyed by Israeli airstrikes, further reducing capacity. This means that women do not receive the regular health checks needed for conditions like anemia, high blood pressure, and gestational diabetes. These conditions can be deadly for mother and child if left untreated. Deborah Harrington, a doctor working in Al-Aqsa hospital, told the *New Yorker* that every one of the patients she tested has been severely anemic. “That means they’re more likely to give birth prematurely, they’re more likely to have small-for-gestational-age babies, and they’re more likely to die in childbirth,” she explained. The psychological wounds of being bombed and displaced, of not knowing where your loved ones are or what you will eat next, have surely also taken a toll on maternal health. According to Harrington, 40 percent of pregnant women in Gaza are considered to have high-risk pregnancies.

Delivery is also a harrowing experience. With doctors stretched too thin, women in labor must often give birth without them—in makeshift shelters or in the street, using whatever tools they can find. Those who do make it to a hospital often find that there’s no pain medication, antibiotics, or sterilized equipment. There have been reports of postmortem cesarean sections to save a baby after the mother has died—sometimes from a medical condition, but sometimes after a bombing.

In the weeks after birth, newborns are at great risk of dehydration, malnutrition, and infectious disease. Breastfeeding is often impossible due to the mother’s malnutrition. Even when formula is available, a lack of clean water means that bottle-feeding could be deadly. Malnutrition at such an early age can result in a lifetime of illness or underdevelopment, and the lack of vaccines and other routine care for newborns puts them at additional risk.

Humanitarian efforts, like Safe Birth in Palestine, can only do so much. The group, founded by Ferhan Güloğlu, does its best to provide telehealth appointments and instructional videos for pregnant women and their families. It has also tried to send medical kits across the border, but these were arbitrarily held by authorities and aren’t expected to reach women in Gaza for a year.

Such heroic efforts mitigate the suffering, but the only thing that will finally allow all women and children in Gaza to receive the care they need is for Israel to end its war there. As Güloğlu says, “Birth doesn’t wait. Pain doesn’t wait.”

Rejoice in Revolution

ARIANA OROZCO

"Where you go I will go my friend / Where you go I will go / Your people are my people / Your people are mine…" A nightly song hummed on as hundreds of Columbia University students linked arms on the school's south lawn to protest the university's investments in Israel. As some students sang adjusted lyrics from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, others performed a Palestinian *dabkeh* dance, banged Malian *djembe* drums, and scraped Dominican *güiras*. It can be tempting to believe media declarations that these protestors were chaotic or malicious; but doing so misses the joyous spirit that arises from making oneself a neighbor with the people of Gaza.

Creating neighbors is fundamental to Catholic ministry. In his reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez summarizes Pope Francis's call as expressed in *Evangelii gaudium*: "to look for neighbors, to make new neighbors," especially in service of the poor. That's just what Columbia students did. During the first week of the encampment, Palestinian civil defense crews uncovered a mass grave of nearly two hundred bodies inside the former Nasser Medical Complex in Gaza; many of the dead were children. The photos of mutilated and unnamed Gazan children are indistinguishable from the mutilated and unnamed Iraqi children, Afghan children, Kuwaiti children… the list of Middle Eastern countries with anonymous bodies where the West has "intervened" goes on. So, when students in the United States, France, Italy, Australia, and the United Kingdom raise Palestinian flags, they are not only demanding a ceasefire and economic divestment. They are recognizing—and insisting—that these deaths are not distant. They are happening to our neighbors.

In many ways, Columbia's curriculum concurs with Guttiérez and Francis, calling students to go beyond the university's walls, and to leverage their privilege for those in need. As part of a teach-in held on Day 8 of the protest, a professor taught excerpts from Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, a text included in the school's Core Curriculum. Admittedly, Fanon is idealistic, and so are the students' demands. Why shouldn't they be? The students are practicing a moral theory driven by the texts Columbia gave them. The school has long taught students not to sterilize their knowledge, but instead to cherish the relationships created by a deeper understanding of others. The encampments are a literal 'embodiment' of the curriculum. When a mariachi band came to perform on the lawns after the Maghrib sunset prayer one night, one student told me: "The revolution doesn't have to be boring." She was referencing Mexican American activist Oscar Zeta Acosta's motto, which she learned from her "Colonization/Decolonization" course. I recognized it because I took the same class my sophomore year at Columbia. A joyful revolution reframes justice as a virtue of kinship rather than destruction.

Shifting our focus from chaos and disruption to radical love is not easy. Indeed, university administrations around the country have found it almost impossible. The media, more interested in sensational images of violence, has barely covered the joy of the encampments. Where are the photos of Columbia students crocheting kippahs in their encampment art corner, or trading instruments for nightly singalongs?

Instead we have repeatedly seen photos of students smashing windows during the occupation of Hamilton Hall on April 30, the night that the protestors' message seemed to splinter. President Biden condemned their actions as "violent" during a recent speech on antisem-

itism. But was rage the only emotion present? Could the occupiers not *also* have retained their compassion with Palestinians in Gaza, who faced a looming invasion of Rafah by a defiant Netanyahu? Students had many reasons to be angry with the university, not just for its intransigence during bargaining negotiations—if Brown, Northwestern, and Wesleyan thought it possible to grant concessions, why didn't Columbia?—but also for the administration's decision to first threaten them with suspension and then have them arrested by police officers in riot gear. Rejected by those they considered community leaders, some students escalated in a manner that was shocking but totally foreseeable.

Perhaps one day, our understanding of what happened on April 30 will make room for greater complexity. During the twenty-four-hour occupation, the mood at the renamed 'Hind Hall' remained positive. Students (and not, as the police later claimed, 'outside agitators' with links to 'terrorists') held community dinners outside, sang songs, and promised to protect one another, no matter the consequences. Whatever you think of their decision to occupy the building, such a promise could not have been easy to make. And they have accepted the consequences, including suspension, expulsion, and doxxing—all in order to demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment to stand in solidarity with Gazan lives.

Perhaps the present agony won't have the last word. Gutiérrez acknowledges that communal joy is not easily earned: "It is not an easy happiness, easy to reach. It is a joy that has to go through the paschal mystery, through the suffering and/or solidarity with those who suffer. But the joy that we're looking for is there." The protests aren't perfect. Accusations of antisemitism within the student movement and the broader pro-Palestinian movement need to be addressed. At Columbia, many students on both sides of the conflict reject the prospect of a two-state solution. These hardened stances inflame the violent wing of the campus movement, and, more urgently, rationalize the continued destruction of Palestinian life and culture. In order to move toward a solution that does not call for death, we must adopt an ethos of joy that celebrates the much-intertwined cultures of Levant peoples. This entails calling for a ceasefire, working towards legitimate and fair solutions between Israel and Palestine, and, just as importantly, singing and dancing alongside each other. During those moments, hope thrives.

The success of the student movement hinges on us not centering ourselves. This has proved difficult. While many in the West—and especially the media—have attempted to shift the perspective from the mounting death toll in Gaza to more abstract conversations about free speech and the moral character of individual protestors, the overwhelming majority of student protestors have remained steadfast and on message. And their witness is being heard by those currently suffering in Gaza. On April 28, displaced Gazans spray painted tarps with messages of support for the protests: "Thank you, students in solidarity with Gaza your message has reached." Even among the ruins of shattered buildings and tents in tatters, photos continue to pour in of Palestinians, smiling and welcoming their new neighbors.

Antisemitism in Paradise

VIVA HAMMER

I am a fifth-generation Australian and have lived my adult life in America, but if you ask me how I identify, I say: as a Jew. A Jew whose community has found a haven on the cliffs between the Pacific Ocean and Sydney Harbour. Australian Jews are small in number, don't make a fuss or attract attention, are not visible in sports, entertainment, or politics. Hanukkah menorahs do not appear next to Christmas trees in public. We are quiet and scrupulously law-abiding.

On October 9, 2023, the Sydney police issued a warning. *Jews*: *Do not go to the city. Do not go to the Opera House. Stay at home*. My mother and I were on our way to the Opera House when we saw the warning. We are *Jews*. We turned around and went home.

That night, I invited a builder to our cellar to find out if we could shelter from an attack there. The builder looked around, pronounced that we were secure, and frowned. "What's your worry?" she asked. "Won't the police protect you?" I was puzzled; why did she think the police would do that?

The Sydney police warned *Jews* not to go to the city that night because a pro-Palestinian mob was marching from the Town Hall to the Opera House, and when the mob arrived at the white sails jutting into the harbour, they rioted, chanting "gas the Jews" and "fuck the Jews."

Pastor Mark Leach, an Anglican church leader, picked up an Israeli flag and marched toward the mob. The Sydney police chased him away and he hid behind a car. The police did not stop the pro-Palestinian mob from its illegal gathering. Nor did they prosecute the incitement to violence in the chants, which they have the power to do under the law.

Two days before "gas the Jews" was chanted at the Sydney Opera House, on October 7, Israel's border with Gaza was breached by Hamas terrorists. They gang-raped women to death, tortured children before their parents and parents before their children, mutilated humans before and after murdering them. They filmed themselves in the midst of these deeds and broadcast their images. About 1,200 people were killed, with 254 people taken hostage into Gaza. At the Opera House and around the world, people were celebrating the atrocities against Israel before Israel had lifted a finger in response.

Sydney is far from Gaza as the crow flies. Most people come here to escape ancient feuds. My mother's family arrived in Australia in 1857, fleeing persecution of Jews in Russia. My father arrived in 1957, having survived as a Jew under Hungarian fascism, Nazism, and Stalin's communism. In Australia, both sides of the family flourished. My father, my daughter, and I all graduated from the oldest university in the country, the same university where my father taught mathematics for thirty years. I took off class for Shabbat and Jewish holidays. I wore a star of David over my clothes. I never got a whiff of antisemitism.

The day after the Sydney police told *Jews* to stay home, I walked into the university from which we graduated and where my father taught. The campus is lush, with Oxford-like buildings nestled in parkland. Students come from around the world for the university's beauty and prestige. That day, every surface was covered with posters in red and green and black, graphic and violent, stuck onto the famous walls and windows, the water fountains, and direction signs. From one side of the university to the other, under blossoming jacaranda trees, they were celebrating the murder and mutilation, rape and burning alive of Jews. When I asked if the posters were hung legally (a man was putting them up as we watched), security told me they weren't legal, but nothing would be done till nightfall.

I waited until dark; the posters didn't come down. I waited again. I called for help. Who was dealing with this abomination? Who was removing it? And I received the customary non-answers, until I understood that nothing

was going to be done and no one was going to do it.

A young Chabad student and I spent the next night taking down hundreds of posters. In the morning they were up again. At night we took them down. And so on, as words and images calling for the end of Israel and of Jews blanketed the university until summer in December, when the sticky mess was cleaned off by the authorities. The school is a destination for graduation photographs and weddings and it didn't suit clients to have *genocide* in the background in green and red and black.

While we were busy with the posters, universities in Sydney hosted symposia on Gaza, beginning this way: *I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we meet. I pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Always is, always will be Aboriginal land*. The speakers, all of European descent, denounced the colonization of Palestine. The flourishing Muslim population between the river and the sea are the only and true natives. Jews do not belong there, nor do they belong in Australia (where only native peoples belong). The speakers did not offer another place for Jews to go. Nor did they commit to moving back to where *they* had come from. The tones were not academic, but vituperative, a call to arms. No alternate views were offered.

What had the Jews of Sydney done to the mob calling for their gassing, to the academics calling for their expulsion? Germans in the 1930s endured economic collapse and mass unemployment, but Sydneysiders? They are among the richest people on earth, with full employment and fuller bellies, living between the harbor and the ocean. What excuse did *they* have to gas the Jews?

Sheikh Abdul Salam Zoud of Lakemba, a leading Sydney imam, called Jews the "criminal, barbaric, tyrannical enemy," reminding his audience that "the Prophet Mohammad, the Righteous Caliphs…none of them conquered the world by peaceful means, negotiations, concessions or understandings. They conquered it through jihad for the sake of Allah." I understood. *That* was the mob's excuse.

Over the months since the chanting at the Opera House, there have been varied attacks against Jews in Australia. In Melbourne, small Jewish businesses have been targeted and destroyed. A man was murdered on his way to synagogue. The Palestinian flag was raised *instead* of the national or the native Australian flag on major government and academic sites. Melbourne and Sydney teachers staged walkouts from schools, taking their students to rallies holding violent anti-Jewish slogans. Preschool children went on an excursion to the university to chant "intifada" with the pro-Palestinian encampment. No other cause has warranted this devotion, not Afghanis expelled by Pakistan into the hands of the Taliban nor the ISIS reign of terror in Syria.

This is not the Australia I grew up in. It is frightening and puzzling. Also, deeply familiar. My father tells us stories of his Hungarian childhood as testimony and warning: the stones thrown at Jewish boys on the way to school, the prohibition on Jews doing business or shopping in the market, the ghetto where Jews were stuffed until they were sent in cattle cars to death. Then, after the war, the hiding and faking under Communism so the authorities would not discover my father was as an observant Jew. These things could never happen here, we thought.

But after October 7, violence has erupted against Jews over the world as if it belonged, as if it were *normal*. Which it is. Violent antisemitism, in a thousand guises and with a thousand excuses, is the human condition. Which is how the State of Israel came to be born, so Jews could live outside the human condition of antisemitism.

In January I visited Jerusalem. My sister lives there, and I wanted to find out how she was, and how my other sisters and brothers, my people, were. I wanted to see them. Because those women raped and those babies mutilated, they are flesh of my flesh.

The last day of the visit, my sister took me to the south of Israel, where I witnessed the devastation of our communities, and, in response, the devotion of the children of Israel to one another. At a crossroads at the entrance to Gaza, the Shuva family has built a way station to anyone who comes, where they offer hot food, clothing, shelter, music, and conversation. A

circle of people was playing guitar and singing, their red-haired baby passed from arm to arm. Young people sat on low benches talking quietly, and when I asked to join, they moved their seats, welcomed me, a stranger. They welcomed me as mourners do at a shiva house—everyone is welcome to comfort the bereaved.

The next day I wrote a note to Kfir, the youngest hostage held by Hamas in Gaza, and fastened it to his photograph on the ramp down to the plane leaving Israel. I flew south. Deep south, into the summer of Sydney, and on landing, I walked into a fifth-grade classroom. On the board I wrote the Hebrew *aleph bet* and the children copied. I taught them about the holiday that was coming up, Purim, when the megalomaniacal Haman convinces a king to issue a decree of genocide against the Jews of Persia, which the wise Jewish Queen Esther thwarts. I then taught them about the next holiday, Passover, when a megalomaniacal pharaoh of Egypt tries to eliminate the children of Israel by enslaving them and throwing their boys into the river. Which God thwarts, delivering them to freedom with an outstretched arm.

At the end of term, I received a note from a young woman of Syrian heritage, my student from university. *I felt compelled to check on you*, she wrote, *and see how you, as a Jew, are feeling. With Iran and Hamas festering, there's a sense of fear around us, even here in Sydney.*

It was the first message I'd received from anyone since October 7 asking how I, as a Jew, was feeling.

> I was curious about opening a dialogue with you, because there's no point talking to people who have the same views as me. I want to take *action* and not be just another voice on social media taking sides. Maybe I'm coming to you because I want to get in touch with my own story as a Syrian Australian woman and finding it so difficult to speak out. I'm feeling an enormous amount of pain with the images coming out of Gaza when there's no view from the Jewish side. I want to work out how as Australians we can bring more light, more understanding and connection, and was keen to hear where you stand in relation to the war with Hamas if you see me as a safe person to share that with.

I had nothing ready-made to say to her. Since October 7, I have migrated inwards, an idea a Ukrainian Jewish refugee introduced to me. Migrating inside our bodies, our homes, our people.

> Australia has such an important role in bringing more light. If we're living here and have the safety and privilege of Australia with these humanitarian rights to share. I'm putting myself out there in the hope of being able to channel the feelings of powerlessness. We can only use our voices and set an example of how to move through these things. The mindless barbaric ideology of Hamas and these horrible horrible acts done in the name of God, it's just disgusting and it's not something I want anywhere close to home, I want it eradicated. It has no place in Australia.

Soon my Syrian student and I will sit down to dinner. We will exchange words of empathy and care. We will deplore the hatemongers. And we will not defeat antisemitism. Because defeating antisemitism is not my student's task, nor is it the task of the Jews. It is the task of Pastor Mark Leach, carrying the Israeli flag, and a few righteous others. My task is to plant trees, build houses, and to teach my children about the exodus from Egypt, and the miracle of Purim in Persia, and the miracle of Hanukkah against the Greeks, and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and the Crusades, and the Spanish expulsion and Inquisition, and—

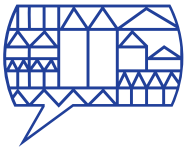
The atrocities of Hamas.

Who speaks about ancient Egyptians except museum curators and Jewish children? Who will remember Hamas except the Jews?

Teaching children. That's the task of Jews.

Because antisemitism is ineradicable. Even in Sydney. And so are the Jews. ✡

Humanizing Immigration



CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

Humanizing Immigration

Venezuela's ongoing political crisis and economic collapse have forced nearly 8 million Venezuelans to flee the country and seek refuge across the Americas. In 2022, Florida governor Ron DeSantis and Texas governor Greg Abbott argued that other states should share in the burden of the crisis. To prove their point, they misled asylum seekers, loading them onto flights and buses with promises of aid they had no intention of providing. The migrants were transported to politically liberal cities across the country without prior coordination with local authorities. These dehumanizing, immoral stunts garnered enthusiasm and support among the Republican base and exacerbated the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States, but they also led local communities to step in.

Ethan Bauer's article describes how faith communities in Sacramento responded to one of DeSantis's exploitative political stunts. Gabby Trejo, a local community leader, was first contacted when the migrants were abandoned at the Diocese of Sacramento. An immigrant herself, Trejo remembered being affected by the 1994 passage of California's Proposition 187, which denied undocumented immigrants and their children access to social services like health care and education. She didn't want to walk away from these new migrants, so she collaborated with other faith-based groups to provide the support DeSantis had falsely promised and more—namely, a sense of belonging and human care.

Despite criticisms of Republican governors and authorities' handling of migrants at the border, Donald Trump doubled down at the 2024 Republican National Convention. He described immigration as a "poison" and promised mass deportation if elected president. Meanwhile, though the Democratic Party has not used migrants in inhumane political stunts, it has still failed to adequately address the complexity of a broken immigration system.

During the 2024 State of the Union Address, President Joe Biden used the word "illegal" instead of "undocumented" to describe a Venezuelan migrant—wording Biden later regretted. Nancy Pelosi came to his defense on CNN, stating that, while he should have said undocumented, it "wasn't a big thing… I don't think it's a big deal." But words matter, and politicians know this. Brett C. Hoover's article highlights the emotional power words carry and how some words contribute to xenophobia. Describing migration as an inundation, a storm, or an invasion not only plants seeds of fear among listeners, but also communicates the beliefs of the speaker about the humanity of the migrants themselves.

Alejandra Oliva, an interpreter for asylum seekers, points out that we hardly ever hear about migrants as individuals. Instead, we mostly hear about "demographics, or economics, or law enforcement, or, very occasionally, a treacly human-interest story, but immigrants themselves are not made *real*." Perhaps more humanizing words would be used by pundits, politicians, and neighbors if we could actually think of ourselves as neighbors. Perhaps we might be able to pass immigration reform while considering the many ways in which the United States shares in the responsibility for the crisis itself. Evan Bednarz, in his article, "The Other Side," reminds us that "interdependence without solidarity is a recipe for mass suffering."

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

Ethan Bauer, "The Shepherds of Sacramento," January 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sacramento-migration-desantis-sacact-faith-bauer

Brett C. Hoover, "'Inundated,'" March 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/inundated

Alejandra Oliva, "Migration's Doom Loop," July/August 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/migrations-doom-loop

Evan Bednarz, "The Other Side," October 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/other-side-border

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Oliva quotes Jonathan Blitzer's description of Óscar Romero: "For half an hour, sometimes longer, he would methodically list the names of people who'd been killed or disappeared, the dates of murders and mass arrests, and the locations of recent crackdowns." Oliva describes this as "revolutionary during a time when government repression kept truth as shadowy as possible." What information is not made available in the media, especially about immigration? What value does Romero's witness provide?

2. The Very Rev. Matthew Woodward, dean of the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, was one of the leaders called upon to help with the migrants in Sacramento. Woodward's goal was to help the community become more involved, living up to the three pillars it uses to define itself: worship, learning, and service. He described the decision to help as an easy task when you already know your purpose. Does your

community have a shared purpose? Would your community be willing and able to help in a similar situation? Are you part of institutions that could organize aid if the need arose?

3. Hoover lists a number of logistical challenges to immigration reform. What do you consider to be the greatest among these challenges? How can these obstacles be overcome? What solutions can you imagine implementing within our polarized political climate?

4. Bauer shows the possibilities for promoting the common good that are created when faith-based groups coalesce for one cause. What opportunities exist in your community for interfaith/ecumenical justice work? What issues might be most important to the faith communities where you live?

5. Is the crisis at our border a national-security issue or a humanitarian one? Evan Bednarz argues that these two choices essentially perpetuate the "othering" of migrants. How else should we think about and discuss the crisis? How can we best acknowledge the responsibility the United States shares in the crisis?

6. "The Shepherds of Sacramento" introduces the reader to two Venezuelan migrants, Yoel and Wilkendry, and their journey from the border to Sacramento. Did learning their names and their encounters in Texas and Sacramento change your understanding of what took place?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Regina Munch, "Biden's New Border Policy," July/August 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bidens-new-border-policy

Núria López Torres and Agus Morales, "Waiting on the Threshold," July/August 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/waiting-threshold

The Commonweal Podcast, "Bordering on Compassion," July 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/bordering-compassion

Brett C. Hoover, *Immigration and Faith: Cultural, Biblical, and Theological Narratives*, Paulist Press, 2021

Alejandra Oliva, *Rivermouth: A Chronicle of Language, Faith, and Migration*, Astra House, 2023

The Shepherds of Sacramento

ETHAN BAUER

Yoel had only been in Texas four days, but after all he'd endured, it felt like eternity. Originally from the Venezuelan state of Yaracuy, he'd chosen to leave in search of work, freedom, and, above all, dignity. He first tried to find them in Chile, but in December 2022, he decided to set out for the United States. For months, by bus and truck and on foot, he journeyed toward the U.S.-Mexico border. Finally, on May 27, he crossed into El Paso. He spent his four days there at a shelter provided by a Sacred Heart Church and was getting restless when a new opportunity presented itself. Finally, he thought, the dignity he'd come all this way for was in reach.

Wilkendry is older than Yoel—thirty-one to Yoel's twenty-two—but he also fled Venezuela and ended up in El Paso by way of Chile. He'd been there two weeks longer than Yoel when men who identified themselves as ex-Miami police officers approached him with some big promises. They told Wilkendry and some fellow migrants that they all had seats on a flight to California, where work and housing were readily available. The situation was confusing, Wilkendry says. What were ex-Miami cops doing in Texas, offering passage to California? He still feared deportation and didn't know what to make of the offer. It could be a ruse; the plane could take him right back to Venezuela. But with no sign in Texas of the opportunity he'd come for, he decided to take the risk. So did Yoel when he heard about the same flight and promises secondhand; two women picked up their group and headed to the airport around ten o'clock that night.

What Yoel and Wilkendry didn't know was that a few days earlier, this same group had sent another plane of migrants to Sacramento. When that plane landed, strangers met the migrants and took them to the offices of the local Catholic diocese—a red-brick building tucked behind an ARCO gas station, about ten minutes from the state Capitol. Then, with barely a word, the strangers left. The migrants, numbering around sixteen and mostly from Venezuela, waited. There was nothing else they could do. They were in a city they knew nothing about, with no money or resources, and the people who'd brought them had disappeared.

A man who worked for the diocese eventually noticed them; he thought they might be protesters. He called Gabby Trejo, who leads an organization called SacACT, or Sacramento Area Congregations Together. "There's a group of people outside," he told her. "I don't really know what they want. But it's a lot of them." SacACT's offices are nearby, so she sent representatives to figure out what was going on. All the migrants could say was that a bus had dropped them off and that whoever brought them had left with these parting words: "Someone will come help you."

This first flight arrived on a Friday in early June, with the second following on Monday. By Tuesday, Florida governor Ron DeSantis's office had taken formal credit for the operation. In an email to the *Sacramento Bee*, his spokeswoman pushed back against the allegation that the migrants had been coerced into going to California. "Florida's voluntary relocation is precisely that—voluntary," she said. "Through verbal and written consent, these volunteers indicated they wanted to go to California." But Yoel and Wilkendry had boarded the flight solely because of what they were promised. "It was completely different than what I expected," Yoel says in Spanish. "I came to work and to find somewhere to live, and this was something else. I never imagined something like this would happen."

DeSantis has made provocation on immigration a cornerstone of his presidential campaign. In June 2022, he signed a budget earmarking $12 million to "facilitate the transport of unauthorized aliens out of Florida." Soon he decided that the money could be used preemptively

to transport migrants who *might* end up in Florida. That September, he organized his first migrant flight, sending forty-eight asylum seekers from Texas to Martha's Vineyard. "We take what's happening at the southern border very seriously…unlike the president of the United States, who has refused to lift a finger to secure that border," DeSantis said in defense of the flights. This was just one of his "innovative ways to protect Florida."

Texas's Republican government has taken similar steps. Since April 2022, the state's Operation Lone Star program has bused more than twenty thousand migrants to major cities across the nation, including New York, Chicago, and Denver. One bus even dropped migrants directly outside the Naval Observatory, Vice President Kamala Harris's home. Texas governor Greg Abbott defends the program on both practical and political grounds: it helps thousands of migrants get to places across the United States while alleviating the pressure on Texas border towns. "We've got to secure our border because the Biden administration is not securing it," Abbott said in a 2022 "Nightline" interview.

DeSantis chose the Catholic diocese in Sacramento to further highlight his fight with Biden and the federal government. "A contractor was present and ensured they made it safely to a 3rd-party NGO," his spokesperson told the *Bee*. "The specific NGO, Catholic Charities, is used and funded by the federal government." Therefore, DeSantis apparently reasoned, it should have no problem helping, without warning, the thirty-six migrants—almost all of them young men—who arrived on the two flights.

Gabby Trejo was raised by her grandparents in Tijuana before immigrating to California. Her grandfather, a "*bracero*," regularly crossed the border to work on short-term agricultural contracts in the United States. Both her grandparents were illiterate, but in Trejo's eyes, that never stopped them from understanding the values espoused by the Bible. They'd often house acquaintances from their home village for long stretches. "My family just modeled what it means to be a person who lives their faith," Trejo says. She often recalls a quote from Pope John Paul II: "Nobody is so poor he has nothing to give, and nobody is so rich he has nothing to receive."

When Trejo was in middle school in California in 1994, state voters passed Proposition 187, denying access to social services like health care and education to undocumented immigrants and their children, including Trejo and most of the people she knew. Her community pushed back, introducing her to the advocacy work that later became her profession. Ten years ago, after she'd moved to Sacramento, she stumbled across SacACT, a branch of a national interfaith organization called Faith in Action. She'd never considered faith-based advocacy before, but she was intrigued. Trejo came on first as an immigration organizer, and, six years ago, she became SacACT's executive director. "It allowed me to live my faith in a way where I didn't have to be convincing people that there's only one way, but that we can experience God in many ways," she says. "I'm Catholic, and I'm an immigrant myself. And as part of my faith, I'm called to seek justice and take care of my neighbors."

Trejo didn't want to walk away, but SacACT had never handled anything like these abandoned migrants directly before. The organization has assembled groups to advocate on behalf of Sacramento's homeless population, but it doesn't itself provide services, food, or shelter. Usually, the projects it takes on are specific and local, and it tries to avoid certain controversial national issues that divide member congregations. "If we were working on LGBTQ rights, or abortion," Trejo says, "we may not be able to bring [our congregations] to the table." But they can bring Catholics and Unitarians together to address the impacts of climate change, for example, or Muslim and Jewish leaders to work on building better schools. Similarly, despite the national political attention, offering assistance to migrants in need was not controversial. "I think that all faith traditions—especially the congregations that work with us—understand that their faith calls them to seek justice," Trejo says. "To stand with the most vulnerable."

Even though SacACT itself lacked experience, many of its member groups did have relevant expertise. "We said yes to supporting them in the beginning," Trejo said, "without any kind of assurance that we would have any sort of income or funding for it, but really trusting that the faith community would step up and answer our call for help."

One of the first calls Trejo made was to Fr. Juan Francisco Bracamontes-Monjaraz, the pastor of Sacramento's Our Lady of Guadalupe parish. He opened the doors of his church as makeshift accommodation for the migrants for as long as they needed. Luckily, the local diocese soon stepped in and paid for a temporary hotel. Meanwhile, Catholic Charities provided pro-bono immigration attorneys to help them understand their rights and legal futures. All of them, it turned out, were legal asylum seekers.

In those early days, the leaders of the Catholic community also took a leading role in advocating for the immigrants in the press. Sacramento Bishop Jamie Soto, in an interview with the Associated Press, explained the situation in blunt terms: "We had no idea that they were coming," he said. Soto and Catholic leaders across the country were enraged that the migrants were used as political weapons without the slightest consideration of their well-being. "What is transpiring in Sacramento," Soto wrote in *America* magazine, "is part of a long, sorrowful litany of migrants being shuffled around as fodder for the propaganda of feeble, failed ideas"

Trejo tried to reassure the migrants that however they got here, it didn't matter to her or SacACT and its partners. Catholic parishes organized activities including guitar lessons and bike rides. For their part, the migrants tried to repay the kindness right away. On their first Sunday in town, a few of them told Trejo they hoped to attend Mass. When the offering plate came around, one man, Diego, placed a crumpled dollar bill inside. Trejo teared up. "He didn't need to do that. He needed that dollar more than the Church."

To secure long-term housing, Trejo turned to Rabbi Mona Alfi, leader of congregation B'nai Israel, which had experience working with refugees, particularly from Afghanistan. Rabbi Alfi's members had voted several years earlier to declare themselves a "sanctuary congregation," meaning its members are "ready to provide shelter when we are called upon," both spiritually and literally. In 2018, a teenage member started a program called Camp Nefesh—a two-week day camp held each summer for refugee children in the region.

Trejo called on a Friday afternoon, just before the Jewish Sabbath was to begin. Alfi said her congregation could probably help, but given the inopportune timing, not that night. Luckily, with weekend sleeping accommodations taken care of by the diocese, Alfi had time to share the situation with her congregation. When she did, donations poured in. Not just money, but clothes, food, and help making the necessary arrangements. Her congregation also leveraged connections with the mayor's office and state government to bring in doctors, psychologists, lawyers to help with asylum applications, and even barbers.

Alfi suspects the overwhelming response was indicative of something deeper with the culture of American Judaism. "In just about every Jewish family, you have an immigrant story," she explains. "Looking at their faces," she says of the migrants, "it was really emotional thinking: 'Oh, my God, this is exactly what my family experienced. How can I not help them?'" Her concern was forward-looking, too. She has a twenty-year-old son, and many of the migrants were around his age. "That just killed me," she says. "I couldn't imagine my son going through what they've gone through." One of her first priorities became securing phones they could use to update their families.

Despite B'Nai Israel's previous experience with refugees, much of this was new. "This was definitely a much more direct-service, crisis mode than we've ever been in," she says. It was made more difficult by the fact that secrecy was a requirement. Even

now, Alfi doesn't want to reveal the shelter where the migrants were housed using cots and bedding acquired by the congregation. If the need arises again in the future, she wants the location to stay secret, to avoid protests and harassment.

She has good reason to be afraid. In August, at a meeting of city leaders in Chicago, many residents voiced disapproval about migrants being housed at a hotel in their neighborhood. "How do we know that these are not criminals coming into our community?" one woman asked. In September, protesters on Staten Island tried to block a group of migrants from entering a shelter, chanting, "Take them back! Take them back!" Likewise, in Sacramento, as soon as the issue became publicized, SacACT was inundated with calls. "I can't believe that you're standing with these people," Trejo remembers callers complaining. "There's so much need in our community. Why are you helping *them*?"

The Very Rev. Matthew Woodward, dean of Sacramento's Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, has an answer to that question. Raised in England, in the Pentecostal tradition, Rev. Woodward attended what was then called the London Bible College, where he immersed himself in the Christian tradition and eventually felt called to the Anglican Church. Its liturgical calendar, with different moods and seasons, seemed to match his own impulses. At the age of the thirty-five, he came to the United States and became Episcopalian—basically the American version of Anglican. When he came on as dean at Trinity, one of his tasks was to develop a strategic plan. He defined his church by three pillars: worship, learning, and service, with the idea that the cathedral should become more involved in community problems.

One of Trinity's biggest projects involves working with the local homeless community. It offers meal programs, a drop-in center, and the congregation has even opened up their Great Hall to a rotational shelter program. "We don't get a choice about whether members of the unhoused community are going to come to our doorstep," Woodward explains. "We just get a choice about how we welcome them."

Matthew 25 tells of how on Judgment Day, God will separate the blessed from the condemned, like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Jesus will tell the righteous that whenever they clothed or fed or sheltered or cared for "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," they also did so for Him. "The image of Christ is in each of us, in every person," Woodward says of those verses. "I don't care what your economic circumstances are, what your background is, or what your immigration status is, you bear the image of the Divine."

When Trejo called Woodward that Monday, the day the second group of migrants arrived, he was already aware of the situation. He'd authorized a member of his congregation to use some of the church's discretionary funds to purchase clothes and other resources for the migrants. But Trejo also had a more specific request: SacACT wanted to hold a press conference to explain what had happened and solicit help from the public—and she wanted to host it at Trinity Cathedral. Woodward didn't have to think too hard. "It's kind of easy when you've done some thinking about what your purpose is."

Parkside Community Church describes itself as a non-denominational, "progressive Christian community" that takes pride in the pursuit of justice and human dignity. The Rev. Rajeev Rambob, Parkside's pastor, learned of the migrants' arrival from Trejo on the day the first group arrived. Before he began that Sunday's service, he told them he'd be holding an optional meeting afterward to discuss how they could help. "Not a single person got up" at the end of the service, Parkside member Jessica Vroman remembers. "Every single person there that Sunday stuck around to hear more about how they could help."

They decided on a few measures, including a clothing drive and a simple effort to spend time with the migrants. Rambob cited Mother Teresa: "The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for

bread." But the main way they could help, the congregation decided, was to provide food. Vroman volunteered to lead the effort and worked with members of other congregations to ensure that the migrants had at least three meals a day. In her mind, it wasn't even a choice. "It's easy to talk about what you would do when it's not in front of you," she says. "But when these people have really shown up on your doorstep, what are you going to do? My faith tells me I have to say yes."

The mother of three young boys, she'd often bring them along for meal deliveries. The migrants' shelter had a playground nearby, and one day, her boys wandered over and started swinging on the equipment, in view of a group of migrants. She noticed the group was watching them like it was a feel-good movie. They all smiled and laughed. "They probably haven't seen kids playing like that in a long time," she thought to herself.

SacACT's work with this group of migrants is largely complete, but another group could arrive any day. The Florida legislature passed a bill earlier this year that allocates another $12 million toward "unauthorized alien transport," with no strings attached this time. DeSantis has made clear that he has no plans to end the program. A day after the second flight arrived in Sacramento, he told a group of Arizona sheriffs, "I think the border should be closed. I don't think we should have any of this. But if there's a policy to have an open border, then I think the sanctuary jurisdictions should be the ones that have to bear that."

SacACT and its partners have helped many of the migrants arrange transportation to chosen destinations across the county. In other cases, they've found more stable housing through other organizations. The Venezuelans in particular have a new lease on their American futures, given President Joe Biden's decision in late September to expand Temporary Protected Status, which makes them eligible to apply for work permits.

That's what Yoel and Wilkendry are most eager to do: "Work hard," Wilkendry says. "Just work hard in this country, in construction or whatever else, without hurting anyone. That's my hope: To thrive by working hard." Whether that's in Sacramento or not, they're grateful for the help offered by the city's faith community. "I have no words. They offered true support, substantial support," Yoel says. "I feel very lucky, very blessed. I thank God for putting these people in my path." "It was a blessing to get the help," Wilkendry adds, "even if it came out of deceit."

To those people who decided to help, the ordeal proves what can be accomplished when faith communities coalesce around shared values. Rambob summarized it like this: "I'm not Catholic.... I'm not Jewish. I'm a very liberal, protestant Christian. But all of these people are my siblings.... We have some differences in how we do things, and in the scriptures and the prayers and rituals, but they're all beautiful. And, if done with good intentions, this is the result: We help each other."

Many of the migrants are eager to repay the favor. Diego, the same man who put the dollar in the offering plate at Mass, now plans to stay and make Sacramento his home. He recently purchased his first car, and he still talks with Trejo often. On an evening in late September, he sent her a text. "If you ever need anything, whatever it is, call me," he wrote. "I will be right there for you."

'Inundated'

BRETT HOOVER

Fifteen years ago, while doing field research in a parish transformed by immigration from Mexico, I asked Anglo parishioners what they thought about the changes in their community. One middle-aged man told me he had no problem with immigration from Mexico, as long as their small Midwestern city was not, as he put it, "inundated." I was struck by the ambiguity in the metaphor. On the one hand, as any engineer or insurance agent will tell you, inundation or flooding is a practical problem, a matter of logistics and infrastructure. Rainfall exceeds what systems can handle. Basements flood; levees break. But inundation can also be viewed as a belonging problem. Water, mud, and even, at times, sewage or toxins end up where they are not supposed to be.

Recent increases in the number of migrants trying to cross the border bring that ambiguity back to mind. Since at least the 1970s, pundits and politicians on the Right have warned of floods of migrants, people "storming" the border (as if the nation were the Bastille), immigration as invasion, the possibility of the country reaching maximum capacity, or even a Reconquista of California, which was once part of Mexico. Democrats sound the alarm about numbers less frequently, and they usually resort to milder metaphors such as a "surge" (think Obama in 2014), suggesting unusually large ocean waves.

In recent weeks, we have heard the embattled mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, argue that blue-state metropolitan areas have reached their limits in providing for asylum seekers. "We are at capacity," Adams has said on multiple occasions, as his Democratic colleagues in places like Chicago, Maine, and Massachusetts join him in asking for more federal help. The numbers of migrants arriving in these places are large. According to the *New York Times*, more than one hundred thousand migrants arrived in New York City in 2023, many by bus from Texas. Housing them costs the city billions of dollars, partly because of a 1981 consent decree that established a right to shelter. Many of those migrants hail from Venezuela, an economically devastated country with fewer immigrants already in the United States and thus relatively few family members to host them.

Much has also been made of the more than 240,000 monthly "encounters" between migrants and Border Patrol at the end of 2023, closer to three hundred thousand in December. These Homeland Security numbers are harder to interpret. They don't take account of people caught and deported by Border Patrol who then try to cross again—and are thus "encountered" more than once. They also reflect the trend of migrants purposefully turning themselves in to Border Patrol hoping to apply for asylum. In previous eras of immigration, crossing the border was largely about trying to *avoid* getting caught by Border Patrol.

Anti-immigrant forces on the Right hope that these numbers will frighten American voters into seeing the increase in migrants arriving in the United States not as a logistical or humanitarian challenge but as a crisis of national belonging and identity. This is "inundation" interpreted as dirty water that doesn't belong. MAGA Republicans contend that today's migrants, especially those from Latin America and from Muslim nations, bring values and attitudes antithetical to U.S. society. Donald Trump began his 2016 presidential campaign branding Mexican immigrants as criminal invaders. As president, he decried the preponderance of migrants from poorer or non-European countries, employing a scatological metaphor to describe homelands like Haiti. More recently, Trump campaign officials have floated proposals to massively increase deportations, to make asylum all but impossible, to ban migration

from Muslim countries, and to once again reduce the number of refugees to near zero. The not-so-subtle implication is that it is better to have no immigrants at all than to bring in people from less affluent and majority-nonwhite nations.

This specific brand of xenophobia has a long history in our nation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, immigration reached an all-time peak of 15 percent of the population. (Today, that number is 13.7 percent.) A bout of nativism erupted, targeting Asian, Eastern European, and Southern European immigrants. The dominance of the "Nordic" (Northern and Western European) culture of the United States was presumed to be under attack. An oxymoronic "scientific racism" made bogus claims about Nordic superiority, and a renewed Ku Klux Klan amassed political power—including at least one governorship—with the express intention of keeping out Catholics, Jews, and Asians. Xenophobia and more traditional forms of racism worked in concert. The Jim Crow caste system in the South gained legal approbation, Woodrow Wilson segregated the federal government, and lynching as an act of racial terror went unprosecuted. By 1924, Congress had engineered federal immigration law by instituting discriminatory quotas that drastically limited migration from Eastern and Southern Europe and barred Asian immigration entirely. What had been an enormous logistical challenge was turned into a racial and ethnic emergency.

We must make sure that this "dirty water" interpretation of the numbers does not dominate our thinking about immigration today. But even if we all see migration as a "logistical challenge," we must remember that we Americans bear significant responsibility for this challenge. Both Republicans and Democrats created "tough-on-crime" deportation policies that sent thousands of MS-13 and Calle 18 gang members back to Central America, where they unsurprisingly recreated the gangs they had known in California. These gangs have established a profitable extortion business, forcing their fellow citizens north when they cannot afford to pay any more. Moreover, both independent research and government investigations show that Mexican organized-crime cartels procure their weapons from U.S. sellers, and then use those weapons to threaten or kill anyone in their way. On past visits to a migrant shelter in Tijuana with my students, we have met countless families seeking asylum in the United States after such run-ins. U.S. government policies and the actions of U.S.-based multinational corporations also drive economically motivated migration, such as when subsidized agriculture in the United States edges out small farmers in Mexico and Central America, or when U.S. sanctions exacerbate the economic mismanagement in Venezuela or Cuba.

As the social ethicist Tisha Rajendra points out, many Americans, even many ethicists, think of newly arriving migrants essentially as strangers. Welcoming them, then, is kindness, even if that kindness is also a Christian duty for some of us. But Rajendra argues that if the U.S. government or U.S. corporations have helped to create the conditions that spurred migration, we cannot really think of them as strangers. International relationships create responsibilities. If our nation has acted in ways that brought migrants to our door, we can't insist that they are not our problem. Attempts to shuffle challenges off onto other countries, such as the "Remain in Mexico" policy of the previous administration, or current efforts to enlist Mexican authorities in turning back migrants, are even more shameful. Ethical nations, like ethical persons, take responsibility for their actions.

We already know what meeting the logistical challenge would look like. Border states and cities like New York genuinely need federal help, though that would require Congress to authorize additional spending. Alternatives to asylum at the border in various parts of Latin America, such as the provisions established by the Biden administration for Cubans and Venezuelans with U.S. sponsors, need scaling up. Congress could relax work-permit requirements for asylum seekers. The

famously glitchy CBP One app, through which asylum seekers had to secure appointments to enter the United States, has gotten better, but improvements in capacity and efficiency are still needed. Above all, Congress must increase investment on the processing side, perhaps something more like the dramatic increases in Border Patrol funding after 9/11, to create the number of immigration courts and judges required to meet demand. In a less polarized environment, at least some of the necessary funding could come from the elimination of ineffective and often expensive enforcement measures such as border fencing. Does Border Patrol really need nearly twice as many agents as the FBI? Lower birth rates and a stronger economy in Mexico have arguably done more to reduce the undocumented population than all the military-style border enforcement. And that enforcement, which is meant to keep people out, might actually end up keeping people in the United States who would prefer to go back. People stay for fear of never being able to return.

In the Hebrew Bible, upwards of thirty-six Torah passages require God's people to be hospitable toward ancient immigrants, who are known in Hebrew as the *gerim* (often translated as "resident aliens" or "strangers"). A large number of these directives explicitly compare the vulnerability of these newcomers to the memory of the Israelites' own time as enslaved *gerim* in Egypt. "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). Prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah echo the refrain. Given that many of the ancestors of today's Americans were also once *gerim* here in the United States, would not these ancestors be disappointed in us, knowing that we let a crisis of logistics get in the way?

Migration's Doom Loop

ALEJANDRA OLIVA

When I first started interpreting for asylum seekers who had landed in New York City in the winter of 2017, I stepped into the immigrant-rights movement with all the zeal of a convert. It felt like the group I was working with, the New Sanctuary Coalition, was inventing solutions to a problem that had only recently become understood in this city. This wasn't a totally out-of-pocket reaction—the early days of the Trump administration were (rightfully) spangled with the phrase "unprecedented times," and it felt like the problems of the country were made anew, made more challenging, urgent, and extreme, by the man in the White House.

However, the very name of the group that trained me and gave me my first look into the U.S. immigration system should have been a hint: it was, after all, the *New* Sanctuary Coalition, which indicated the existence of an older movement from which this organization had evolved. And so it was—the original sanctuary movement had been a nationwide association of churches and congregations that had banded together to provide safe havens and a platform for Central American refugees fleeing violence and government repression. They were the first to open up church buildings to house people, to figure out how to file asylum applications pro se, and to round up plaintiffs for the first class actions.

There's something visceral and immediate about working with asylum seekers—it's me, an application, and the person in front of me telling me the story of why they fled their home country, which I then have to reshape into tidy little answers that fit the boxes on the form. There's often not a lot of time for reflection or questioning, for wondering who shaped the practices that now feel so vital to keeping people from deportation, who sat in church basements before you and decided this was work a congregation ought to do. No time to ponder the story behind the story the person sitting across from me is telling. In those moments, the questions of who caused the bullet hole and who came up with the Band-Aid are simply not relevant. All that matters is the semi-inadequate first aid I'm able to provide.

The longer I spent working with people in the immigration system, the more I also realized that when I heard their stories in the news, I was hardly ever hearing about *them*, the people I worked with. I would hear about demographics, or economics, or law enforcement, or, very occasionally, a treacly human-interest story, but immigrants themselves are not made *real* to the average viewer of the evening news. Though immigration is literally the movement of people from one place to another, you get very little of the people themselves if you look at the phenomenon as an outsider. They are either shapeless masses in motion or stories flattened into easily digestible trauma porn; migrants' motivations are either impossible to discern or as dumbly outlined as the plot of a soap opera. And into this bleak narrative landscape steps Jonathan Blitzer with his new book, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis.*

A long-time *New Yorker* reporter on the immigration beat, Blitzer's journalism is usually people-centered. From a Brooklyn priest running an immigration program in New York City, to a mother trying to survive the immigration system, to a White House staffer disillusioned with their job, Blitzer's writing often takes the form of the profile that illuminates the system, the individual who clarifies the structure. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here* is no different, following activists, bureaucrats, law-enforcement agents, and immigrants through more than forty years of immigration history. The main challenge this book takes on is showing how

what Blitzer calls today's "politics of permanent crisis," evident in most media coverage of immigration, is in fact a response to a consistent pattern of self-defeating U.S. foreign policy, which is dangerously interventionist even as it turns a blind eye to murderous regimes across Central America. This is one of those truisms that earnest young activists might figure out after reading, say, Greg Grandin or Eduardo Galeano. The real value of Blitzer's book lies in how vividly he shows these policies impacting individual lives.

Structurally, the book is organized into three parts, corresponding to three different eras of Central American unrest and the American policies that reacted to them. Each introduces a new character while also continuing to weave in the stories that have already begun.

The first character is Juan Romagoza, a Salvadoran doctor involved in the student protest movements of the 1970s. Arrested while caring for campesinos caught in the crossfire between guerillas and government forces, he barely survived torture at the hands of government agents. He then fled the country in the early eighties and, after spending time in Mexico and California, ended up running a health clinic in Washington D.C. All the while, Romagoza worked as an activist fighting to secure the rights of Central Americans living in the United States. The torturers who caused Romagoza incredible suffering were part of a regime that received material aid from the Reagan administration, which in turn dismissed reports of human-rights abuses and denied the vast majority of Guatemalan asylum applications. Romagoza's flight from his home country and his struggles for rights in a new one were born of the same set of policies.

Blitzer's next protagonist is Eddie Anzora, an ambitious young Salvadoran whose mother brought him to South Central Los Angeles as a toddler in the early eighties, in the same wave of immigration that included Romagoza. In Los Angeles, Anzora witnessed the beginnings of MS-13, originally a gang for Central Americans whose exclusion from the older, more established Black and Mexican American neighborhood gangs had left them vulnerable. Anzora, whom Blitzer describes as "half anthropologist, half wannabe hood," had managed to stay on the outskirts of hardcore gang life, opening a recording studio and working as a vet tech. But a conviction for drug possession in his twenties (the result of a Clinton-era crackdown on crime) led to Anzora's deportation to El Salvador in 2007 (following Bush's post-9/11 increase in punitive immigration enforcement). For Anzora, returning to El Salvador meant struggling to survive in a country where deportees were increasingly targeted by gang members—the same ones he'd grown up with in Los Angeles. His story reveals how the harsh immigration and crime policies of the early 2000s didn't just perpetuate the circular violence in Central America, but actually exacerbated instability and led to renewed waves of migration.

Blitzer's third and final section focuses on Keldy Mabel Gonzáles Brebe de Zúniga. During her childhood in La Ceiba, Honduras, she witnessed the same kind of gang violence that Anzora had encountered in El Salvador after his deportation. Gonzáles initially left Honduras in 2007 after the death of her brother and amid increasing concerns about her husband's ability to make a living in a dwindling tourist industry. She returned in 2010 to be reunited with her sons, whom she had left with family members for what was meant to be a short-term trip to the United States. But her return was marked by waves of increasing violence. After Gonzáles testified in court against her brother's killers, she knew she had a target on her back. She spent years hiding in different parts of Honduras, and even crossed into Mexico only to be deported. In 2017 Gonzáles and her two sons decided to cross into the United States again. Gonzáles's faith had undergone a renewal during her return trip to Honduras, and her preternatural calm and welcoming spirit earned her the nickname of "la pastora" from fellow migrants. That faith and that community sustained her as she waited to be reunited with her sons, whom U.S. border officials had separated from her during the so-called zero-tolerance policy era.

Blitzer's knack for telling compellingly human stories is matched by his skilled political reporting and analysis of the tortuous landscape of our capricious, ever-shifting immigration policy, which requires constant adaptation on the part of attorneys and immigration experts. The early Tucson sanctuary movement's tactic of flooding the system with asylum applications caught my eye, in part because it was the same one I had practiced early in my activism in New York. I also recognized their creeping suspicion that there were new unwritten policies at work, evident in changing patterns of acceptances and rejections I saw in my own work alongside immigration attorneys. Fighting to have those hidden policies acknowledged as unjust and overturned was, and continues to be, hard, necessary work. Finding a lineage of activism across the past four unrelenting decades feels like a reason to continue.

In his preface, Blitzer recounts a single reporting trip during which he followed Department of Homeland Security officials as they met in Guatemala to stem migration at its source, as well as migrants praying in a Tapachula shelter in Mexico, "the very people DHS was trying to discourage." The mission of the book, Blitzer writes, is "to be a kind of go-between: to tell each side's story to the other." And so he does—alongside migrants and activists, we also get portraits of real government officials. There's Doris Meissner, a career bureaucrat who served in successive presidential administrations from Nixon to Clinton, and Janet Murguía and Cecilia Muñoz, civil-rights activists who worked in the Clinton and Obama administrations, respectively, who saw their values eroded by the necessity of political compromise. There are also portraits of nativists and anti-immigrant activists who found a home in the White House, including Stephen Miller, the architect of many of Trump's most vicious policies. Where Meissner, Murguía, and Muñoz recognized migrants as human beings worthy of dignity and aid, but struggled to make the political machinery align with their convictions, Miller and other nativists instead found a system predisposed to dehumanization, alienation, and violence and exploited it to inflict further cruelty.

From the ground, immigration has felt to me like an intractably huge problem. I've worked with both grassroots organizations focused on addressing people's emotional and physical needs and huge immigration legal-assistance nonprofits engaged in strategic litigation and policy proposals. In neither setting does it feel like we're anywhere near getting our arms around the issue, much less offering a solution big enough to work. The sense of scale boggles: there's a person, sitting here in front of you, who often needs services across a variety of fields, from legal aid to housing assistance to language classes to physical and mental-health care. And for every person like the one sitting across from you there is at least one more person who has been returned to a country they took great pains to flee, and another still who hasn't figured out how to get connected to these services, or has given up on them. *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here* begins explaining why that is so, giving a bird's-eye view of a system—at once intimate and consequential at the level of individual lives and big enough to span governments, administrations, and thousands of miles over nearly forty years—that has been created piecemeal, at times actively and other times passively, law by law, decision by decision, story after story.

Stories, especially stories piling up one after another, can hold more power than we realize. We learn of Romagoza's initial interest in and subsequent alienation from the Catholic Church, and his eventual reconciliation with it after he met Archbishop Óscar Romero. Canonized by Pope Francis in 2018, Romero was best known in El Salvador for his sermons—searing homilies on the need for forgiveness and reconciliation that often concluded with his recitation of the week's events. In Blitzer's description: "For half an hour, sometimes longer, he would methodically list the names of people who'd been killed or disappeared, the dates of murders and mass arrests, and the locations

of recent crackdowns." This commitment to the simple recitation of facts and dates was revolutionary during a time when government repression kept truth as shadowy as possible. While Blitzer avoids taking a direct stance on policy proposals and never quite says how to fix the mess he's detailed, his book mirrors Romero's weekly updates in form and intent: he lays out facts and chronologies so that we might learn to recognize the injustice we have and imagine the justice we might work together to create.

The Other Side

EVAN BEDNARZ

"You have picked a bad night to cross," the man tells the shivering couple in the kitchen, as they watch snow falling outside the window. The other man replies, "Every night is bad." This observation, recounted in Octavio Solis's *Retablos*, a coming-of-age memoir set in El Paso during the sixties and seventies, still applies in the borderland.

At El Paso's Sacred Heart, the Spanish-speaking Jesuit parish half a mile from the border, hundreds of Venezuelan migrants milled outside the church's overcrowded shelter, Casa del Sagrado Corazón, spilling out into the alleyway and nearby street corners. Those inside and outside the shelter were all part of a refugee crisis that has pushed past 7 million. With an eye to the thousands of migrants camping out across the border in Ciudad Juárez as well as those already on the streets of El Paso, the mayor declared a state of emergency beginning in May. Anticipating a dangerous surge after the expiration of Title 42 (the provision of federal-health law invoked during the pandemic that expedited the expulsion of migrants), Gov. Greg Abbott sent a "Tactical Border Force" of the Texas National Guard to counter what he sardonically referred to as President Biden's "laying down of a welcome mat for the entire world."

On a Sunday in April, a few weeks before Title 42 ended, I was volunteering with my girlfriend at Sacred Heart, beautifying the block after 10 a.m. Mass. As we harvested cigarette butts, Coke cans, and the occasional diaper, some migrants saw us and began to help. A Venezuelan man in his mid-thirties, with a sunburnt, melancholic face and a weathered backpack, trailed behind me for part of the block, picking trash with his bare hands. "*¿Qué está pasando en Venezuela*?" I asked in gringo Spanish. The man answered simply, "*Muy fea allí*": "Very ugly there."

Life for most people in Venezuela has been ugly for the past decade: political turmoil, food shortages and malnutrition, a collapse of public infrastructure, and a lack of clean water. As liquid pooled at the bottom of our trash bag, I thought of news footage I had seen of hungry Venezuelans sifting through rubbish piles for food. At the end, I offered the man a handshake and "*buena suerte*," as he returned to the queue, likely to pass another night in the streets. Canopies of Red Cross blankets and cardboard bedding lined the alleyway between the church and the shelter. I hoped the man might find America less ugly.

Beyond the wall and the Rio Grande, Ciudad Juárez stares back at El Paso. From the University of Texas–El Paso, you see houses arrayed on hillsides, splashed with tropical colors that offset the drabness of cinder block. A city associated in popular imagination with cartels and crime (it features in *Breaking Bad* and *Sicario*), Juárez is part of a transborder manufacturing hub that generates about $4 billion annually. It was also the scene of a horrifying fire at a migrant detention center in late March, which killed forty migrants. Most migrants use Juárez as a staging point before crossing into El Paso, adding a layer of complication to the lives of those who cross back and forth across *la frontera* every day.

As my girlfriend and I drive over the Bridge of the Americas into Juárez, we see a few joggers and families congregating in a park. White-gloved Mexican cops, one impressively smoking a cigarette with no hands, direct traffic at an intersection. We are heading to Clinica Proyecto Santo Niño, a school and health clinic run by the Sisters of Charity in Anapra, an impoverished *colonia* on the northwest outskirts of Juárez. Paved streets are interspersed with dirt roads, and we have learned to navigate hidden speed bumps and roundabouts made of tires. The first time I came here, sewage spilled into

the streets. Further west, miles of border wall span into the Chihuahuan desert, tagged here and there with anti-Trump graffiti.

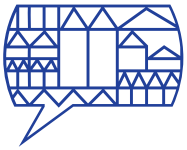
The façade of Clinica Proyecto Santo Niño is painted bubblegum pink, with a children's mural depicting the Holy Mother surrounded by *angelitas* and a boy in a wheelchair. Inside, there are Montessori-style classrooms, a common area, a common bath, and a physical-therapy room. The clinic mostly serves locals with disabilities such as muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, or cerebral palsy. I sometimes assist my girlfriend, who is a physical therapist, but just as often I am simply there, drinking coffee with the mothers, playing with the kids, practicing my broken Spanish—a male presence in an unmistakably maternal atmosphere.

Just being there, I encounter the Christlike beauty of the broken and poor. Mothers carry their disabled children like icons of the *pietà*, lowering them gently into the waters of the bath. Hands caress and wash damaged muscles in everyday liturgies of hope and healing. Jesús is in his early thirties and comes to the clinic with his affable mother, Monica. A former criminologist, he had a brain tumor that was over-radiated and now he has difficulty walking and speaking. With the help of a translator, I talk with Jesús and Monica after a session, asking them about life in Anapra, about what they might want Americans in Chicago or Seattle to know about their experience on this side of the border. Shy at first, Monica expresses her gratitude to the clinic and the sisters, and to my girlfriend for the physical therapy she provides her son. Only then does Monica speak of the troubles that afflict her and others in Anapra: poverty, corruption, the trafficking and violence of cartels. "You have to have faith, because the devil is here," she tells me. Monica cares for Jesús full time, while her husband works as a handyman and her youngest son studies to become a nurse. What she wishes for her family is not very different from what most middle-class American parents would wish for theirs: better access to health care, more economic opportunity. But Monica also speaks freely of Christ and the guardian angels who protect her family. Her faith and gratitude give her courage, protecting her against bitterness and despair.

At the Paso del Norte Bridge, a stone's throw from Sacred Heart, we idle in our car, waiting to pass back into the United States. I watch as a female border-patrol agent strides across the pedestrian walkway, leading recent deportees to the streets of Juárez. Another agent brings up the rear, hand on his holster in an easygoing martial pose. Many Americans believe the situation on the border requires a military response. Gov. Abbott is one of them. He has deployed a "Tactical Border Force," and tasked thousands of Texas National Guard troops with his "Operation Lone Star." Fort Bliss, home to seventeen thousand soldiers of the First Armored Division, is also a major player in the economy and culture of El Paso. The border wall, steel-beamed and concertina-wired, can seem like the frontline in a military zone.

Is the crisis at our border a national-security issue or a humanitarian one? These simplistic characterizations seem to be the only ones we are allowed to choose from, but they obscure the systemic nature of the problem. They obscure, for example, the history of U.S. meddling in Latin America. They also obscure the cartel operations bankrolled by drug use across the United States. The average migrant trudging through the Panamanian jungle or sleeping rough in the alleys of El Paso is a victim of these larger forces, for which we bear at least some collective responsibility. Mass migration, like economic globalization and pandemics, points urgently to the interdependence of today's world. And interdependence without solidarity is a recipe for mass suffering. As the French Catholic poet Charles Péguy wrote, "We must be saved together / We cannot go to God alone; / Else He would ask, / 'Where are the others?'"

The Role of the Worker



CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

The Role of the Worker

In recent years, many observers have expressed concern about the resilience of our democratic institutions. An understated component of this conversation is the role of "big money" in politics. After all, what use are democratic institutions if the wealthy can manipulate them to their own ends and if workers lack the ability to reform those institutions to protect their labor power? It should be no surprise, then, that the United States' crisis of democracy is simultaneous with the rise of economic inequality. At the same time that the United States has been downgraded by experts from a "full" to a "flawed" democracy, the top 0.1 percent have accumulated nearly as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. As Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, "We can either have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both."

The United States faces many challenges when it comes to sustaining workers and its democracy—but, as Joseph A. McCartin shows, our nation has faced many of them before. In 2018, McCartin reflected on the Supreme Court's decision to diminish workers' bargaining power. In the essay, he unfurls a history of Catholic social teaching from *Rerum novarum* to the present day. McCartin shows that "democracy cannot thrive unless workers enjoy a measure of democracy at work" in the form of collective bargaining.

In "This Economy Kills," Anthony Annett unpacks why "Catholic social teaching insists that economic activity be ordered toward the common good." An economy like the United States', which is ordered toward productivity, is likely to have many drawbacks (one of which is that it won't be that productive). But the greatest problem with a productivity-oriented economy is that it creates rampant inequality, which in turn "severs the sense of shared purpose necessary for the realization of the common good." A lack of shared purpose and commitment to the common good erodes social trust and has the potential to devolve into political instability.

Another challenge to labor is the practice of consolidating industries, which gathered steam in the 1970s because economists and politicians prioritized increases in efficiency that might benefit consumers. However, as Regina Munch argues, while consolidation decreases prices, it also decreases workers' wages and comes with hidden political costs: "[I]t has encouraged us to conceive of ourselves and our fellow citizens…merely as consumers." Instead, Munch asserts, we should strive for policies that conceive of work as a social good and bring democratic deliberation back into economic processes.

Despite these challenges, Matt Mazewski observes that the United States has witnessed a "resurgence of union activity in recent years" across a range of industries. Another bright spot is a 2023 ruling by the National Labor Relations Board that revitalized an old precedent. The precedent protects workers from employer intimidation, meaning that "a more effective system of deterrence against union-busting is beginning to shape." There is still more work to be done, but when policy backs up unions, they become more capable of exerting pressure on lawmakers to pass further pro-worker policies.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

Joseph A. McCartin, "Labor's Existential Crisis," August 10, 2018
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/labors-existential-crisis

Anthony Annett, "'This Economy Kills,'" June 16, 2017
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/economy-kills

Regina Munch, "Let Them Eat TVs," June 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/anti-trust-consolidation-economy-sandel-reich-mccarraher

Matt Mazewski, "A Star Recruit," November 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/taking-union-busting

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. McCartin's and Annett's essays grapple with the paradox of the Church's longstanding support of unions alongside a history (and present) in which Church leadership and other Catholic public figures appear to be opposed to unions. How do we grapple with this tension between Church teaching and leadership? What is the role of the laity when it comes to the worker? How can we remedy the crises facing unions and Catholic social teaching?

2. Munch and Annett claim that the American economy is ordered toward consumerism and productivity. Do you agree? How do you think the economy came to be ordered as it is? How might a reassessment of the past help us to discern the path forward?

3. Annett observes that Catholic social teaching "insists that economic activity be ordered toward the common good." How do you define the "common good"? Are there drawbacks to reordering the economy that way?

4. Munch writes strikingly about the dilution of our concept of citizenship—that U.S. citizens are "merely consumers." What does it mean to be a citizen? Are there obligations beyond consumerism implied by citizenship? If so, what are they, and how can we bring back a thicker account of citizenship?

5. One of the through lines in these pieces is that when workers are protected, so is our democracy. Why might that be the case? Does the erosion of democratic norms, citizenship, and unions have something to do with a broader sense that local communities and institutions are faltering? How can we build an economy that reverses these trends?

6. Mazewski writes, "[P]olling has shown that a much larger share of nonunion workers say they would join a union if they could, and that this number has only been growing over time. This naturally raises the question: Why aren't they?" How would you respond? How might the precarity of workers factor into this dynamic?

7. What are your experiences—or your family's experiences—with unions? What kinds of things would need to happen to continue to see the resurgence in union activity that Mazewski observes is taking place? How can you contribute to this process of revitalization?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Daniel Zamora, "Redistribution is Not Enough," May 2024:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/redistribution-not-enough

George Scialabba, "What Were We Thinking?," January 2023:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-were-we-thinking

Dorothy Day, "Houses of Hospitality," April 1938:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/houses-hospitality

John C. Cort, "Christians & the Class Struggle," July 1986:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/christians-class-struggle-0

Steven Greenhouse, "Stop Protesting, Start Organizing," September 25, 2015:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/stop-protesting-start-organizing

August 10, 2018

Labor's Existential Crisis

JOSEPH A. MCCARTIN

On June 27, by a 5-4 majority, the Supreme Court in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees* ruled as unconstitutional laws in twenty-two states and the District of Columbia that gave public-employee unions the right to collect fees from the workers they represent. The majority opinion, authored by Justice Samuel Alito, held that collective bargaining in the public sector was a fundamentally political act, and that no workers could be compelled to pay for the benefits they receive from collective bargaining without infringing on their First Amendment rights to free speech and free association.

The full significance of the decision has eluded most commentators. Many have characterized it as a blow to the finances of public-employee unions whose members account for nearly one-half of the U.S. labor movement, undercutting one of the Democratic Party's strongest institutional allies. And it is. But more ominously, at a time when inequality is surging and the economy is changing in ways that continue to weaken worker bargaining power, the court dismantled what has been a cornerstone of U.S. labor policy for decades. *Janus* puts all the nation's public-sector workers on a "right-to-work" basis, endangering the very concept of collective bargaining.

Even before the *Janus* decision, no public-sector workers could be compelled to pay union dues. At most, they could be required—if state laws allowed it—to abide by contracts approved by the majority of their coworkers that stipulated that all workers covered by such contracts share the costs of winning and administering them. These "agency fees" were not equivalent to union dues and could not be used for electioneering. Under the provisions of the *Janus* decision, governments must assume that their employees prefer to be free riders unless they indicate otherwise. States must now *require* that workers opt in to support the union.

The devastating effects of the decision are already being felt. Public-employee unions are now cutting their budgets, laying off staff, and putting once robust campaigns like the fast-food workers' Fight for $15 on hold. The nation's largest union, the National Education Association (NEA), which represents more than three million teachers, estimates that it will lose 370,000 members over the next two years. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) also expect significant membership losses.

Janus v. AFSCME was no fluke. It was more than forty years in the making. The rise of public-sector unions in the 1960s caught the anti-union movement by surprise. They had been focused on passing right-to-work laws at the state level and fighting labor's effort to amend the anti-union Taft–Hartley Act in Congress. It was not until the early 1970s that the National Right to Work Committee realized the threat posed by the unionization of millions of teachers, sanitation workers, social workers, and other government employees.

As anti-unionists turned their attention belatedly to the public sector, Sylvester Petro, a libertarian law professor who rubbed shoulders with Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich A. Hayek, and Milton Friedman at Mont Pelerin Society meetings, helped anti-union forces devise their legal strategy to attack public-sector unions. Petro was a lifelong opponent of collective bargaining—he called it "compulsory bargaining"—and believed that it infringed on the individual rights of workers to decide for themselves what conditions they were willing to accept at work. In *The Labor Policy of the Free Society*, published in 1957, he called for rolling back the 1935 Wagner Act, which had granted collective bargaining rights to a broad swath of private-sector workers.

Petro adapted to the rise of public-sector unions by reworking his old arguments against "compulsory"

bargaining. Instead of attacking bargaining *per se*, he contended that public-sector unions were unavoidably political vehicles and that any laws that allowed workers to be compelled to pay for union activity undermined the First Amendment.

When Petro advanced that argument before the Supreme Court in 1977, in *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education*, it failed badly. But the United States was different then. There was still significant bipartisan support for public-sector collective bargaining. The Michigan law whose provisions Petro challenged in *Abood* had been signed by a Republican governor. Richard Nixon's appointees to the court, including both Chief Justice Warren Burger and Justice William Rehnquist, found Petro's arguments ponderous and exasperating. An Eisenhower appointee, Justice Potter Stewart, wrote the court's controlling opinion, ruling that public-sector unions could collect agency fees as long as they weren't used for partisan political purposes. It's telling that an argument dismissed as radical libertarian overreach by the Burger Court could be embraced by every Republican appointee on today's court.

That such a change was in the offing has been unmistakable since at least 2012. It was then, in the case of *Knox v. SEIU*, that Justice Alito first made clear his intention to overturn *Abood.* Two years later, he made this even clearer in his opinion in *Harris v. Quinn.* Alito would have gotten his wish in 2016 in the case of *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association* had Justice Antonin Scalia not died and left the court deadlocked. It was only with the arrival of Justice Neil Gorsuch, appointed by President Donald Trump last year, that Alito was able to secure his long-sought objective.

But it wasn't just the composition and disposition of the Court that had changed since 1977. That shift reflected a broader hard right turn in U.S. politics. As the number of liberal Republicans dwindled and the party became a vehicle for conservative and libertarian ideologues, collective bargaining in any form, not just in the public sector, lost the bipartisan support it once enjoyed. Even some leading Democrats seemed to give up on the conviction once firmly embodied in the New Deal's policies that political democracy cannot thrive unless workers enjoy a measure of democracy at work—through strong unions that bargain collectively with employers.

That Catholic justices on the Supreme Court have followed and reinforced this trend, embracing a theory that originated on the libertarian fringe, illustrates another factor in this rightward shift: the role that decades of culture wars have played in weakening Catholic social teaching on labor. Of the five Catholics on the court, four sided with the plaintiff. (That tally becomes five of six Catholics—all five ruling against the union—if Neil Gorsuch, who was baptized and educated as a Catholic but now worships as an Episcopalian, is counted.) Their position, that individual workers have a constitutional right to avoid supporting a union that bargains on their behalf and that of their coworkers, reveals the marginalization of an idea once deeply embedded in American thinking on labor relations, an idea that Catholic social teaching once helped legitimize: that collective bargaining is deserving of the support of those it protects.

The court's decision also arrived after a generation of Catholic leaders deprioritized church teaching on union rights and instead made fighting the culture wars central to their political witness. To be sure, official church teaching on labor issues did not change. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops even submitted an *amicus curie* brief supporting the union's position in *Janus*. After the decision was announced, Bishop Frank J. Dewane, of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, quoted Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in veritate* to express his disappointment in a decision that "renders the long-held view of so many bishops constitutionally out-of-bounds, and threatens to 'limit the freedom or negotiating capacity of labor unions.'"

But most bishops remained silent on the *Janus* case, and some, including Bishop Thomas John Paprocki

of Springfield, Illinois, publicly rejected the USCCB's stance. He took to social media to applaud the court for ensuring workers' right "to be free from coercion in speech," celebrating that workers would no longer be "required to pay dues to support unions"—even though workers were *not required* to pay union dues.

Unfortunately, Bishop Paprocki is not an outlier. As recent efforts by Catholic universities to block the unionization of their adjunct faculty and graduate assistants show, the once grand edifice of Catholic social teaching on workers' rights has little purchase these days, even within many Catholic institutions.

History has confirmed the wisdom of Catholics who believed that securing democracy in the workplace would help protect and expand it in politics. From the Progressive Era through the New Deal to the formation of public-sector unions in the 1960s, their defense of collective bargaining led to a more just, if still imperfect, society. As collective bargaining expanded, so did political democracy: voting rights were won by women and African Americans, poll taxes were eliminated, and the voting age was lowered to cover anyone old enough to serve in the military; the power of money in politics was curbed; and economic inequality sank to a level not seen before or since. Catholic teaching played a supportive role in all these developments.

Yet that era is now gone. As collective bargaining has been rolled back, efforts to suppress voting have returned, inequality has grown, and unregulated big money again dominates politics. In many ways, we now confront a world not so different from that of the late nineteenth century, which gave birth both to Catholic social teaching on labor and to U.S. workers' long, bitter struggle to win collective-bargaining rights.

Like our forebears in the era of *Rerum novarum*, we now face the challenge of articulating principles and devising practical mechanisms that can build a more humane and democratic world. Our urgent task is to revitalize what they bequeathed us—both our moral tradition and the tool of collective bargaining that this tradition did so much to legitimize. It is difficult to imagine how we can tame the most destructive features of today's capitalism and preserve a robust democracy without reviving workers' ability to bargain collectively.

Even before *Janus*, collective bargaining was becoming an increasingly ineffectual tool in the public and private sector alike. The form of collective bargaining that developed in the private sector in the mid-twentieth century began to break down in a world where power became concentrated in the hands of fewer economic actors and the financialization of the economy altered the goals and behavior of employers—their every decision now subject to potential punishment by fickle financial markets or the manipulations of private equity. It was not built for a world where subcontracting, franchising, and extended international supply chains insulate those who call the shots from the demands of the workers whose employment conditions they dictate from afar, or where "gig" employment frees corporations like Uber from even being categorized—let alone held accountable—as employers.

Similarly, public-sector bargaining was not created for a world where governments operate in a constant state of forced austerity, saddled with growing debt and subjected to relentless privatization. Nor can it survive conditions where taxation is shifted from the rich to the backs of working people, even as governments compete to bestow tax abatements on the nation's wealthiest corporations in the name of development—as many cities are now doing to lure Amazon's new facility. Like private-sector workers, government employees are finding that they lack the ability to bargain with the financial forces that are determining the conditions under which they work.

Realizing that they must revitalize bargaining in response to these new conditions, public-sector unions began to experiment with new approaches in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Since 2012, teachers' unions affiliated with the NEA and the AFT in Chicago, St. Paul, and Seattle, and municipal workers

affiliated with the SEIU and AFSCME in San Diego and Los Angeles, have sought to expand the ranks of those who participate in collective bargaining, open up its processes, and broaden its purposes. They have invited community allies to help craft bargaining demands that advance shared goals, then insisted that these allies get a seat at the bargaining table.

These experiments have used bargaining to challenge how big money controls the public agenda. Chicago teachers documented the loss of tens of millions of dollars in school funding to toxic interest-rate swaps foisted on the school district by private managers, and millions more in tax giveaways to wealthy corporations; Los Angeles municipal workers found that their city spent more in *fees* to wealthy Wall Street firms than it did maintaining streets; St. Paul teachers discovered that their school district did business with banks that foreclosed on students' families during the school year; and Seattle teachers exposed rampant racial inequities. Strong union-community alliances used bargaining to address these issues.

These experimenters convened at Georgetown University in 2014 and gave a name to their approach, one that resonates deeply with the language of Catholic social teaching. They called it Bargaining for the Common Good.

The teacher uprisings this past spring took up Bargaining for the Common Good in style if not in name. In West Virginia, teachers refused to return to work until *all* state workers had received a pay increase equal to theirs. In Oklahoma, teachers protested the state's failure to fairly tax wealthy oil and gas interests. In Arizona, they demanded that no further tax cuts be enacted until the state's per-pupil spending on education reached the national average.

Although the nascent effort to reinvent public-sector bargaining has a long way to go, there is reason to believe that *Janus* will accelerate it. To survive, unions know they must enlist allies and cultivate public support by defending the common good. As they find ways to do this, there is also reason to believe that their successes might help revitalize our deeply broken system of private-sector bargaining. Just as the success of private-sector bargaining after World War II provided a model for spreading public-sector bargaining in the 1960s, public-sector experiments with Bargaining for the Common Good could in time inspire new private-sector bargaining models.

As unions struggle to respond creatively to this crucial moment, can we expect the same from Catholic leaders? Pope Francis eloquently defends unions and condemns "the economy of exclusion and inequality"; some influential U.S. bishops echo him. But overall, the U.S. church's defense of collective bargaining needs to be more than an afterthought, remembered only when it is imperiled. It isn't only unions that are facing an existential crisis after *Janus*—so is Catholic social teaching on labor.*

This Economy Kills

ANTHONY ANNETT

In an article published a few months ago in *America* magazine, Arthur Brooks—president of the American Enterprise Institute—described his conversion to capitalism. His basic argument is that the free-market system has lifted an unprecedented number of people out of poverty, which means that opposition to free enterprise is deeply misguided.

The frustrating thing about these debates is that the terms are rarely defined. Catholic social teaching certainly gives a qualified endorsement of the free-market system, but not in the way meant by Brooks. People like Brooks tend to conjure up a stark dichotomy between a virtuous free market and oppressive state control. They obscure the fact that Catholic social teaching has long condemned both extremes—libertarianism and collectivism (which Pope Pius XI dubbed the "twin rocks of shipwreck").

Between these two extremes, Catholic social teaching insists that economic activity be ordered toward the common good. One aspect of this is "social democracy" or the "social-market economy"—a market economy, yes, but one in which the state ensures that goods and services essential to human flourishing but not necessarily provided by the free market are made available to all; one that corrects for the swings of economic fortune that are inevitable in any market economy and regulates business to better align private behavior with the requirements of the common good. This is why Pope Benedict XVI was able to declare that "democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness."

But Catholic social teaching also insists that solidarity cannot be wholly outsourced to the state. Again, Pope Benedict argued that market activity cannot be just about making money for its own sake, but must embody "authentically human social relationships of friendship, solidarity, and reciprocity." This means that business must orient its activities toward the common good—producing goods and services that meet genuine human needs, prioritizing dignified work and decent wages over profits, and embracing a keen sense of social and environmental responsibility. It's not only about creating wealth, but creating it sustainably and distributing it justly.

This is the kind of market economy favored by Catholic social teaching. But is it the kind favored by Brooks? Probably not. Brooks is known for painting a stark contrast between American-style free markets (good) and European-style social democracy (bad), and he has spent years castigating the centrist Barack Obama as an enemy of free enterprise. Nor is there any hint that he believes businesses have a responsibility to look beyond profit.

Brooks—like his ideological comrade Paul Ryan—seems under the spell of libertarianism or market fundamentalism, an ideology that puts economic freedom first. This ideology insists that all market rewards are fairly and justly earned and that the government's role in economic affairs should be severely restrained. And libertarians insist that the role of business is to maximize profit, typically equated with shareholder value.

This is something of a shell game. Brooks never uses the word "libertarian" in his *America* essay, which offers him plausible deniability. This is unsurprising, because such an ideology—by detaching individual freedom from communal responsibility, elevating self-interest over solidarity, and upholding freedom from coercion over the universal destination of goods (which Pope Francis deems a golden rule of social conduct)—is utterly incompatible with Catholic social teaching. It is a rock of shipwreck.

Brooks credits five forces for the reduction of poverty worldwide—globalization, free trade, property rights, the rule of law, and the culture of entrepreneurship. These forces are certainly important. But reducing all material gains to these forces is simplistic, and Brooks is wrong in inferring that a consensus among economists supports his ideology. Economic development is actually far more complicated than he lets on. Yes, trade is beneficial, but so is investment in health and education. When it comes to fighting poverty, a country might face natural impediments—including being landlocked, mountainous, without access to energy resources, prone to disease, or highly vulnerable to natural disasters. It could be stuck with self-serving and short-termist policies adopted by self-interested elites. There could be instability and conflict, including through the intervention of global or regional powers. Or there could quite simply be a poverty trap, whereby a country has good intentions but is too poor to make the basic investments needed to end deprivation. The bottom line: it's complicated. To claim that the 800 million or so people still mired in extreme poverty can escape their plight through Brooks's five factors is misleading and unserious.

From this wider perspective, any explanation of the economic rise of the United States must account for negative factors like the exploitative system of slavery and positive factors like an early push for mass education. It must also account for the devastation of Europe after the war, combined with the fact that the United States took over a role vacated by the United Kingdom—deploying military power to extend economic power. The Japanese postwar economic miracle had its roots in the deliberate and heavy-handed strategy of the U.S. occupiers to widen the distribution of income and ownership of wealth. Turning to China, the extraordinary reduction of poverty over the past few decades came from moving away from ruinous collectivism, not toward a Western-style free market, but toward a state-directed capitalism in which property rights—and human rights, more generally—are still at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party. The recent progress in reducing poverty in sub-Saharan Africa was partly due to the end of the Cold War, combined with debt relief and development aid delivered under the aegis of the Millennium Development Goals. To reduce the reduction of poverty to such factors as property rights, entrepreneurship, and the magic of free markets is folly in the service of ideology.

Yet this ideology has made great inroads over the past few decades. The idea was deceptively simple: if government restraints on free enterprise were eased or removed, this would unleash a wave of dynamism and wealth creation. This idea was used to justify policies like deregulation, privatization, cutting government programs, reducing upper-income and capital taxes, and curbing the power of labor. After demand-side policies associated with Keynesianism lost legitimacy during the stagflation of the 1970s, these new supply-side policies were supposed to boost long-term growth, which entails boosting productivity. But this never happened. In his magisterial work, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, Robert Gordon shows that output per hour was much lower after 1970 than in the middle of the century. Even worse, total-factor productivity—the best measure of the pace of innovation—was actually three times higher in the earlier period (1920–1970) than afterwards. This earlier period was dominated by social-democratic policies under the auspices of the New Deal. It reflected a spirit of solidarity with high levels of social trust and economic growth that was broadly shared among the different social classes. In contrast, while the Reagan revolution never delivered its promised dynamism, it did deliver higher inequality, lower social trust, greater corporate power, and increasing financial instability.

In Europe, too, the social democratic settlement enjoyed phenomenal success in the decades following the war. Yet people like Brooks disparage the European social model. An un-nuanced analysis might note, correctly, that real GDP per capita in the Euro Area

is only about 70 percent of what it is in the United States. But this is misleading on a number of levels. GDP per capita is a product of three separate factors—productivity, the employment rate, and average hours worked. It turns out that productivity in Europe is not that different from productivity in United States (although it is weaker in southern Europe). Nor is employment as different as some imagine, especially for prime-age workers. The big difference is in average hours worked, which reflects a conscious choice to forsake extra work in favor of family and leisure. This is a feature of Europe's social market, not a bug.

Not surprisingly, Europe beats the United States on a host of human-development and quality-of-life indicators. Poverty and inequality rates are lower. Life expectancy and infant-mortality rates are better. And yes, this is in large part due to extensive safety nets. In disparaging these programs, Brooks fails to mention their genuine achievements, or the fact that the European countries in the worse economic condition are precisely those, in southern Europe, with the most underdeveloped welfare systems. Nor does he mention the fact that the United States has effectively stopped fighting poverty in the aftermath of the Reagan revolution. As Anthony Atkinson—one of the giants in the field—pointed out, no advanced economy has managed to achieve a low level of inequality or relative poverty with low levels of social spending.

In sum, the European social model shows that prosperity can go hand in hand with fairness and cohesion. This is especially the case in Scandinavia, the quintessence of modern social democracy, where citizens readily accept high taxes to ensure that everyone has access to quality education, health care, child care, and other social services. Despite the claims of libertarians, Scandinavia shows that it is perfectly possible for a modern economy to be simultaneously productive, fair, compassionate, sustainable—and happy.

The last point is important, because Brooks devotes so much attention to happiness. He is right to do so, although the evidence fails to back up his claims. In this year's World Happiness Report, half of the top-ten happiest countries in the world are Scandinavian—Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden. Rounding out the top ten are Switzerland, Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. The United States ranks fourteenth.

A key finding of the happiness literature is that, above a certain minimal threshold, money does not buy happiness. In the United States, while income per person has risen roughly threefold since 1960, happiness has not. This is known as the Easterlin Paradox. But this finding would not have surprised Aristotle, who understood that happiness was driven by such factors as relationships, meaning, and purpose. Modern happiness studies affirm this ancient instinct. Brooks himself points to a study showing that happiness derives from "intrinsic goals" rather than "extrinsic goals" like wealth or fame. What tends to matter most for happiness is the quality of social relations and the ability to make a social contribution. And indeed, the World Happiness Report demonstrates that happier countries enjoy stronger social support, higher levels of trust and generosity, and a greater ability for people to realize their capabilities. Even more, it shows that social factors have a larger effect on happiness than financial factors. Jeffrey Sachs has shown that happiness is declining in the United States not because of income, but because of a mounting social crisis—rising inequality, isolation, mistrust, and corruption. And it is precisely the libertarian policies favored by Brooks that drive this crisis. Sachs also demonstrates that "economic freedom"—measured by a Heritage Foundation index capturing such elements as property rights, small government size, low levels of regulation, and open markets—does not produce happiness. In short, libertarianism is at odds with human nature. The church has known this all along.

One of Brooks's main arguments is that income inequality is nothing to worry about, and that the real focus should be on equality of opportunity. The gist

of his argument is that, while income inequality in the United States might be high and rising, this is not true for consumption inequality. This is a peculiar argument. It is of course important to look at consumption. But a quick perusal of the recent evidence shows that consumption inequality has tracked income inequality quite closely over the past few decades. Brooks is simply wrong. And anyway, the focus on income can easily be defended on the grounds that income provides advantages that go beyond consumption.

What Brooks is trying to say is that because poor people have access to goods that their predecessors did not, such as air-conditioning and color television, we should not worry too much about inequality. But this appeal to historical comparison is actually ahistorical; it overlooks the fact that poverty and wealth are always contextual. What matters is not that even many poor Americans now own devices and enjoy conveniences that would have astonished the richest robber baron of a century ago. What matter are the material conditions that allow one to participate and flourish across the various dimensions of life in a specific time and place.

Brooks also downplays distributional concerns by appealing to the familiar fact that, while inequality within countries has risen sharply in recent decades, inequality between countries has fallen: the gap between the rich and poor countries is shrinking. This development reflects the remarkable achievement of countries like China, which transformed itself from an impoverished village-based nation to a middle-income economy within a matter of decades. Nevertheless, the nation state remains the locus for deliberation on the common good and the most effective political instrument for distributive justice. We therefore have good reason to be concerned about growing inequality within our borders, since that is the inequality over which we have some control as citizens. Why should the rise of a large middle class in the developing world, welcome as it is, justify an increasingly uneven and inequitable division of wealth in the developed world?

The real problem with inequality is that it severs the sense of shared purpose necessary for the realization of the common good. This is an insight that goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, who feared that when the gap between rich and poor grows too large, the rich become more attached to their wealth than to their civic obligations. The founding fathers of the United States fretted about oligarchy for similar reasons. This older insight seems to have been largely forgotten, but it is highly relevant today—because inequality has returned to Gilded Age levels, and because market ideology has detached the creation of wealth from social duty.

Today, as during the Gilded Age, inequality is being driven by technology and globalization. But in both periods, it quickly developed a momentum of its own. This self-perpetuation is a key theme of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which argues that inequality is endemic to capitalism, since the financial return on wealth tends to exceed the rate of economic growth over long periods of time. Branko Milanovic, another leading expert in global inequality, has reached similar conclusions with somewhat different reasoning. Milanovic argues that while inequality in each period has been spurred by underlying economic factors, it soon ushers in policies that favor the rich—cuts for upper income and capital taxes, curbs on the bargaining power of labor, greater tolerance for monopoly power, and looser restraints on financial innovation. From this perspective, market ideology might be nothing more than a mask for plutocracy.

The evidence suggests that in a highly unequal society the sense of an all-encompassing common good tends to evaporate. As the rich grow increasingly segregated from the rest of society and more convinced that wealth is always and only the product of individual effort, their circles of fraternity and ethical horizons tend to narrow. Wealthy individuals and powerful corporations increasingly put narrow financial gain over the broader common good. And since an unequal distribution of income translates too easily into unequal access

to political power, the rich have the ability to get what they want and keep what they have. In this retreat from the common good, it is the poor who get trampled.

The relationship between economic growth and inequality is complicated. Neoclassical economics has traditionally insisted on a trade-off between equity and efficiency; it has warned that efforts to reduce inequality can undermine incentives to work, save, and invest. But in present circumstances, this doesn't seem to be the case. The IMF has shown that income inequality is associated with less sustained economic growth and that growth trickles up from the poor and middle classes, not down from the rich.

Why might inequality hurt prosperity? There are a number of reasons. First and simplest, demand is lower in a more unequal economy. This is because the rich spend less of their income and save more. Second, inequality goes hand in hand with a decline in trust and social capital, which in turn harms productivity and increases the likelihood of social strife and political instability. Third, because the common good is undermined, inequality reduces the likelihood of growth-enhancing investments in areas like infrastructure, education, decarbonization, and research and development. Fourth, inequality tends to be associated with corporate rent-seeking—the tendency to extract rather than create wealth, driven by such factors as monopoly power, corporate concentration, and weak corporate governance.

There is a fifth reason that is directly relevant to Brooks's argument: inequality of income is directly tied to inequality of opportunity. This is because inequality magnifies the social advantages of the wealthy. Plutocracy rewards mediocrity and undermines meritocracy. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong empirical association between income inequality and intergenerational mobility—the famous "Great Gatsby curve"—and both are better in Europe than in the United States. The bottom line is that if Brooks truly cares about inequality of opportunity, he should also care about inequality of income and wealth.

In downplaying the detrimental effects of American inequality, Brooks draws a distinction between the United States and other highly unequal regions in the world, such as Latin America. He argues that, in these other places, prosperity depends more on power and privilege and less on the free market. He's right about that. But he fails to note that as the United States inches ever closer to Latin American levels of inequality, the corrupting effects of plutocracy become ever more embedded in our own system. It is important to point out that in Latin America, the pattern tends to be one of oligarchic dominance interspersed by disruptive populist backlashes—and both harm the common good. Given recent trends, perhaps the United States is destined to go down this path. Perhaps last year's election actually represents a terrifying regime shift. The catch, of course, is that Donald Trump is a plutocrat masquerading as a populist.

The corrosive effects of inequality extend well beyond the economic dimension. In a pioneering study titled *The Spirit Level*, social epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett showed that people in more unequal societies trust each other less, fear each other more, participate less in community life, and are more prone to violence. In the United States, Robert Putnam and others have documented a decades-long decline in social capital, civic purpose, and associational life—all in tandem with rising inequality. Wilkinson and Pickett tie fraying social relations to a litany of social ills—including poor physical and mental health, drug abuse, weak educational attainment, obesity, teenage pregnancy, and illness among poor children. The social dysfunction is also tied to the neoliberal ideology that is driving much of the inequality. This ideology stunts not only solidarity but self-worth. It sends a toxic mixed message—telling people that happiness comes from consumerism and that market outcomes reflect moral desert: those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame. Not surprisingly, the growing prevalence of this outlook has been linked to an unprecedented epidemic of stress,

loneliness, and mental illness. In the United States, the recent rise in opioid addictions and the documented decline in the life expectancy of working-class white people adds to the long list of social pathologies. Having a color television or air conditioning—to use Brooks's favorite examples of the luxuries of the poor—is a paltry consolation prize in the face of massive social collapse.

Brooks is well aware of the claims that market ideology—by emphasizing such traits as selfishness, competitiveness, and boundless acquisitiveness—can undermine virtue. Yet he has no real answer other than to say that "systems are fundamentally amoral" and that what matters is the morality of the people who participate in the system. But this view is not in accord with Catholic social teaching. In *Caritas in veritate* Pope Benedict XVI states explicitly that the economic sphere cannot be regarded as "ethically neutral": "It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner." Indeed, as the theologian David Cloutier pointed out in his own response to Brooks, it is ludicrous to conjure up a powerful economic system that depends on such vices as fear and greed, and then claim that the problem is only with the vices, not with the system itself.

The bottom line is that the toxic interplay of inequality and ideology gives rise to an economic system antithetical to solidarity. It gives rise to what Pope Francis has described as the economy of exclusion, the throwaway culture, and the globalization of indifference.

In the U.S. context, this can be demonstrated with a couple of topical examples: health care and climate change. In health care, the attempt to sabotage the Affordable Care Act is a brazen ideological assault on a form of solidarity that calls for the young and healthy to subsidize those most in need—the old, the infirm, expectant mothers. The debate has been framed by Republicans as a matter of consumer choice, not compassionate care. In direct contravention of Catholic social teaching, this ideology insists on consigning a basic human right to the whims of the market. Worse, the money saved from cuts to Medicaid and insurance subsidies is to be transferred to the rich by means of tax cuts.

The case of climate change is even more egregious. In the United States, a combination of libertarian ideology and the lust for profit lies behind the scandal of climate change denialism and the intention of the new administration to abrogate responsibility for cutting carbon emissions. This puts the planet on course for environmental disaster, and is tantamount to a direct assault on the poor of today, as well as future generations. It is one of the great moral issues of the twenty-first century and a core theme of Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*. And it is exhibit A of what harm can be done by the ideology Brooks defends in his *America* article. I have no doubt that he is sincere is his desire to improve human well-being, especially the plight of the poor. Yet the institution he directs—the American Enterprise Institute—takes money from climate-change deniers and hard-line libertarians, including the Koch Brothers. Such people pose a grave threat to the common good, and no amount of rhetoric can make their positions compatible with Catholic social teaching.

Our situation today is perilous. At a moment when we desperately need political consensus to address collective problems, such consensus seems farther out of reach than ever before. In its place, we have the false consensus of neoliberalism, which tells us that there is no alternative to the economic model Brooks celebrates. As Mark Carney—governor of the Bank of England—suggested, unchecked market fundamentalism can lead capitalism to devour its own children. Or as Pope Francis puts it, this economy kills. What we urgently need is a re-orientation of the economy toward the common good. We need policies that set markets in the kind of moral framework promoted by Catholic social teaching. This will require both personal and structural change; it will require that we spend our money differently, judge politicians differently, and run our businesses differently. In other words, it will require a genuine conversion—away from the creed preached by Arthur Brooks.

Let Them Eat TVs

REGINA MUNCH

In January 2021, *New York Times* reporter Peter S. Goodman visited a family of cattle ranchers in Shepherd, Montana. The memory of beef shortages, increased food prices, and crises at meatpacking plants due to the COVID-19 pandemic was still fresh in Americans' minds, and Goodman wanted to see one of the U.S. ranches that help keep grocery-store shelves across the country stocked.

Most small-scale ranches sell the cattle they raise to a large meatpacker like Tyson or JBS for processing and distribution. For years, this system had delivered reliable, if inadequate, income to ranchers. Most of them at least broke even. But Goodman found that in spring 2020, when the pandemic began and consumer demand for beef "had never been higher," ranchers couldn't find anyone to buy the cattle they had raised. And even though the wholesale price of beef had increased by 40 percent in 2021, the ranchers who raised the cattle were not seeing any increase in profits.

Goodman writes that these trends in the meatpacking industry reflect something wider in the American economy of the past few decades: across dozens of industries, a few companies control huge portions of the market, which gives them the ability to dictate prices, production, and distribution. In the beef industry, just four companies—Cargill, JBS, National Beef Packing, and Tyson—control 85 percent of the market. (In the 1970s, the four largest controlled only 25 percent.) In other industries—air travel, health care, technology, publishing, and many more—the numbers are similar. This kind of control does not always benefit consumers or the economy widely; in Goodman's words, the corporations are often "ending up with fatter profit margins while everyone else ends up with less."

The trend toward mergers, which leads to the consolidation of industries, began in the 1970s, when corporations and their lobbyists argued that consolidated industries were good for consumers; better economies of scale would lead to lower prices, allowing more people access to more stuff. In the wake of the pandemic, there has been more attention paid to how the consolidation of industries affects not only prices, but also wages, labor conditions, and supply chains. In the past decade, a new movement of anti-merger, antitrust, and anti-monopoly politicians and activists have sought to reverse this trend toward ever greater consolidation. They argue that, while consolidation has (sometimes) led to lower prices for consumers, it comes with a host of other, often-hidden costs worth considering.

Among its other effects, consolidation in the name of lower prices has subtly changed the way many Americans see themselves and one another; it has encouraged us to conceive of ourselves and our fellow citizens not mainly as producers, nor even as producer-consumers, but merely as consumers. What we do or make has become less important than what and how much we can buy. For decades, Americans have been drowning in *stuff*, and buying that stuff has become our primary way of engaging with strangers in public. What has this done to us, individually and as a society?

In his book *Davos Man*, Goodman describes the type of person who gives his book its title: an ultra-wealthy master of industry who uses his power to lower taxes and minimize regulations—the kind of person who's a guest of honor at the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. In the process, Davos Man racks up massive profits for himself and justifies it with promises that this arrangement is also good for everyone else. Jeff Bezos is an obvious example: someone whose business strategy involves "amassing monopoly power and applying it to crush competitors; relentlessly squeezing workers for productivity; and gaming the tax system

to avoid surrendering money to the government." Once the world's richest man, Bezos accumulated his mind-blowing fortune by wielding a massive amount of power over competitors and shrewdly manipulating the business landscape.

In doing so, Goodman writes, Bezos has delivered a business model very popular with consumers: a "miraculously efficient marketplace and distribution network." Famed for its "Customer Obsession," Amazon "bestowed once-unimaginable convenience on humanity while erasing the traditional limits of time and space, pervading the sense that virtually anything can now be purchased nearly everywhere." From the perspective of consumers, there is a strong argument for letting Amazon continue to do what it's always done. Its prices are lower than those of its competitors, and the convenience it provides to consumers is unmatched. Goodman writes that, according to Amazon, "[a]nything that yielded lower prices was to be applauded as consistent with the public interest. Amazon was a monument to the success of that formulation."

Davos Man has deployed similar arguments in other industries, with less convincing results. In *Washington Monthly*, Shannon Brownlee has described the consolidation of hospital systems by private-equity firms. Promising that consolidation would bring prices down and the quality of care up, these companies created health-care monopolies in many regions in the United States, such as the UPMC system in Pittsburgh and Northwell Health on Long Island. But these rosy predictions have not panned out. Brownlee writes, "The cost of health care keeps going up, bankrupting families and depressing wages for average workers, and a major reason for its meteoric rise is the giant hospital chains that have come to dominate the health care landscape." Goodman writes about Stephen Schwarzman, CEO of the private-equity firm Blackstone Group, which paid $6.1 billion to take over TeamHealth, one of the two largest emergency-room staffing companies in the United States. "As in everything that private equity touched, health care found itself subject to intensifying demands for profit," Goodman writes. Patients were treated more like customers who could always be squeezed for more money. Hospitals prioritized big-ticket elective surgeries rather than guaranteeing that they had adequate emergency supplies, sufficient staffing, and safety protocols, with predictably devastating consequences during the pandemic. These are obviously not good outcomes for patient-consumers, and the effects have been just as dire for many health-care workers.

All this would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. To begin with, it would likely have been prohibited by antitrust law. For the better part of a century, it was assumed by regulators and policy-makers that economic concentration leads to political concentration. In *The Economists' Hour*, Binyamin Appelbaum points out that, until recently, the government "treat[ed] size itself as un-American. A dominant company might provide the best service at the lowest price, but economic efficiency was not the goal of public policy." The goal of antitrust law—including the famed Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890—was instead to balance competing goods. Sherman was, Appelbaum writes, "a conscious effort to subordinate economic efficiency to politics. It was intended to preserve the autonomy of small business owners. More than this, it was meant to safeguard the viability of democratic government." A good regulatory landscape, of which antitrust law is just one important part, protects both the political and economic interests of ordinary citizens. It is part of the federal government's responsibility to take political and social considerations into account when deciding whether to interfere in corporations' business.

The *political* considerations in political economy fell out of favor in the 1980s, as economists popularized the idea that the sole purpose of antitrust law was to deliver economic benefits for consumers. Appelbaum writes, "[E]conomists gradually persuaded the federal judiciary—and, to a lesser extent, the Justice Department—to set aside the original goals of antitrust law

and to substitute the single objective of providing goods and services to consumers at the lowest possible price." Famously influential in this transition was Robert Bork, whose 1978 book, *The Antitrust Paradox*, "rewrote history" to claim that Sherman's actual intent had been to maximize consumer welfare. Less famous figures, like Aaron Director (Bork's professor, as well as Milton Friedman's brother-in-law), George Stigler, and Richard Posner had laid the groundwork for Bork's argument. In his 1976 book, *Antitrust Law*, Posner insisted that economic efficiency should be the sole standard of antitrust policy. "In his view," Appelbaum writes, this meant that "the government mostly should let corporations do as they pleased."

In 1968, the federal guidelines for antitrust law stipulated that the "primary role" of merger enforcement was "to preserve and promote market structures conducive to competition." But as Lina Khan, the current chairwoman of the Federal Trade Commission, has explained, new guidelines issued by the Reagan Administration in 1982 marked a "radical departure" from the demand that mergers "should not be permitted to create or enhance 'market power.'" "Today," Khan writes, "showing antitrust injury requires showing harm to consumer welfare, generally in the form of price increases and output restrictions." The result is the highly consolidated economy we have today.

So what has been the result of all these changes? How have they affected workers and compensation? The short answer is that they have made working life harder and less rewarding. They have also led to a massive shift of wealth to the very rich from almost everyone else.

Between 1980 and 2019, the share of household income going to the richest 1 percent more than doubled in the United States; meanwhile, the earnings of the bottom 90 percent barely rose. CEO pay increased by 940 percent while the average worker's pay rose by a mere 12 percent. This growing income inequality has led to growing wealth inequality: the richest 0.1 percent of American households now own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent combined—the bottom *half* own just 1.3 percent. The former secretary of labor Robert Reich thinks there's a clear connection between the trend toward corporate consolidation and worsening economic inequality. In *The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*, he writes:

> Since the 1980s, after the federal government all but abandoned antitrust enforcement, two-thirds of all American industries have become more concentrated.... All this consolidation has inflated corporate profits, suppressed worker pay, supercharged economic inequality, and stifled innovation.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that, during the same period, the economy became friendlier to consumers. As the globalization of production and trade became more common, prices for consumer goods did indeed drop. Globalization also meant that many American workers suddenly faced more competition from abroad. Even as their productivity increased due to advances in technology and automation, they put up with slow wage growth because they knew that their bosses could move their factories overseas and pay foreign workers even less.

The consumer-based economy was created by decisions at both the domestic and global levels. On the home front, the 1944 Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates made the dollar the world's currency. Ultimately, the global demand for dollars drove down the price of foreign goods, which Americans eagerly imported. But U.S. manufacturers that had to compete with foreign rivals suffered, and, as Appelbaum writes, "the American economy tilted toward consumption at the expense of production."

When Nixon finally unpegged the dollar from the price of gold in 1971—ending the Bretton Woods system and letting exchange rates float—the American consumer bonanza grew even more. Over the 1980s, the dollar soared in value, imports got cheaper, and more American factories closed. Meanwhile, Appelbaum

writes, Walmart "ended the decade as the nation's largest retailer, operating more than four times as many stores, each staffed by low-paid workers and stuffed with cheap imported goods."

Another push toward an economy built for consumers came from a new crop of economists reacting against the old Keynesian consensus. In the tradeoff between inflation and unemployment, Keynesians since the Great Depression had prioritized keeping people employed rather than raising interest rates to fight inflation. Milton Friedman, Paul Volcker, and Alan Greenspan convinced policymakers to take a different approach. "Monetarists," as they were called, believed that driving down inflation should be the overriding goal, not full employment.

The infamous Volcker shock that began in 1979 was the death knell of the Keynesian response to inflation. Millions of Americans lost their jobs, and American workers never regained their standing. The median income for a full-time male worker in 1978 was $54,392; as of 2017, the median income of the same worker was $52,146. Appelbaum notes that the nation's annual economic output tripled during that period. The "Volcker recession" of 1981–1982 was "hugely profitable" for the financial industry, whose ascendency in the following decades would permanently alter the balance of economic power in the country. "The benefits of low inflation…were concentrated in the hands of the elite," Appelbaum explains. "By punishing workers and rewarding lenders, monetary policy was contributing to the rise of economic inequality."

All of this was paired with trade policies meant to deliver low prices to Americans while doing little to protect their role as producers. In fact, lower prices were seen as a kind of compensation for job losses and stagnant wages. Writing for the *American Prospect*, David Dayen and Rakeen Mabud describe the "bargain" thus:

> In exchange for funneling all this money upward, hollowing out the industrial base, ruining competitive markets, and worsening U.S. jobs, businesses would keep consumer prices low. And low prices have a definite psychological pull. That belief in getting more for less, of perceiving that you've beat the system, was enough to keep people reasonably satisfied. If you are stuck with low wages, you depend on low prices. As long as shelves were stocked, and America's desires were covered with overseas goods, this radical reinvention of the supply chain kept us fulfilled.

An increasingly powerful Wall Street pushed "profit maximization through deregulation, mergers, offshoring, and hyperefficiency," prioritizing short-term profits over every other goal. Over time, Dayen and Mabud write, "financiers built our supply chain to enrich investors over workers, big business over small business, private pockets over the public interest."

One of the results of these new priorities was the consolidation of industries, creating in some cases oligopoly or monopoly conditions. Bork's philosophy ruled the day, not just on the political right, but among Democrats as well. Goodman explains that, while liberals had once opposed consolidation and monopoly, the promise made by economists and corporations that consolidated industry could deliver lower prices for Americans was very tempting. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton and other Democrats "embrace[d] this idea that's sold to them by the [meat]packers…[that] the way you get low-cost food is by large, efficient companies that are allowed to amass scale, continuing to consolidate the marketplace." In reality, "they can control not only the relationships with the ranchers…. They can dictate the prices that they're going to charge grocery stores, supermarket chains, and restaurants." But the spiraling food prices of the pandemic reminded us that these major companies are not public-benefit projects; when they can get away with charging more, they will.

All these conditions—a system that rewards imported consumer goods, the policies designed to

combat inflation rather than unemployment, and the goal of keeping prices low through consolidation—have conspired to change the way most ordinary Americans see themselves and each other in relation to the economy: their principal role is now that of the consumer, not the producer. Instead of secure, high-paying manufacturing jobs, working-class Americans are now more likely to work in Amazon warehouses and Walmart supercenters, where the hours are unpredictable and the work itself is relatively unfulfilling.

During the pandemic, there was a brief moment when the tide seemed to have turned in favor of worker power. Suddenly, everyone could see how valuable and necessary these "front-line workers" were, and how much more exposed to Covid. As the crisis unfolded, these workers were often able to demand more from their employers. A wave of unionization at companies like Starbucks and Amazon, supported by President Joe Biden, suggested that something had changed in the way we think about work.

Many commentators blamed the higher wages that resulted across the economy for the spike in inflation that began in 2021. But, as Timothy Noah points out in the *New Republic*, it didn't take long for this trend toward higher wages to come to an end.

> If anything was going to boost labor's share of corporate income, you'd think it would be a Covid-induced labor shortage. But it didn't. From the start of the pandemic through 2021, labor's share of corporate income actually *fell*. The same corporate executives complaining that you simply can't get good help these days are paying that help a smaller share of company revenues.

Some might argue that, especially during the pandemic, the tradeoff of less-than-rewarding work for affordable consumer goods paid off. "When it comes to buying stuff online, American workers have it made," writes Galen Herz in *Jacobin*. Many Americans relied on deliveries of necessities and diversions while they were sheltering at home, and massive companies like Amazon and Walmart met this demand more or less successfully. "But," Herz continues, "when it comes to 'mass services'—transportation, housing, education, health insurance, and childcare—American workers are getting fleeced." These "mass services" are "unavoidably collective in nature," reliant especially on public-policy decisions about taxation, investment, and access. They make up the bulk of most households' expenses. This is especially true for working-class households. The consumerist model can get you cheaper TVs, but people can't live on TVs; and what we do need in order to live comfortably and securely is often harder to obtain today than it was before the consumerist model took over.

In the past several decades, as government has increasingly shied away from directly providing the things we need (access to higher education, health care, housing, etc.) such goods and services have been left to private, for-profit companies, with the result that these goods have generally become more expensive without their quality improving. The providers of consumer goods—electronics, clothing, housewares, and other physical products—have been able to deliver on the promise of lower prices, at least to some degree. And, yes, perhaps Amazon will keep things cheap if they're allowed to dominate the market. (It should be noted, though, that Amazon has cashed in on the previous two years of inflation, sometimes raising prices simply because they have the market clout to do so.) But the same logic does not tend to deliver benefits for consumers when it comes to such things as medical care. As Herz concludes of current trends, "The consequences for working-class living standards are stark: fewer living options, higher costs, more instability, and less freedom."

Why less freedom? The question is not only economic (how many consumer options do we have, and can we afford them?) but also political. As Reich insists, "The reason to fight oligarchy is not just to obtain

a larger slice of the economic winnings; it is to make democracy function so that we can achieve all the goals we hold in common." When citizens are treated only as consumers, with minimal say in how the services they rely on are delivered, they lose their political agency.

Today, there is a tacit understanding that policy-making is the proper domain of a credentialed elite: the experts (mostly economists and lawyers) who advise our elected leaders. Ordinary citizens, lacking the relevant expertise, are expected to defer to this elite, which is thought to be entitled to its power and influence because of its superior intelligence and training. In the *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel denounces this understanding of desert as corrosive to democracy. Of course, taking talents and skills into account when deciding who should perform which jobs is generally a good idea. But making a good life or full democratic participation contingent on meeting a narrow definition of merit is not. As economic inequality has deepened in the past several decades, those with wealth or credentials have come to see their fellow citizens as unworthy, or at least *less* worthy, of taking an active role in our political institutions. The result is a fracturing of society and an underclass left precarious, alienated, and angry. "The same market-driven globalization project that had left the United States without access to the domestic production of surgical masks and medications had deprived a great many working people of well-paying jobs and social esteem," Sandel writes. Politically, the loss of social esteem is every bit as important as the lack of well-paying jobs. Again, this was not the result of inevitable economic developments, but the natural consequence of a collection of policy choices that benefited one group of Americans over another.

The last socially acceptable kind of prejudice, Sandel claims, is against the uneducated. Our meritocracy teaches us that it's the most talented and determined who get to go to college, and that the educated are those who have the most to contribute to society. The ones who don't make it to college didn't have what it takes. And so the division between those who have a college degree and those who don't is one of the starkest in our society. It has become as much a political division as an economic one.

As good jobs become scarce, areas of the country from which both companies and government have disinvested become poorer. As Reich writes:

> Corporation after corporation began laying off workers in the 1980s without easing the often difficult transitions that followed—without providing workers with severance payments, job retraining, job search assistance, job counseling, help in selling homes the values of which predictably dropped when businesses left town, or help moving to where jobs existed; without aiding affected communities that were being jettisoned, or seeking to attract other businesses to make up for their losses of jobs and tax revenue, or finding other uses for the abandoned infrastructure of schools, roads, pipes, and real estate; without giving workers and communities sufficient advance notice so they could plan their own transitions.

The result was "a systemic change that would scar the nation for decades." One of the largest predictors of support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election was whether one had a college degree. This fact became an obsession of elites. Perhaps they realized the effects of their last acceptable prejudice but were unwilling to take responsibility for the conditions their policies had created. "Since 2016," Sandel writes,

> pundits and scholars have debated the source of populist discontent. Is it about job loss and stagnant wages or cultural displacement? But this distinction is too sharply drawn. Work is both economic and cultural. It is a way of making a living and also a source of social recognition and esteem.

Sandel argues that what the United States lacks is not merely distributive justice—the equitable use of resources to provide for everyone's material needs—but "contributive justice," or the ability to contribute to the common good. For decades, Democrats have offered working- and middle-class citizens measures of distributive justice but devoted insufficient attention to contributive justice. People want "an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that go with producing what others need and value," Sandel writes. Being without a job—or being without a job one considers meaningful—is not only a material deprivation; it can also deprive one of a sense of purpose, a sense of being useful to others. The result is often loneliness and despair, and the destructive behaviors to which these give rise: alcoholism, opioid overdose, or suicide.

In his seminal work *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch lamented that our obsession with the bottom line has corrupted all kinds of working life.

> At every level of American society, it was becoming harder and harder for people to find work that self-respecting men and women could throw themselves into with enthusiasm. The degradation of work represented the most fundamental sense in which institutions no longer commanded public confidence.

Instead, we equate social progress with the "indefinite expansion of the demand for consumer goods" and assume that "our future is predetermined by the continuing development of large-scale production, colossal technologies, and political centralization."

In his analysis of previous generations of economic-justice movements, Lasch is critical of both Left and Right for assuming that unbridled industrialization and the endless division of wage labor were necessary ingredients of all economic progress. Mainstream labor movements like the Progressives or the Fabian socialists proposed only a redistribution of income, not a reconsideration of work. Today's liberal and progressive movements also tend to emphasize fiscal redistribution rather than fostering economic conditions that wouldn't funnel so much income to the top in the first place. Their focus is mainly on the purchasing power of consumers, not the security and dignity of labor.

How, then, do we regain a sense of what Sandel calls contributive justice? Most basically, we have to reprioritize understanding ourselves and each other as producers as well as consumers—as people with a need to contribute, to meet each other's needs, and to be part of a community. "It is in our role as producers, not consumers, that we contribute to the common good and win recognition for doing so," Sandel writes. Without this role, we are liable to become passive, surrendering to processes and decisions over which we have no control.

To this end, economic policy should be focused not only on prices but on creating jobs that provide adequate compensation and involve meaningful activity. One of the best ways for policymakers to do this is to reverse the trend toward consolidation that has come to mark so many industries. The ultimate goal is to "democratize the economy," as Brian Callici and Sandeep Vaheesan write for *Dissent*. That requires "not only more choices over employment options among different employers, but also more voice and power within the businesses that employ them." Businesses such as Amazon make decisions that can restructure a whole local economy, mustering an army of workers and delivery people—or, just as quickly, hanging them out to dry. Callici and Vaheesan argue that "employment should confer a kind of economic citizenship in the firm. Current law, however, structures business firms as authoritarian regimes with all power concentrated in the hands of boards and managers serving financial interests." Cooperatives and employee-owned companies do exist, but they are far less common in the United States than in some other developed countries. Other policies could give workers more stability and better compensation—for example, a higher minimum wage, caps on the ratio of CEO-to-av-

erage-worker compensation, and better enforcement of the right of workers to unionize.

Keeping people in their jobs needs to be as important to central bankers as fighting inflation. For decades, employers have been used to a "slack" labor market, one in which workers are inexpensive and always available. A tight labor market, as we saw briefly during the pandemic, creates very different conditions: higher wages, better bargaining conditions, and more investment in training and employee benefits.

Ultimately, reprioritizing work as a social good puts the "political" back in "political economy." Rather than allowing purely commercial indices to dictate our economic policies—whatever maximizes a company's profit, whatever keeps prices low for consumers—we can deliberate together how we want to produce and distribute the goods we need. Our role as producers is not incidental for these deliberations; it is a fundamental component of our individual lives and of our communities.

Another way of putting this is in Sandel's terms: the market can't solve problems or answer questions that belong in the realm of democratic deliberation. Deciding what will contribute to the common good "cannot be achieved through economic activity alone.... It requires deliberating with our fellow citizens about how to bring about a just and good society, one that cultivates civic virtue and enables us to reason together about the purposes worthy of our political community." Insisting, as corporations, lobbyists, and many of our politicians do, that the best policy is always whatever is best for consumers is a simplification that preempts true democratic deliberation. It reduces all social goods to one: the efficient satisfaction of appetites. It treats citizens as units, not agents.

Consumption, it should be acknowledged, is an important aspect of our lives. We need some basic things for survival, of course, but we also enjoy goods that rise above the realm of mere necessity: books, art, nice clothing. One can easily become too moralistic about the pleasures we get from the things we buy. The problem with consumption arises when the acquisition of more and more material goods—including goods that aren't actually very good for us—is the only remaining activity that allows us a sense of purpose.

Of course, we can also risk over-romanticizing production. We must avoid the Promethean valorization of "creators"—the visionaries who rise above the riff-raff to produce, innovate, and crush the competition. This was the warped anthropology of Ayn Rand, for instance, and it usually entails a toxic elitism. Historically, fascists have been obsessed with the productive capacity of the population—to preserve the glory of the state, to win the never-ending war, to root out bourgeois weakness or halt a supposed decline of masculinity. This, too, can have the effect of reducing citizens to units.

We tend to think of the postwar decades as an era that struck a happy balance between production and consumption. Work paid well enough for most workers to afford to buy the goods they produced, and leaders of corporations saw themselves as benevolent lords providing for the good of their workers as well as that of society. As Eugene McCarraher writes in *The Enchantments of Mammon*, "All parties agreed that steady economic growth, distributed with unprecedented equity, would mitigate class conflict; all disagreements would be conducted within the parameters of Keynesian economics, a welfare state, and anti-Communism." The material abundance the American economy produced would guarantee social stability, even if much of the (decently compensated) work was tedious and unfulfilling.

But there's a reason that the counterculture of the 1960s emerged. A hollowness exists at the heart of this vision, one that confuses human flourishing with mere satiety. It is yet another substitute for politics—perhaps this vision was better than the neoliberalism that replaced it, but it was nonetheless incomplete. McCarraher argues that the seeds of our own era were

already present in the postwar complacency: as factors like increased automation and the globalization of trade tempted us to sharpen our focus on consumption rather than production, we had few political or philosophical reasons to resist. The American Dream had long since been reduced to an idyll of material abundance. What we did mattered less than what we had.

What we need now is a reassessment of our priorities, a shift in the way we think about work, consumption, and justice itself. For decades, justice movements have argued that the price tag on all kinds of products doesn't accurately capture the true cost of making them. Environmentalists point out that the price tags on Ikea furniture, for example, don't take into account the ecological cost of clear-cutting. Workers-rights advocates insist that cheap groceries don't reflect the poor wages and workplace hazards that farmworkers bear. If good work, and the protection of workers, were a priority, we would have to make fair prices, not low ones, our policy goal. It's likely that, if we did this, the ordinary consumer wouldn't be able to buy so much so cheaply. (As a model of political economy, producerism is probably not compatible with the business model of Amazon.) But more important than mere convenience and sheer accumulation is having the things we need to lead good lives, as well as the ability to do meaningful, satisfying work that contributes to our communities. Today, too many of us have neither.

Taking on Union-Busting

MATT MAZEWSKI

When evaluating the job performance of government officials, I like to apply one of the few sports analogies I understand and consider their "wins above replacement," a sabermetric term that refers to a baseball player's record relative to that of the average player with whom their team could replace them. Given who the president is at any particular time, for instance, there may be only so much one can reasonably expect of those selected for certain federal posts; if the bar is low enough, just having key positions filled by those who are not either ludicrously corrupt or actively working against the public interest might be cause for celebration. But when expectations are high, even competent bureaucrats may seem like a disappointment if they fail to truly shine.

With that in mind, one of the star recruits of the Biden administration has been a woman whose name is probably unknown to most Americans, and who rarely, if ever, makes the evening news. Jennifer Abruzzo has served since July 2021 as the general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the independent agency that administers federal statutes around collective bargaining and unfair labor practices. In her role as the nation's chief enforcer of labor law, Abruzzo has displayed remarkable creativity in how she has used the power of her office to help ordinary people secure more power in their own places of work.

The NLRB's general counsel under Donald Trump, Peter Robb, had been on a more or less explicit mission to kneecap the agency, and so virtually anyone that Biden could have selected would have been an improvement. But considering that many of the president's appointees—especially to agencies charged with overseeing public health, immigration, or foreign affairs—have ended up pursuing policies not very different from those of their predecessors, Abruzzo's tenacious efforts to advance a pro-worker agenda have been especially impressive. One of her most significant accomplishments to date came this summer, when the Board issued a ruling that some observers have hailed as its most consequential in decades.

The United States has seen a resurgence of union activity in recent years, with major strikes rocking industries from auto manufacturing to health care to TV and film production in the past few months alone. Yet despite the renewed attention paid to organized labor, the fraction of workers who belong to a union remains at or near its historic nadir: according to the U.S. government's Current Population Survey, as of 2022, just 6 percent of private-sector workers are union members—down from around 25 percent half a century ago, and the lowest figure on record. At the same time, polling has shown that a much larger share of nonunion workers say they would join a union if they could, and that this number has only been growing over time. This naturally raises the question: Why aren't they?

Part of the explanation has to do with the fact that starting a union in your workplace is not easy, and often becomes even more difficult once your boss catches wind of what you're up to. Although employers are legally prohibited from interfering with workers' right to join a union—by, say, threatening to fire them if they do—the penalties for such interference are, in practice, very weak. As MIT economist Anna Stansbury has argued, it should come as no surprise that this sort of illegal behavior is pervasive when there are so rarely any meaningful consequences.

Thanks to Abruzzo and her fellow Biden appointees at the NLRB, however, that might be changing in a big way. In a decision known as *Cemex Construction Materials Pacific, LLC*, handed down in late August, the Board made a major revision to the rules around how private-sector unions are formed. Typically, unions come into being in one of two ways. With *voluntary*

recognition, a majority of employees in a particular workplace announce their desire to unionize by presenting signed "authorization cards" to their employer, who then willingly agrees to begin contract negotiations. With a *certification election*, a secret-ballot vote is overseen by officials from the NLRB, usually at the request of would-be union members whose employer has declined to recognize them voluntarily.

The case that led to this decision originated in 2018 when a group of truck drivers employed by Cemex, a Mexican distributor of cement and ready-mix concrete, began an effort to organize a union affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Although close to 60 percent of eligible workers had signed authorization cards, the company refused to recognize the union and the workers moved to petition for an election. This is not at all uncommon: businesses that want to remain "union-free" will often withhold voluntary recognition in order to buy time to dissuade their workers from opting for union representation.

And Cemex really made the most of its extra time. In the run-up to the NLRB vote in early 2019, the corporation spent well over a million dollars on high-priced lawyers and "union avoidance" consultants, and engaged in aggressive tactics to undermine the organizing drive. It fired one driver for her pro-union stance, threatened to fire or freeze the wages of others, and even hired private security guards to intimidate workers outside the polling place on the day of the balloting. As one Teamsters official put it, "The way Cemex conducted itself when its workers sought to organize five years ago was on par with the way elections are undertaken in a tin-pot dictatorship."

In the end, the drivers voted not to unionize by a narrow margin of 179–166. Their organizing committee filed a complaint with the NLRB alleging that the company's coercive behavior had created an environment of fear that tainted the outcome of the election. Ordinarily, even when the Board finds that an employer's bad behavior may have tipped a vote against a union, the prescribed remedy is to order a do-over, with a warning against trying the same thing again. In rare cases, though, the NLRB has concluded that an employer's conduct was so egregious that a fair rerun of the election would have been effectively impossible. In such instances, the Board has ordered the employer to recognize and bargain with the union without a do-over, provided there was an earlier showing of majority support in the form of signed authorization cards.

In the *Cemex* case, the Board agreed that management's antics had likely not only affected the result but also made a fair do-over unworkable, and ordered the company to bargain with the union. But it also established a wholly new algorithm for handling such cases in the future: from now on, if an employer is presented with a request for voluntary recognition from a majority of its workers but insists on an election, there will be no do-overs. If the employer is found to have intimidated workers ahead of a vote, the Board will immediately compel it to bargain.

According to Harvard Law School student Tascha Shahriari-Parsa, this new arrangement has the potential to "significantly dissuade flagrant transgressions of our labor laws—possibly more than any Board decision of the last half-century." The *American Prospect*'s Harold Meyerson wrote that, when taken together with other recent Board actions, the *Cemex* ruling "makes union organizing possible again." Georgetown Law professor Brishen Rogers thinks that it "may be the most important NLRB decision in a generation."

Precisely for those reasons, organized capital has denounced the *Cemex* decision as a radical departure from long-settled precedent, even though the truth is closer to the opposite: the new framework the ruling sets up harks back to an older labor-law principle known as the "*Joy Silk* doctrine," which was embraced by the NLRB from the Truman Administration until the mid-1970s. Under *Joy Silk*, employers could not refuse to voluntarily recognize a union simply because they didn't feel like it; they could only insist on an election if they had a "good-

faith doubt" that a majority of their workforce really wanted one. Labor lawyer Brandon Magner has maintained that the principle's abandonment "explains much of the chronic under-enforcement of federal labor law over the last half-century" and is a crucial reason why employers are now more brazen in resisting unions than they were in the past.

After taking office, Abruzzo made clear that she intended to ask the Board to revive the *Joy Silk* doctrine whenever it had an opportunity to do so. Although the *Cemex* decision does not fully resurrect that earlier precedent, it moves in that direction by effectively declaring that employer intimidation or coercion is evidence of *bad-faith doubt* that warrants calling off an election. Thanks to Abruzzo's knowledge of labor-law history—and willingness to support an idea that even most scholars in the field had come to assume was a dead letter—a more effective system of deterrence against union-busting is beginning to take shape.

Some have expressed doubt that the *Cemex* precedent and other recent actions of the current Board can survive the inevitable onslaught of employer lawsuits. But as Georgetown's Rogers has also emphasized, "labor and the state can use [*Cemex*] to change power alignments right now through organizing—which in turn would *help* it survive review." Labor-law reforms are no substitute for the difficult task of convincing workers to engage in collective action in their workplaces. But history suggests that tearing down obstacles to organizing can spark a virtuous cycle: as unions become stronger, they can apply more pressure on elected officials to enact other policies that empower workers. *Cemex* could create an opening that makes it possible to pass other helpful measures, like monetary fines for unfair labor practices of the sort included in the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act or Build Back Better Act, both of which passed the House of Representatives in 2021 only to die in the Senate.

No matter how capable, civil servants or politicians will not be able to revitalize the labor movement in America on their own. The contributions of committed individuals outside government—academics, journalists, lawyers, organizers, and workers themselves—are needed, too. To return to the baseball analogy, one star player will not be enough: only a real team effort will win the game.

Embodiment

CONVERSATION
STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

Embodiment

The relationship between our bodies, our minds, and who we "are" has long fascinated philosophers, from Cartesian dualism to modern "brain-in-a-vat" thought experiments. Some Christian theology frames our flesh as evil or sinful and our immaterial souls good, while secular posthumanists dream of a future free from the pesky constraints of a physical body. But the body doesn't need to be thought of as something separate from the self. Indeed, our embodiment—imperfect, expressive, messy, frail as it may be—gives meaning to our lives. We should embrace it rather than seek to escape it.

In "The Risk of Birth," theologian Gilbert Meilaender argues that the arc of a human life, through its development and eventual decline, provides a narrative structure that endless youth or a consciousness uploaded to the cloud would eliminate. If we can appreciate the importance of our physical bodies, he explains, "we can then come to appreciate the way an embodied life is also an embedded life—embedded in a series of relationships that involve both coming into being and going out of being." This requires us to accept our physical limitations, even to honor them.

That is no easy task. We dread the consequences of those limitations. Particularly in the United States (with our "frantic bias toward youthfulness"), we fear, above all, losing control. What if we become physically dependent on others? What if our loved ones have to sacrifice some of their own freedom to care for us? But, as Rand Richards Cooper writes in "Burdens & Blessings," our fear and shame at that prospect can reveal "a latent revulsion" for those who have already lost control and can narrow our conception of each other's dignity.

Embracing both our limitations and embodiment need not be miserable. If we take seriously the human body's capacity for strength and physical perseverance, the results are deeply rewarding. Considering her experiences as a rock climber in "Climbing & Falling," Isabella Simon describes how practicing difficult movements, even when she risks failure and disappointment, can clarify the integrated nature of body and self—and can create a genuine self-love separate from popular conceptions of beauty or desirability. That work, difficult, sweaty, and frustrating as it can be, is also a way of recognizing and honoring the body's reflection of the divine image.

After all, as David Albertson reminds us in "Fraternity in Finitude," "Our mortal bodies already bear a relation to God, even before we search beyond the world." Engaging with the work of Christian philosopher Emmanuel Falque, Albertson emphasizes the centrality of the body to Catholicism. Christ "saves us first with his body, not his words." He occupied a fallible body; it is not the fallibility of the body that is sinful, but our refusal to accept its condition. We are not caged souls seeking a prison break; we are selves experiencing the physical world with all its despair and joy.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

Gilbert Meilaender, "The Risk of Birth," November 2023:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/preserving-hope-humanity

Rand Richards Cooper, "Burdens & Blessings," December 18, 2015:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/burdens-blesings

Isabella Simon, "Climbing & Falling," March 2021:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/climbing-falling

David Albertson, "Fraternity in Finitude," January 2024:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/fraternity-finitude

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should we try to develop technologies that allow us to transcend our "natural" limits? What is the line between productive and positive advancements (vision-correcting surgeries, hip replacements, chemotherapy) and harmful or ethically questionable ones? What is the real danger, if any, of a transhumanist approach to the body?

2. How can we reconcile the reasonable desire to minimize our own suffering with Albertson's claim that "our love is measured through the welcome we give to suffering"? Is suffering virtuous? If so, to what extent and in what ways?

3. Cooper contends that we have "embraced a vision of love in which obligation has no place, and not imposing on the ones you love is considered the greatest gift." Should we seek to minimize dependency on our loved ones as we age or struggle with disability or injury? If you have ever been a caretaker, has that experience changed how you approach the question? If you have ever required a caretaker as an adult, how did you navigate the physical imposition?

4. Do you think of your body as "good"? What does that mean? Is your answer shaped by the perceptions of others or by a belief in being created in God's image? Have you noticed the temptation to, in Simon's words, "mistrust [our bodies], making assumptions about what they can or should do"? If so, how have you responded? Does religion have a role in causing or curing this mistrust?

5. Are the standards of judgment you apply to your own body different from those you would apply to another's body? How does a fear of losing control of our bodies seep into the way we talk or think about other bodies—in particular, those of the elderly, the marginalized, the disabled, the infirm, or anyone rejected by society as undesirable or repulsive?

6. What do we lose when we trade the physical world for a digital one, or when we separate the mind from the body? How have your embodied experiences shaped your sense of self, your philosophy, or your faith?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

"Better Off Without Us?," November 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/posthumanism-symposium-transhumanism-antihumanism

Cathleen Kaveny, "The Fullness of Time," March 2020
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/fullness-time

Roberto J. De La Noval, "What We've Been Missing," April 2021
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-weve-been-missing

Eve Tushnet, "Velvet & Pus," July/August 2021
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/velvet-pus

Rand Richards Cooper, "The Dignity of Helplessness," October 25, 1996
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dignity-helplessness

John Schwenkler, "Picture Imperfect," September 2022
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/picture-imperfect

The Risk of Birth

GILBERT MEILAENDER

Adam Kirsch's examination of "Anthropocene antihumanism" and "transhumanism"—two quite different ways of revolting against humanity and welcoming the end of human life as we know it—is readable, informative, and bracing. Nonetheless, it ends not with a bang but a whimper, suggesting that even a true humanism might have to welcome, albeit sorrowfully, a world in which human beings no longer exist. Perhaps, however, before endorsing a prescription of species-suicide we should at least consider what insight Christian faith might offer.

Kirsch's concluding chapter is titled "The Sphere of Spiritual Warfare." And he is, in fact, depicting what might almost be called competing *religious* views. According to antihumanists, our species has exploited and despoiled the natural world, and our "disappearance would be a net benefit to life on earth." The best thing we could do is to stop giving birth to others like us. Transhumanists, with their technocratic confidence in scientific progress, might at first seem to be the polar opposite of antihumanists. But not really. Their goal is to get beyond the limits of the body, tied as it is to organic life, and then experience a "virtual" existence, having uploaded to a computer the pattern of information that is one's brain. If there is a sense in which this approach hopes for a continued existence, it is no longer what we normally think of as human existence. Hence, Kirsch writes, beginning from very different premises, "transhumanists and antihumanists could converge on an ideal of extinction, with rapacious humanity making way for wiser virtual beings who tread more lightly on the planet."

From the perspective of either of these two seemingly different yet converging views, what is the real problem with the continued existence of our species? In a word: birth. The transhumanists have a vision of virtual human nature that makes it unnecessary. The antihumanists hope for a human destiny that will exclude it. In her poem "The Risk of Birth," Madeleine L'Engle captures the despair of what Kirsch calls Anthropocene antihumanism and the gnostic dream hidden beneath the desire of transhumanism to slip the bonds that tie us to organic, bodily life.

> This is no time for a child to be born,
> With the earth betrayed by war & hate
> And a comet slashing the sky to warn
> That time runs out & the sun burns late.

What, if anything, can we set over against such a reluctance to give birth, to commit ourselves not just to the continuation of "intelligent life," but to the survival of *Homo sapiens* in particular?

Perhaps an old-fashioned humanism of the sort Kirsch seems to favor? Will it do? He characterizes such humanism as a belief that "the individual human being is the *source* of all value" (my italics). And, of course, that little word "source" suggests that this approach, too, has a religious flavor. But Kirsch himself is not optimistic that such a humanistic commitment can or should survive in the coming spiritual warfare; for it seems to encourage us to set "an arbitrary limit to progress." And doing that, he claims, is "the classic posture of the reactionary" and is "fundamentally incompatible with the principles humanists claim to honor—freedom, reason, moral autonomy."

I myself do not think Kirsch's understanding of humanism is adequate. To see why, we can ask whether setting limits to progress is always best characterized as arbitrary or reactionary. Kirsch's example of such an arbitrary drawing of a line in the sand is Leon Kass's well-known appeal to "the wisdom of repugnance" in opposition to proposals for human cloning. Such wisdom, going beyond what reason alone can demonstrate, may,

Kass suggested, help us to honor moral limits that are integral to our humanity.

We should not dismiss this suggestion too quickly, for it invites us to wonder whether human reason alone will suffice as a source of either moral insight or a full understanding of human nature. "The head rules the belly through the chest," C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Abolition of Man*. That is to say, rational insight and argument alone cannot enable us to live well. There is a humility here that draws back from thinking of ourselves as the source of all value. On the contrary, a rightly ordered life depends on trained emotions that control and shape our desires, enabling us to love what is good and experience repugnance at what is evil. Aristotle said that only one who has been brought up well—one in whom those trained emotions have been inculcated—can usefully study ethics. We might add that only such a person can usefully consider what limits are essential to our humanity. Without good moral habits, reason may simply lead us astray. And the first such habit that we need is a commitment to the goodness of human, bodily life—a sense of its centrality to both human nature and destiny.

Of course, this way of thinking is not obvious to everyone. "It is a loathsome and cruel trick," Mike Treder once wrote, "that nature takes such an exquisitely wondrous creation as the human brain and imprisons it inside the weak, inefficient, fragile, and short-lived structure that is the human body." But we inculcate a contrary belief—a belief in the goodness of human, bodily life—every time we hear and take to heart the Johannine teaching, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Since God has a human body, we need not run from our own bodies and their limits in the way transhumanists recommend. Moreover, in the resurrected Jesus we are given an intimation of the destiny of those bodies. They have a future. Christians honor human life not because it is the *source* of all value, but because it has been honored by God and drawn into the divine life.

Given that sort of commitment to human life as embodied life, we should think of the body as integral to who we are, not just as a prosthesis used by our real, disembodied self. We can then come to appreciate the way an embodied life is also an embedded life—embedded in a series of relationships that involve both coming into being and going out of being. Having a beginning, middle, and end, our lives take a narrative shape that is more than just a succession of bare, momentary presents. After all, even without the transhumanist dream of a virtual existence, a desire to overcome that "short-lived structure that is the human body" can threaten to make nonsense of life. The philosopher Larry Temkin once made this point in an arresting thought experiment: "As things stand today, the physical, psychological, and experiential gap between a grandmother at sixty, a mother at thirty-five, and a daughter at nine is enormous. But the physical, psychological, and experiential gaps between a grandmother at 10,060, a mother at 10,035, and a daughter at 10,009 would be practically inconsequential." Embodied life has a shape. Memory and anticipation—as well as the virtue of hope—are built into lives that take the risk of birth. Appreciating and embracing those risks and limits lies at the heart of a true humanism. We can and should set it over against the transhumanist desire to overcome human nature rather than honor it.

If transhumanists move us to think in particular about human nature, antihumanists direct our attention more to human destiny. As transhumanists hope for a "human" future that is bodiless and virtual, in a quite different way antihumanists would prefer that human bodies simply cease to exist. They do not want to take the risk of birth. We should always remind ourselves that rejecting such antihumanism does not mean supposing that earthly human life as we know it will or should endure forever. "Anyone who intends or perceives the world as a Christian," Paul Ramsey once wrote, knows that "one day there will be none like us to come after us.... The Revelation of St. John is still in the Bible."

Written into our nature is the hint of a greater destiny than continued earthly existence as we now experience it. In the words of a character in Wallace Stegner's novel *The Spectator Bird*, "[a] reasonably endowed, reasonably well-intentioned man can walk through the world's great kitchen from end to end and arrive at the back door hungry." That eros, that hunger buried deeply in our nature, is the hint of a destiny that has been given shape and form in the Word made flesh, who was given into death and raised to a new, transfigured life.

Hence, Christian hope for a human future is not simply anti-antihumanism. It is not hope for more of the same, more of the life that is ours here and now. Nor is it hope for a future produced by the ingenuity of those who imagine themselves the source of all value. It is hope for a qualitatively different life—though, of course, what our freedom and reason cannot produce, we also cannot fully imagine. In that respect we will always be a little like the small boy C. S. Lewis described who, "on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure, should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time." What a new creation and a resurrected life will be like we cannot fully fathom, but what we need in the face of such mystery is clear. We need commitment to what is truly human, even as the Logos of the universe, the Word who was with God from the beginning, committed himself to us and took our human nature into his person. The whole of L'Engle's "The Risk of Birth" beautifully expresses such commitment.

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor & truth were trampled to scorn—
Yet here did the Savior make His home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

The virtues that we need are, as always, three. Faith that sees gift and grace at the heart of human life and that seeks, in turn, to be faithful to the gift we have been given. Hope that looks to the future, grateful for God's embrace of our human life, and generates others like ourselves. Love that does not cling to the gift of life, keeping it for ourselves, but gladly hands it on, taking the risk of birth.

Burdens & Blessings

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

I spent a weekend in Vermont with three old college friends, an annual fall ritual. We're in our mid-fifties, and talk centered on our children, who range in age from my nine-year-old to the twenty-five-year-old of one of my pals. We also talked about our parents. One of us has both still living; one lost both years ago; the other two have one parent remaining. All the surviving parents are facing major health challenges.

I drove back with the friend whose parents are still living, both in their early nineties and failing. He discussed the widely varying roles taken on by himself and his two siblings in assisting them, roles dictated by differences in resources, location, and willingness to help—especially with his mother, whom he described as "difficult."

Our talk turned to our own planning for the future. For my friend, goal number one for his old age is to avoid saddling his children with responsibilities that might mar their ability to live their own lives. It troubles him to think that costly care in his or his wife's later years could burn up the legacy they hoped to pass on to their children. "I'm going to spend the last ten years of my career earning as much as I can as a buffer against that," he said. As for the possibility that they might one day care for him personally, that isn't even on the table.

My friend is a political progressive who frequently laments capitalism's creative destruction and its dissolving effect on traditional bonds of family and community. His family is tight-knit; he loves his own two children desperately and could hardly feel closer to them. Yet he can't imagine his children ever caring for him. "I really can't stand the thought of someday being a burden to them," he said.

I sympathized; what middle-aged person, looking forward, doesn't feel that? At the same time, the prospect of children taking in and caring for their ailing and elderly parents is one of those primordial arrangements that arise from—and complete—the life cycle, in the process constituting a foundation stone of human society. And yet it doesn't happen much anymore, at least not in this country. U.S. census data show that only a little more than 1 percent of all households with children have a grandparent living at home (though the number almost triples if you include households in which one or both parents are absent and the grandparent is actually raising the grandchildren).

When I lived in Europe I found that people there wondered about the prevalence of old-age homes in the United States. Of course they existed in Europe, but typically they were seen as the last option, not as a convenient means for grown children to preserve their options. My German friends tended to see, in Americans' reluctance to take grandparents into the home, something lacking in our character or in the depth or sturdiness of our family bonds. An abiding recollection of my time there is the image of an elderly person, usually a woman, sitting at an upper window, elbow propped on the windowsill, looking out over the street. Of course, such arrangements aren't easy. I recall my German girlfriend's stories of her grandmother's years spent in their house. She had her own room and bathroom, but took all meals together with the family, and coexistence created strains and abrasions. It was difficult, it was aggravating, it was rewarding, it was funny and sweet—it was life, in other words, in a family.

Well, the structures of society change over time, and as a general rule, people will do what they have to do, and not do what they can afford not to. And this includes older people themselves these days, many of whom can afford to live in comfortable independence. Not all can, to be sure. A friend of my daughter's lives with her mother and grandmother. The father recently left the family, and

finances are tight. When I stop by, I often see them in the family room, the kids watching TV, Mom knitting, Grandma sitting alongside, breathing with an oxygen mask. Everyone is living together and coping together, helping out in what is clearly a straitened situation with limited options.

What is the consequence of the expanded options that so many Americans possess? For my part, I would have welcomed caring directly for my mother, and taking her into our home, at the end of her life. She was ill, and I regularly drove across the state to help her. A decade later I still acutely recall the poignant intimacies these errands of help created during her last months: taking her to chemo treatments; showing her how to use the finger-pricking gizmo to measure her blood sugar; shopping or cooking a meal for her; helping her dress; empathizing when she bit down on something one day and a tooth fell out; emptying and cleaning the portable potty she kept, toward the end, at her bedside. I would have gratefully done all of this in our own house, with my wife and then-infant daughter. My mother wouldn't have wanted me to; she was fiercely proud and independent, and would have quaked at the thought of being, yes, a burden. Thus she had purchased long-term care insurance—though, in the end, she died before it kicked in.

But caring for her wouldn't have been a burden at all—not in the deep sense. Rather, it would have been a joyous reciprocation of love and care for the person who loved me and cared for me so well for so many years. I would have as gladly cared for her on her way out of the world as she did for me on my way in. Thus it has been, after all, down the ages—till now, anyway. But we have embraced a vision of love in which obligation has no place, and not imposing on the ones you love is considered the greatest gift.

The dignity of the elderly and the importance of loving care for persons nearing the end of life are fundamental concepts in Catholic teaching. So too is the emphasis placed on a family's mutually loving and rewarding relationship with its elderly members. "[T]he wisdom and experience of the elderly are recognized as a unique source of enrichment for the family," John Paul II observed in *Evangelium vitae* (1995):

> Their presence in the family...is of fundamental importance in creating a climate of mutual interaction and enriching communication between the different age-groups. It is therefore important to preserve, or to re-establish where it has been lost, a sort of "covenant" between generations. In this way parents, in their later years, can receive from their children the acceptance and solidarity which they themselves gave to their children when they brought them into the world. This is required by obedience to the divine commandment to honor one's father and mother (cf. Ex 20:12; Lev 19:3). But there is more. The elderly are not only to be considered the object of our concern, closeness and service. They themselves have a valuable contribution to make to the Gospel of life. Thanks to the rich treasury of experiences they have acquired through the years, the elderly can and must be sources of wisdom and witnesses of hope and love.

How well are we equipping ourselves to receive this wisdom and this witness, or even to recognize it? In the Christian tradition, old age, mixing equal parts of wisdom and need, was understood both as an inevitable phase of the human condition and as a significant part of an individual's spiritual path toward God. Modern life, however, with its medicalized conception of the human being—and American life in particular, with its frantic bias toward youthfulness—has tended to subvert this conception. Our contemporary attitude toward the elderly infirm reveals our deep fear of dependency. To fetishize the idea of control over one's own fate is to betray a terror of losing it—and a latent revulsion at those who already have.

And so old age, once "characterized by dignity and surrounded with reverence" (in John Paul's words), has sunk in our regard from veneration to dread, an attitude that facilitates what Pope Francis has called society's "abandonment of the elderly." Francis has often found occasion to weigh in against this trend—as he did in September 2014, when he addressed forty thousand elderly persons and their grandchildren gathered in St. Peter's Square for a celebration of long life. In his homily Francis praised the institution of the family for fostering "the encounter between young and old, an encounter full of joy, full of faith, and full of hope." Noting that grandparents often assume the duties of prayer and of transmitting the faith down generations, he added that they also typically "convey the experience of life, the story of a family, the story of a community or even of a people." A family rich in such stories is rich indeed. "Blessed are those families who have grandparents nearby!" Francis enthused.

I wish more *were* nearby. These days we understand, forlornly, that necessity is the mother of grandmother living with your family—and of all that that arrangement used to bring. Family is a burden. It is also a blessing. We seem to find it increasingly hard to perceive that sometimes the blessing is in the burden.

Climbing & Falling

ISABELLA SIMON

"Falling!"

For a moment, there is air beneath me; then I'm caught by the rope tied to my harness. My belayer, holding the other end, calls up, "Good fall!"

My heart pounds, but my fear of falling is already fading. A new challenge awaits—a different kind of fear. I have to try again until I successfully climb beyond the place where I fell, past each bolt to the anchors at the top of the route. My goal was to climb the whole route in one try. Having literally fallen short of that, my task narrows to trying to finish without stopping to rest or falling again. It's a daunting prospect. *What if I don't even make it as far as I did last time, let alone to the top?*

My fingertips are raw, the top layers of skin scraped away by the roughness of the rock. I'm frustrated by my hands, unable to hold on despite their calluses; by my feet, for slipping; by the way I positioned my body and threw myself off balance. Below, my belayer asks what went wrong. I explain the foot slip, the mistake in my movement. I'm grateful to her, not just for catching me—my life is literally in her hands every time I fall—but also for her encouragement before, during, and after every attempt. She trusts that I'm strong enough to finish this route; I trust that she is paying attention, that she will feed out the right amount of slack in the rope and be patient even through a long belay.

This trust in another person is one antidote to my fear. But I also have to trust my own body. By virtue of good genes and good luck, I'm fully able-bodied, but I've still spent much of my life thinking of my body as a stranger or an adversary. As an unathletic and uncoordinated kid, I conceived of my "self" as separate from my physical abilities—I was brainy, not brawny, my identity divorced from my inevitable failure in any community soccer league or high school gym class. And it's true that all our bodies sometimes fail us. Our feet slip. Our balance is imperfect. We fight against exhaustion and lethargy; against cravings for foods we know we should avoid; against signs of age and use: wrinkles, stretch marks, scars. In this interminable period of virtual communication and constant enclosure in our homes, we might consider being embodied a liability—another night of restless snacking, another video call facing our unflattering on-screen reflections, tripping over roommates, family members, or pets in too-small apartments. To keep each other safe from viral infection, we sacrifice physical reminders of love. In their absence, our bodies can feel like dead weights we drag around. Even when we don't hate them, we often mistrust them, making assumptions about what they can or should do, wishing they were different.

Sitting in my harness, I reach for the rock again, pushing past frustration, disappointment, and burning forearms toward hope. This is the only way to continue the route: recognizing that my body is not a faulty machine, but something capable, trustworthy, and fundamentally *good*. I am created in the image of a loving God, and he is reflected in the myriad conscious and unconscious physical processes that keep me healthy and strong; in my capacity to grow and develop not just intellectually or spiritually, but physically. Messages of self-love or body positivity tend to focus on teaching us to view our bodies with generosity, but our bodies also deserve our trust in their incredible potential for strength and perseverance. As a climber, having faith in my own body isn't a matter of convincing myself it is perfect or desirable just the way it is. It's a matter of not preemptively accepting failure.

Sometimes when I'm in the middle of a climbing route, I press the pads of my fingers against a ripple in the rock and hesitate, paralyzed by the impossibility of

pulling myself up using something so small. Even when the holds are large, if the route is long and overhung, leaving my legs shaking with exhaustion, I want to stop trying. I want to reach the nearest bolt and rest there, so I don't have to risk a fall. I want to give up on my body, to write it off, to enclose it in the limits of what is comfortable. I want to try easier climbs instead, to avoid the out-of-control, split-second moment of losing my grip.

But when I trust myself enough to pull up on that ripple, my shoulders engage and I lift myself higher. The thing that felt impossible is already ingrained in my body by hours of practice. Climbing the long route, my desperate fingers find the next hold. I pull against the textured corner of the cliff and stand, keeping my hips close to the wall. In these moments, nervous and exhausted, I love my imperfect body fiercely. Another move, my right foot searching for purchase on the rock. The metal anchors glint above me. I trust that my foot won't slip, and I rock my weight onto it.

And if my body fails me again, as it sometimes does, and I feel that moment of nothingness beneath me? I trust my friends, waiting below, to catch me.

Fraternity in Finitude

DAVID ALBERTSON

He leapt to the podium with youthful energy and gripped the lectern with both hands. Pausing for a moment to collect his thoughts, he pushed the hair out of his face and smiled broadly at the audience that had assembled for the opening lecture of a conference at Notre Dame. "It is a privilege to be with all of you at this university," I recall him saying. "And if I may say so, it is my privilege to be Catholic, here with you."

The philosopher and theologian Emmanuel Falque is one of the leading Christian thinkers in the world today, but he is not as well known to American readers as he should be. Jean-Luc Marion, his famous teacher and occasional sparring partner, has attained international renown after being inducted into the Académie Française and awarded the Ratzinger Prize in theology by Pope Francis. Marion's books on love and politics are often reviewed in these pages. But Falque's star is rising. Over the past decade, his works have been translated into English and he has held visiting posts at American universities. Falque is dean of the faculty of philosophy at the Institut Catholique de Paris, the country's Catholic university. In 2015, he founded the International Network in Philosophy of Religion (INPR). Following Marion's retirement from the Sorbonne and the University of Chicago, Falque's network has become the hub for young intellectuals inspired by the so-called "theological turn" in French philosophy, from Michel Henry and Jean-Yves Lacoste to Jean-Louis Chrétien and Marion himself. Falque was formed by this tradition, and over the past two decades his writings have refreshed and reframed it. Now he is working to shape its future.

Falque deserves to be better known for several reasons: the verve of his writing, the quality of his insights, and the range of his erudition. In *God, Flesh, and the Other* (2008) he demonstrates command of the full library of patristic and medieval theologians. Yet he has also written extensively on the twists and turns of the French phenomenological tradition over the past century in *The Loving Struggle* (2014). More valuable still is the timeliness and freshness of his approach, a winning humility and openness that speaks beyond the usual choir of philosophers (and Christians). If Marion was the Catholic philosopher of the Benedict XVI papacy, it would be fair to see Falque as the one most akin to Pope Francis, and not only because of the book he cowrote with Laure Solignac, *François Philosophe* (2017).

The boundary between philosophy and theology in Jean-Luc Marion's works is strictly policed and remains controversial. Falque relishes crossing back and forth from one domain to the other, a shuttle diplomacy that enriches both sides of the boundary by calling each of them into question. "The more we theologize, the better we philosophize," he writes in *Crossing the Rubicon* (2016). Marion established that the methods of modern phenomenology can accommodate the extraordinary events of Christian revelation. By contrast, Falque seeks to begin not from above but from below—from the ordinary skeins of embodied life not yet saturated by divine glory. Not from impossibly far away, but from impossibly near. Falque's 1998 Sorbonne thesis opted for the Seraphic Doctor over Aquinas, a book later published as *Saint Bonaventure and the Entrance of God into Theology*, and his oeuvre has retained that Franciscan signature ever since.

At the same time, Falque resists a merely confessional theology, since the culture within which we operate today is not already Christian. In *Crossing the Rubicon*, Falque warns that "confessing belief" first requires an "ordinary belief" in the world and in others, or what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls "animal faith." "No one believes in God if he does not first believe in the world," Falque observes. He is "before all else a philoso-

pher," even if he remains open to theological experience, for the philosopher is the one "who respects and begins with the human per se."

In *By Way of Obstacles* (2016), Falque explains the genesis of his project twenty years earlier. In 1996, he and others convened an interdisciplinary working group for young Catholic intellectuals. Although theological questions had come to the fore in phenomenological circles, Catholic theology itself was impaired by too many divisions and too little dialogue. Falque was convinced that Catholic traditions had something fresh to say if the relationship between philosophy and theology—between culture and faith—could be reconceived.

Falque's subsequent works have carried out this program. His books reach out sympathetically to the religiously indifferent "nones" whom all of us count among friends. In the 1940s, Henri de Lubac analyzed the "drama of atheistic humanism" in Marx, Comte, and Nietzsche. Falque is more interested in the *non*-dramatic atheism that reigns in our time—less defiant non-belief than the weary agnostic shrug that Nietzsche called nihilism. Some are "for" or "against" God, but most simply live "without" God, which is something different. Falque likes to quote Michel Foucault: "Modern man is possible only as a figuration of finitude."

Falque asks what Christians might now say that could actually matter to their post-Christian contemporaries in the academy or the arts who find this strange religion useless or passé. But his strategy is precisely the opposite of the histrionic lament one hears from many educated Catholics today; there is not a wisp of nostalgia in his approach. As Falque puts it, the true theological challenge is not to destroy Nietzschean atheism, but to learn from it. We must seek a "grammar in common"—a phrase he borrows from John Paul II. "The Christian, more receptive to difference, will be precisely transformed in his true capacity to differ."

Falque begins from the standpoint of our common bodily experience, the weak flesh that we share with our unbelieving sisters and brothers, all our illnesses, noisy leaks, and despair, *nudus cum nudo Christo*. As much as Falque has learned from Protestants like Karl Barth and Paul Ricœur, he insists that a "Catholic hermeneutic" cannot remain at the level of texts and ideas. A Catholic method must be embodied, almost materialist—not a hermeneutic of text but a "hermeneutic of body and voice." Christ, he reminds us, saves us first with his body, not his words.

In the sweltering summer of 2022, I attended the annual meeting of Falque's network in Paris. Marion and Falque squared off for an hour, but most of the panels were packed with twenty-somethings. When it came time for Falque to read his paper, he put down his notes to emphasize a point, raising a professorial finger in the air. "The non-Christian is other than me as Christian, but I am not better than him," he said. "Other, not better." Like Pope Francis, Falque seems most comfortable on the margins, and in academic circles this means accepting the growing marginalization of Christianity itself. But Falque meets the unbelieving on their own territory. He is after "the exposition of a credible Christianity" that is not simply a "Christianity for believers." In philosophical terms, this means listening patiently to Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, or Gilles Deleuze, who all condemn Christianity for forgetting the body and domesticating death. As Augustine worked with Platonism and Aquinas with Aristotelianism, "today, it is the horizon of finitude for Heidegger, which still waits to be investigated and transformed."

Falque urges Christians to renew their solidarity with unbelieving contemporaries through our shared bodily plight. He mines the depths of human anxiety in the face of death, starting with the groans at Gethsemane. He asks what it means to be born into the world, a first time or a second time; one's birth, he notes, is even less knowable than one's death. Falque's best-known books are his trilogy on Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Holy Thursday, his *Triduum philosophique*. There he writes, "Only by posing questions about the impossible overcoming of our nature can we open up and force ourselves

to live anew our irreducible finitude." The fraternity that we find in finitude passes from birth to death, and then from death to birth again.

Falque wrote the trilogy's first volume, *The Guide to Gethsemane* (1999), after two close friends died in one terrible year. He starts from a single verse, Mark 14:33. In Gethsemane, Jesus was absolutely gripped by fear of death in the garden. More than mere regret at leaving his students behind, Jesus was overwhelmed with a very personal "alarm" or "terror" (*thambos* in Greek). This is the shock of panic one feels in the face of raw vulnerability when retreat is impossible and violence is imminent. In the words of Charles Péguy: "The Christ once feared to die." Jesus recoils at his end and despairs when help never comes. He has no choice but to navigate the ordeal, Falque says, "without resignation or certitude or heroism."

At Gethsemane, Jesus enters the full meaninglessness, the Nothing, that intense pain brings. He arrives at the non-sense of human life oriented to death. Language ends, and the body cries out on its own, for only flesh can express anxiety in its full radicality, trembling and sweating mutely. Here, Falque quotes the great Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: "Sobbing…announces death. To die is to return to this state of irresponsibility, to be the infantile shaking of sobbing." Like a woman giving birth, Jesus does not rise above his death but abandons himself to its inevitable unfolding. He comes to "envisage his death successively as a way of living his life and no longer as the end of life." He accepts his death absolutely, and he gives his consent to the Father to let him die. He never seeks to overcome his death through tranquility or virility, but allows the Father to overcome it for him. In a perfect "nonmastery of the self," Jesus gives up managing his death in favor of a "childlike and positive irresponsibility." In this weakness, we see that he is a Son of the Father.

The Resurrection should liberate us from anxiety about our sin, but it does not spare us from anxiety about death. Jesus himself passed through that alarm and in doing so transformed it into abandonment in God. According to Falque, Jesus dies for me and with me, but not in my place. I must still work through my own particular death. But Jesus' passage through death transforms my death into a way of proceeding through the life I have left. My death becomes a "place of reception of an *elsewhere* or *other* of my life"—the other of the Father, the otherness of God's love. Our love is measured through the welcome we give to suffering, not because this purifies us from sin, but because it allows the "imprint of the other" upon us. I should not flee my suffering or strive to overcome it heroically. When I undergo my pain, even as I recoil from it, resist it, and enter into its absurdity, I can allow my flesh to end and be given away in perfect passivity. I can receive myself anew as one being given away, and this, says Falque, is a kind of birth.

Everything rests on this distinction: sin is not finitude itself—our aging bodies, maladies, ignorance—but rather the refusal to accept that condition of finitude and the limits it gives us. Panic before death and depression at the meaninglessness of suffering are not in themselves sinful, for Jesus felt them viscerally and without reprieve. "Not only nonbelievers fall into despair," Falque observes. Rather, sin is about treating finitude as a prison that needs to be escaped. The desire to deny our finitude, even by pious means, is the sin of sins, the resentful lust for perfection that the serpent exploited in Eden: *You will be like God*. In the Incarnation, Jesus teaches us to remain in finitude without illusions. Falque writes:

> The agony of Christ…confirms a weakness chosen by God that will be forever and forever manifest, and that we bear—we also—even in our own flesh…. The full extremity of his power consists precisely in complying with an originary powerlessness…that remains always woven into human finitude…to which God himself, right to the end and without ever disposing of it, consents.

In anxiety and tears, Jesus embodies the humanity that we all experience. His suffering takes places on a plane of immanence shared as much by philosophers as by theologians. Hence Falque's maxim: "Nothing speaks or is spoken without passing through humankind, in that God was made man." When Jesus falls to the ground in the garden, he completes his commitment to dwell on earth. Falque wonders if Christians today can live up to this achievement, or whether Christianity has become an instrument to separate our anxious lives from those of our neighbors, who share the same flesh. The hard lesson of Gethsemane is that I must relinquish myself to *this* world, accept my finitude, without seeking a subtle escape belonging only to Christians. Rather, I find transcendence only in the face of the other who shares finitude with me. Paradoxically, by abandoning oneself to the loss of selfhood in death, one can "break open the circle of one's own isolation."

Falque's strategy to start again from Gethsemane is a brilliant one. For the experience of divine abandonment in the garden matches the contemporary philosophical experience of facing life without God. In the face of the Father's silence, Jesus kneels here with the unbelieving. By the same token, Falque stresses that sharing in Christ's anxiety never turns into a Christian "privilege" that releases one from the anguish of finitude. Rather than trying to hustle philosophers back into the fold, Falque asks Christians to remain in the garden for a while longer, accompanying Jesus and their unbelieving neighbors. For Jesus teaches us "what it is to be one of humankind, when the human being, in human flesh, suffers from no longer understanding God."

If the terrors of finitude that Jesus experienced in Gethsemane were not sinful, then Christianity does not need to rush to convert birth into rebirth, eros into agape, earth into heaven, time into eternity. Our mortal bodies already bear a relation to God, even before we search beyond the world. The basic facts of natural humanity—our ever-past birth, ever-present sexuality, and ever-future death—are the coordinates we share with our unbelieving contemporaries. Yet they are also the beating heart of the Resurrection, Eucharist, and Cross. This is the productive struggle between Nietzscheanism and Christianity. Philosophy teaches theology to remain in finitude in an "impassable immanence." But as it does so, philosophy discovers within that immanence new dimensions that it could never find on its own.

Nietzsche announced the death of God and prophesied the advent of a posthuman animal, the Übermensch who embraces the eternal return of the same. Falque recognizes this for what it is: a parody of the Resurrection, indeed a self-resurrection. Is Nietzsche right that Christians view the body only as something to be overcome, something never to be affirmed? Or does the Christian idea of resurrection dignify our embodied existence?

The second volume in Falque's trilogy is *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection* (2004). What can Jesus' resurrection mean for us today? Like Nicodemus, we find it hard to imagine what rebirth would look like. Modern Christians are reluctant to say too much, but Falque finds our reticence unwarranted. We need to ask not *what* really happened, but *how* it happens. For if the Resurrection is real, it would "change everything." In truth, it has *already* changed everything. The Resurrection "modifies us from the start" by placing within us a longing for the infinite.

The Resurrection signals the "cracking and opening up of immanence and temporality," the "transfiguration" of our being in time. The Resurrection is not "*another* world nor an event *in* the world" but a "transformation *of* the world." In this way, the finitude that Falque maps in *Guide to Gethsemane* remains the field in which we encounter the Resurrection. "We have no other experience of God but human experience," so we must find the "courage to loiter" with our contemporaries within the "blocked horizon" of immanence. In fact, it is the Resurrection that allows us to understand this common experience, since the finite creation we know has already been transformed. We have only to pass from the static

finitude of death to the dynamic finitude of rebirth, but these are a "*single finitude*." By the same token, Falque adds, "there is no finitude of unbelievers and atheists on the one hand and of believers and the elect on the other."

The opening up of finitude comes from God, not humankind. It happens first within the Trinity. In the death of the Son, Falque argues, the Father is transformed. Through the flesh of the Son, the Father undergoes the rough grain of human finitude, as he sees and touches through Jesus' eyes and hands. Falque quotes Hans Jonas on Auschwitz: "God receives an experience from the world." But as the Father endures the Son's death, the Spirit transforms death into a possibility of life. That metamorphosis works its way into every cavity of the body and every instant of time. Everything in our world, from the joy of birth to the pain of suffering, is now "implanted" in God. "Nothing happens to mankind that did not first happen to God, except sin," for sin is precisely the misguided effort to escape from the world. True Christianity promises the "common construction of a bodily world for human beings with God."

Falque offers two ways to think about the resurrection of the body. The first begins with Husserl's distinction between the "organic body" (*Körper*) and the "body of lived experience" or "flesh" (*Leib*). My flesh is my body in time, or the way I appropriate my physical body. According to Falque, the Resurrection names both the vanishing of Jesus' body and the manifestation of Jesus' flesh, his way of being. In the Incarnation, God becomes a material body; in the Resurrection he becomes the "expressivity of his flesh." The strangeness of his appearances to his disciples makes this clear. In the tomb, there is only clothing, no body. In the garden, Mary cannot touch him, and when Thomas does, Jesus still has wounds. Yet Jesus still feeds his disciples, still gives himself to their gaze, still calls them by name, still teaches and consoles them, as he always had. "When the body withdraws and the flesh becomes manifest, it is then that he shows himself," Falque writes.

The second way to think about the resurrection of the body has to do with time. The Resurrection of Jesus is not just another episode in which one man is given life again. It "makes time," as Falque puts it, by opening a new mode of temporality. The "joy of the eternal" can be discovered in every moment of time. Falque's extended account of Christian joy seems to echo Francis's *Evangelii gaudium*. The joy of God is neither ecstasy nor entertainment, both of which promise a way beyond finitude. No, the joy of God is absolute reception of each moment as something delivered from God to me, in pure receptivity within time. This childlike dependence is the experience of being given into the stream of time—in other words, the experience of being born, or born again. The birth of joy is the joy of birth.

I have only scratched the surface of Falque's thought. I have not even touched on the third volume of the philosophical Triduum, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb* (2011), which unfolds a new theory of the Eucharist: "The Eucharist assumes our animality and saves us from bestiality." In fact, Falque has orchestrated three different cycles of works, and promises a fourth. In the first trilogy, already discussed, phenomenology improves theology and theology improves phenomenology. A second trilogy on method theorizes this connection: *Crossing the Rubicon*; *The Loving Struggle*; and *By Way of Obstacles*. A third trilogy comprises Falque's explorations of patristic and medieval sources: *Saint Bonaventure and the Entrance of God into Theology*; *God, the Flesh, and the Other*; and most recently *The Book of Experience* (2017) on twelfth-century monastic theology, from Bernard of Clairvaux to Richard of St. Victor. The fourth cycle will mirror the first in a passage through three days: on Holy Saturday; on the First Day of creation; and on the Last Day of the end of time. Falque has also written a short book on Freud, *Nothing to It* (2018), and another with his spouse, Sabine Fos-Falque, an accomplished psychoanalyst and author in her own right.

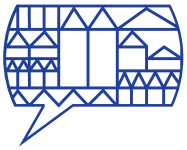
It is exciting to consider where Falque's thinking might go next. He has already confronted two of the thinkers Paul Ricoeur called "masters of suspicion," Nietzsche and Freud. Will Falque also take up Marx? Will he explore the female medieval mystics alongside the male monastic authors? Julian, Angela, Hildegard, and Mechthild all wrote on embodiment with at least as much sophistication as Tertullian and Bernard. The French phenomenological tradition has strangely neglected these visionaries, to its detriment. Will Falque's interests in eros and birth lead him further into Mariology or a theology of the womb? One might have expected that organ to be more conspicuous in a phenomenology of birth. Will Falque return to Thomas Aquinas to define the method of finitude? Will his remarkable essays on Nicholas of Cusa grow into a volume on philosophy in the Renaissance?

It is a curious fact that the history of philosophy is ordered by duets of thinkers. Time and time again, their proximate contradictions bear witness to an epochal line that has been crossed: Aquinas/Bonaventure, Luther/Calvin, Descartes/Spinoza, Cusanus/Bruno, Kant/Hegel, Husserl/Heidegger, even Balthasar/Rahner. Falque's nearness to Marion, even as he positions himself as an alternative, is another example of the same dynamic. Just in the moment that he contradicts, expands, or exceeds it, Falque underscores Marion's achievement.

Together they offer an auspicious prospect, one that isn't legible within Marion's works alone: a rethinking of the Christian legacy, beginning from *ressourcement* in the first half of the last century and passing through the postmodern turn of the second half. This project continues the theological renegotiation of modernity undertaken by Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Wojtyła, but now in a parlance that engages secular contemporaries who are more at home with Foucault and Derrida. "One can't emphasize sufficiently how much our understanding of the Christian mystery can turn out to be better or differently deployed by those who do not share it—surprising though it may seem," writes Falque in *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*. "Probably this is one aspect of its vocation of catholicity."

Like Marion, Falque likes to think with paintings. When my wife and I visited Paris, he insisted we see *Jacob Wrestling with an Angel* in the Church of Saint-Sulpice down the street from his university. The image had inspired his favorite metaphor for the productive tension between belief and unbelief: *le combat amoureux*. Like Jacob and the angel, belief and unbelief should not let go until they bless each other. The virtue required for such intimate fraternity is not strength, but patience.

The Ethics of Health Care



CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

The Ethics of Health Care

What makes a healthy person? Of course, we know we must drink the right amount of water, tolerate vegetables, and take thousands of steps a day to fulfill the empirical metrics of a healthy lifestyle. But plain biometrics offer little insight into the spiritual and social dimensions of our wellness. To consider those, we must move beyond the question of individual practices to contemplate how hospitals, governments, and churches can facilitate the well-being of the entire person.

Arguing on the *Commonweal Podcast* for an updated model of hospital organization, Dr. Ricardo Nuila insists that single-payer health care is a plausible solution for the millions of uninsured Americans facing exorbitant health-care costs. Through personal anecdotes and political analysis, Nuila recounts how for-profit health-insurance companies are transforming patients into customers. He examines this phenomenon in both the at-large system and the more intimate relationship between physician and patient. He worries that "algorithmania"—doctors streamlining care through predetermined treatment plans for symptom inputs—almost certainly means people are being misdiagnosed and mistreated.

Nuila's concerns that empathy and attention are becoming less central to medicine are not unfounded. In Paul Lauritzen's article "End-of-Life Dreams," he suggests that tech-driven health care flattens the experience of life and death. While Lauritzen learns about the effects of end-of-life dreams, uncovering their cause is vexing. The spiritual dimensions of health are often dismissed because they are not easily studied and require physicians to admit that technology cannot explain everything about the human condition. However, by recognizing the full scope of humanity, including its mysteries, Lauritzen suggests doctors may be better equipped to meet their patients' medical needs.

Health-care woes extend beyond the perimeters of a physician's office. In "Preventable Deaths," Dr. Jessica Gregg criticizes how addicts are shamed, rather than treated, for their illness. From inaccessible treatment-center locations to humiliating procedures, addicts realize it is "much, much easier in this country to find a fentanyl dealer than to find a way through the multiple, unconscionable barriers limiting access to [methadone and buprenorphine]." Far from accepting addiction as an unavoidable social ill, Gregg suggests a treatment method aligned with Nuila's claim that there is more to health than data inputs and outputs. In addition to hard data, medicine must prioritize human dignity, which entails providing both physical and emotional care for people.

Providing this care is complicated, and religious efforts to do so have not always succeeded. Take the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (ERDs), the much-debated regulations for Catholic hospitals and doctors. Catholic hospitals serve as public goods, and they "employ more than half a million

people and see one out of every six patients," many of whom are not themselves Catholic. Bernard Prusak's "All a Matter of Perspective?," a review of Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler's *Pope Francis and the Transformation of Health Care Ethics*, acknowledges where ERDs have fallen short. Unable to weigh lesser evils, ERDs often complicate ethical dilemmas, especially in situations like abortion where the life of the mother is at stake. In prioritizing tradition over discernment, they can infringe on the dignity of doctors and patients. However, Prusak concludes that while scholars may fairly criticize ERDs, they also fail to outline a way forward that would guarantee full dignity for patients.

There is no easy solution to health-care issues. But even small changes can help transform hospitals from intimidating and costly places to genuine care centers for the sick.

ARTICLES FOR DISCUSSION:

The Commonweal Podcast, "How Hospitals Could Be," May 2023
https://commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/how-hospitals-could-be

Paul Lauritzen, "Final Visions," April 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/end-life-dreams

Jessica Gregg, "Preventable Deaths," October 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/opioid-treatment-addiction-gregg-oxycodone-buprenorphine

Bernard G. Prusak, "All a Matter of Perspective?," February 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/health-care-philosophy-theology-salzman-lawler-catholic-prusak

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on your own experience in medical spaces as a patient, medical professional, or visitor. How do individuals uphold the dignity of others in the room? What does it look like to treat someone as a patient rather than a customer?

2. Lauritzen traces his journey from fixating on the outcome of his wife's dream to accepting dreams as indicators of something more sentimental. He writes: "Learning about the therapeutic power of pre-death dreams has not answered my original question about how such dreams can predict death, but knowing that such dreams provide comfort to the dying is itself comforting." What are situations where it is more

helpful to provide comfort than solutions? How might we incorporate comfort into medicine, which we often view as a more technical field? How, if at all, have you tried to analyze aspects of death?

3. Gregg identifies social factors, rather than personal failings, as catalysts for opioid addiction. But many people blame "lifestyle choices" for certain health problems: addiction, obesity, smoking-related diseases, etc. How do these cultural attitudes affect the care that patients receive? Do they threaten patients' dignity? How has stigmatizing this kind of illness affected health-care policy? Is destigmatizing these health problems a step in the right or wrong direction?

4. The central tension in U.S. health care is between corporations and people. While Nuila argues that single-payer health care is possible, it is far from possible in our current political climate. In the meantime, are there policies that would improve access and quality of care for individuals? How do we advocate for even small changes to the state of our health care?

5. Employees at Catholic hospitals who may disagree with Church teachings on abortion, transgender care, and other procedures are in a precarious position, balancing their employers' directives against their consciences. How can ERDs provide meaningful guidance while leaving room for moral discernment?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Paul Lauritzen and Mathew A. Crawford, "One Year to Mourn," July/August 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/one-year-mourn

The Editors, "Patients Over Profits," October 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/aca-health-care-medicare-big-pharma-biden-editorial

Jacqui Oesterblad, "Conscience and Catholic Health Care," June 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/conscience-and-catholic-health-care

John F. Tuohey, "A Fatal Conflict," January 28, 2011
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/fatal-conflict

How Hospitals Could Be

THE COMMONWEAL PODCAST

Is single-payer health care really feasible in America? For one Texas physician, the answer is an unqualified 'yes.'

On this episode, *Commonweal* associate editor Regina Munch speaks with Ricardo Nuila, an internist at Houston's Ben Taub hospital and author of the new book *The People's Hospital: Hope and Peril in American Medicine*.

LISTEN

Hear the full interview with Ricardo Nuila on Episode 105 of the Commonweal Podcast.
commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/how-hospitals-could-be

Preventable Deaths

JESSICA GREGG

I am a physician who specializes in the treatment of addiction and my patients are dying. Among them, a sweet legally blind kid with thick glasses, barely in his twenties, who used heroin and then fentanyl. He needed treatment with methadone, but federal regulations intentionally limit access to that lifesaving medication. So, he died instead. Another patient: a sixty-year-old woman hooked on pain pills. I started her on a medication called buprenorphine that has an excellent track record of treating opioid addiction. She stopped using drugs and moved to rural Oregon to reunite with her children. But near her new home, there was only one doctor who would agree to continue her prescription, and when he retired, she lost access to the medication. She started using again. And then she died.

Yes, my patients chose to take the drugs that eventually killed them, but before they died, they also tried to take evidence-based medications that could help them stop. Unfortunately, they discovered it is much, much easier in this country to find a fentanyl dealer than to find a way through the multiple, unconscionable barriers limiting access to these essential medications.

Methadone and buprenorphine are opioids themselves. Unlike other opioids, however, methadone and buprenorphine save lives. They decrease cravings, decrease use, and decrease deaths. Methadone is what is known as a "full agonist" at the opioid receptor, which means it sits on the receptor and activates it fully, just like morphine, oxycodone, or fentanyl. The difference with methadone is that it builds up slowly and sticks around, so there are no rapid highs and few deep dives into withdrawal. At the right dose, it activates the receptor just enough to remove cravings and stem withdrawal, helping patients focus on other, valued parts of their lives.

Buprenorphine is a "partial agonist," meaning it occupies the opioid receptors but only partially activates them, decreasing cravings and withdrawal without an accompanying high. Because it is a partial agonist, it is very difficult for anyone to overdose on buprenorphine. It doesn't have the potency necessary for complete respiratory depression. Also, because it binds the receptors tightly, it keeps other opioids from binding on the receptor, which means that when it is in a person's system, it protects that person from overdosing on any other opioids as well.

Both are excellent medications, but methadone is stronger than buprenorphine. For users of fentanyl, it is sometimes the only medication strong enough to stem cravings. However, federal rules can make it near impossible for some patients to access methadone to treat their addiction. The rules stipulate that patients may only obtain methadone from an opioid treatment program (OTP), and, for the first three months of treatment, they must attend the OTP in person daily to receive their medication. They receive just one dose a day. It doesn't matter if the OTP is hundreds of miles from their home, if a job or childcare makes it impossible to pick up the medication on time, or if they have no car to get there.

Furthermore, rules stipulate that the initial dose must be no higher than thirty milligrams, which generally doesn't come close to curbing cravings. With this insufficient dose, patients often keep using opioids on top of methadone. When they test positive, they don't earn take-home doses, which means that they remain shackled to the OTP, sometimes waiting in long lines, sometimes in cold, wet parking lots, sometimes in terrible heat. It is almost as if the regulations were specifically designed to be shaming.

When buprenorphine was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2002, it was an intense relief to physicians like me to know that we could offer a treatment for opioid addiction that did not require daily attendance at an OTP. Buprenorphine could

be prescribed by a regular doctor in a regular clinic. Still, initial regulations limited who could prescribe it (only providers with a special federal waiver) and to how many patients (thirty at a time).

Faced with a tidal wave of fentanyl-related sickness and death, Congress has whittled away at the rules surrounding buprenorphine until, recently, nearly all barriers to prescribing it were removed. Unfortunately, however, most medical providers still don't prescribe the medication. It was too long considered outside the scope of regular care, and the tight prescribing limits made it seem as if the medication, and the patients who needed it, were too complicated, perhaps even dangerous. Best to avoid, too many physicians concluded.

Similarly, most pharmacies don't stock the medication, and some won't fill the prescriptions at all. Distributors also cap the quantity of buprenorphine an individual pharmacy can dispense. I am lucky. I work in a city. When Target won't dispense, we call CVS, then Rite Aid, then Costco, until we find a pharmacy that has the medication. Patients in rural areas aren't so fortunate. If the pharmacy doesn't have it, they go without. Many likely begin using again. Some of them likely die.

Last month my sister was prescribed a bottle of fifteen oxycodone pills after a minor outpatient procedure, even though she said she didn't want the drug; she didn't even need Tylenol afterwards. She could have picked up the meds, no problem, at the corner pharmacy. But had she wanted a medication to *quit* taking pills or heroin or fentanyl? If she asked for help with that, would she have found one of the minority of providers in the United States who prescribe buprenorphine and then found a pharmacy to fill the prescription? Or would she have been willing to stand in that methadone line, every morning, while her kids were at home, while she worried about making it to work on time, while she hoped no one she knew would see her?

There is widespread sentiment I have heard at least a hundred times: people who take buprenorphine or methadone are just "replacing one addiction with another."

No.

Addiction is defined as the compulsive use of drugs or alcohol in a manner that makes the user's life worse. It is use that leads you to skip your daughter's basketball game because you are sick with withdrawal. It is a weekend of oxycodone that leads to missing work on Monday, again. It is knowing you might die but injecting fentanyl anyway. When my patients stabilize on buprenorphine or methadone, they start going to the basketball games, stay employed, stop injecting, don't overdose. They don't die.

It is true that both buprenorphine and methadone can be misused or diverted and sold. I'm not arguing that the medications should be handed out willy-nilly. But they should be prescribed in the same way we prescribe other potent, lifesaving medications: with close attention to benefits and harms, with the expectation that our prescriptions will be filled, and without stigma, shaming, or life-jeopardizing restrictions.

In some minor good news, the Department of Health and Human Services is considering an update to the methadone rules, adding a drib of telehealth here and drab of dosing flexibility there. But there is no proposal for real change. Tinkering around the edges is not enough. We need to dismantle the disgraceful rules surrounding provision of methadone, incentivize buprenorphine prescriptions, and require pharmacies to stock these lifesaving medications.

Until then, if, for instance, you are a blind kid, barely twenty years old, shooting fentanyl, with no reliable means of transportation and no family around to help, you might give up on trying to get to the methadone clinic after a few weeks of missed buses, missed appointments, missed doses. You might know that you need the medication, but you also know that this is not a life you can lead.

So, in the end, you lead no life at all.

Final Visions

PAUL LAURITZEN

In April 2018, my wife of thirty-eight years died from complications of ovarian cancer. During her three-year ordeal, it seemed that every twist and turn of the disease could be predicted by a lab value or framed in terms of a statistical probability. Right up until the end. In her last days, it was not blood work or vital signs that foretold her death. It was a dream. If that sounds strange, it is because our society mostly shuns death and consequently knows little about dying.

At the time, I certainly knew little about the process of dying. Of course, I knew that the treatments Lisa was receiving were not working, but her doctors never spoke of how she would die or how close to the end she was. Only when she entered hospice were we told that she probably had weeks to live, not months. Even then, however, there was no discussion of how she would likely die or how we would know that death was very near. Thus, when she was admitted overnight to an in-patient facility to get control of symptoms we were not able to address at home, I was unprepared for the conversation I had with the hospice physician the next morning.

"Medically," Dr. D said, "Lisa is much better. Her vital signs are strong, and she is not experiencing any nausea. This is the good news. The bad news," he continued, "is that your wife called the nurses in the middle of the night to say that she saw her parents on a boat outside the window beckoning her to come. I know this may not make sense," he went on, "but we see this repeatedly in our patients. When patients report a vision like this, they almost always die within a day or two. I'm so sorry." My wife died a little more than twenty-four hours later.

I have spent a lot of time since my wife's death trying to make sense of this paradox. In the high-tech, evidence-driven world of contemporary medicine, it was a dream that led a physician to conclude that my wife was dying. How was that possible?

To try to answer that question I researched end-of-life experiences among hospice patients, but initially found little scholarly literature. I talked to friends and family about Lisa's experiences and heard plenty of anecdotes about near-death experiences but not much about end-of-life dreams. Then I discovered the work of Christopher Kerr, MD, PhD. Although the experience of pre-death dreams and visions predicting death is well known in hospice circles, Kerr is one of the only physicians in the country who has studied this phenomenon in depth. He undertook the study of end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs) because he repeatedly encountered patients whose dreams and visions were important to them and were frequently predictive of death. Yet, without research findings that validated the importance of such dreams, Kerr could not get physicians to take them seriously.

Ask hospice nurses about this phenomenon and they will likely tell you about the many, many patients for whom they have cared who were comforted by end-of-life experiences. Yet the phenomenon is not well known outside hospice circles, and even in hospices many physicians treat such experiences as forms of delirium and medicate patients when they report them.

Kerr is not surprised when physicians do not take ELDVs seriously, for he was once such a physician. He tells the story of caring for a patient early in his career. He believed the patient was not about to die and had instructed a nurse to start a course of IV fluids and antibiotics. The nurse responded skeptically about the need for fluids and antibiotics because, she said, the patient was dying. When Kerr asked her how she knew, she responded that the patient was seeing his deceased mother.

Kerr eventually decided to study the end-of-life experiences of his patients to see if he could empirically

document the role of dreams and visions in the dying. In a series of research studies conducted over the past ten years, Kerr has generated a substantial body of evidence that ELDVs are common, therapeutically important, and frequently predictive of imminent death. Yet, despite the rigor of the research, it has been an uphill battle to get clinicians to take end-of-life experiences seriously. I asked Kerry Egan, a former hospice chaplain who has also written on her experiences with dying patients, about the reception Kerr's work has received among physicians, and she was very direct: most of them remain skeptical if not dismissive. "It breaks my heart," she said, "but it is not surprising." The account in her own book, *On Living*, of the role of the hospice chaplain may explain why physicians resist Kerr's findings. The role of the chaplain is not to preach or teach; it is instead to "create a space—a sacred time and place—in which people can look at the lives they've led and try to figure out what it all means to them." End-of-life dreams, she told me, help patients do that; physicians typically do not.

Given how generally irreverent Kerr is, he would probably not use the language of sacred time and space, but Kerr knows from both his experience and his research that end-of-life dreams help the dying find meaning. He came to believe that even if physicians resisted this critical knowledge, patients would welcome it, and so he began to see his primary audience as patients and their families and not just his fellow physicians. For that reason, to get his message out, he turned from academic writing to storytelling. His first effort in this direction was a TEDx talk on the topic of whether death can be illuminating. The talk was wildly successful, and the media coverage of the talk led to a book contract for *Death Is But a Dream*. Because he is a clinician and not a writer, the publisher wanted him to work with a ghostwriter to produce a manuscript. By all accounts, the collaboration did not go well, and Kerr turned to a friend and literary scholar Carine M. Mardorossian for help. Mardorossian is a professor of English and global gender and sexuality studies at the University of Buffalo. Though she had not written creative nonfiction before collaborating with Kerr, she knew from her academic work the power of listening to the marginalized.

It was a commitment to telling Kerr's patients' stories that made the collaboration work. The previous ghostwriter who worked with Kerr wanted to highlight themes in the research and not the stories of the patients. Mardorossian understood that, like medicine, the humanities are often death-denying. Scholars write with ease about illness and its treatment, but they are not comfortable writing about death itself. She knew that in listening carefully to his patients and their experiences at the end of life, Kerr was rejecting the strict binary of life versus death. Dying, he seemed to say, was a way of living. To listen to the dying was to attend to a form of living that is frequently ignored.

When I asked Mardorossian what it was like to collaborate with Kerr, her admiration and respect for him were palpable. "Chris constantly changed anything I wrote for him in the first person from 'I' to 'we.' I had to fight for the first person, because Chris always wanted to give credit to others." This makes it seem like Mardorossian wrote and Kerr revised, but Mardorossian is clear that this was not the case. She learned as much about writing from Kerr as he did from her. "It was like he had a (narrative) chessboard in his head," Mardorossian said. "I would see the next move in the section we were working on, and Chris would see the next five moves almost immediately."

Mardorossian is particularly fond of a chapter about love in *Death Is But a Dream*. It tells the stories of some of Kerr's elderly patients whose love confounds our culture's focus on romantic love as only for the young. One of Kerr's patients, Benny, suffered from what is commonly referred to as broken-heart syndrome, or in technical terms, stress-induced takotsubo cardiomyopathy. Eighty-seven years old and in good health when his wife, Gloria, died suddenly from an infection, Benny was inconsolable and visited his wife's grave every day,

sometimes several times a day. On Valentine's Day, two months after Gloria died, Benny's daughter found her father at the cemetery in subzero weather tracing an outline of a heart in the snow around Gloria's tombstone. Benny's health declined dramatically after his wife's death, and this ill-advised trip to the cemetery accelerated the decline. Yet when he was admitted to hospice, Benny found a kind of peace, because almost immediately he began dreaming of Gloria. He could no longer visit his wife at the cemetery, but it was as if he visited her in his dreams, or so he insisted. Benny made it clear that when he dreamed, he was in his wife's presence.

Kerr's comment on this case helps explain why he is passionate about listening to the dreams and stories of his patients: there is wisdom at the end of life that is missed if one thinks dying is only about death and not also about life. "Old couples," Kerr writes, "have much to teach us about true love. Their bond requires no big declarations, loyalty tests, or dramatic endings.... They continue to feel and believe in it even when the person through whom that love originated leaves them. For elderly patients especially, their love for their other half is who they are. Jobs, ambitions, hobbies, mortgages, and plans have come and gone. What is left and what matters is the relationships they have maintained, cherished, and tended to through a lifetime of small gestures and greetings, loving glances and humorous words, shared stories and forgiven faults."

If Kerr's academic research has not gotten much traction among clinicians, the more popular presentation of his work has struck a chord. The TEDx talk has had nearly five million views. The book that followed has sold extremely well and has been translated and distributed in ten other countries. A documentary based on the book has aired nationally on more than thirty PBS-affiliated television stations.

The more I read about Kerr's work and watched videotapes of his interaction with patients, the more I wanted to meet the person himself. So I wrote to ask if we could meet via Zoom to discuss his work. During that meeting, I asked if I might come to Buffalo to interview him and some of his colleagues. Without hesitation, he agreed, and the next day sent me a list of seven colleagues who had also agreed to meet with me.

Although the stereotype of a hospice physician is that of a kindly grandfather, Kerr is sixty years old and radiates a kind of barely contained kinetic energy. In fact, knowing that he was originally from Canada, I couldn't help but wonder if he was a former hockey player. When I asked, his characteristically self-deprecating response was: "No, but I guess my face does look like it has seen some pucks." Except when he is at home on his working horse farm, you are likely to see him in an open-collar dress shirt and sport coat, with a stethoscope around his neck and his glasses pushed up on his head. But you get the sense that he wishes he could wear jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap to work. His colleagues describe him as gruff, rebellious, someone who paints outside the lines, passionate, a fierce advocate for his patients, and a person with no tolerance for injustice.

Kerr's mentor Robert Milch—a legendary figure in the history of Hospice and Palliative Care of Buffalo—used to tell the story that his father believed that a good surgeon needed three things: a sense of humility, a sense of humor, and an incision. The story might be adapted to say that a hospice physician needs three things as well: humility, humor, and a significant encounter with death. Kerr has the first two in abundance, and he traces his career trajectory to losing his father at the age of twelve.

Kerr is affable and engaging, and if you talk to one of his colleagues or friends, it won't be long before you hear a favorite Chris Kerr story. One particular story I heard seemed to provide a measure of the man. It has to do with a patient named Ann Gadanyi, a devout Catholic who was dying after a twelve-year battle with breast cancer. Gadanyi was fifty-six years old when she entered in-patient hospice care around Thanksgiving. Her daughters, Juliana (seventeen) and Emily (twenty-five), pretty much took up residence with their mother in her room at Hospice Buffalo. As Christmas approached, Ann told

Kerr that she wanted to spend Christmas Eve at home, go to Christmas Eve Mass to hear her daughter sing in the choir, and wake on Christmas morning at home.

Kerr explained that this plan would be difficult because Ann was receiving medication through IV lines to which she was tethered and without the IVs, pain and bleeding could be serious problems. However, he told her, if she had her heart set on this plan, they could probably make it happen. Kerr, who is neither Catholic nor particularly religious, concocted a plan that involved his drawing up syringes full of medications to take to church and home, accompanying Ann and her daughters to Mass, returning to their home afterward to give Ann the injections, and then returning later that day to get his patient back to hospice. Ann was so grateful for Kerr's help that she called a reporter at the *Buffalo News* to ask if the reporter would do a story on Kerr. When the reporter asked Kerr why he had gone to such lengths to help, Kerr replied simply: "Sometimes the best medicine is not medicine."

I like this way of putting the point, but it may be more accurate to say that sometimes the best medicine is not medicine *as it has come to be practiced outside hospice*. John Tangeman, the administrative medical director of Hospice Buffalo, believes that being a hospice physician is distinctive. "Being a hospice doctor is doctoring in its purest form. It is old-style doctoring, which involves listening both to the patient and to his or her body." Hospice physicians rarely need to rely on technology; they can focus on the person before them. Listening and touching, Tangeman insists, are more important than technology.

Perhaps this is why Hospice and Palliative Care of Buffalo has such an extensive array of services that might initially strike some as non-medical. I spoke to Abby Unger, the director of expressive therapies at Hospice Buffalo, about her team's work, which includes music, art, massage, and dance therapy. Prior to the pandemic, there was a twelve-member team that delivered a variety of techniques for engaging the bodies of patients. Unger told me that when these interventions are structured so that family members are present, everyone seems to benefit. As Unger puts it, when patients get a massage, family members seem to relax as if they, too, were getting a massage.

Unger makes another point that echoes what Tangeman and Kerr say about caring for hospice patients. "When people come to us," she says, "their whole lives come." This may be why home care is so important; home is often where patients' families are, and caring for patients in their homes may, as Kerr puts it, be the best medicine. It is striking that Hospice Buffalo has twelve physicians who see patients in their homes.

I had come to Hospice Buffalo to better understand the phenomenon of pre-death dreams and visions and how they might be predictive of imminent death. What I discovered is that pre-death dreams and visions are so much more than predictors of death. I'm certain Kerr's research group was glad to document that ELDVs foretell death, but that is not why they studied ELDVs. Instead, they were interested in these experiences for the same reason they were interested in the role of new medications for treating pain, fatigue, and depression. It is why they examined cost-saving measures with at-home hospice care or how music could help patients tell life stories or how different delivery systems for end-of-life medications might be more efficacious. In every case, the research was designed to demonstrate how a novel approach to dying patients could be shown to have better outcomes for patients and families. It is certainly what they found in studying pre-death dreams and visions.

Consider just some of the findings from the small mountain of data on end-of-life experiences Kerr's research team has accumulated. In his studies, Kerr found that close to 90 percent of patients report having at least one dream or vision that could be classified as an end-of-life experience. These dreams are distinguished from regular dreams by being especially vivid. When asked to rate the degree of realism of such dreams, most

rate them ten out of ten—the highest degree of realism. Patients often report that they are "more real than real." They occur both during periods of sleep and periods of wakefulness, and they are easily distinguished from hallucinations or bouts of delirium.

Kerr has also tracked the content of the dreams, their frequency, their relationship to time of death, and the subjective significance that patients and their families placed in them. Here, too, the results were striking. Because Kerr began studying end-of-life dreams when patients first entered hospice and were not all imminently dying, he could monitor the dreams over many months. He found a predictable pattern. As patients approached death, their dreams increased in frequency and their content changed. Earlier in their time in hospice, patients reported dreams about living friends and relatives; as the patients approached death, the dreams were mostly filled with deceased family and friends. It was also clear that the dreams involving family members who had already died provided the most comfort. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest level of comfort, dreams with dead relatives and friends scored 4.08. Dreams with living friends and family provided much less comfort, scoring only 2.86.

Although Kerr's research has focused primarily on the effects end-of-life dreams have on his patients' acceptance of death, his research team has also examined whether these experiences affected the process of bereavement for loved ones. Here, too, he found a positive correlation between pre-death dreams and the ability to accept death and loss. Not surprisingly, the more at peace someone is with his or her own dying, the easier bereavement is for those left behind. Because end-of-life experiences often bring peace to those who are facing death, encouraging dying patients to talk about these experiences with their families is a way to care for those families and help facilitate the grieving process.

Kerr's team is working on a "toolkit" on dreams and visions to give to patients and family members when a dying person enters hospice. The toolkit provides about as clear a statement of why such work is important as I have seen. "End-of-life Dreams and Visions (ELDVs)," the toolkit reads, "show that the experiences at the end of life can be full of dignity, strength, and grace. While many envision dying as a bleak or hopeless time, ELDVs reveal the heart of the human experience and re-contextualize death by emphasizing the connections between end-of-life experiences and the living."

The evidence that Kerr and the research team at Hospice Buffalo has documented about the role ELDVs can play in providing meaning and comfort for individuals at the end of life is important and should be better known. But it is also important to note that not everyone has an end-of-life dream and not all such dreams are in fact comforting. Kerr's team also emphasizes that their research does not seek to explain pre-death visions. They make it clear that their research focuses only on the experiences of patients and families in the face of the vivid dreams and visions they have documented. And most patients are not particularly concerned about explanations; it is enough that the experiences provide meaning and comfort.

In this regard, there is one finding of Kerr's research that is somewhat surprising. Almost none of his patients had a dream or vision that was explicitly religious. I asked Kerry Egan whether that was true in her experience working with dying patients. She emphatically agreed with Kerr on this. "In all my years of listening to the dreams of my patients," she said, "I never once heard a patient talk of seeing Jesus in a dream." Yet, Egan believes that the dreams are nevertheless often profoundly spiritual. Although religious figures rarely appear in end-of-life dreams, deceased family members, particularly parents, are pervasive. And as Egan makes clear in *On Living*, when hospice chaplains spend time talking to patients about their families, they are having religious conversations. Talking about families, she writes, "is how we talk about God. This is how we talk about the meaning of our lives. That is how we talk about the big spiritual questions of human existence."

I think this is why Egan says that the role of a hospice chaplain is to create a kind of sacred space in which people can examine their lives and try to make sense of them at the end. It seems to me that this is precisely what Kerr and his team are attempting to do when they ask patients to talk about their end-of-life dreams and visions and to share them with their families. To be sure, creating such a space requires treating the medical problems that may prevent patients from trying to make sense of their lives as they die, but it requires much more than that.

For this reason, I came to see the stethoscope that was always around Kerr's neck less as a diagnostic tool than as a symbol of how he sees his role as a physician caring for the dying. He is at the bedside to listen to his patients—and not just to their heart and lungs. He is there to listen to the story of their lives. This is essentially what Egan said of hospice chaplains. They are with patients, she said, not as storytellers but as "story holders." That's not a bad way to think of the work of Christopher Kerr and his colleagues. They are a remarkable group of "story holders" who have discovered the power of end-of-life dreams to help the dying find meaning.

Learning about the therapeutic power of pre-death dreams has not answered my original question about how such dreams can predict death, but knowing that such dreams provide comfort to the dying is itself comforting. I like to think that my wife found joy in the vision she had of her parents shortly before she died. I also can't help wondering whether, when the time comes, I will find myself in Lisa's presence again. If the research of Kerr and his colleagues is any guide, the answer is likely yes.

All a Matter of Perspective?

BERNARD G. PRUSAK

Catholic health care in the United States finds itself at a startling point of convergence with non-Catholic health care. On the one hand, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, other health-care systems across the country have suddenly had to become more like Catholic health care in restricting abortion. (As of January 2023, thirteen states ban abortion with next to no exceptions; similar bans are pending in several other states.) On the other hand, in the context of fierce competition and dwindling margins, some Catholic health-care systems appear nearly indistinguishable from their most ruthless, for-profit counterparts. The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, famous for their research on the rise of midlife morbidity and mortality in the United States over the past twenty-plus years, have claimed that "[t]he American healthcare industry is not good at promoting health, but it excels at taking money from all of us for its benefit. It is an engine of inequality." The *New York Times* recently published two shocking stories about the Providence health-care system and about Bon Secours Mercy Health—both officially Catholic—showing that they have taken money from the poor and vulnerable to benefit themselves. In an inversion of Catholic social teaching, the poor received special attention not to be served, but to be shaken down.

It would be both ungenerous and inaccurate to suggest that those cases are the rule rather than egregious exceptions to it. At bottom, the mission of Catholic health care remains to tend the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, these examples remind us that Catholic health care in the United States—comprising more than six hundred hospitals that employ more than half a million people and see one out of every six patients—is a very big business and therefore subject to the same market forces and trends characteristic of U.S. capitalism at large. Catholic health care also has to contend with the pitfalls of U.S. politics, as it did a decade ago in the uproar over the Affordable Care Act's contraception-coverage mandate, and as it will likely have to do in the coming backlash against abortion restrictions. A Catholic hospital's refusal to perform an abortion for a woman who is miscarrying, but whose nonviable fetus still has heart tones, means one thing when a non-Catholic hospital is willing to step into the breach. It will mean something else when a non-Catholic hospital declines transfer so that it won't have to negotiate a poorly written state abortion law, and a woman dies of hemorrhage and sepsis in a Catholic hospital's care.

Enter Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler's *Pope Francis and the Transformation of Health Care Ethics*. Salzman and Lawler are moral theologians at Creighton University who have often collaborated. They present their book as a "critical commentary" on the sixth and most recent edition of the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" (ERDs), issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2018. In fact, their book is an extended polemic against the USCCB. A representative sentence begins, "Unfortunately, most bishops in the United States and the USCCB as a body...." Exhortation and excoriation follow. According to Salzman and Lawler, the 2018 ERDs, as they're typically called, are "problematic anthropologically, methodologically, ecclesiologically, and pastorally." Their book's second thesis is that "Francis's...contributions and shift in emphases invite a substantial revision of the ERD and the formulation of new directives."

There is much that is just about Salzman and Lawler's polemic, but there is also much that is misguided. They inveigh against authoritarianism in the Church with a

righteous passion that sometimes sounds a little too, well, authoritative. Their book prompts the question of whether Catholic health care can find a viable middle way—a center that can hold, so to speak, against strident voices on both the Right and Left.

The ERDs, to quote from the sixth edition's preamble, "provide authoritative guidance on certain moral issues that face Catholic health care today." They must be observed for a Catholic health-care service to be recognized as Catholic. Violations may result, at the local bishop's discretion, in a service losing its Catholic status.

The ERDs originated in 1948, but they took a hard legalistic turn in 1971, partly in response to changing medical norms with respect to abortion in the United States and partly in response to variations in practice in Catholic hospitals in the 1960s with respect to sterilization and the distribution of contraceptives. In 1994, the bishops significantly expanded the document with the aim of ensuring uniformity. As the Jesuit ethicist Kevin William Wildes observed in a 1995 commentary, "In contrast to the complexity of traditional Catholic morality, the [1994] directives seek to remove areas of ambiguity and leave little room for judgment." Wildes went on to suggest that "[o]ne way to understand the Directives is to see them as an effort by those *in* authority [e.g., bishops] to restrict the space and liberty of those who are *an* authority [e.g., moral theologians]."

Salzman and Lawler couldn't agree more. The passage in the 2018 ERDs that bothers them the most—to judge from how often they refer to it—appears toward the end of the document's introduction:

> While the Church cannot furnish a ready answer to every moral dilemma, there are many questions about which she provides normative guidance and direction. In the absence of determination by the magisterium, but never contrary to church teaching, the guidance of approved authors can offer appropriate guidance for ethical decision making.

Unsurprisingly, the criteria to qualify as "approved" are not articulated. For it goes without saying that an approved author is someone who never disagrees with Church authorities: in Wildes's terms, the people *in* authority.

The 2018 ERDs are a direct descendant of the 1994 ERDs, with some subtractions and additions. Salzman and Lawler focus on the 2018 ERDs not only because they are the most recent but also because, they claim, it is "perplexing and even scandalous" that the USCCB did not revise the ERDs in light of Pope Francis's "anthropological and methodological contributions."

Salzman and Lawler are correct that the ERDs reflect a "hierarchical ecclesiology." As they write with a touch of snark, "[t]he revised *ERD* reads as if its composers never heard of" *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II's constitution on the Church. The model of Church in the ERDs is top-down, heavily invested in the authority of bishops, which, as Salzman and Lawler rightly note, has been badly damaged by the Church's sexual-abuse scandal. Furthermore, the ERDs show no interest in the *sensus fidelium* and do not acknowledge that experience might be, as Salzman and Lawler propose, "a source of ethical knowledge."

Here the case that Salzman and Lawler discuss at length is illuminating. In November 2009, the ethics committee, chaired by Sr. Margaret McBride, RSM, of St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, permitted the abortion of an eleven-week-old fetus. The pregnant woman was suffering from acute pulmonary hypertension, which her doctors judged would prove imminently fatal for both her and her child. After the fact, Phoenix's then-bishop, Thomas J. Olmsted, criticized both Sr. McBride and the hospital, which he stripped of its Catholic status after it refused to repent of its decision in the case. As Salzman and Lawler comment, "There is no indication [in the 2018 edition of the ERDs] that this case had any impact on the recognition of the possibility of conflicts in interpreting and applying the ERD, resolving such conflicts, or formulating new directives in

light of such conflicts." I have argued elsewhere that the Phoenix case indicates the need for the ERDs to incorporate a principle of lesser evil, but the bishops seem to have drawn neither this lesson nor any other.

Salzman and Lawler are on shakier ground when they discuss their theory of ethical knowledge (their "metaethics"), the authority of individual conscience, and some of Pope Francis's pronouncements. Their "metaethical epistemology" is perspectivism, which they explain by observing that although the view from a first-story window is different from the view from a twenty-story window, neither is false. Both are "partial and particular." That's certainly fair enough for views from windows, but it's a far leap to argue, as they go on to do, that "[p]erspective is also what accounts for different moral judgments. Seeing and judging from different perspectives accounts for the different judgments on the morality or immorality of abortion and of removing [artificial nutrition and hydration] from a [persistent vegetative state] patient." In short, the rightness or wrongness of these practices depends, they seem to suggest, on one's point of view: proponents and opponents can both be partially right. It is hard to imagine that Salzman and Lawler would make a similar claim about, for example, an act of sexism or racism.

Along similar lines, they also write that "[t]he morality of an action is largely controlled by the subject's motive." This may not seem controversial—after all, doesn't the Church teach that the morality of an act depends partly on one's intention? But intention is a quite different concept from motive. I may *intend* to rob a bank with various motives, some of them better than others; perhaps I want to distribute the money to the poor. But a worthy motive doesn't make my intention right. The deeper confusion here has to do with how to specify an action for the purpose of moral evaluation. In brief, it is a mistake to reduce the so-called object of an action to what is physically done—Pope John Paul II is right in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* that "the object of a given moral act" is not just "a process or an event of the merely physical order"—but it is equally a mistake to reduce the object of an action to the agent's purpose. As the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe remarked in 1982, "Circumstances, and the immediate facts about the means you are choosing to your ends, dictate what descriptions of your intention you must admit."

Salzman and Lawler propose their account of the authority of individual conscience in response to another passage in the ERDs that they vehemently dislike—the last paragraph of the introduction to Part 1, which reads as follows:

> [W]ithin a pluralistic society, Catholic health care services will encounter requests for medical procedures contrary to the moral teachings of the Church. Catholic health care does not offend the rights of individual conscience by refusing to provide or permit medical procedures that are judged morally wrong by the teaching authority of the Church.

Salzman and Lawler reply:

> The prioritization of Church teaching, the institution, and absolute norms over conscience contradicts the long-established tradition on the authority and inviolability of a well-informed conscience and is, therefore, a violation of human dignity and the common good.

Remarkably, they manage to put this point in even stronger terms: "The ERD subordinates the authority and inviolability of patient conscience to the health care institution and, ultimately, to the authority of the bishop. This usurpation reflects an assault on human dignity and a violation of justice." Citing *Dignitatis humanae*, Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom, they argue that "no Catholic is 'to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor…is he to be restrained from acting in accord with his conscience, especially in

matters religious' (DH, 3) and also medical." That's quite a stretch. They also claim that "it seems to be a violation of human dignity and the authority and inviolability of individual conscience to declare certain acts 'intrinsically immoral' without consideration of the perspective of the acting person." But again, as Anscombe pointed out, what one can say one intends is constrained by the structure of what one is actually doing. Hoary denunciations of "physicalism," which recur throughout the book, fail to answer this objection.

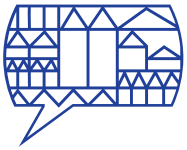
That said, it is true that accommodating conscientious objection is a challenge for every organization, and it is also true that the ERDs make no provision for it. Yet institutions, too, may be said to have a kind of conscience. Salzman and Lawler dismiss that claim on the grounds that "conscience requires subjectivity, which institutions do not have." By contrast, the bioethicist Daniel Sulmasy has claimed that conscience requires "a fundamental moral commitment…to moral integrity," which in fact institutions may have.

The enlistment of Pope Francis in Salzman and Lawler's argument for the transformation of health-care ethics is also problematic. They claim, for example, that "Pope Francis's recent statements on marriage and the family that natural methods of fertility regulation are to be 'promoted'" are "very different from *Humanae vitae*'s and the ERD's absolute condemnation of contraception." According to them, he "does not absolutely forbid contraception and may, in fact, be interpreted to promote it." They thus write that "Pope Francis and revisionist moral theologians maintain that contraception may be either right or wrong depending on how it impacts human relationships." This is simply wishful thinking. Francis hasn't (yet) said any such thing.

Salzman and Lawler are right that ERDs reflecting Francis's priorities would give much greater attention to "social justice and environmental issues." And I think they're also right to consider Francis's 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, as potentially of great significance for Catholic moral thought. As they observe, *Amoris laetitia*, especially in its notorious chapter 8, emphasizes "conscience, discernment, and the virtues." But the document's potential is lost if its teaching is reduced to the claim that individuals have the right in conscience to do the good as they see it. As David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel have recently explained at length, conscience in *Amoris laetitia* is not opposed to law, but is instead the way that persons discern how objective norms apply to them in their concrete, complex circumstances.

Salzman and Lawler close their book by proposing "to shift the ERD from a focus on absolute norms and intrinsically evil acts to principled guidelines for forming consciences." That sounds reasonable enough, but Catholic health care will need a different, more rigorous book to make progress toward that end.

Poetry & Commonweal



CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

2024 – 2025

Poetry & Commonweal

Does the poet have a role in our society? What makes for a "good" poem? And what is poetry for? Perhaps the capaciousness of this last question can guide us toward possible answers for the others. You may already have a couple responses in mind. Poets in *Commonweal* have some thoughts, too.

Cristina Campo invites us to see poetry as attention. This is an attention to "the reality around us, which is truth in images." It is focused and deliberate. It accepts reality as it is, with patience and fearlessness. With attention at the center of Campo's understanding of poetry, a "good" poem is measured by its attentiveness, and the poet is seen as a kind of mediator, as the person "between man and God, between man and other men, between man and the secret laws of nature."

Joshua Bennett offers another perspective. Coming from the spoken-word tradition, he speaks of poetry as getting together "to sing the beauty of your interior world," often in the face of brutalities happening in the material world. The communal experience of poetry is central to this understanding—a community creates space for this art form and becomes part of what the poet embodies in their performance. "Spoken word," Bennett shares, "is about representing where you're from." The aim, then, is to offer "the most evocative and true performance of the material." This begins before the poet appears on stage. The way one dresses, comports themselves, and rehearses are all part of the poem.

Answering these questions within Christian Wiman's reading of a Gwendolyn Brooks poem may prompt a little further excavation. Is poetry for reigniting the dormancies in language or delving into the "mystery of existence"? Is a poet a teller or a teller a poet? And what qualities stand out in the poem? Wiman exemplifies a type of interpretation a reader can pursue.

If these works can provide a sensibility or philosophy of poetry, the poems included in this guide are a chance to practice reader interpretation. These poems, like most poems in *Commonweal*, do not exceed a page in length. While this is a constraint of our pages, it's also an indicator of style as we seek the "pinhole precision" (to borrow from Wiman) a short poem can provide.

One pathway into these poems would be to print them out and annotate them. This is a practice of close observation. You may circle words that catch your attention, notice the shape and parts of the poem, listen to the diction of it, or name its emotional curve. You may also turn to what you know about prosody (i.e., counted lines or free verse), rhetorical devices (i.e., apposition, metaphor, onomatopoeia), or speech acts (i.e., address, lament, question). Aim to have your annotations exceed the total length of the poem.

You may also consider extratextual information that may be relevant to your reading and interpretation. Is there something in your experience as a reader that adds new meaning to the poem? What do you notice when you read the poem out loud? Does learning something about the poet or the context in which the poem sits add a layer of meaning? Are you reminded of other poems and poets? These are some of the ways to expand your interpretation of the poem. Start with one poem and give it a try.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION:

Cristina Campo, "Attention and Poetry," February 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/attention-and-poetry

The Commonweal Podcast, "Out Loud," April 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/out-loud

Christian Wiman, "One Wants a Teller," May 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/gwendolen-brooks-poetry-christian-wiman-God-spirituality

SUGGESTED POEMS:

April Bernard, "This Life," July/August 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/two-poems-april-bernard

Tom Hansen, "Night Cry," January 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/poem-night-cry

W. S. Di Piero, "Enter You, Waving," March 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/poem-enter-you-waving

Lawrence Joseph, "It Is This That Is Intended," March 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/poem-it-intended

Philip Metres, "The New New Colossus," May 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/poem-new-new-colossus

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cristina Campo describes poetry as a form of attention. What does this say about poetry amid the relentless noise and distractions of our fast-paced world? How is cultivating the capacity for attention a calling to one's highest form or a form of justice? What do you make of the juxtaposition between attention and imagination? Do you agree that imagination is a "flight into the arbitrary"?

2. Joshua Bennett highlights the collective tradition and experience of poetry. What are some of the ways this appears in spoken word? How are poems linked to peoples and other poems, whether it's in spoken word or another poetic tradition? What does embodiment mean to Bennett? How might the "most evocative and true performance" overlap with Campo's understanding of poetry as attention? Where does poetry appear in your community?

3. Christian Wiman sees Gwendolyn Brooks's poem as being about "the love, divinity, and poetry of reality." What does he mean by this, and how is it different from "the reality of love, divinity, or poetry"? Would you consider this a religious poem? What is the role of the "teller" in all this? And what is Wiman trying to say about the "mystery of existence"?

4. Which poem(s) did you choose to read? What kind of poem is it? What qualities of the poem drew your attention and what is the speaker trying to say? Are there any oddities?

5. The suggestions for further reading are interviews with some of the poets featured. How does listening to the poet change the way you think about their poetry? Is there extratextual information that adds new meaning to your understanding of the poem? How might you answer the questions posed at the beginning of the introduction now?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*, 3rd edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.
Anthony Domestico, "Something Greater," July/August 2023
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/something-greater

The Commonweal Podcast, "An Evening with Christian Wiman," January 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/evening-christian-wiman

Anthony Domestico, "Portrait of Our Time: An interview with Lawrence Joseph," September 22, 2017
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/interview-lawrence-joseph

Anthony Domestico, "A Literary Homeland : An interview with Phil Metres," May 2024
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/literary-homeland

Attention and Poetry

CRISTINA CAMPO

Translated by Alex Andriesse

Truth did not come into the world naked but in symbols and images. There is rebirth, and there is an image of rebirth, and it is by means of this image that one must be reborn.

—Gospel of Philip

In the old books, the just man is often given the heavenly name "mediator." Mediator between man and God, between man and other men, between man and the secret laws of nature. The role of mediator was given to the just man—and the just man alone—because no imaginary or passionate tie could constrain or deform his ability to read. "Et chaque être humain (one might add et chaque chose) crie en silence pour être lu autrement."

This is the reason so much importance has been placed on the freedom of the heart. Every church recommends it as a kind of spiritual hygiene: vigilance against turmoil, readiness for divine revelation. However, no church has ever explicitly said: keep yourselves pure in your works and thoughts in order to reconcile men and things in an unshadowed gaze. Here poetry, justice, and criticism converge: they are three forms of mediation.

For what is mediation if not an utterly free capacity for attention? Set against it is what we, quite improperly, call passion—that is, feverish imagination and fantastic illusions.

We might say, then, that justice and imagination are antithetical terms. Passionate imagination, which is one of the most uncontrollable forms of opinion (that dream in which we all move), can in reality only serve an imaginary justice. This is, for example, the essential difference between Electra's passionate justice and Antigone's spiritual justice. Electra imagines she can proceed from blame to blame, shifting the weight from one link to the next in an unbreakable chain. Antigone moves in a realm where the law of necessity no longer holds.

Indeed, contrary to what is typically asked of him, the just man does not need imagination but attention. We are asking a judge for justice by the wrong name if we ask him to "use his imagination." What, in that case, could the judge's imagination be except an inevitable abuse, an act of violence against the reality of things? Justice is a fervent form of attention, and completely nonviolent. It is as remote from appearances as it is from myth.

"Justice, a golden eye, looks." An image of perfect immobility, perfectly attentive.

Poetry, too, is attention. In other words, it involves reading, on multiple levels, the reality around us, which is truth in images. And the poet, who takes these images apart and recomposes them, is also a mediator: between man and God, between man and other men, between man and the secret laws of nature.

The Greeks were disdainful of imagination: fantasy had no place in their minds. Their heroic, unswerving attention (of which Sophocles provides perhaps the most extreme example) continually established relationships between things, separated and united them, in an unceasing effort to decipher reality and mystery alike. The Chinese meditated for millennia, in the same manner, on the marvelous Book of Changes. And Dante is not, however scandalous it may sound, a poet of imagination but a poet of attention: to see souls writhing in the fire and the olive tree, to recognize pride in a cloak of lead, is a supreme form of attention, which leaves the elements of the idea pure and uncontaminated.

Art today is largely imagination. In other words, it is a chaotic contamination of elements and levels. All of this, naturally, is opposed to justice (which is, in any case, of no interest to artists today).

If attention is a patient, fervent, fearless acceptance of reality, imagination is impatience—a flight into the arbitrary: an endless labyrinth navigated without Ariadne's red thread. This is why ancient art is synthetic, whereas modern art is analytic and, for the most part, concentrates on breaking things down, as is appropriate to an era brought up on fear. For true attention does not lead, as it may seem it would, to analysis but to a resolving synthesis, to symbols and images—in a word, to destiny.

Analysis can become destiny when attention, successfully performing a perfect superposition of times and spaces, is able to recompose them, one after the other, in the pure beauty of the image. Such is the attention of Marcel Proust.

Attention is the only path to the unsayable, the only path to mystery. In fact, it is firmly anchored in the real, and only through allusions hidden in reality is that mystery manifested. The symbols of the Holy Scriptures, myths, and fairytales, which have nourished and consecrated life for millennia, are clothed in the most concrete earthly forms: from the burning bush to the talking cricket, from the apple of knowledge to Cinderella's pumpkins.

When it is confronted with reality, imagination recoils. Attention, on the other hand, grasps it, directly, as a symbol (think of Dante's heavens, the divine and detailed translation of a liturgy). It is thus, finally, the most legitimate, absolute form of imagination. The one to which the old alchemical text no doubt alludes when it recommends dedicating "the true imagination and not the fantastic imagination" to the work. By this, clearly meaning attention, in which imagination is present but sublimated, like the poison in medicine. Due to one of the many ambiguities of language, it is commonly called "creative imagination."

It hardly matters if long and painful pilgrimages lead to such a creative instant, or if it comes in a flash. Such bolts from the blue are only the spark (whose origin and nature become increasingly mysterious as little by little it gives us the key to everything) that attention solicits and prepares: like the lightning rod the lightning, like the prayer the miracle, like the search for a rhyme the inspiration that may flow from that rhyme.

Sometimes it is the attention of an entire lineage, a whole genealogy, which suddenly flares up in a godlike spark: "I had set foot in that part of life beyond which one cannot go with any hope of returning."

Such an individual, whose attention is ravishing and definitive, the world defines, with a very beautiful abbreviation, as a genius, meaning a person inhabited by a demon, a person who incarnates the manifestation of a spirit unknown.

Attention frees the idea from the image, like the genie from the bottle, then gathers the idea back inside the image: once again in imitation of the alchemists, who first dissolved salt in a liquid, then studied how it reformed and solidified into figures. It is a matter of decomposing and recomposing the world in two distinct but equally real moments. And so justice is served, destiny is fulfilled, through the dramatic decomposition and recomposition of a form.

The expression, the poetry that is born from it, can only, of course, be hieroglyphic: something like a new nature. That is why only a new attention, a new destiny, will be able to decipher it. But the language instantly reveals the degree of attention that produced it, through its earthly and spiritual weight: the more consummate it is, the more space and silence that surround it, the more intense the poet's attention must have been.

Every word is offered in its multiple meanings, like the strata of a geologic column: each one differently colored and differently inhabited, each one reserved for the reader whose intensity of attention will allow him to discern and decipher it. But for everyone, when a poem is pure, it comes as an abundant gift that is simultaneously partial and total: beauty and meaning independent yet inseparable, as in a communion. As in that first Communion, which was the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Everyone who heard the master speak, says a Hebrew tale, felt they were hearing a secret destined for his ears alone, and so everyone felt the marvelous story the master told in the squares belonged to him and was complete, although every newcomer heard only a fragment.

"*Souffrir pour quelque chose, c'est lui avoir accordé une attention extrême*." (So Homer suffers for the Trojans and contemplates the death of Hector; so the Japanese sword master does not distinguish between his own death and that of his adversary.) And to have given something extreme attention is to have accepted suffering it to the end, and not only suffering it but suffering for it, placing ourselves like a shield between it and everything that can threaten it, both inside ourselves and outside ourselves. It is to have taken upon ourselves the weight of those dark, incessant threats, which are the very condition of joy.

Here attention attains perhaps its purest form, its most precise name: responsibility, the capacity to respond on behalf of something or someone, which is equally vital to poetry, understanding between beings, opposition to evil.

Because truly every human, poetic, or spiritual error is nothing, in essence, if not inattention.

To ask a man to never be distracted, to be continually turning his faculty of attention away from the errors of imagination, the laziness of habit, the hypnosis of custom, is to ask him to realize his highest form.

It is to ask him for something very close to holiness in a time that seems to be pursuing, with blind fury and bone-chilling success, nothing so much as a total divorce of the human mind from its capacity for attention.

Out Loud

THE COMMONWEAL PODCAST

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One Wants a Teller

CHRISTIAN WIMAN

"I am beginning to despair
And can see only two choices:
Either go crazy or turn holy."

—Adélia Prado, "Serenade"

Sometimes the mystery of existence—that we exist at all, that we feel so homelessly at home in this place—gets embedded so deeply in life that we no longer feel it as mystery. Language, too, partakes of this sterilizing sameness and becomes in fact as solid and practical as a piece of wood or a pair of pliers, something we use during the course of interchangeable days. Poetry can reignite these dormancies ("words are fossil poetry," as Emerson put it) of both language and life, sending a charge through reality that makes it real again.

I woke this morning so leaden I could hardly rouse myself from bed. I clutched for despair, but all the loyal life buoys—failure, self-contempt, God's "absence"—drifted out of reach. I felt...nothing, my whole being as solid and insentient as a piece of wood or a pair of pliers. (Hölderlin, going mad: "Nothing is happening to me, nothing is happening to me!") It was a teaching day, as unluck would have it: Gwendolyn Brooks, in a graduate divinity-school seminar called "Poetry and Faith." When I was a child, the two most intolerable aspects of my life (or the two of which I was then conscious) were church and school. Both seemed to me so geologically dull I felt my arteries hardening. It seems either cold fate or high irony, then, that I should end up in church school. Some people can't conceive of a god who can't suffer. Me, I can't conceive of a god who can't laugh.

One wants a Teller in a time like this.
One's not a man, one's not a woman grown
To bear enormous business all alone.
One cannot walk this winding street with pride,
Straight-shouldered, tranquil-eyed,
Knowing one knows for sure the way back home.
One wonders if one has a home.
One is not certain if or why or how.
One wants a Teller now:—

Put on your rubbers and you won't catch cold.
Here's hell, there's heaven. Go to Sunday School.
Be patient, time brings all good things—(and cool
Strong balm to calm the burning at the brain?)—
Behold, Love's true, and triumphs, and God's actual.

—Gwendolyn Brooks, from "The Womanhood"

When first reading this poem, one is likely to understand "teller" as some sort of recorder or attentive onlooker. One wants a sensitive witness to capture and memorialize the "truth" of what happens "in a time like this." (The surrounding poems suggest war and social crisis, but specificity isn't needed; everyone alive has "a time like this.") But that reading quickly collapses. (That it was possible, though, lingers through and influences the rest of the poem.) What one wants, actually, is a teller to tell one what one knows is *not* true. Because in fact you are going to catch cold, bone cold, and hell and heaven are hopelessly fused in this life, and time is ticking every instant toward a catastrophe orchestrated just for you.

But what about that last line? Is it merely a continuation of the wry irony of the first three lines of the stanza? Or does the parenthetical question, and the "cool strong balm" of its sound, chasten and change the tone so that the "Behold" is credibly prophetic and annunciatory, not merely mockingly so? And if that word is credible and volatile in the ancient sense, then what of the assertions that follow?

"Actual" is a very precise word, a "telling" word, a crucial wingbeat away from the word "real," which one might have expected. "Actual" comes to us from the Old French *actuel*, meaning "active, practical." Farther back, the Latin *actus* meant "driving, doing, act or deed" (an *actus* was, literally, a cattle drive). Clearly the word once referred less to a condition than an action, less to a state of being than being itself. To say that God is actual, then, in the context of this poem, is not necessarily to say that God is "real." It's to say that God is so woven into reality that the question of God's own reality can't meaningfully occur.

One more pinhole precision: "and cool / Strong balm to calm the burning at the brain." *At*, not the more expected *in*. The burning is not psychological, or at least not entirely so, but circumstantial. The threat of meaninglessness is inside the speaker's mind, but it is a response to a threat that is external and palpable. The powers invoked by the poem—of telling (poetry), of love and God and patience—are not simply effective in the "real" world. They are what makes the world real. In the end, this is not a poem about the reality of love, divinity, or poetry, but about the love, divinity, and poetry of reality.

Too much interpretation? Yes and no. Gwendolyn Brooks certainly never sat down and self-consciously seeded her poem with these meanings. My guess is she chose both "actual" and "at" entirely for the sounds (both of which are less predictable, less mellifluous). But that's the mystery of language, and of its reach into—rather, its co-extensiveness with—life, love, and God. A reader's need can release a meaning an author never intended, but which her whole-souled submission to sound enabled. That's what happened for me in the midst of my barren dread this morning, and for the rest of the day love was true (from Old English, meaning steadfast, loyal), God was a verb (how lively and lovely the class!), and I was rescued by a revelation so tiny it would take a crazy and holy attention to see it as such.

THIS LIFE

April Bernard

I would be the dove, tucked
in the heavy arbor, listening to the rain
tap the leaf lobes. I would be the bear,
stupid beneath the snow.

Say a syringe came to tease me with relief,
offering my stretch of earth: for this,
I would pay even the jewels of poetry.
But bribes don't work.

Did I agree to this? The sages tell us
that blindness in the morning
may give way to sight by evening....

How they lie. We know only a little more
than the animals, and it is pain. This life
that demands, with every sun-up, to be lived.

NIGHT CRY

Tom Hansen

Is it a phantom
from some lost land
so long forgotten,
never quite gone—

some exiled spirit
whose wild night cry
startles the darkness
into reply?

We who are shorelings
start at that cry,
feel something in us
quiver with joy—

feel something in us
waken, take flight
into shadow lands.
Loon cry at night.

ENTER YOU, WAVING

W. S. Di Piero

There you were, last year, just inside the door,
hand raised like a happy Etruscan lord
reposing on his limestone tomb.
Bunched tweeds, blue work shirt, camo backpack,
squinting behind dense granny glasses...
You saluted across *Le Pain Quotidien*
as if, just arriving, you were about to leave.

We ate skillet eggs and drank red wine at noon,
while you, the stevedore poet, flirted with
our hipster waitress. An hour ago, we were
college greenhorns in Horn and Hardart's,
crazed by writing, Shelley's anarchies, Houseman's
sensuous rue, automat lemon meringue pie
and tuna sandwiches and aspiration and nerve.

These weeks, you're in your other chair,
rigged with fluid lines and I.V. ports,
flesh lightly pinned to cheekbones and skull.
We make crass jokes about ambition now.
What's left to want? What's left of want?
You cough up a laugh: "Welcome to my way out."
Yet you're still writing it, writing it.

IT IS THIS THAT IS INTENDED

Lawrence Joseph

It is this that is intended, an execution regime
death row prisoners must propose an alternative
killing method preferred to lethal injection,
prison officials providing forms to opt-in
for suffocation. The death penalty works as a deterrent,
it permanently incapacitates extremely violent
offenders, serves the important societal goal
of just retribution, reaffirms society's moral outrage
at the wanton destruction of human life,
the Attorney General decrees, fast-tracking
a rule reintroducing firing squads and electrocutions
in federal executions. This, to save the Republic,
this for the glory of the state, they, the inheritors of,
for them, a great tradition, in their murderous insistences
they, the United States, conduct a killing spree,
July 14, 8:07 a.m., Daniel Lewis Lee…July 16,
8:19 a.m., Wesley Ira Purkey…July 17, 4:36 p.m.,
Dustin Lee Honken…August 26, 6:29 p.m.,
Lezmond Charles Mitchell…August 28, 4:32 p.m.,
Keith Dwayne Nelson…September 22, 9:06 p.m.,
William Emmett LeCroy Jr.…September 24, 6:46 p.m.,
Christopher Andre Vialva…November 19, 11:47 p.m.,
Orlando Cordia Hall…December 10, 9:27 p.m.,
Brandon Bernard…December 11, 8:21 p.m., Alfred Bourgeois…
January 13, 1:31 a.m., Lisa Montgomery…January 14,
11:34 p.m., Cory Johnson…January 16, 1:23 a.m.,
Dustin John Higgs. Things in Oklahoma are happening
not as planned, the instant the first drug, midazolam,
is injected into John Grant, convulsing so much
his entire upper back lifts off the gurney, vomiting,
the prison medical staff enter the death chamber
to remove his vomit, it takes fifteen minutes for John Grant
to be declared unconscious after vecuronium bromide,
paralyzing his body, and potassium chloride, stopping
his heart, are given him by the state.

THE NEW NEW COLOSSUS

Philip Metres

Fed by the brazen gift of drought's famine,
Her tongue tasting language after language
Here at our search-burned landfill of garbage,
A migrant woman scrounges for samplings
That might fill her children's insides. Scavenge,
Mother of Exiles, on your paltry stage.
You play the part of a human bandage
On a body that will not stop bleeding.
She says: "Storied landlords, open your doors
To us, the roofless. We've hidden in swarms
To escape the dread masters of horror,
The lead-teeming automatic arms
You profit from. Welcome us, the deplored.
We stand at the landing of your golden dorm."