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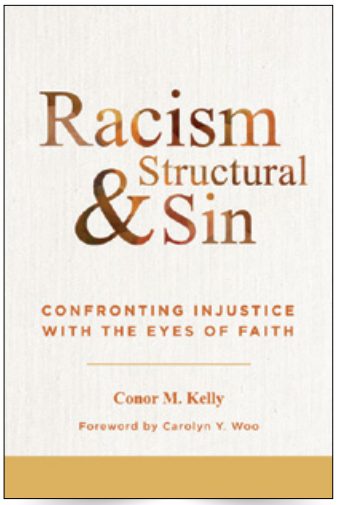

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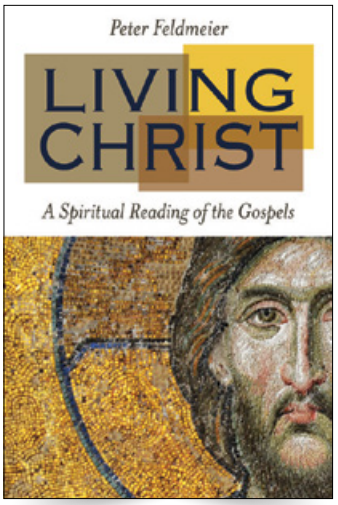

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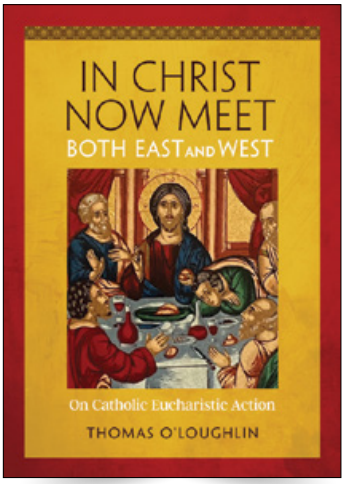

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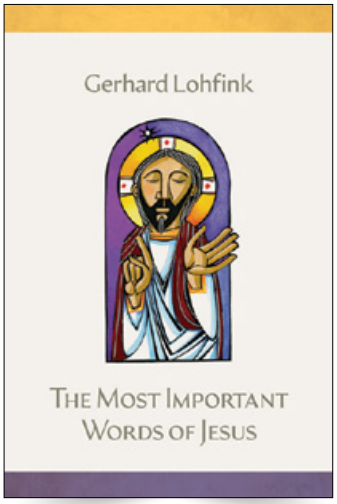

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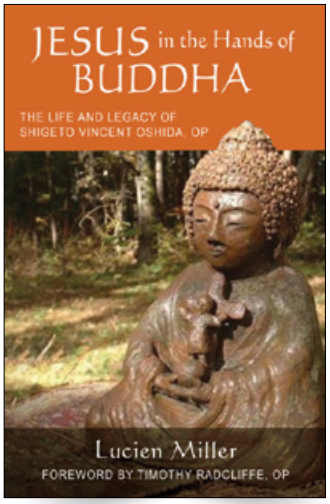

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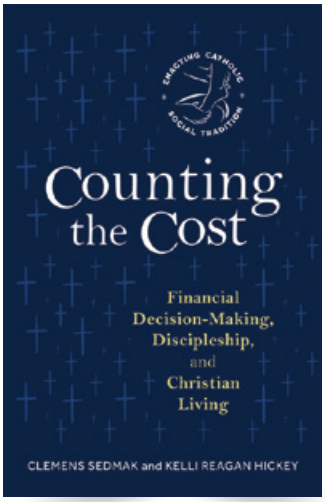

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LETTERS

Compassion in death, comfort in music

MAID IS A MERCY

Thanks to Associate Rector Cole Hartin ("Assisted Suicide & the Cure of Souls," March) for raising an urgent question: whether and how pastors should provide spiritual accompaniment to members of their flock who seek the benefit of medical aid in dying (MAiD) laws to avoid unnecessary suffering when the end is near. Humbly and wisely, Hartin chooses to walk alongside them, albeit at some distance. Sadly, he does so as "a physical reminder of the judgment and mercy of God, even when both have been flouted." When dying, the last thing a person needs is to feel judged and found wanting. What is called for, instead, is compassionate understanding, support, and relief, as so richly demonstrated by Jesus in his earthly ministry.

But first, it is important that U.S. readers understand that the Canadian law on which the article is based differs radically from the legal context in the United States. Where it is legal in the United States, MAiD allows only a self-administered procedure under stringent conditions, including, typically, the presence of a terminal illness judged to result in death within six months, mental competency, the involvement of an attending physician and a consulting physician, repeated and documented requests, witnesses, and waiting periods. Clinician-administered MAiD, legal in Canada, is illegal everywhere in the United States. Thus, MAiD in the United States is emphatically *not* a "euphemism…for euthanasia."

The crux of Hartin's argument against medical aid in dying (of whatever type) rests on the bedrock belief that "life and death both come from the hand of the Lord." But our understanding of what life and death are and how they come about has changed drastically with the strides of science. For Christians, the answer to novel and difficult end-of-life questions is in the first place found in Scripture and, particularly, the teachings and life of Jesus. "The message of Jesus is mercy," said Pope Francis in his second homily as pope. In Jesus Christ, God's mercy and compassion are revealed. The purpose of medical intervention through MAiD is eminently compassionate: the intent is to avoid suffering when death is near, even if that intervention substantially hastens the arrival of death. If God is compassionate, so should we be. MAiD is a mercy.

Yes, as cultural norms change and medical science opens new possibilities, questions surrounding life and death will continue to throw up new challenges to the faithful and those entrusted with their pastoral care. The questions will not be simply to allow or disallow, but how to deal with either alternative in ways that honor the dignity of being and the love of God. In the exercise of a well-informed conscience, MAiD, as enabled in certain jurisdictions of the United States, allows the faithful to do just that.

Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck
Phoenix, Ariz.

GENTLENESS STILL ON MY MIND

I have now read Rand Richard Cooper's incredible article "The Life of a Song" (February) at least four times. I can remember when I first heard Glen Campbell's "Gentle on My Mind." I was in a Baptist dorm in Jos, Nigeria, missing my parents. One of the older girls was playing it on her record player, and I was just entranced.

I was going to write this letter to correct what I thought was a wrong interpretation of the lyrics. I always thought she was "waving" from those backyards of his memory, not "waiting." I finally found a half minute to sit down and listen to an old recording from when Campbell was young. Clearly, in that one, she is indeed "wait'n'." I was so shocked I nearly fell out of my chair.

But then I noticed in the YouTube sidebar a much later recording of the

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LETTERS

song, from when he was on tour in London. His daughter, Ashley, performs with him, playing her banjo. Man! If you weren't crying by then, that should be the tipping point. In this recording, I heard "wavin'." I rewound it, replayed it, and confirmed.

To me, "wavin'" makes so much more sense. Whoever "she" is, she doesn't seem like the kind of person who would wait for someone to return. If she were waiting, he'd feel guilty, but her "wavin'" personality is gentle to him.

In the fourth verse, when "some other woman's cryin' to her mother," the singer obviously knows he hurt yet another woman by disappearing. But I believe this makes him appreciate the waving woman, who doesn't mind him coming and going. The lyrics "your door is always open" and "your path is free to walk" show that neither of them is "shackled" or "clinging," yet the love they share is real. He pretends to hold her to his breast. And, in the penultimate verse, he declares that no matter what happens to him, even blindness, he's never going to be where he can't see her back there in those backyards and rivers, which brings him no small comfort. He craves gentleness, and that's what she gives him.

Thank you for sending me down the backroads and rivers a continent away to that dorm room that afternoon when I was just a homesick missionary kid listening to the big girls' music, wishing I could be with my parents.

Martha Abadie
Hattiesburg, Miss.

CORRECTION: Due to an editing error, the number of protesters listed in the subhead of the anonymous photo essay about Iranian protesters was incorrect. More than five hundred protesters, not five hundred thousand, have suffered eye injuries from being shot at by security forces in Iran. We regret the error.

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IN MEMORIAM
EDWARD T. WHEELER
1947–2023

We mourn the death of *Commonweal* contributor Edward T. Wheeler, who wrote for the magazine for twenty-five years. May he rest in peace.

Outfoxed

The $787.5 million that Fox News agreed to pay Dominion Voting Systems is the largest publicly known defamation settlement by an American media company. Many who'd hoped that Fox would receive a more severe punishment for knowingly spreading lies about the 2020 election, including the alleged role of Dominion's voting machines in "stealing" it from Donald Trump, were disappointed by the unexpectedly sudden resolution. Fox did not have to offer an apology or admit to any specific wrongdoing; instead, it issued a short statement acknowledging "the Court's rulings finding certain claims about Dominion to be false" and cynically insisted on its "commitment to the highest journalistic standards." The payout is only about half of what Dominion had originally sought, and Fox should be able to write much of it off as a cost of doing business—the very profitable business of feeding fantasies to its viewers, as company executives and on-air personalities themselves acknowledged in private text messages following the 2020 election.

As gratifying as it might have been to see a jury pronounce Fox guilty—or to witness Maria Bartiromo, Tucker Carlson, and other purveyors of Trump's election lies compelled to make public acts of contrition—the settlement shows there can still be a price to pay for knowingly disseminating falsehoods. It also reveals what can happen when evidence comes to public light in the discovery process. As each new damning detail about the network's post-election deceptions emerged in advance of the expected trial, Fox's mendacity was further confirmed. Nor was Dominion the only victim of Fox's bad faith. Smartmatic USA, another voting-machine company, has its own $2.7 billion defamation case pending against the network and is demanding a full retraction of Fox's false reporting.

Dominion shrewdly built its public case on protecting and preserving the principles of the American democratic tradition—including the importance of journalistic integrity—yet ultimately this was a business dispute between two large companies with a lot of money at stake. Each made careful calculations in arriving at the terms of their settlement. Fox wanted to avoid the likely revelation of even more damaging information in a lengthy trial potentially culminating in a guilty verdict; Dominion wanted to avoid the possibility of a jury ruling against it, or, in the case of victory, being dragged through years of costly appeals by a corporation with $4 billion of cash on hand and a market capitalization of more than $17 billion.

The case did not fit neatly into the traditional understanding of defamation litigation in the United States, as Quinta Jurecic notes at *Lawfare* blog. Fox sought protection behind the so-called actual-malice standard established in the 1966 Supreme Court decision *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*. This standard requires plaintiffs to prove defamation by showing that a defendant intended to inflict harm by airing its claims. The justices worried then about "the possibility that a good faith critic of the government will be penalized for his criticism," something that "strikes at the very center of the constitutionally protected area of free expression." *Sullivan* has long been seen as a way to defend the press and ordinary citizens from being intimidated or silenced by the powerful, including public figures and elected officials. Not surprisingly, the decision has been targeted by Republicans and right-leaning organizations who feel that their critics are *too* well protected and would like the actual-malice standard to be lowered, if not eliminated. Florida governor Ron DeSantis is among those floating the idea that *Sullivan* should be revisited, and Supreme Court justices Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch have expressed openness to such challenges. One wonders what their position might have been had Fox gone on to win its case by invoking *Sullivan*—not at all outside the realm of possibility. Perhaps the high bar *Sullivan* sets for defamation suits is exactly where it should be, even if it invites abuse from bad actors like Fox.

Even with the record-setting payout, Fox isn't likely to change its behavior. The "journalistic" model it has pioneered and perfected is far too lucrative and remarkably durable—capable even of withstanding the forced departures of Bill O'Reilly and now Tucker Carlson. (The latter's unceremonious firing may have had less to do with election lies than with workplace misconduct and criticisms of Fox executives.) The network still wants to let its viewers know it "respects" them, as Fox chief executive Suzanne Scott put it in a text shortly after the election, so as to prevent their flight to outlets even friendlier to Trump. Of course, it's not really "respect" that viewers are being treated with, but a kind of contempt. Fox has hardly reported on the settlement with Dominion or on the pending case with Smartmatic, and prominent hosts continue to hawk conspiracies and to fan right-wing grievances. The former president, after a period of absence from Fox's airwaves, is back giving interviews. All this proves the limits of litigation, which is no substitute for political action. Saving American democracy will require much more from us than cheering on a lawsuit, or jeering as another Fox host gets his comeuppance. —*April 27, 2023*

Indefensible "Self Defense"

A sixteen-year-old boy in Kansas City was shot after he rang the wrong doorbell. A twenty-year-old woman in upstate New York was fatally shot after she and her friends pulled into the wrong driveway. Two cheerleaders in Texas were shot after one reportedly entered the wrong car in a parking lot. A six-year-old girl and her parents were shot in North Carolina because she raced to retrieve a basketball in a neighbor's yard.

Each of these incidents seems like a tragic aberration. But they were all in the news within a single week in April. In fact, such shootings are all too common, though they rarely make the headlines.

The more general problem is familiar. Gun violence is now the leading cause of death for children and teenagers in the United States, surpassing car crashes. In 2020, more than 4,300 young people died from firearm-related injuries—a 29 percent increase from 2019. Staggering numbers, but hardly surprising, given the arsenal of guns scattered across the country. According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, about three in ten adults say they own a gun, and four in ten say they live in a household with a gun.

These most recent incidents of innocent people dying after making what should have been trivial errors are another grim reminder of our collective failure to address gun violence. They also demonstrate our collective failure to push back against the "castle doctrine" and stand-your-ground laws, which offer expansive legal protections for people who use deadly force against anyone they perceive to be a threat.

Often referred to as a "make my day" law, the castle doctrine is rooted in centuries-old common law. Stand-your-ground laws are a more recent phenomenon. In 2005, the Florida state legislature, enthusiastically backed by the NRA, voted to extend self-defense protections from the home into the public arena. Gun-control advocates, prosecutors, and police chiefs all warned that the law would result in needless deaths. Seven years later, George Zimmerman, a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, shot seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was walking home from a local store. A jury later acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder.

Today, about thirty states have some form of stand-your-ground law, including Missouri, Texas, and North Carolina, where three of the four recent shootings occurred. The castle doctrine is currently in effect in New York state, the site of the fourth.

Rather than serving as a deterrent to crime, as proponents of the law maintain, such laws encourage a "shoot first, ask later" mentality that leads to vigilantism and increased gun violence. An Oxford University study estimates they account for seven hundred homicides per year. Such laws also apply unevenly to different racial groups. An analysis by the gun-control advocacy group Coalition to Stop Gun Violence found that the laws exacerbate racial inequalities and are more likely to be used as a successful defense in homicides involving a white shooter than a Black shooter.

What's more, such laws normalize gun violence and perpetuate a climate of suspicion and racial animus. They literally weaponize paranoia, and they promote a private arms race in a country already drowning in guns.

With gun reform effectively stalled in Congress, and with the Biden administration seemingly content with half measures, state legislatures need to reform or repeal these deadly self-defense laws that grant legal cover to gun owners who shoot their neighbors at the slightest provocation.

Last year, in between the mass shooting in Buffalo and the child massacre in Uvalde, we wrote in these pages that "gun violence is something no decent society can afford to get used to." But we *are* getting used to it, and now we are also getting used to the idea that one wrong turn could be fatal.

—Miles Doyle, April 27, 2023

A Bishop Chooses Prison

Exile or twenty-six years in jail: two months ago, Msgr. Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, the bishop of the Nicaraguan city of Matagalpa, faced that choice. He chose jail. Daniel Ortega, co-dictator of Nicaragua, was angered by the bishop's decision. Ortega hadn't considered the possibility that any of the 223 political prisoners he had chosen to deport would instead decide to stay.

Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, rule Nicaragua by decree. Their party, the Sandinistas, was once a revolutionary force; today, it is a vehicle for the ruling couple's cruelty. Msgr. Álvarez's choice amounted to an act of rebellion, even if it meant that he would remain under the dictators' control. A quick trial was arranged, and a corrupt judge read the charges: "Betrayal of the homeland," "undermining national integrity," and "spreading fake news."

During the trial, an agitated Ortega called the bishop's choice "absurd" and accused him of pride and, incredibly, of having chosen the more comfortable path. "He has been treated amazingly well," Ortega said. "I was in prison for seven years and I have never met…a prisoner who was treated in such a way." It's true that Álvarez has been spared El Chipote, an infamous jail where political prisoners sleep on concrete slabs, starve for weeks at a time, and are locked in dark rooms. But La Modelo, the fifty-year-old prison where the bishop is currently detained, is only a little better. One report describes it as having "obsolete plumbing"; its inmates are often

deprived of shoes and soap and live on a diet of rice and beans.

It's the bishop's open opposition to the regime that earned him Ortega's enmity. Last August, having already confined Álvarez to his episcopal residence for almost two weeks, Ortega transferred him to the capital, Managua, where he spent several months under house arrest. The bishop was then charged with inciting "acts of hatred" and "destabilizing" the state. What he had really done was denounce the government's crimes. Since crackdowns began in 2018—after mass anti-government protests broke out across the country—Nicaraguan police have shut down Catholic radio stations, jailed priests for political homilies, installed recording devices in churches, censored newspapers, shot activists, tortured prisoners, deported the Missionaries of Charity, exiled political opponents, outlawed outdoor religious processions (even during Holy Week)…it's a long list. Álvarez denounced all of it—in homilies and public statements and, last May, with a hunger strike.

Suddenly, on February 10, he and 222 other political prisoners were told that their citizenship had been revoked and that they would all be flown to the United States. Instead, the bishop chose to remain in Nicaragua, come what may. Ortega no doubt thought that he was ridding himself of a meddlesome priest; instead, he may have created a martyr.

In a March interview, Pope Francis called the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship "nasty" and "obscene" and compared it with those of Hitler and Lenin. Álvarez's choice, the pope said, was the choice "of witness." Dora María Téllez, a famous Sandinista guerrilla who fought alongside Ortega during the 1970s, was among those deported to the United States. She was a commander in the 1978 coup that put the Sandinistas in power. But her more recent break with Ortega, and above all her commitment to democracy, earned her solitary confinement and torture. Of Álvarez's decision, she said: "[Ortega] believes that people will kneel before him. And Monsignor Álvarez will not kneel. No matter where they throw him."

—Santiago Ramos

Running Dry

Deadline after deadline has passed, but the seven states that draw their water from the Colorado River system have yet to agree on the cuts required to save the fast-shrinking river. Despite a short reprieve delivered by this year's unusually wet winter, the river is still heavily over-allocated. Climate change and aridification guarantee that the problem won't resolve itself. The federal government has asked for a cut of up to 30 percent in water use as the river approaches "dead pool"—water levels too low to flow downstream from the reservoirs at the Hoover and Glen Canyon Dams. Reaching dead pool would threaten the water and electricity supply of California, Nevada, Arizona, and several Indian reservations.

While both Upper and Lower Basin states have been involved in the negotiations, the Biden administration has the power to impose cuts only on the three Lower Basin states, which draw their water from the reservoirs rather than directly from the river. The administration's preliminary recommendations propose various alternatives for how the water could be divided. One option would be to prioritize senior water rights, protecting California agriculture at the expense of Nevada and Arizona residents, who would receive almost no water after California had taken its share. Another option would be to impose more uniform cuts across all three states. Overriding senior water rights would invite lawsuits and raise prices on the quarter of the nation's food that comes from the region, as well as for all the dairy and meat from cows fed by the alfalfa grown there. But the administration has signaled its willingness to set aside longstanding rights to ensure that tribes and residents in the other states have access to clean water—a more urgent need than granting virtually limitless water to mega-farmers to grow whatever thirsty crops maximize their profits.

While much has been made of wasteful golf courses or swimming pools, the luxury excesses of urban and suburban areas are only a drop in the bucket: 80 percent of the water in the region is used for agriculture, and that's where the most significant changes must occur. For the remaining 20 percent, cities like Las Vegas provide a good model for water recycling and municipal regulations, such as banning grass lawns. Developers, meanwhile, must face the harsh reality that the desert cannot sustain infinite growth.

For farmers, a patchwork of solutions could provide partial relief even in the wake of water cuts. Replacing spray irrigation with subsurface drip irrigation could halve the amount of water needed to grow alfalfa—but right now, only 1 percent of farms use it, since it is more expensive and labor intensive to maintain. Some of the money dedicated to drought relief in the Inflation Reduction Act could be used to help farmers make the change. It could also be used to fix leaky irrigation canals damaged by land subsidence caused by the overuse of groundwater. Other kinds of irrigation used by Indigenous peoples could be effective for certain crops, and the government could offer farmers incentives to grow those crops—for example, tepary beans adapted to the desert, rather than almonds that require a gallon of water per nut. It's not impossible to maintain some farming in the desert. But it *is* impossible to continue farming the same way. We can no longer treat a finite water source as if it were infinite or allow massive corporations to use free water for water-intensive monocultures. As the comment period continues and states keep negotiating, the exact nature of the cuts remains undecided. But the need for those cuts is no longer up for debate.

—Isabella Simon

CATHLEEN KAVENY

Chasing the Unchaste

Do priests have a right to privacy?

In March 2023, the *Washington Post* detailed how a group of Catholic conservatives spent millions of dollars de-anonymizing mountains of data to identify priests who were using phone apps that facilitate sexual hookups, like Grindr and Tinder. The most public of the targets was Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, who was general secretary for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops when he was outed in such a sting a couple of years ago. This story reveals an ongoing problem for both priests and bishops.

Progressive Catholics were uncomfortable with the revelations. Michael Sean Winters said the sting was "creepy." James Martin, SJ, noted on Twitter that it targeted only gay priests rather than all the unchaste people who work for the Church. Both observations are true, but is there anything more to say about the ethics of the sting itself?

Conservatives defended the sting on moral grounds. But their moral analyses were largely consequentialist. R. R. Reno, the editor of *First Things*, emphasized the importance of promoting clerical sexual integrity. The stings provide "useful and important information." He analogized the sting to reporting a drunk priest you see stumbling out of a bar. Maybe—but only if you put a hidden camera monitored by the ecclesial vice squad at every bar within a hundred miles of his rectory. Francis X. Maier, the former speechwriter for Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, took a similarly consequentialist stance, fuming over the priests' violation of their promise to remain celibate. He also noted that the means used to detect the priests were not against the law and observed that, in any case, everyone is invading other people's digital privacy these days.

Illustration by David Sankey

This was ironic, given Maier's work as a pro-life activist. The fact that certain procedures are legal doesn't make them moral. And the fact that a practice is rampant doesn't mean that it is fit for Catholics. And as Reno surely would attest in other circumstances, we need to pay attention to the morality of the means, not just the morality of the ends we seek. So the question is this: Is it moral to spend millions of dollars to turn peoples' cell-phone data into a tracking device for wayward clerics?

One problem is the money spent on this surveillance project. Would it not have been better to devote this money to the corporal works of mercy? A defender could respond that the sting is a *spiritual* work of mercy, in that it permits the Church to identify and admonish the sinner. But does such an argument really work? In the Catholic tradition, admonishing a sinner presupposes a face-to-face relationship between the admonisher and the admonished, a relationship that is premised on equality in Christ. But the sting treats the unnamed people at the end of the data like targets, not like brothers in Christ. The process does not admit of equality, just as there can be no equality between a hunter and his prey.

Maier claims that priests who break their promises of celibacy don't have a right to privacy. This claim is distorted, both morally and theologically. Morally, it is putting the cart before the horse. You can only tell who's breaking those promises by violating that right. Theologically, the Church recognized some right to privacy for sinners by abandoning the requirement for public atonement in the fourth century.

The right to privacy may sometimes be exaggerated, and it can certainly be abused. But that doesn't mean it is not real. Freedom from the constant, prying eyes of other people is essential to the development and maintenance of a sense of selfhood. If we do not recognize the claim other people have to be free of our scrutiny, then we treat them as objects for study, manipulation, and destruction—not as human beings equal in dignity to ourselves.

Unless the bishops act decisively, their priests will become weapons and targets in the competing panopticons of the culture wars.

The sting distorts the relationship between the Catholics who fund and run it and the priests who fall within its ambit—which was potentially *all* priests. The moral danger to the self-appointed members of the purity committee is substantial. How does it affect their own relationship to the Church to see its priests as guilty of sexual sin until proven innocent? How does it affect their relationship with Christ to see themselves not as fellow sinners in need of redemption (even if one's own sins are of a different sort), but as self-appointed police officers and judges?

There is also a moral danger to the priests, and to those who might wish to become priests. Will the fact that they live their lives in a context of pervasive suspicion and scrutiny, including electronic scrutiny, crush their spirits and erode their freedom in Christ? How will such priests interact with parishioners? Will they see them as fellow sinners in need of redemption, or as potential spies? How will they structure their lives? Will this lead them to avoid some sins (especially sexual ones) more than others (say, gluttony and waste)? Will an anxious obsession with not being suspected of committing sexual sin make them more likely to ignore sins of omission in their lives, including the duty to reach out to those at the margins?

The bishops need to act decisively. If they do not, their priests will become weapons and targets in the competing panopticons of the culture wars. After all, if they put their minds to it, progressives can track and embarrass priests as easily as conservatives.

The bishops' first task is to distinguish morally legitimate from morally illegitimate ways of obtaining compromising information. Stumbling upon a priest on Grindr is different from de-anonymizing data. Their second task will be deciding how to handle illegitimately obtained information. Here, in my view, is where the Church might helpfully borrow from the state. The Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits "unreasonable" searches and seizures. It recognizes that unreasonable searches affect everyone—not just the guilty. But without enforcement, such a prohibition is no more than a paper tiger. Consequently, the provision is interpreted as preventing the government from introducing evidence obtained directly or indirectly from such a search into a criminal trial. The government is thereby disincentivized from conducting searches without a warrant, except in certain extreme circumstances. The bishops should adopt similar disincentives for lay sleuths. They should strongly condemn any violation of priestly privacy, and they should declare that they will not allow priests whose activities were discovered in an unethical manner to be targeted or punished. The only exception, in my view, should be activities involving minors.

Some might say that this approach goes too easy on priests who break their promises of celibacy. I disagree—just as I disagree with those who say the Fourth Amendment goes too easy on those who commit crimes. The point of the Fourth Amendment is not to say that committing crimes is okay. It is to say that in using its considerable power to chase criminals, the government must observe reasonable limits. If that is what members of a state bound together by earthly ties owe one another, consider how much stronger the obligations are among members of the Body of Christ.

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KAREN KILBY

Famine and the Living God

Letter from Kenya

"I believe in the living God." The bishop of Marsabit repeated this several times during our brief courtesy visit. Most strikingly, at one point he said "I believe in the living God, and I trust no one will die of this."

I met the bishop while on a visit to Northern Kenya. Marsabit is the largest of Kenya's forty-seven counties, but sparsely populated and therefore politically marginal. It is part of a region in East Africa currently experiencing an extraordinary drought, the worst in living memory—worse even than the drought that brought the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s.

Most of us haven't heard much about the crisis affecting Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Northern Kenya. This is partly because their governments don't want to declare a famine—it's not a good look for them. It is also because NGOs struggle to draw media attention to a slow-onset disaster, especially at a time when humanitarian interest has been so focused on Ukraine. In the past, one might have brought celebrities into a situation like this, and media interest would follow, but concerns about "white saviorism" have blocked that strategy. Since the '80s, communities in the region have developed their resilience, their capacity to survive difficult conditions, but the extraordinary severity of this drought—widely considered a consequence of climate change—has pushed past what they can manage. The effects of climate change, in other words, have wiped out progress made over four decades, and left the people worse off than before. It's a grim situation, and an absolutely unjust one. It is also very frightening.

I was visiting Marsabit with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), a British Catholic development agency, but I am a theologian rather than a development specialist. Perhaps this is why I found myself wrestling so much with the bishop's words: "I believe in the living God, and I trust no one will die of this." That no one will die seemed to me, unfortunately, extremely unlikely. And yet I sensed that there was something right in what he said. To hear him affirm his trust was, I felt in some obscure way, to be taught something of what faith itself means.

Before stopping off to see the bishop, we had spent much of the day touring an extraordinarily parched and dusty landscape, almost a moonscape. Again and again we'd seen the bodies of dead camels and donkeys. There's something haunting in the sight of a camel that has perished from drought. Across the day, we'd met several groups of pastoralists and heard their stories, their anxiety, their sense of shock. In losing their animals they have lost their source of milk, meat, cash, savings, and employment. What can you do when the herds have all died?

Just as important were the things we *didn't* see. There were no convoys of trucks bringing relief. We didn't see the logos of the various humanitarian agencies. Our guide that day, a man born into these pastoralist communities and now head of Marsabit diocese's humanitarian wing, told us of a major mismatch between the scale of need and the level of resources. He spoke very positively of a longer-term project involving Catholic Relief Services, and for the immediate crisis there had been some support from CAFOD and its German counterpart, Misereor, but nothing like enough. This is why the part of my brain that computes odds believed—and continues to believe—that people will indeed die from this famine.

The bishop, of course, knew much better than I did the reality of the situation. One could sense the weight of it in what he said, the way it pressed upon him. Wherever his affirmation of trust came from, I cannot believe it was ignorance or some lazy optimism. Perhaps what he said was rooted in the love and connection to the particular people and communities in his diocese. To him they are not examples of a general truth—sometimes there are famines, and when relief doesn't come, people die. For him they are real, concrete, familiar, particular, beloved individuals and families and villages. For those whom we know and love, we keep hope open as long as we possibly can, refusing to accommodate ourselves to a terrible probabili-

The carcass of an elephant killed by the effects of worsening drought in Mwatate, Kenya, November 2022

CNS PHOTO/THOMAS MUKOYA, REUTERS

ty. We continue to search the horizon, to hope and pray for things to take an unexpected twist.

And perhaps his response was also rooted in another reality he knew very well, which is that relief could perfectly well be brought to these communities. Their suffering and death is not inevitable. There is a paved road to Marsabit. As we had travelled along it the day before, we passed giant polytunnels in which Kenya grows food and flowers for export to Europe. If people in Marsabit and all across the horn of Africa die of famine, it will not be the result of some natural evil—just a sad outcome of the way the weather works. It will be because of actions not taken. It will be the result of a lack of interest where there should have been interest, a lack of attention, a lack of care.

Sometimes I teach my students about the understanding of evil as privation. Augustine was its classic proponent in his rejection of Manichaean dualism. On this view, evil is not a distinctive thing in itself, some separate substance, but a lack, an absence of what should be. To my students the notion of evil as privation can seem unimpressive, too weak and tame to capture what is so dramatically wrong with things. When I think about the likely outcome of our own and the world's absence of attention to this crisis in East Africa, though, I am not so sure.

I, too, believe in the living God, or I try to. And so I hope against hope that God's Spirit will stir up something in our hearts, and I hope against hope that the bishop of Marsabit will be right after all.

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Readers can donate to famine relief in the Horn of Africa through the Catholic Relief Services.

Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, in Kraków

CNS FILE PHOTO

PIOTR H. KOSICKI

Poland's Memory Offensive

A campaign to protect the reputation of John Paul II challenges NATO and silences victims of sex abuse.

Apparently, it is in NATO's interest to prevent public discussion of Pope John Paul II's role in covering up child abuse. At any rate, this was the message sent out into the world by Poland's right-wing government in early March.

Not three weeks after President Joe Biden's second state visit to Poland inside of a year, Poland's foreign ministry issued a "summons" to U.S. Ambassador Mark Brzezinski regarding an alleged campaign "to weaken the Polish Republic's ability to fend off a potential enemy as well as its resistance to threats." The so-called campaign began with a documentary film aired on March 6 on Poland's TVN, whose principal owner is actually Warner Bros. Discovery. TVN is well known for its opposition to the current government—in fact, given the government's stranglehold on state-subsidized as well as religious media, TVN has effectively become Poland's *only* independent TV network.

The film, *Franciszkańska 3* (named for the street address of Karol Wojtyła's residence as Archbishop of Kraków), offers detailed testimony and investigative reporting showing that the future pope covered up child molestation by priests in his archdiocese. Mere discussion of this testimony, according to Poland's current minister of culture, is tantamount both to an "attack on the Polish national interest" and to "hybrid warfare" that will weaken Poland's ability to fulfill its NATO obligations and to support its neighbor, Ukraine.

Biden is only the second Roman Catholic president in U.S. history, and the first sitting Catholic U.S. president to visit Poland. (John F. Kennedy visited as a senator.) His February trip to Warsaw overlapped with Ash Wednesday, yet rather than attend Mass publicly in the company of Polish officials, Biden attended a private Mass in his suite at the Marriott. The choice of celebrant is telling: it was not a bishop, but an Augustinian monk who is former head of the Polish Council for Christian-Jewish dialogue and is closely tied to Poland's storied but rapidly dwindling movement of liberal Catholic intellectuals.

Biden has indicated that his private meeting with John Paul II in 1980, when Biden was a senator, was among the highlights of his life. But now, visiting that pontiff's homeland, a country that

ranks, demographically and historically, among the most Catholic in the world, on an important day in the Catholic liturgical calendar, the deeply Catholic U.S. president avoided any direct contact with Poland's Catholic hierarchy.

Biden has faced his share of prominent criticism from U.S. bishops, not just for his commitment to a woman's right to choose but also for his support for equal rights for LGBTQ citizens—criticism that Pope Francis has rebuffed by calling the president a "good Catholic." In Poland, the problem is that uncritical veneration of (St.) Pope John Paul II has become a matter of state policy, if not an outright civic loyalty test. When the TVN documentary aired, Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski of Kraków described it as a "second assassination attempt" on John Paul II, a campaign of "Satanic lies" based only on materials of the former Communist secret police. This even though the documentary's allegations are not principally anchored in police reports and denunciations, but in the future pope's own correspondence and the personal testimony of abuse victims. This is testimony that has been consistently silenced by the Polish hierarchy.

To be fair, the Catholic Church worldwide has confronted child abuse within its ranks only belatedly, partially, and amid a whirlwind of obfuscation. Even serious scholarly histories of the Catholic Church have barely grazed the surface (a crucial exception is Notre Dame provost John McGreevy's authoritative new survey of modern Catholic history). The Polish pope himself was at the heart of this problem, amassing as he did throughout his twenty-seven-year pontificate a record of protecting the Church as an institution at the expense of justice for victims and punishment for perpetrators. Too often, the word "mercy" justified repeated transfers of recidivists from one diocese to another, one school to another. Films and investigative reporting have amply documented the abuses and their concealment; in the United States, 2015's *Spotlight* and the haunting 2012 documentary *Mea Maxima Culpa* stand out.

In Poland, uncritical veneration of (St.) Pope John Paul II has become a matter of state policy, if not an outright civic loyalty test.

In Poland, however, the government and the episcopal hierarchy march in lockstep to prevent a serious national reckoning with child abuse by Catholic priests—because that reckoning would have to start with Poland's most famous export to the world, Pope John Paul II.

2023 is an election year in Poland; as in so many other countries, the politics of the past decade has demonstrated that fomenting culture wars electrifies the base. Despite its international leadership on Ukraine and its attempts to broaden its constituency with social-benefits programs, Poland's right-wing government is not assured of victory. That being said, its sudden militancy in defense of John Paul II may be one of the most egregious examples of manipulating national memory that twenty-first-century Poland has seen yet. On March 9, at the initiative of Poland's minister of culture, the lower house of Parliament voted on a resolution "in defense of John Paul II's good name." The scene was spectacular: scores of MPs cast votes while holding poster-sized votive images of John Paul II, after which the house's speaker delivered an oration condemning "the foreign-owned television station operating in Poland" that aired the documentary, equating TVN with "the worst years of communist propaganda." A critical center-right MP fired back, "You are trying to sign John Paul II up for PiS [Poland's current ruling party], not to defend him," for which he was shouted down as an anti-Polish "Judas." Two days after this legislative spectacle, Polish president Andrzej Duda declared that the "memory of Saint John Paul II represents an integral element of our national heritage and is part of the Polish national interest, which we must defend with absolute devotion and decisiveness, without consideration for the consequences. This is our civic, patriotic, and historic responsibility."

Yet what makes John Paul II such a powerful standard-bearer for Poland's global standing goes far beyond national politics. The Law and Justice party's parliamentary speaker underscored, after all, that the documentary came from a "foreign-owned"—i.e. not really Polish—TV station. This is a tactic well known from Vladimir Putin's playbook for shutting down Russian civil society under the pretext that its institutions were serving foreign masters. Summoning the U.S. ambassador to the Polish Foreign Ministry three weeks after the country hosted President Biden wasn't just about Polish history or Polish elections, but about Poland's role in the defense of Ukraine. The takeaway message: an open and frank discussion about John Paul II's past not only threatens the national interest, but also acts as "hybrid warfare" to weaken Poland's effectiveness as NATO's eastern bulwark.

We don't yet know what Ambassador Brzezinski thought of all this, but two things are clear. First: bittersweet as it must have been for him personally, President Biden was right to keep his Catholicism private in the homeland of a pope who was an important source of inspiration for him. To do otherwise would be to lend ammunition to the fundamentalist faction guiding Polish memory politics. Second: proclaiming itself the international defender of the good name of John Paul II—in many respects, the defining pope of the Cold War—in an era of renewed conflict with Russia is such a strong card that it apparently entitles the Polish government to renew its longstanding attempts to silence critical media outlets. Completely lost amid this militant grandstanding are the voices of victims of child abuse by Catholic clergy—voices once again silenced in the face of realpolitik.

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GARY DORRIEN

'The Gospel is a Social Gospel'

Rev. Traci Blackmon and prophetic Black faith

The idea that churches must be involved in political struggles for justice and peace to be faithful to the Gospel is disputed in every generation. Those who affirm it are always a minority. Walter Rauschenbusch, the Baptist icon of the Social Gospel movement, refused for most of his career to employ the term "Social Gospel." There is no legitimately Christian *non*-social Gospel, he protested; why should he concede otherwise by adding a redundant adjective? Rauschenbusch bowed to convention only near the end of his life, in 1917, when he lamented that a non-social Gospel was the norm; those, like him, who dissented from that norm had to wear a special name.

This issue played out very similarly in Black churches, despite all that was different in the founding and history of Black American churches. The Black Church was born liberationist, hearing a message of freedom and equality in the Gospel that was not what was preached to enslaved Black people. Black churches had to deal with the hostility and oppression of the dominant white society, lacking any choice in the matter. But even in Black churches, those who preached social-justice activism were always a minority, even in the heyday of the civil-rights movement.

The Black social gospel paved the way for the civil-rights movement by raising up a luminous line of prophetic spiritual leaders, providing the social-justice theology that the movement preached and sang. Today, the tradition of prophetic Black faith that called for a new abolitionism in the 1880s and fueled the civil-rights movement remains the moral epicenter of the social-justice movement in the United States. It sustains this standing on the strength of its unique capacity to elevate compelling spiritual leaders in every generation. Last October I wrote about one of them for *Commonweal*: U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock. United Church of Christ pastor Traci Blackmon, the subject of this article, and Disciples of Christ pastor William J. Barber II, the subject of my next article, stand out in a crowded field.

Blackmon grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1960s, integrating an exclusive private high school with her presence. From fourth grade to college she was the only Black student in the room; meanwhile, from fourth grade to seminary she didn't have a single Black teacher. In her sophomore year of high school, she toured Ivy League schools; in her junior year the tour consisted of elite Southern schools. She applied to Princeton, Yale, Swarthmore, Duke, Emory, Vanderbilt, and Birmingham-Southern, and was admitted to all. A Harvard recruiter came to her school; Blackmon, feeling good about her record, thought *why not*—Harvard had not appealed to her during her sophomore tour, but why pass up the pitch?

Blackmon went to hear the recruiter, who told the crowd that Harvard was extremely selective, the odds of admission were terrible, but good luck. Blackmon felt nauseated, not planning to meet with the recruiter. But at the reception he headed straight for her. She listened with all the politeness she could muster as he told her not to worry about her grades. If she maintained a C average at this high school, she was sure to be admitted to Harvard. Blackmon was devastated. This guy knew nothing about her—nothing of her skills, achievements, awards, grades, or SAT scores. All he knew was that she was Black at an elite school, so she should ignore the admission speech. Blackmon absorbed that nothing she could ever achieve at Harvard would make this recruiter see her. Her race alone disqualified her from being a *real* Harvard student; she could only be a pretend one. She knew that Harvard didn't deserve her, yet the episode stung her. Many years later she recalled: "The words of that arrogant, presumptuous recruiter wounded my heart but he did not shape my identity. Nothing about me is defined by that moment." She passed up the other elite schools too, enrolling instead at nearby Birmingham-Southern College.

There she earned a bachelor of science degree in nursing in 1985 and embarked on a twenty-five-year career as a registered nurse. In her early nursing career, Blackmon focused on cardiac care; later, she focused on mobile health care in underserved communities. She developed a mobile faith-based outreach program called "Healthy Mind, Body, and Spirit" that changed health outcomes in impoverished areas. To Blackmon, health care was very much a ministry, but it also drew her into African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church ministry, which led her to seminary. For nine years she served in a variety of ministerial assignments in the AME Church, eventually studying at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, from which she graduated in 2009 with a master of divinity degree. That year, she transferred to the United Church of Christ (UCC) to facilitate her call as the first female pastor in the 159-year history of Christ the King UCC.

Christ the King was a large building in Florissant, Missouri, with a proud history and very few members. It was struggling to keep the lights on. It managed to pay the required income of a UCC pastor only because it had some longtime members living in wealthier neighborhoods who still made the drive to Florissant. Blackmon said this was not a sustainable model, or anything with which she could identify. If the congregation was going to survive, it

REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Rev. Traci Blackmon speaks to a crowd in St. Louis, Missouri, May 2019.

had to become a church of its poor Black community, not a relic of its white past propped up by suburbanites. Blackmon developed neighborhood service programs that did not require church membership. The church grew modestly and she felt encouraged.

On August 9, 2014, Blackmon got a phone call from someone who told her that in Ferguson, three miles away, an unarmed eighteen-year-old Black man had been gunned down in the street by police and was lying prone on the pavement.

Michael Brown's body lay uncovered on the street for four hours. His blood poured onto the pavement. Blackmon plunged into the explosion of grief, rage, trauma, and violence that erupted in Ferguson. She spoke to the moment, decrying the eagerness of white Americans to react hysterically to the presence of a teenage Black man. She stressed that many had been killed like Brown. Two more—Ezell Ford and Kajieme Powell—were killed shortly afterward only a few miles from the site of Brown's death.

Why did Ferguson spark a historic eruption? Blackmon believed it was Brown's blood oozing for hours on the street, making a statement about the value that America places on Black life. She said Brown's blood exposed the eagerness of white Americans to regard a Black teenager as an "other" to be feared. His blood displayed "the pervasive assumption of guilt that is the black man's burden in America." It cried out against the racism that criminalizes and dehumanizes Black bodies. It unveiled the chasm "that exists between a disenfranchised young generation and a disconnected church." It showed how race, poverty, and hopelessness intersect on American streets. It provided "needed commentary on the self-mutilating, self-annihilating behaviors that have infected our communities of color." Above all, Blackmon said, the blood of Michael Brown exposed the insidious effects of racism "that are intrinsic to the very fiber of our nation's being."

Blackmon was a beacon during a period when many clergy fretted about the hard things that Black Lives Matter said about church leaders. To her, there was no question about showing up and bearing witness. She was going to do it, and who she was had been settled long ago. She said she had never known the Gospel outside of justice work. Justice work is essential to the Gospel, so showing up at Ferguson was part of her ministry, not something extra. She found that being a UCC pastor was a huge advantage in the Ferguson moment. Blackmon called pastors across the entire gamut of local Christian and religious communities. It occurred to her that two hundred pastors from many different denominations would make a greater impact than two hundred members of a big downtown congregation.

At the first such gathering at Christ the King Church, the first thing Blackmon did was ask the clergy to stand. The sanctuary was packed with them. Blackmon reflected that only her scrappy, small, liberal congregation and

denomination could have convened this diverse crowd of white mainline Protestants, Black mainline Protestants, Black and Hispanic Pentecostals and Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, gay and gender-nonconforming congregations, white Pentecostals and Evangelicals, Unitarian Universalists, and others. It was the small, open, and affirming UCC that made these disparate groups feel welcome and safe.

Her speaking calendar exploded. The UCC was thrilled to be associated with Blackmon, and President Obama appointed her to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based Neighborhood Partnerships for the White House. Blackmon said the UCC is made for fights—fighting for justice, love, compassion, and equality. Her high position in the quintessential liberal denomination and her support of its liberal views on sexuality earned her a tag she hated—"progressive Christian." Sometimes she ripped it off just after being introduced: "One of my pet peeves is when people describe me or others that I work with as being left, or being progressive, or being liberal. I don't preach a progressive Gospel. I preach *the* Gospel. The Gospel is progressive. The Gospel is a social Gospel. The gospel is a liberating Gospel. And if, when you preach it, it does not do those things, it is not the Gospel."

Donald Trump won the White House, and Blackmon shuddered at church audiences that just wanted to talk about Trump, Trump, Trump. Yes, some things must be said about Trump, she said. But the most important thing is that his presidency did not come from nowhere. Trump is a product of four hundred years of racism and a half-century of cunningly racist politics geared to destroy the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

On August 11 and 12, 2017, neo-Nazis and white nationalists staged a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, beginning with a march through the campus of the University of Virginia. Local and visiting clergy held a counter-protest worship service at St. Paul's Memorial Church, across the street from the university rotunda. Blackmon preached a barnburner of a sermon to an overflowing, high-spirited crowd. Three hundred white supremacists, marching two by two, approached the church with torches, chanting, "Jews will not replace us! Blood and soil! You will not replace us! White lives matter!" There were flyers calling for a race war and flyers declaring that the white nationalists had come to take back their country. No one knew if the mob would invade the sanctuary, where the crowd sheltered in place, fearing the worst, until the mob finally returned to Nameless Field. Blackmon, on MSNBC, replied to the chants: "Are you kidding me? And this president wants to talk about revising history? Read some history. Black people built this country." From Charlottesville, she traveled to a small evangelical college in Nebraska, not realizing that she was traumatized. Blackmon discovered this only when she found herself demanding to be moved to a hotel containing at least one or two Black people. She couldn't stay in her room or go to sleep surrounded only by white people.

Often she spoke and marched alongside William J. Barber II. Every week on the road, someone chastised Blackmon, instructing her that the church should not be involved in politics. Sometimes, they opined that her approach to her job crossed the line. She replied that the line was real to her; she didn't want the church to take positions on how people should vote. But the teaching of Jesus is quite specifically political, she argued. An apolitical Jesus is a fantasy or some kind of cover-up. When faced with a choice between Jesus and any American convention, she took Jesus every time. On the road, when teamed up with Barber, she has to say it differently if Barber gets the question first, because Barber has the same answer.

Blackmon contrasts the light of Epiphany that shines in the darkness and compels all persons forward in love with the fear-mongering hatred that erupted on Epiphany 2020—January 6. She watched in "horror and disbelief," she recalls, as insurrectionist vigilantes stormed the gates of the Capitol, scaled walls, built gallows, and inflicted injuries and deaths, trying to thwart the peaceful transition of power, all of it spurred on by Trump's "inflammatory lies" and the many public figures who endorse them. The vigilantes are gaining, she warns. Nineteen states have passed thirty-four laws restricting voting rights. On the other hand, twenty-five states have enacted fifty-four laws that expand voting access. January 6, 2020, was atrocious, to be sure, but on January 6, 2022, tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators gathered across the nation in more than 350 vigils.

Blackmon urges rally crowds and sanctuary gatherings to reject the current flood of legislation to ban books and teaching on America's racial history: "It is the *not* seeing things through the lens of race that makes privilege invisible to whites." "If we remain silent at a time such as this," she says, "deliverance will arise from some other place but we, my friends, will be lost. Jesus stands at the door of everyone, and knocks, and hopes to gain entrance but also requires that we change, that we repent, that we do better." Everything, she says, that has tried to kill her has failed, because love never dies: "Redemption is possible when we live out love. Let us learn from the tragedies of our past and move toward the light within each of us fueled by the everlasting power of love."

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NOT GOOD COMPANY

Elizabeth Poreba

Plastics are on my mind, floods. Any pause
in the conversation, I come up with some
Sorry Business, Aboriginal term for mourning.
Doleful, that's me, no small talk, not unpleasant,
but my idea of intimate is apt to be some
terrible statistic. I can't say Susan
is feeling better or Eileen's arm is mending
without adding but she has a preexisting condition
or but she's got no insurance (as if getting the facts
straight makes it all right). I've got no banter,
I'm all judgement and edges, an edgy white lady
wondering what to do, what to do next
as in *Jesus is coming, look busy*.

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Reckoning With Birth

Jennifer Banks

What would happen if we took our natality as seriously as our mortality?

Birth is humanity's greatest under-explored subject. I had that thought over thirteen years ago, when I first gave birth and realized how very little in my upbringing and education had prepared me for the experience. I believe it still, although I have come to see how birth has been explored more extensively than I first imagined. Humans have thought about and written about birth from the beginning of recorded history, from ancient creation stories to medieval theological tracts, from philosophic manuals to obstetrics textbooks, and from nineteenth-century novels to twenty-first-century memoirs.

Look back at the earliest written sources and there birth is. In creation myths from ancient Egypt to ancient Greece, and from ancient India, Africa, and the Arctic to Indigenous communities in the Americas, the mystery of human birth was probed as a sub-narrative in the creation of the cosmos. Where did humans come from? How and why were they born? What is this creation they are a part of? The range and creativity of the answers people have come up with are astounding. The first humans are born from dismembered gods (Greek) or from the earth (Israelite). They emerged out of an ear of corn (Maya) or they were vomited out of a lonely god's mouth (Congolese). They are born by sex or without sex, with mothers or, more often, without any women at all.

Doctors carry a newborn baby in a hospital.

JAVIER VALENZUELA/EYEEM

But despite birth's recurring presence in the written record, and despite rumors of some long-lost matriarchal age and society that privileged a feminine divine and saw birth as the primary axis of imaginative, political, and social power, there is little evidence that birth was ever the foundational experience that any culture organized itself around. Just as women have been seen, in Simone de Beauvoir's phrasing, as "the second sex," birth has a sense of secondariness about it; it has long hovered in death's shadow, quietly performing its underrecognized labor. Death has been humanity's central defining experience, its deepest existential theme, more authoritative somehow than birth, and certainly more final. It is a given that humans are mortal creatures who must wrestle with their mortality, that death is the horizon no one can avoid, despite constant attempts at evasion and postponement and despite the recurring fantasy of immortality. Birth, meanwhile, is what recedes into a hazy background, slipping back past the limits of memory, existing in that forgotten realm where uteruses, blood, sex, pain, pleasure, and infancy constellate.

Perhaps it's a survival instinct: from the time one is born, death becomes the most pressing concern. How to avoid death, how to deal with it as an inevitability—these are urgent questions. Different traditions have defined a range of ways of confronting death and integrating that encounter into one's daily life. Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca spoke of death's omnipresence in our lives: "From the time you are born, you are being led to death." Our deaths are a point fixed by Fate; we cannot predict that point and we cannot control it. Accepting death and learning how to die were hailed by Seneca as paths to ultimate freedom. It is our love of life, he believed, our attachment to living, that holds us in bondage. "Study death always," he instructed. "It takes an entire lifetime to learn how to die."

Those who philosophize properly, Plato asserted centuries before Seneca, are those who practice death and dying. In the Christianity that matured alongside such Greek and Roman influences, the crucifix would overshadow the manger as the central symbol of liturgical worship, with Christ's death and resurrection accruing more theological significance in most communities than Mary's miraculous birthing. Celibacy and an otherworldly asceticism would be recommended for those on the fast track to salvation; the end was imminent, many early Christians believed, and true seekers should seek not to perpetuate the human race, but to be reborn into God's kingdom. "Remember to keep death daily before your eyes," St. Benedict advised a faithful flock of celibate monastics in the medieval period.

Or, as Buddhists have insisted for millennia: to be born is to be chained to endless rounds of human suffering. The consequence of birth is death, a Buddhist maxim asserts, and the renunciant's goal is to escape from this hellish cycle, to gain enough insight into the nature of reality so that at death he or she is freed from birth once and for all. One ancient Buddhist text, the *Sūtra on Entry into the Womb*, describes the uterus as a place where a body is trapped "amidst a mud of feces and urine…unable to breathe." The text is unambiguous in its perspective on birth: "I do not extol the production of a new existence even a little bit; nor do I extol the production of a new existence for even a moment. Why? The production of a new existence is suffering."

By the twentieth century, these philosophic and theological traditions would be reimagined by artists like Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who believed that "the aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul." And by the twenty-first century, death was "having a moment," an *Atlantic* reporter declared, as millennials joined forces with aging baby boomers in the global death-acceptance movement, creating "death cafés" and "death salons" where people could gather to discuss their mortality while sipping craft beers, eating cupcakes decorated with tombstones, and listening to presentations by hipster morticians.

But where are the birth cafés? And what hipster would ever be seen there? Faced with the resounding, final clap of death, what claims can birth have to existential, theological, or moral significance? To artistic or imaginative grandeur? To political importance? Does it really matter that, or how, we were born, that someone carried us in a uterus and then ejected us into the world through a tight canal headed downward toward the earth, or that we emerged from an abdomen, or that we grew in some test tube? What was that process? Where did it begin and where did it end? How did it shape us and how did it transform the people and places we were born into? What is the place of birth in the widest and deepest human story one might tell? And what does it mean that the greatest power humans have had—the power to create another human being—has been relegated in nearly all time periods and all places to a secondary status, a task to be performed by an underclass defined by their gender?

I've asked these questions obsessively for over a decade. Birth often felt so huge and untamed, so morally dense and so imaginatively rich, that it continually overwhelmed all human attempts at describing or controlling it. But I've wondered what human life would look like if the poets, sages, intellectuals, and political leaders had made statements more like these: "From the time we are born, we are being shaped by birth." "Study birth always; it takes an entire lifetime to come to terms with our having been born." "Keep birth daily before your eyes." "Birth is evidence of our freedom." "The fundamental purpose of art is to process the strange, painful, and miraculous experience of childbirth." Imagine what the world would look like if we humans understood ourselves as natal creatures who throughout our lives, whether we like it or not, need to wrestle with our own *natality*.

I came across the word "natality" shortly after my first child was born. I was in my early thirties working as an editor at a university press about an hour up the coast from where I lived. Each morning I'd drop my daughter off at a small, cramped daycare, passing her into the arms of another woman. She'd wail as I walked down a corridor lined with finger-paint smudges on colorful paper, out through the heavy double doors and into the crowded parking lot. Fresh from the rapture, alive with birth's dizzying intensities, I'd drive alone up I-95, past factories and smokestacks, supermarkets and fast-food chains, hugging the coast and gripping the wheel with a silent maternal fury. A limb was missing. Who was she, back there with that other woman? And who was I now? What had just happened? I wasn't the person I had been. I thought the things that many new mothers think after giving birth: Why did no one tell me what this was like? Why did no one prepare me? Where was birth in all those books I've read so voraciously since childhood? An hour up the coast I'd go, into the outer world of meetings, conferences, opinions, and ideas. I'd park my car and walk to my office, sit down, and begin reading submissions from the world's leading experts on various subjects. There were books on just about everything, it seemed. Everything except birth.

And then, there it was: "natality." One strange word, suddenly appearing in a book proposal I received from a philosopher who was writing on childhood. The term, the philosopher said, had been coined by Hannah Arendt, one of the most celebrated and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century. "Natality" conveys the idea that birth as a beginning represents, in Arendt's words, "the supreme capacity of man," a capacity inherent in human life that is the "miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin." Because we all were born, Arendt believed, we are always all capable of beginning again, of starting something new through each human action—the most prized of capabilities, in Arendt's estimation. These definitions had an immediate, powerful resonance, the philosopher said, because Arendt articulated them after fleeing Nazi Germany as a childless Jew.

The author casually mentioned natality and then moved on. But the word stuck with me. *Natality?* Familiar words lurked within it—"natal," "native," "nature," "nativity," "nation"—and yet "natality" itself had an alien ring. "Natality" is in the dictionary, I discovered, but usually with a definition as brief as "1. birthrate." But Arendt wasn't speaking about statistics. Her natality planted itself in my imagination with all its foreignness and stayed with me, flowering in unexpected ways over the next thirteen years. In a world bedeviled by destructive tendencies, Arendt's creative and democratic approach to birth, her entirely worldly and simultaneously miraculous understanding of natality, had a strong, subversive appeal. In her own life, Arendt *chose* not to have children; natality was not pro-natalism, not an argument for why women should give birth or become mothers. But she understood that while we may not choose birth, birth has already chosen us.

I clung particularly to this challenging insight of hers: that it is not enlightened wisdom to doubt human natality, or to argue against birth's crucial role in human life. It's a sign, rather, that one is ripe for totalitarian control. Today, celebrating birth can seem like an oblivious denial of just how dire our political, social, and ecological reality is. But Arendt saw birth and our engagement with it as a deep, direct encounter with reality in all its materiality, rather than as an evasion of it. Totalitarian leaders, she wrote, know neither birth nor death and "do not care whether they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born." They take power when their subjects have stopped caring too. Totalitarianism thrives "when the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world, is destroyed." Each new thing we add to the world is another birth; our having been born is what guarantees us the ability to act, to work as agents in our societies. Once that creativity, as she defined it—birth, politics, action, people coming together to create new lives and new realities—had been completely extinguished, you had a mass society of atomized individuals who could be completely coerced into doing anything their leaders ordered. They had lost touch with reality, a reality that included the fact that they had all once been born and that this birth was evidence of their inherent, miraculous creativity. "Ideologies," she wrote, "are never interested in the miracle of being."

Despite Arendt's fame, "natality" never made it far outside academia. It was virtually ignored by everyone other than specialists, and there is still no single, alternative word to express for birth what "mortality" expresses for death: how birth shapes all human life, defining its limits and its possibilities. Medical advancements have revolutionized birth over the past century, and a simultaneous explosion of writing and research about childbirth has been published in novels, poems, academic studies, how-to books, and memoirs across the globe. But birth remains a niche topic, a singular event relevant only to those experiencing it immediately.

Most people who have spent time with birth admit its seismic power, either positive or negative. But they often lack the language to articulate what it is or how it works. Birth is beyond language, people tell me, too mysterious and contradictory to be captured fully in words. Even as birth is ubiquitous now—splashed on the covers of magazines, dramatized in reality TV shows, and graced with its own product lines—it remains somehow shrouded in silence, exiled at the farthest reaches of what can acceptably be talked about in polite company. And so I witness them, mothers gathered in private, sharing birth stories the way veterans share war stories, like a secret upon which a society depends but which lingers in its shadows.

In the twenty-first century, birth remains unspeakable not only because of its graphic physicality, but also because of its thorough domestication—its reputed role in conserving a mainstream, normative order, one controlled largely by men. Feminism grew up in the twentieth century partially through various women's radical disavowal of a traditional sexual politics that used birth as the key engine for women's subordination. A woman who wanted to do anything of significance in this life needed a "room of one's own," as Virginia Woolf famously put it, not a house overrun with children. Simone de Beauvoir went further, writing, "Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity."

Brilliant, radical, second-wave feminist Shulamith Firestone agreed with this point, arguing that women live "at the continual mercy of their biology—menstruation, menopause, and 'female ills,' constant painful childbirth, wetnursing and care of infants, all of which made them dependent on males… for physical survival." It wasn't just men who were to blame. It was nature itself. The biological division of labor had turned women into birthers and that division marked the beginnings of all class and caste systems. It was the first inequality, and it led to "psychosexual distortions" that humanity is still wrestling with. Firestone imagined a cybernetic future in which technology would take over childbearing and the work of raising children would be distributed across a society's members. Artificial wombs would release women from the tyranny of nature.

Birth was understood as a problem by many leading voices in the movement, and sometimes their critiques of birth have overshadowed the complex and even unparalleled richness in birth found by many self-described feminists. The feminist critiques came as a needed corrective, and they deserved to be heard. Many women, after all, had died in childbirth since time immemorial. Women were given little agency or credit when it came to birth, but they were forced to deal with the full weight of its consequences. Expectations about birth had essentialized women according to a set of often oppressive ideas about gender, leaving childless women at the margins.

The easiest way around birth's many conundrums was to avoid it altogether. Other twentieth-century movements made the same recommendation on different grounds, adding fuel to the flames of feminist critiques of birth. A global population-control movement, for instance, sounded the alarm about humanity's increasing numbers. There are just too many people, Paul R. Ehrlich argued in his bestselling book *The Population Bomb* (1968). He believed we were birthing our way into extinction. Mass famine was on the near horizon. "Hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death," he anxiously predicted. And not only people. As environmental scientists have painfully illustrated, humankind is a destructive species, a threat to biodiversity. One of the major ways individuals can limit their carbon imprint, protecting other species, is by not reproducing.

By the twenty-first century, giving birth was not looking like a great option in many parts of the world. Having a child would limit one's career opportunities and drain one's

Birth, like democratic politics, challenges us with otherness, with the putting aside of oneself to make room for another person.

finances. Birth would hurt the environment and might entail one's participation in gender inequalities. It would be a selfish act, some argued, in a world with millions of orphans. Self-described "BirthStrikers" gathered into a small movement, refusing to have children and expressing their terror at the apocalyptic future any children might face.

Natality rates are now at record lows. About 44 percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine who don't already have children say they don't plan on having children at any point in the future; most of them simply don't want kids, they report, while about a quarter of them cite medical reasons and about 14 percent cite financial concerns. Rates have fallen across classes and age groups, among the native-born and immigrants alike. In the United Kingdom, fertility rates in 2020 dropped to about a child and a half per woman, a record low. Global fertility rates likewise plummeted from the 1950s on, with wealthy G7 nations Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan joining the United States and the United Kingdom at the head of the pack.

The declines may be a natural response to positive developments, including the fact that people in these countries are living longer and exercising more control over their reproductive lives. But they are accompanied by troubling and not unrelated trends: growing inequality and loneliness, rising suicide rates, fewer social services, greater political polarization, the spread of false narratives and propaganda campaigns, political setbacks for women, the stalled campaigns for racial justice, and the erosion of democratic norms. These phenomena all point to a profound isolation at the heart of modern life, a pulling back from a shared, embodied, and committed life with other people. Birth, like democratic politics, challenges us with otherness, with the putting aside of oneself to make room for another person, and with the challenges of difference and plurality.

The critiques of birth are not easily dismissed; without them, it is hard to imagine a different and more just social order. The negativity toward birth has had costs, however. It has historically alienated many ordinary women from the feminist movement and stymied a more systematic reappraisal of gender relations by emphasizing the priorities of individuals against the needs of the collective. Declaring birth barbaric or retrograde means undermining many people's experiences and diminishing the role that women and caretakers have played in the history of human civilization. The aversion to birth that is articulated as an open rebellion against a patriarchal tradition often directly echoes the shame and disgust expressed about birth in that tradition itself.

A barrenness haunts these visions of life beyond birth, but it also haunts the fetishizations of birth that can seem at first like affirmations of it. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for instance, birth has been used as a powerful moral prop by political movements otherwise deleterious to human life. In terms of political priorities, various pro-natal groups have valued the fetus's life more highly than that of the struggling mother or the hungry child, the first-grader about to be gunned down in her classroom in a senseless mass shooting, or the species on the brink of extinction. In so exclusively sanctifying the unborn, these groups often approach birth as an unforgivable degradation.

What is missing in the culture war's heated, polarized debates are the voices that imagine other possibilities, those who intuit a freedom *in* birth, not *from* birth. Take American novelist Toni Morrison, a single mom of two boys, who described becoming a mother not as the nail in the coffin of her oppression but as "the most liberating thing that ever happened to me." She believed that we specifically *asked* to be born. "That's why we're here," she said. "We have to do something nurturing that we respect before we go. We must. It is more interesting, more complicated, more intellectually demanding and more morally demanding to love somebody. To take care of somebody."

Minimizing birth means diminishing one of the greatest powers humans have had: the creation and sustenance of life itself, the bringing forth of a next generation that might live better, imagine more, suffer less, and create a more lasting world. This doesn't mean we need a specified number of people, or that it's necessary to stay at replacement levels. Maybe we should dial back and hold our own viral spread in check until we've found more sustainable ways to live on our planet. But I stop far short of extinction, alarmed by descriptions of our species as a scourge that must be wiped from the earth, formulations all too similar to those used to justify ethnic cleansing.

It remains an open question for me: Are our attempts to rein ourselves in by controlling birth entirely responsible, or are they too tainted by the same destructive and even eliminationist mindset that has made possible genocide and environmental degradation? We, of course, are not separable from nature, hovering above or outside of it, protecting or destroying it. We *are* nature. Could our tendency to see ourselves as distinct from the rest of creation be part of the problem? These questions are some of the most complex and urgent we can ask in the twenty-first century, and the history of birthing we can draw in wrestling with them doesn't provide easy answers.

My husband, for instance, was born in 1972 in a small town in Gujarat, India, in the years when a Western-led campaign to

limit the number of children born to poor, untouchable people like his parents reached its apogee. Despite having the youngest and the second-largest population on earth, India also has one of the world's longest-standing official family-planning programs. In the early 1950s, not long after the nation gained independence, and while Western countries were experiencing their postwar baby booms, India adopted the world's first national policy aimed at shrinking its domestic population. Contraceptives, sex education, and, eventually, sterilization were aggressively offered to both men and women. Technologies that Western feminists had celebrated for furthering the crucial cause of reproductive choice were taken up by neo-Malthusians and eugenicists who saw in birth control, sterilization, and family planning a way to shrink burgeoning populations in other countries. India was a point of particular focus. The Western population controllers who went there and were welcomed by Indian leaders came home horrified by the country's crowds and by what they saw as its people's impoverished, unmitigated misery. Their concern was sometimes an expression of genuine humanitarian impulses, but very often it was also infused with nationalistic, eugenicist, and exploitative ambitions and driven by fears of marauding, nonwhite hordes. Controlling human populations became in the twentieth century an alternative to outright warfare, with other countries kept in check not by the military occupation of their land but by strategic social-engineering schemes targeting their people's fertility.

In 1975, three years after my husband was born, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency, giving herself the power to rule by decree. Among the human-rights violations that occurred during the Emergency was a campaign directed by Gandhi's sons that resulted in the forced sterilization of more than eight million people in a single year—many more people than were sterilized by the Nazis. The effort, bankrolled by American taxpayers, mandated that men with two or more children have vasectomies, and it also led to the sterilization of many men who were political opponents of the Gandhis, and of men who were poor, uneducated, or disabled. Botched operations killed thousands. The Indian people, still organized in loosely connected states distinguished by different languages, identities, and traditions, generally resisted this centralized government program. Many of the family-planning efforts in subsequent years shifted to the sterilization of women, who seemingly had less power to resist. Still, the campaign has been widely perceived as an abject failure. For a complex set of reasons, not all of them liberatory, many people in India kept giving birth, even when incentivized not to, and even when that birthing was an act of civil disobedience.

My husband's parents had no more children after he was born. As a Dalit man, was his father subject to forced sterilization? Was his mother targeted? If so, my husband suspects they would have welcomed the sterilizations, burdened as they already were with three children and limited resources. He was glad they limited their family to three children; he grew up knowing how hard it had been for his grandparents to have large families, how difficult it was for his parents even to raise him and his two siblings. But he also grew up seeing the signs that read "Hum Do Hamare Do," meaning "We Two Our Two." The message was clear: two parents should have only two children. But there he was, growing up as a third child who violated the generational symmetry; he was the human surplus the posters warned against. This background has fostered my husband's discomfort with group names like BirthStrikers.

The reality is that pro-natal norms have rarely been promoted evenly across populations. There have always been groups of people—the poor, disabled, religious or racial minorities, women on welfare, the gender-nonconforming, the sick—whom no government or powerful interests want to reproduce. People in these groups can come to birth with different baggage, histories that ironically help them see in birth opportunities denied to them in the broader culture: familial intimacies, self-definition, life affirmations, love, continuity with and respect for their ancestors, creativity, and the creation of a better world.

The pressure to procreate may feel very real to many people, and motherhood can be presented as an idealized state, but most mothers can attest to the fact that while motherhood may be superficially championed, at a deeper level it is often undermined by their culture. Motherhood is venerated in places like the United States except when it comes time to pay the bill from the maternity ward, offer maternity leave, feed a mother's children, or come up with solutions to the child-care conundrum. Birth goes against widespread cultural values in the West: to accumulate and hoard capital, to seek one's own individuation and success, to create and maintain one's own private space, to avoid discomfort, and to eschew risk. Birth breaks down most of the dualisms humans use to structure reality: man/woman, mind/body, thought/experience, destruction/creation, self/other, creator/created, birth/death. In challenging those binaries, birth can be an act of resistance and motherhood an expression of alterity. Therein lies the difficulty of talking about birth today: birth is both the norm and its transgression.

And so maybe the twenty-first century is a time to think more carefully and deeply about birth, about what it has been throughout history, is today, and could be in our future. Maybe it is time for all people, and not just new mothers, to wrestle with human natality—to think anew about how birth has shaped our lives and societies, and how it has altered the course of our planet's history. Can our reckoning with birth's ubiquity and magnitude, its private and public significance, re-attune us not only to its difficulties but also to what Hannah Arendt called a "shocked wonder at the miracle of Being"? Can it remind us of our innate capacity to always begin again?

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Ukraine and the Ethics of War

An exchange

The Possibility of a Just War

Tobias Winright

While this year marks the sixtieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris*, which was issued on April 11, 1963, the past fifteen months have served as a reminder of the continuing threat and reality of *bellum in terris*. Indeed, Pope Francis has remarked more than once that "a third world war fought piecemeal" is underway not only in Ukraine, but also in Syria, Myanmar, and "everywhere in Africa." As the pope has also noted, the people of Ukraine are being "martyred" by Russian aggression, and the consequences of this war are affecting other people, especially the poor and vulnerable, in places such as Africa. Finally, the risk of escalation from conventional to nuclear war—with repercussions for the whole world—has weighed heavily in statements by Pope Francis and others.

At the same time, Pope Francis has been criticized for suggesting that NATO's expansion was partly to blame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and for failing to denounce more explicitly Vladimir Putin and the Russian forces. But in his Angelus on March 6, 2022, the pope did say that what is happening is not merely a "military operation [Putin's euphemism], but a war that sows death, destruction, and misery." Likewise, a week later Francis referred to the "unacceptable armed aggression," obviously with Russia in mind. Yet he added that "those who support violence profane" God's name, since "God is only the God of peace." Did this last judgment refer only to the forces of the aggressor or also to Ukrainian men and women who have felt compelled to take up arms in defense of their country and fellow citizens? Again, after the massacre in Bucha, Pope Francis deplored the "ever-more horrendous acts of cruelty done against civilians, unarmed women and children, whose blood cries out to heaven and implores, 'End this war. Silence the weapons. Stop sowing death and destruction.'" While clearly condemning Russia's indiscriminate violence against Ukrainian civilians, the pope's plea "to silence the weapons" sounded to some as if it could be directed at both countries. A year later, at his Sunday Angelus on March 19, 2023, Francis prayed, "Let us not forget to pray for the battered Ukrainian people, who continue to suffer due to war crimes," but he went on to pray for "the mothers of the Ukrainian and Russian soldiers who have fallen during the war"—thereby, as one report put it, "continuing the path begun by Vatican diplomacy since the conflict began in February 2022, trying to stay equidistant between Russia and Ukraine."

Massimo Faggioli has argued in these pages that "Russia's war in Ukraine, where there is clearly an aggressor and an attacked," tests the Vatican's position of permanent neutrality in international relations, a policy that risks "drawing moral equivalence between Russia and Ukraine." I would add that this war also tests the recent narrowing of the Catholic ethic of war and peace to nonviolence. On several occasions—including in a recent call for people to pray during the month of April for a culture of nonviolence and peace—Pope Francis has claimed that "any war, any armed confrontation, always ends in defeat for all." Accordingly, he implores us to reject

KAY NIETFELD/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

Soldiers carry the coffin of a fallen comrade in Butscha, Ukraine, February 2023.

This war has forced Catholic theologians and ethicists to ask whether some of us have acted prematurely in relegating just-war theory to the margins—or even supplanting it with pacifism.

violence: "Let us make nonviolence a guide for our actions, both in daily life and in international relations."

This emphasis on nonviolence appeared in Francis's 2017 World Day of Peace message, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," which he wrote at the request of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International. In April of the prior year, Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace sponsored a Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference that issued an "Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence." While urging the Church to promote education and training in active nonviolence, the Appeal asserted "that there is no 'just war'" and that "often the 'just war theory' has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war." Although "often" is not the same as "always," the Appeal went on to recommend that the Church should "no longer use or teach 'just war theory.'" Pope Francis has appeared sympathetic to this recommendation, writing in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti* that "it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war.' Never again war!"

David DeCosse observes that an increasing "Catholic skepticism about the moral justification of war at all" has developed in recent years. According to Lisa Sowle Cahill, proponents of this move toward "a pacifist direction," though still a minority, have "considerable" sway and see "all military action as a moral failure." This view is reflected in the prayers and remarks of Pope Francis, as well as in op-ed pieces by some Catholic theologians—most notably Eli McCarthy, one of the more influential promoters of nonviolence, just peace, and the rejection of just-war theory.

I have often wondered, though, how a Ukrainian soldier or civilian who took up arms to defend his or her fellow citizens must feel whenever the pope and others have emphasized nonviolence and condemned the use of armed force. If I were in such a person's shoes, would I feel like "a moral failure" because I had used armed force to repel an invasion? While I have never found myself in such dire circumstances, when I was an ROTC student and also a law-enforcement officer in the 1980s, I wrestled with such questions—especially in the latter capacity, where I sometimes had to use force to defend myself or others from violent attack. Although I was moved by the example of Gandhi and attracted to Christian pacifism—and even studied under two of the most influential critics of just-war theory, Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder—I continue to think that using armed force is sometimes the morally right thing to do. It may not be *good*, but it is right—as long as it is just.

Eli McCarthy insists that Pope Francis is not "condemning or judging people in very difficult situations, like some [some?] Ukrainians who choose to take up arms in violent defense of their country," and that the pope "affirms and admires their willingness to take a high-risk stand against injustice rather than to be passive." Still, McCarthy himself highlights and endorses only examples of nonviolent methods that some Ukrainians are using to resist Russian forces. After all, in his view, what the pope has in mind "is also not about justifying methods of war and enabling the violent dynamic to perpetuate and spread." I worry McCarthy's words about those "who choose to take up arms" come across as condescending. It isn't enough to say that their willingness to actively resist injustice is commendable; their use of armed force in that resistance is also morally justified. I suspect that if they could have chosen some other method of resistance, most Ukrainians would have done so, but Russian bullets were already flying, Russian tanks already rolling in, Russian missiles already striking not only Ukrainian military targets but also civilian apartment complexes, schools, and hospitals. As for McCarthy's concern about "justifying methods of war," in the Catholic moral tradition, just-war theory rather aims to limit and constrain both *when* war is justified (*jus ad bellum*) and *how* it is conducted (*jus in bello*). In recent years, this tradition has also yielded criteria and practices for *jus post bellum*—justice after war—so as to put an end to "the violent dynamic" about which McCarthy is rightly concerned.

As DeCosse observes, "In the face of overwhelming odds, the Ukrainians fought back," a feat that leads him to ask, "What are the implications of their decision to engage in a war of self-defense for the current debate within Catholicism over the rejection of just war theory in favor of Christian nonviolence?" This war has forced Catholic theologians and ethicists to ask whether some of us, including perhaps Pope Francis, have acted prematurely in relegating just-war theory to the margins or even supplanting it with pacifism. I say "perhaps" because, contrary to McCarthy's interpretation of the pope's position, over time the pope has come to acknowledge the moral legitimacy of the Ukrainians' armed resistance. "To defend oneself is not only licit," the pope said in September, "it is also an expression of love toward one's homeland." In a letter addressed to Ukrainian young adults, Francis wrote that "to courageously defend your homeland, you had to put your hands to weapons instead of the dreams you had cultivated for the future." And, in his recent call for prayer in April, while urging the world to "develop a culture of peace," the pope

added, "remember that, even in cases of self-defense, peace is the ultimate goal."

Admittedly, Francis has never said that the Ukrainians are fighting a "just war" or that the Russians are conducting an "unjust war." But the traditional moral criteria for just war—just cause, right intent, proportionality, discrimination, etc.—are the bases for many of Pope Francis's remarks about legitimate defense versus aggression and indiscriminate slaughter. Even if we don't always name them as such, the Catechism reminds us that "these are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the 'just war' doctrine" (2309).

Massimo Faggioli has suggested that the war in Ukraine might prove to be "a turning point" in Catholic teaching about war and peace. Michael Sean Winters writes that "the most significant intellectual development in the life of the church this year was the emphatic reinstatement of just war theory as the principal Catholic moral approach to violence." Perhaps "reinstatement" is an overstatement, for just-war theory was never really set aside, not even by Pope Francis, even if he no longer uses the term.

Of course, there's more than one version of just-war thinking within the tradition. Cahill and others identify two basic approaches to just-war theory: one that offers "energetic defenses of war" and another that advocates a more "restrictive" or "stringent" use of just-war reasoning and principles. In my view, if there was any real debate in Catholic circles on the ethics of war and peace in recent decades, it was between these two approaches, not between just-war theory and pacifism—that is, not until the 2016 Appeal's condemnation of just-war theory. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, many articles, blogs, and op-eds by Catholics and others representing the two broad approaches to just-war thinking have offered a moral evaluation of the fighting by both sides, as well as of the provision of support and arms by their allies.

Representing the less stringent camp, George Weigel maintains that "the just-war tradition is the normative way of thinking about the challenges of war and peace within a classic Catholic understanding of international relations," even as he acknowledges that this tradition includes a "peace imperative,"—a "*jus ad pacem*" commitment for "conducting a just war in such a way that a just peace is its result." While acknowledging the complexities of just-war analysis, Weigel holds that Russia's "war on Ukraine is clearly" and "unambiguously" unjustified as well as unjustly conducted, whereas Ukraine's "is a war of legitimate self-defense, which…has been conducted proportionately and discriminately." Similar analyses have been offered by J. Daryl Charles, Anglican theologian Nigel Biggar, and others associated with the less restrictive approach to just war.

From the more stringent camp, Gerald J. Beyer worries that his "fellow citizens and colleagues in the academy in the U.S. do not grasp the reasons for the war and its monumental stakes." Beyer warns that "this war is about annihilating a country and its people and continuing Russian expansionism if left unchecked." He emphasizes that he is not "hawkish," much less a "warmonger": he opposed the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, Beyer says he "abhors war and believes that all other reasonable means should be exhausted before the use of lethal force is undertaken," but he is "convinced there are times—albeit rare—when the evil is so great that no measure other than force will prevent grave atrocities on a massive scale." While he supports the active nonviolence, civil resistance, and just peacemaking practices advocated by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and others, Beyer believes that these "alone will not stop the Russian juggernaut." Other Catholic theologians and ethicists—including Anna Floerke Scheid, David DeCosse, Ramón Luzárraga, Ashley Beck, and myself—take the same view.

Cardinal Robert W. McElroy spoke on "Our New Moment: Renewing Catholic Teaching on War and Peace" at the University of Notre Dame on March 1, 2023. Like Faggioli, McElroy believes the war in Ukraine is a turning point. The Church, he argues, still needs to prioritize nonviolence, but we also need "a deep renewal, restructuring and expansion of the Catholic teaching on the legitimacy of war *in extremis*." McElroy recognizes the flaws of just-war theory and the risks of its misapplication, but he thinks the "ethical tools" are present "to be forged into a larger ethic of war" for times such as this one. He laments the lack of an "ethics of war termination," though this question has actually received significant attention from just-war theorists in recent years.

Both McElroy and Faggioli mention the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, which sought to "help Catholics form their consciences and to contribute to the public policy debate about the morality of war." I know it helped me as I wrestled with these questions at the time. When the United States went to war against Iraq twenty years ago, Drew Christiansen, SJ, asked "Whither the 'just war'?" and replied that Catholic teaching, as reflected in documents like *The Challenge of Peace*, has "evolved as a composite of nonviolent and just-war elements." In his recent book, *Preventing Unjust War*, Roger Bergman argues that *The Challenge of Peace*, which "takes nonviolence seriously" and "teaches a strict interpretation of the just-war tradition," offers a "richness" that is "missing from the Appeal" of 2016. He thinks the bishops "got it right": "We should simultaneously develop strategies of nonviolence *and* hold to a strict understanding of when war can be justified, *and when it cannot*—but we should not jettison the tradition until it is genuinely obsolete."

I agree. I recommend a return to the bishops' insistence that proponents of nonviolence and just-war theorists can work together in a *complementary* way. Indeed, Pope Francis's 2017 message on nonviolence makes the same point: "Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary *complement* to the Church's continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms."

Accordingly, in his recent book on Catholic social teaching, the pacifist theologian William O'Neill, SJ, encourages both sides of the debate to "not condemn" but rather to "learn each from the other" and work together. Such a joint effort could eventually produce the "larger ethic" Cardinal McElroy hopes for—what I would call an ethic of legitimate defense, both armed and unarmed. Perhaps the Ukraine-Russia war will further stimulate collaboration among Catholic theologians and ethicists. Maybe it will even lead to a new synthesis, one that will help guide Catholics and others to defend and achieve a just and integral peace. We can hope.

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No War Is Good

William T. Cavanaugh

My newsfeed knows what kind of stories I like: "Retired Russian General Says Putin is Leading Russia to Defeat"; "Russia's Budget Deficit Has Surged"; "Russia Just Lost One of its Most Advanced Weapon Systems"; "New Reports on Putin's Ailing Health." For a short while I was also getting stories from the *Hindustan Times* about how the brave Russian soldiers were devastating the Ukrainian army—I must have clicked on the wrong article—but that has stopped, and the news is all good again. Like most people in the West, I find myself cheering Ukraine's armed forces on as they inflict casualties on the Russians. This war is, as Leon Fink and others have

An evacuating resident passes Ukrainian soldiers and the body of a woman killed by a Russian missile in Kyiv, Ukraine, March 2022.

argued, a "good war," maybe the goodest war since World War II. The military defense of Ukraine seems to fit all the traditional Catholic just-war criteria. The lines are so clearly drawn between the aggressor and the smaller, freer nation it attacked that the war has captured our attention in the West. Add the Ukrainians' plucky and unexpectedly successful defense against steep odds and the war in Ukraine has all the elements of must-see TV.

I don't think this attitude is good for my soul. As the casualties mount on both sides of the conflict, I am increasingly troubled by the "good war" narrative. Not because I have any sympathy for the Russian version of events; this is clearly an unprovoked war of unjust aggression, prosecuted with criminal brutality against soldiers and civilians alike. I do not believe that Ukraine belongs to Russia's sphere of influence any more than I believe in the Monroe Doctrine, or any more than I believe that an eighth-grader who is being bullied should accept the school pecking order as natural and inevitable. Nor do I have any affinity for Republicans whose opposition to support for Ukraine is an unappealing admixture of "America First" chauvinism and sotto voce admiration for Putin's putatively Christian nationalism. Rather, as a Christian, I think there are reasons why lament rather than cheerleading should be our first response to the war in Ukraine. Three considerations should complicate the narrative of a good war for any Catholic.

The first is the disproportionate nature of the West's response to the invasion of Ukraine when compared with conflicts elsewhere. The Catholic just-war criterion of proportionality is usually restricted to the consideration of whether the means used are proportional to the end sought. But a Catholic approach should also call into question the proportionality of our response to various conflicts going on in the world. The outpouring of aid for Ukraine has been motivated by a genuine concern for the victims of the invasion, a concern that is stoked by news stories updated every hour. The suffering of millions in Ukraine—and of Ukrainians scattered to other countries—has rightly attracted our attention and empathy. But the Russians have been shelling Syrian civilians and destroying their cities for years with barely a shrug from most of us in the West. In September 2018, the head of the Kremlin's parliamentary defense committee announced that in Russia's first three years of backing the Assad regime it had killed 85,000 people in Syria. Russia claims that these victims were all terrorists and that Russian forces killed no civilians, but that is clearly false. Millions of civilians have fled Syria, but only 20 percent of them have been welcomed by the West. Since the invasion of Ukraine began a year ago, the number of Ukrainian refugees Europe has accepted is about four times the number of Syrian refugees that it's accepted in the ten years since the Syrian civil war began. The United States has fast-tracked refugee status for Ukrainian citizens, while other refugees from places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo wait. The conflict in Congo has been the bloodiest in the world since World War II, with the number of its casualties dwarfing those of the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts combined. But Congo never appears in my newsfeed, and most in the West pay no attention to war there.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the "good war" narrative is unavailable to places where people are less like "us," places where the majority is Muslim or Black. The just-war criterion of right intention prohibits going to war for self-interest; it should perhaps be expanded to critique the ways in which self-regard more generally skews the way we get involved in some wars and ignore others. In the weeks following the invasion last year, there appeared a smattering of articles in the Western press asking why the attention paid to Ukraine was so disproportionate, but I have not been able to find such articles more recently. Africans, meanwhile, seem not to have forgotten. Russia enjoys significant support among African leaders and African people, in part because Russia is seen as an alternative to Western neocolonialism. For us, the West are the good guys and the Russians are the bad guys; for much of the rest of the world, things are more complicated, in large part because our interventions in other parts of the world have not always been as altruistic as we like to think. The United States has poured arms into many places in Africa, Central America, and the Middle East, providing military aid to some very unsavory regimes and leaving devastation and chaos as our legacy. We should pause before concluding that pouring arms into Ukraine can somehow be innocent of such moral taint.

The second complicating factor for the "good war" narrative is the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, which is applauded in the West as a way to counter Russia's attempt to erase Ukrainian culture. While I fully sympathize with the effort to resist Russian cultural imperialism, I worry that one of the casualties of the war will be prewar Ukraine's openness to creating a multiethnic, multilingual democracy without the kind of militant nationalism that has been a scourge in so many places in the world, not least in Russia. It is of course true that not all nationalisms are the same, and the hardening of Ukrainian nationalism is an understandable reaction to a mortal threat. Nevertheless, nationalism—in its Russian form—was the principal cause of the invasion of Ukraine, and I am not convinced nationalism is something the world needs more of.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes the division of humanity into nations as a check on the pride of Babel, but it also says that "the idolatry of the nation and of its rulers constantly threaten this provisional economy with the perversion of paganism" (57). Seeing the division of the world into nations as a "provisional economy" complicates the just-war criterion of legitimate authority. Nation-states do not have absolute value, and all are challenged by the call to catholicity, which promotes the unity of the whole undivided human race. Defending the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian nation-state—that is, the borders Ukraine has had since 1991—is not an absolute value. One of the darker impulses of nationalism is to survey the horrific carnage unleashed to defend borders and to declare it "worth it."

CNS PHOTO/THOMAS PETER, REUTERS

One of the darker impulses of nationalism is to survey the horrific carnage unleashed to defend borders and to declare it "worth it."

Which brings me to the third and weightiest reason to question the "good war" narrative: there is no such thing as a good war. Each Russian soldier sent back to his home village in a body bag is not a victory for the good side, but a wound in the heart of God. There is no question that the invasion of Ukraine is unjust, and I am in no position to tell Ukrainians how to respond. As a Catholic, however, I must lament the slaughter on both sides, the Ukrainian children killed by Russian missiles as well as the scared Russian teenagers used as cannon fodder on the front lines. Pope Francis has been criticized for not coming more firmly to Ukraine's defense, but he is trying to do something more difficult: to respond to the invasion as a follower of Jesus Christ. Whatever else it is, the war in Ukraine is a massive failure by Christians on all sides to imagine the world as Christ would. Christ asks us to love our enemies, to respond to an excess of evil with an excess of love. We rarely stop to ask what that might look like.

We tend to rely instead on just-war criteria to give a vaguely Christian sanction to whatever the military was going to do anyway. But the just-war tradition at its best is not a checklist of criteria to justify violence; the just-war tradition implicitly recognizes the primacy of nonviolence for followers of Jesus by demanding that a stringent moral test be passed before violence can be used. Even where those conditions are met, violence is always a last resort, a recognition of failure. Nonviolence should be the first resort, the default position for a Christian.

In fact, there have been many examples of active nonviolent resistance to the Russian invasion in Ukraine. An October 2022 report by the International Catalan Institute for Peace identified 235 acts of nonviolent resistance just in the period from February to June of last year. Such acts include farmers refusing to sell grain to Russian soldiers, firefighters refusing to join Russian departments, nonviolent protection of local officials and school directors, setting up alternative governments, and engaging Russian civil society with antiwar messaging. The report found that nonviolent resistance has protected civilians, strengthened local governance and community resistance while hindering the military and political goals of the Russian authorities, and undermined the Russian narrative about the war. Nonviolent activists say they would like their stories to be heard in the West and would like to be supported with as much enthusiasm and resources as violent resistance has generated.

Those who initially did not believe the Ukrainian military resistance had a reasonable chance of success—another just-war criterion—have mostly changed their minds. But no one yet knows how this war will turn out. To those whose fields and homes and loved ones and lives have been destroyed, will we ever arrive at a point where we will be able to face them and say it was worth it? That is a judgment we should tremble in fear to pronounce. As Pope Francis said two days before the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, "That which is built on ruins will never be a true victory." We easily acknowledge the right to self-defense that Ukrainians have exercised as a justification for their use of violence. I am certainly in no position to scold the Ukrainian whose village is being overrun for taking up arms. But Eli McCarthy has emphasized the right to life as an alternative lens for viewing this conflict. If the hundreds of thousands killed and the millions displaced have a right to life and safety, then the definition of success changes. Avoiding carnage might take priority over defending borders. Nonviolent civilian defense, noncooperation, and peaceful protest might constitute a strategy for making Ukraine ungovernable by the Russians. As Pope Francis has pointed out, the Russian empire of Communist regimes fell thirty years ago because of nonviolent protest. It is not simple naïveté to think it might be effective again.

Nonviolent resistance, however, is not just a plausible strategy to defend Ukraine but also a path to conversion on both sides of the conflict. As Pope Benedict XVI said, "For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behavior but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is *so convinced of God's love and power* that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of one's enemy constitutes the nucleus of the 'Christian revolution.'" In the face of Putin's "Christian nationalism" it is hard to imagine the power of Jesus' Christian revolution, but that is what we are called to do. Again, my point is not to tell Ukrainians what to do, but to allow our imaginations to be captivated by those Ukrainians who know firsthand that there is no good war and who seek to try something else.

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THE POWER HOSE

W. S. Di Piero

> They leveled what was left of the funeral pyres,
> Set apart the cold bones, ashes chilled by cold,
> And covered over these ashes and bones.
>
> *Aeneid*

They stand trackside among their tents and tarps.
A dump truck waits until the clearance starts.
A squad car idles at the street's far end.
Who does their world and ours belong to now?

The city rousts them shortly after dawn.
The workers strike their edgy habitats.
The Cat front-loader coddles the remains.
It plows a casita clapped of bungees and boards.

An elder holds a box of someone's ashes.
She shouts alarms. Hey, you, leave us alone.
Beach chairs, flip-flops, bathrobes, pails.
A stroller, bike-wheel, blanket, cardboard door.

The bossy truck clears its consumptive throat.
The nomads fade away to some other patch.
The power hose lances the ancient scene
and bleaches what's left of those not yet dead.

W. S. DI PIERO *'s recent books are a volume of poems titled* The Complaints *and* Fat: New and Uncollected Prose.

A Singular Country

Glimpses of Ukraine

MEGAN BUSKEY

I first started traveling to Ukraine in the early 2000s. At first, it was mainly because of my heritage: my mother is Ukrainian and I have a large extended family there. But I kept returning as I realized Ukraine was a fascinating country in its own right. It was a place where big questions were being worked through: How do you build a country amid the ashes of an empire, one that some despised and others mourned? Should you stay in your homeland even when it means struggling for basics, like a salary to support your children? How much are you willing to fight for representation, for freedom, for democracy? Ukrainians have been devoting themselves to answering these questions throughout the past three decades of independence, and in an especially heightened form since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Since that event, the country has not left the headlines, with the Western press depicting Ukraine as a place of suffering and resilience, destruction and stoicism. As important as these features are, they miss much of the essence of the country. Ukrainians are often cosmopolitan, ingenuous, and playful. The landscape of the country is diverse, containing mountains and seaside and steppe. Slag heaps, storied cathedrals, prefab housing projects, tin-roofed rural huts, and Secession architecture mingle in its cities, towns, and countryside. The pages that follow contain images taken from my travels in recent years. They aim to capture something of Ukraine's singularity.

MEGAN BUSKEY *is the author of* Ukraine Is Not Dead Yet: A Family Story of Exile and Return *(ibidem, 2023). She shares her photography on Instagram at @meganbuskey.*

RIGHT: A young woman stares out of a bus window in a parking lot in Sambir. I put this image on the cover of my recent book about my family history, *Ukraine Is Not Dead Yet*, because the young woman reminded me of Ukraine—bold, embattled, and beautiful.

LEFT: Every autumn, people gather bouquets of fallen leaves to enjoy the vivid colors of the season at home. In 2022, a Russian missile landed close to this park in central Kyiv, leaving a large crater that was quickly patched up.

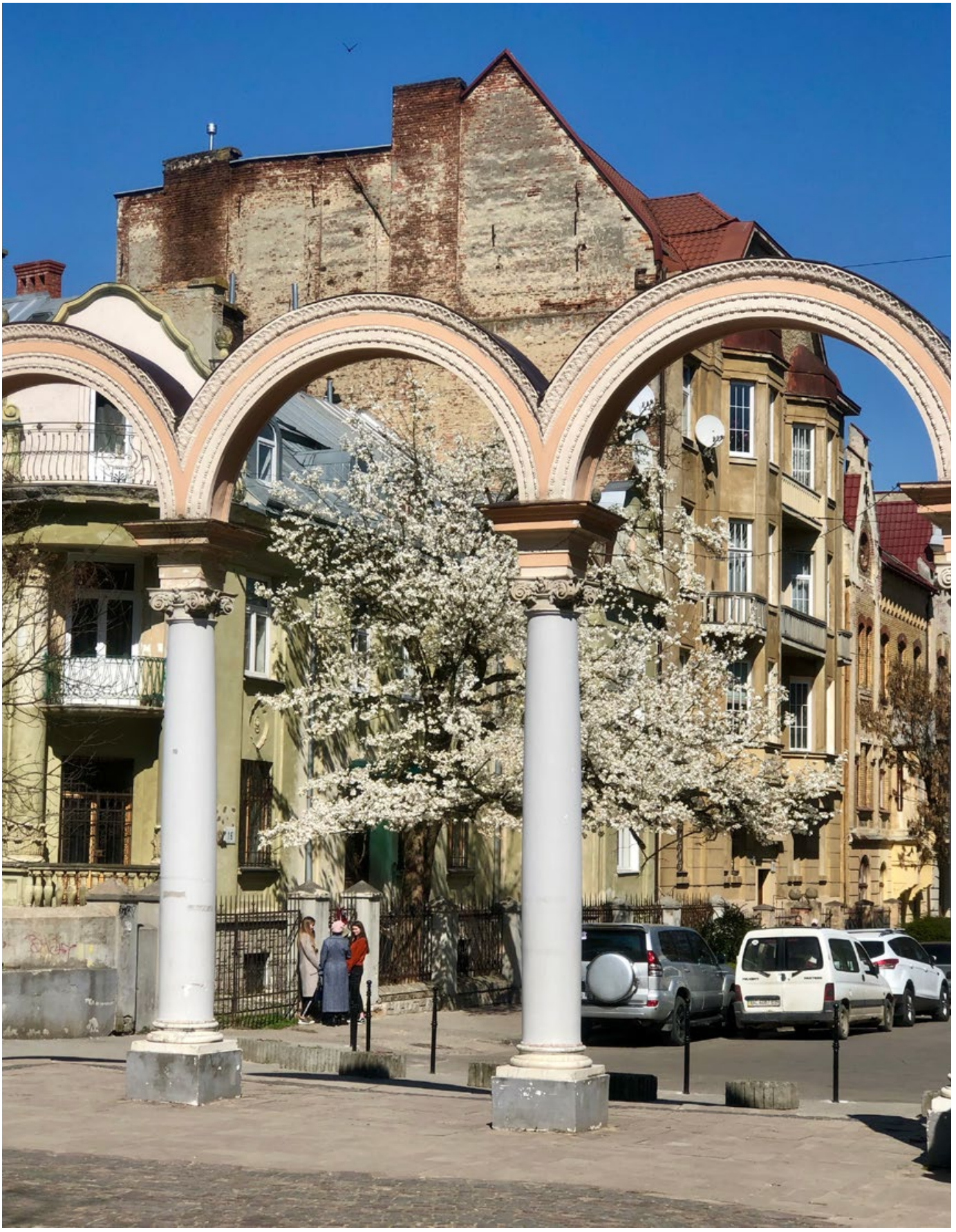
BELOW: Light floods into a gallery of the Bukhanchuk Museum of Fine Arts in Kmytiv, a village about thirteen miles from Zhytomyr. The museum houses one of the nation's largest collections of Soviet art.

OPPOSITE: Even though few Ukrainians live off their farms alone, agriculture continues to play a large role in rural life. Potato-planting season is a jovial affair, with friends and relatives pitching in to help seed each other's fields every spring.

TOP: The legacy of the Soviet Union was a fraught topic even before Russia's full-scale invasion. At the Bukhanchuk Museum of Fine Arts in Kmytiv, decommissioned Lenin statues from Soviet times are stored out of sight in the basement.

BOTTOM: Sisters Polina and Nastia pose at a relative's home in western Ukraine. Born and raised close to Bakhmut, the girls fled their native village with their family after Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Their home was destroyed in subsequent fighting.

OPPPOSITE PAGE: Trees bloom near an entrance to Stryiskyi Park in Lviv. This bountiful scene brought to mind the lines of a poem by Adam Zagajewski, who was born in the city in 1945 and knew it as Polish Lvov: "There was too much of Lvov, it brimmed the container / it burst glasses, overflowed / each pond, lake, smoked through every / chimney, turned into fire, storm, / laughed with lightning, grew meek, / returned home, read the New Testament, / slept on a sofa beside the Carpathian rug."



A Pilgrimage in Reverse

An interview with Gianfranco Rosi

Gianfranco Rosi is one of Italy's most important living documentary filmmakers. His films include El Sicario, Room 164 *(2010),* Sacro GRA *(2013), and* Fire at Sea *(2016), which was nominated for an Oscar. His most recent film is* In Viaggio: The Travels of Pope Francis, *which is largely composed of archival footage shot during the pope's thirty-seven journeys to fifty-three countries over the course of nine years. He spoke recently with* Commonweal *associate editor Griffin Oleynick. Their conversation has been edited for clarity and length.*

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK: The tenth anniversary of Francis's pontificate coincided with the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which the pope was initially hesitant to directly condemn. How did the outbreak of war in Ukraine affect the making of *In Viaggio*?

GIANFRANCO ROSI: Enormously. I began making the film a little more than one year ago, before the beginning of the war. Initially it was impressionistic, without a definite structure or progression.

But last spring I traveled with the pope to Malta, where he spoke out strongly against the war in Ukraine. That was the moment when "history" intruded into my editing process, devouring everything I'd made before. It also threw me into a crisis, making me realize that I really needed to structure *In Viaggio* chronologically.

So I began with Pope Francis's famous visit to the island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea in 2013. He spoke out in defense of migrants and refugees, and criticized our indifference to the suffering of those on the margins. His remarks back then were prophetic, setting him on a trajectory that led to his antiwar speech in Malta almost a decade later. When I heard it, it just crystallized everything for me, and *In Viaggio* became like a kind of cinematic Rubik's Cube—the pieces fell into place.

I also returned to the footage of Pope Francis's meeting with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, which took place in Cuba in 2014. To me, it seemed like Francis had had a premonition. Alluding to Putin's invasion of Crimea, the pope told Kirill that one day the "war would touch us all" unless we confronted it right then. He was actually talking about Crimea, and unfortunately, he was right—that conflict has indeed affected the whole world.

We can think of Pope Francis as a "contemporary of the future." There's a moment in the film that is a metaphor for how the pope's prophetic thinking reaches us. It's when he meets (by video conference) a group of astronauts living at the International Space Station during the pandemic. Seated at his desk in the Vatican, Francis simply says, "Good morning!" Then there's complete silence, a long pause. After a few seconds, the pope's voice finally arrives, so that the astronauts can hear him. In a sense, that's the way it is with all of us, too.

GO: I'm struck by some of the formal choices you made in the film, which are unconventional by today's documentary standards, especially for films about the pope. There's no voiceover narration and very little context or exposition given—*In Viaggio* almost feels like a cinéma vérité film from the 1960s, or even a visual poem. Tell us about that.

GR: Yes, the film is very experimental. I don't like making distinctions between fiction and documentary. For me, there's just *cinema*, and what matters is whether a film is true or false. My process is different from, say, a director of feature films. I don't use actors. And unlike many documentarians, I don't have a huge staff. I'm a one-man crew working with reality. But I'm always attentive to the visual language of cinema: I add and subtract, taking reality and transforming it into something else. That's always my challenge.

With *In Viaggio* I was trying to provoke an emotional experience on the part of the audience. If two hundred people see the film, I want them to have two hundred different individual reactions. The audience needs to be totally free to interact with Pope Francis in a very personal way. That's why I include so much silence in the film. The moments of silence form a kind of backdrop, giving viewers space to breathe and reflect, just as Pope Francis himself takes time for contemplation.

When Pope Francis meets the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, the entire scene unfolds in total silence. Through the magic of cinema, their silence becomes a kind of voice, an evocation that enables viewers to converse wordlessly with Pope Francis. At least, that's what *In Viaggio* has been for me. I've spent a lot of my career making movies and calling attention to many of the places he's traveled to, like Lampedusa, Mexico, and Iraq. So the film is also a kind of personal dialogue with the important work Francis has done there.

Francis is always urging us not to lose our ability to dream. That really became my anchor. This is a pope who speaks to everyone, believers and nonbelievers, with great humility. He talks about urgent historical, political, and moral issues like migration, mass incarceration, climate justice, the arms trade, and war. In a sense the film evokes the great themes of his encyclicals, especially *Fratelli tutti*. It's a collage of fragments, eighty minutes drawn from more than eight hundred hours of footage, most of which I didn't shoot myself. So I was more of a spectator throughout. I wanted to make a portrait of the pope as a man, without resorting to theological or ideological categories.

It's also true that Pope Francis is not perfect. I actually did get to travel with and shoot him during his trip to Canada last summer. Speaking with Canada's Indigenous population, he asked forgiveness for the Church's participation in the horrors and abuses of the residential schools system. I deliberately filmed that scene out of focus, and intercut it with archival images and sounds as if it was taking place inside his own mind.

It was important to show the pope meditating on his own mistakes, and those of the Church. That's why I also included the scene of Francis's defensive reaction to a group of reporters in Chile, when he forcefully dismissed allegations of sexual abuse against Bishop Juan Barros. Pope Francis is a man who lives his life in front of cameras, sometimes forgetting that they are there. So he makes mistakes. But more importantly, he knows how to apologize.

GO: Francis's pontificate has been especially controversial here in the United States, with many American hierarchs openly voicing skepticism about some of his signature initiatives, like the upcoming Synod on Synodality. What role, if any, did intellectual debates—about the future of the Church, say—play in the making of *In Viaggio*? What do you hope American audiences, both Catholic and secular, will take from it?

GR: My point of view is essentially that of a secular person. Obviously, Pope Francis's perspective is different, but he does manage to draw attention to issues with universal, political dimensions. He's an important player in a globalized world.

Francis is also a revolutionary. He's changing a lot of things inside the Church, trying to open it up. He's the first pope to talk openly about the possibility of civil unions for gay people. He never speaks about abortion in an accusatory, aggressive, or judgmental way. He comforts the women who have gone through that painful process. "Who am I to judge?" he asks.

ALBUM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Pope Francis visits the Western Wall in *In Viaggio*.

So if the pope is disliked in some quarters, he's beloved in many more. And by all different kinds of people: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu. He speaks in a transversal way. In Africa, he addressed a huge gathering of half a million people. But he has an incredible way of focusing on the individual, of communicating and looking at people, at what's inside them. He *touches* them, and you can almost feel it in the footage. He has a remarkable capacity for compassion.

But the film isn't just a portrait of Pope Francis. It's also a map of the human condition, a Stations of the Cross for today. Or a kind of pilgrimage in reverse. The pope is always traveling to see the people, instead of the faithful coming to him. The only moment of *In Viaggio* where we see Pope Francis inside the walls of the Vatican is at the beginning of the pandemic, where he prays in an empty, rainy St. Peter's Square. It's as if he is embracing the whole world with his words at that moment. So many people saw it and picked up on what he was saying, feeling a connection with him. Being a revolutionary also means being alone. And I think viewers will understand his loneliness.

GO: Speaking of loneliness, some of the most moving scenes in *In Viaggio* take place inside prisons, especially when Pope Francis embraces incarcerated individuals. What do you see in those moments?

GR: In March, just before the global release of *In Viaggio*, Pope Francis invited me and the production staff to the Vatican for a private meeting. It was brief, just twenty minutes or so, but he was extremely warm and open. Before leaving, he told me, "Take risks! Be courageous! Because there are too many conservative people around us."

That's just what he does in prisons around the world. When I was editing the film, I got very emotional viewing those scenes. Because it's really where the pope's nonjudgmental spirit comes to life and becomes visible. He finds dignity in every person he embraces—even notorious *sicarios* that may have killed twenty or thirty people. Yet Pope Francis addresses them with dignity, telling them that their experience of prison can change them, that they are not alone.

We will miss Pope Francis after he's gone. Who's going to be there to warn us, to remind us of the ways in which we're dehumanizing our world and each other—all without judging us? Perhaps he's not changing anything concretely, but he's speaking as the world's conscience, reminding us of our failings but also of our dignity.

In Viaggio opens with a phrase: "What's your position?" These are the words of the Italian coast guard, speaking over the radio to a boat full of migrants sinking in the middle of the Mediterranean. This is another metaphor. For the world to actually change, for our situation to become different, we have to know what our position is. What is our position toward war, climate, poverty, globalization—toward everything? Are we indifferent? Do we really care? *What's my position?* That's what Pope Francis is always urging us to ask ourselves.

Gabriel LaBelle in *The Fabelmans*

ROBERT RUBSAM

Frozen Moments

'The Fabelmans' & 'Aftersun'

Two films, two views of filmmaking—and of film's relationship to memory. Not two philosophies or programs, but two *views*, arising spontaneously from very different sensibilities. One of the filmmakers, Steven Spielberg, is among the most successful in the history of Hollywood; the other, Charlotte Wells, is still at the beginning of her career, but her focus is already clear, and it is very different from his.

Spielberg's *The Fabelmans* opens with a young boy's introduction to the power of cinema. His face bathed in the projector's flickering glow, Sammy Fabelman watches the climax of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, his mouth wide with awe as a pair of criminals crash into a Barnum & Bailey train, sending their convertible flying. It's a quintessential piece of Spielbergian Americana: the collision of technology and art sparking wonderment in the mind of a child.

This, anyway, is how the film's disastrous marketing campaign presents the scene. Because, in fact, young Sammy isn't impressed or inspired, much less awestruck: he's terrified at the violence at the heart of the spectacle, the ease with which human life can be discarded, smashed, reduced to nothing for entertainment. When his father (Paul Dano) gives Sammy a train for Hanukkah, he almost breaks it as he reenacts the crash scene in the movie. It takes his mother, Mitzi (Oscar-nominated Michelle Williams) to recognize that he's trying to take control of his fear by recreating it, as if he might contain the horror by holding it in his hands. So she offers him a compromise: if they film the crash with his father's camera, Sammy can reenact it as often as he likes, no damage required. His home movie is full of cuts and perspective shifts, a tiny spectacle in its own right. He contains his terror by transforming it into art.

Which is also to say: into entertainment. Spielberg is our master entertainer, imbuing even his grimmest films with visual and narrative zip. (Not for nothing did Michael Haneke accuse Spielberg of treating the Holocaust like a horror movie.) *The Fabelmans* dives right into that contradiction, a film about a boy using the movies as a shield against pain, and a film that uses all of cinema's tricks to delve into that pain.

Soon we see a teenaged Sammy (Gabriel LaBelle) throw himself into filmmaking, enlisting all his pals to help him earn merit badges. But at home, his life is coming apart. After the family moves to California, Mitzi falls into a deep depression, unable to balance her desire to keep her family together with the knowledge that she simply cannot be happy in her marriage anymore. Again and again, Spielberg inverts his trademark tricks. At one point, Sammy discovers that he has inadvertently filmed evidence of his mother's infidelity on a family camping trip. He cuts out the offending clips and shows only the happy bits to his family, constructing the scene out of compounded deceptions: Mitzi's, Sammy's, Spielberg's. When Sammy does finally confront his mother, Spielberg uses his most iconic trick, showing Mitzi's face as she responds with shock and disappointment and finally shame to the secret film—and to the knowledge that her own despair has infected her son. Once again, art is presented as a vessel for pain. It can wound but it cannot heal.

That is one view of the filmmaker's art; happily, there are others. *Aftersun* is the autobiographical debut feature from Scottish filmmaker Charlotte Wells. Calum (Paul Mescal) has taken his daughter Sophie (Frankie Corio) on a vacation to Turkey to celebrate his thirty-first birthday. Calum had Sophie when he was very young, and the intervening eleven years have been hard

on him. He moved to London, far from the girl and her mother in Edinburgh. He arrives in Turkey with his arm in a cast, unable to remember how he broke it. "I don't know how I made it to thirty," he tells a total stranger. "I can't imagine myself at forty."

Sophie senses her father's restless unhappiness, even if she can't quite make sense of it. At times Calum is almost oppressively generous, lavishing attention on her and buying her gifts he can't afford. Yet just as often he recoils from parenthood, diving to depths where Sophie can't follow, even disappearing in the middle of the night and leaving his daughter locked out of their room. He is trying to manage a life that he finds unbearable, and to care for a daughter he loves but cannot help disappointing.

Wells presents their relationship as a wavering back and forth. Whenever one of them approaches, the other withdraws, so that every step closer is also a step back. Calum's affection causes Sophie to pull back; his (implied) death draws her memory toward him, when he is far beyond her. Their only point of contact is a video camera that Calum seems to have purchased for the trip. Calum films Sophie by the pool and in their room while Sophie films them both, questioning her father about his own childhood and mugging for the camera when he's gone. Calum goes back through the footage when he's alone, perhaps hoping to hold on to the day—to prove that his daughter loves him, and that he is happy.

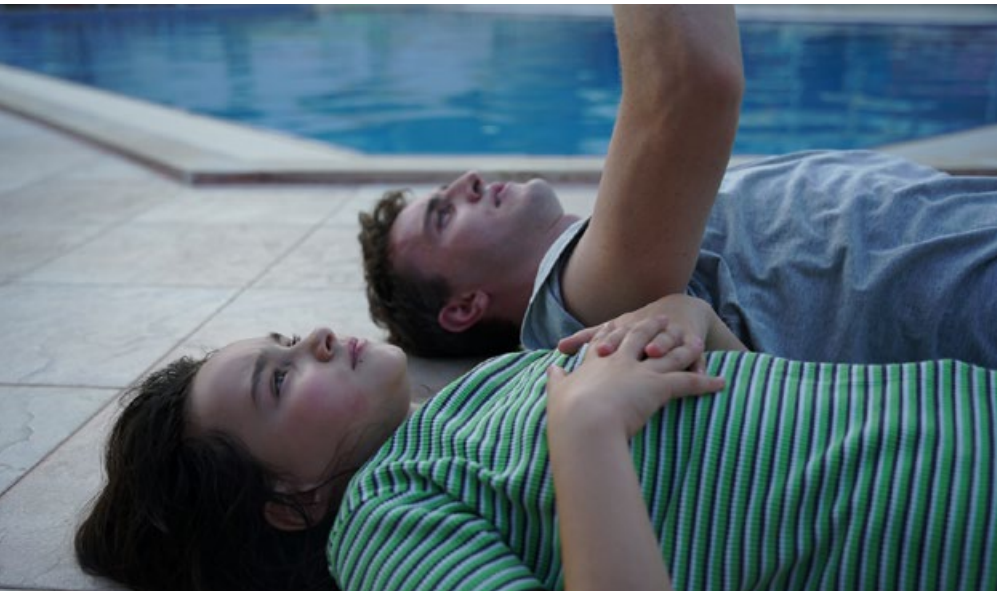
Aftersun is poised on a precipice where memory can easily slip. Image and sound frequently fall out of sync, and scenes dissolve into one another without a clear connection. Wells prefers gestures and moments, and her camera lingers on details that feel at once charged and opaque: a teen girl's bra strap, a mouthful of toothpaste spat onto a mirror. Wells shoots her two main characters through reflective surfaces and divided by barriers, separated even when they occupy the same frame.

This delicate waltz is at the heart of the film. Calum sees the beginnings of his restlessness and depression in his daughter, but his attempts to reach her are feeble, reflecting his essential helplessness. Sophie observes this all without quite comprehending it; and when he pulls her toward him, she pushes him away. By the time she recognizes her father in herself, he is beyond her reach.

She is left with only that camera. We see snatches of footage throughout the film, as an older Sophie, perhaps approaching the age of her father then, re-watches their video recordings. She can return to these moments, can see herself as she once was, as her father was in life—and yet there will always come a point at which the tape runs out. Every moment spent with the footage is a moment without her father, a moment further from their time together and from the day of his death.

COURTESY OF A24

Paul Mescal and Frankie Corio in *Aftersun*



After his mother's death, Roland Barthes went looking for her in a collection of her photographs. He discovered that he could not recognize the woman he knew, a realization that quickly grew into distress. "To say," he writes in *Camera Lucida*, "confronted with a certain photograph, 'That's *almost* the way she was!' was more distressing than to say, confronted with another, 'That's not the way she was at all.'" It is only in an image of his mother at five years old, decades before his own birth, that Barthes at last recognizes "*the impossible science of the unique being*," those qualities essential to his mother *as he knew her*. Nothing else has been preserved "except in fragments."

The essential tragedy of photography lies in how it freezes moments without stopping time, creating a record of things that it cannot actually preserve. Similarly, art might allow the artist to respond to the unbearable, to take hold of their fears and traumas and perhaps to make something new from their pain, but it cannot recover the lost or make the broken whole. It brings the dead to life through imitation, as simulacra.

Aftersun ends with father and daughter pointing their cameras at one another, one filming, the other watching, still somehow connected by the images spooling out on this one cassette. Wells visualizes the hope I think all artists harbor, that through their work the living might hear from the dead. And then Calum closes the camera's screen, the lens jitters shut, and he crosses that threshold into the unviewed, the unviewable.

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XIAO SITU

Lifelines

'C. C. Wang: Lines of Abstraction'

A lifeline is a rope you toss into the water to save someone struggling to stay afloat. Metaphorically, it describes a person or resource you depend on for survival, especially in dire situations. In the arts of divination, lifelines are those wrinkles on your palm that predict how long you'll live. Visually, with their rising, falling, twisting, and turning, lifelines can also reflect the character and trajectory of a person's life.

All of these senses are present in the life and work of C. C. Wang (1907–2003), the Chinese-born American artist at the center of a retrospective exhibition this spring at the Hunter College Art Galleries in New York City. Wang holds a significant place in the history of twentieth-century American art. He was one of the most influential collectors and connoisseurs of Chinese painting (tenth through eighteenth centuries) in the world. Today, works from Wang's collection can be found in prominent museums and universities across the country, including in Boston, New York, Princeton, Chicago, Cleveland, and San Francisco.

Besides serving as a mentor to generations of scholars and curators of Chinese art, Wang was also a talented artist in his own right. Curated by Wen-shing Chou and Daniel M. Greenberg with Margaret Liu Clinton, *C. C. Wang: Lines of Abstraction* powerfully demonstrates Wang's achievement through a range of intriguing works. The show grew out of collaborative seminars taught by Chou at Hunter and Greenberg at the University of Minnesota. A deeply researched, richly illustrated catalog, the first book to focus on Wang as an artist, has also been published in tandem with the exhibition.

One of the most striking works on display is *No Title (Abstract Work in Monochrome)* (1998), a monochromatic painting done with ink on paper. Strokes of black ink rise, fall, and swoop across the surface. Sometimes the lines veer back on themselves to form boxy loops; other times they make sharp acute angles. A few are dense and rich with ink, while others reveal instances when Wang's brush was drier, yielding fainter, staccato-textured marks.

Although entirely abstract, the work resembles a landscape. Wang's variation of lines and overlapping of forms render a sense of depth and distance, with a foreground seemingly receding into a background. Washes of gray ink appear luminous in certain areas and smoky in others, alternately evoking the contours of earthen mounds or the effervescence of the atmosphere. Throughout, the quavering lines evoke the swift, rhythmic flow of movement initiated by Wang's wrist and arm. Wang made this work when he was in his nineties, and it's emblematic of the artist's lifelines: not a single, straight line moving in one direction, but many lines traveling different paths and coalescing into a unified whole.

Wang was born in 1907 in Suzhou, China, to a literati family. Then in their twilight years, the literati comprised an elite social class of scholars and officials who had formed the heart of China's state bureaucracy since the tenth century. This privileged group emphasized self-cultivation and the pursuit of knowledge. It also developed its own educational program, which Wang and his generation were among the last to receive.

As students, young literati were expected to learn not only classical Chinese texts and essay composition, but also to master calligraphy and landscape painting. Their training with brush and ink was in fact a full-body exercise: dots, lines, washes, and stains were rendered with subtle variations on the position and pressure of the brush in one's hand, guided by the choreography of arm and body moving across paper.

To build tactile and experiential fluency, literati artists ideally maintained a lifelong practice of copying the works of earlier masters. This not only increased their own repertoire of skills and improved their technique, but also facilitated a kind of spiritual communion and embodied dialogue with centuries of preceding artists.

Adherence to the practice of copying did not imply a lack of originality or individual expression. Literati pedagogy aimed to prepare individual artists to discover their own paths through expertise in ancient methods. Over the centuries, there evolved a rich lexicon of techniques named for the individual literati artist who had originated or exemplified them: the "raindrop" method of Fan Kuan (ca. 990–1030), the sustained "single stroke" of Shitao (1642–1707), or Guo Xi's (1020–1090) practice of meditating on his walls to find inspirational patterns. Each artist made their own original contribution—their "mark," so to speak—to the lineage.

Repetitive emulation of past masters also trained literati artists to become connoisseurs. When examining a particular brushstroke or detail in a painting, they could use their intimate, physical knowledge of an array of techniques to determine exactly who had painted it. Such connoisseurship predisposed literati to be natural collectors. Before the advent of photographic reproductions and public museums, the only way of studying original Chinese artworks was to own them yourself, or to know someone else—usually a literati artist—who did. Appreciating, authenticating, buying, selling, and displaying literati art were all part and parcel of the artist's vocation.

In 1949, as the Communist Party rose to power in mainland China, Wang, then forty-two, immigrated with his wife and two youngest daughters to New York City. Wang had studied law in Suzhou and Shanghai, which gave him a familiarity with English. A

STAN NARTEN/THE ESTATE OF C.C. WANG

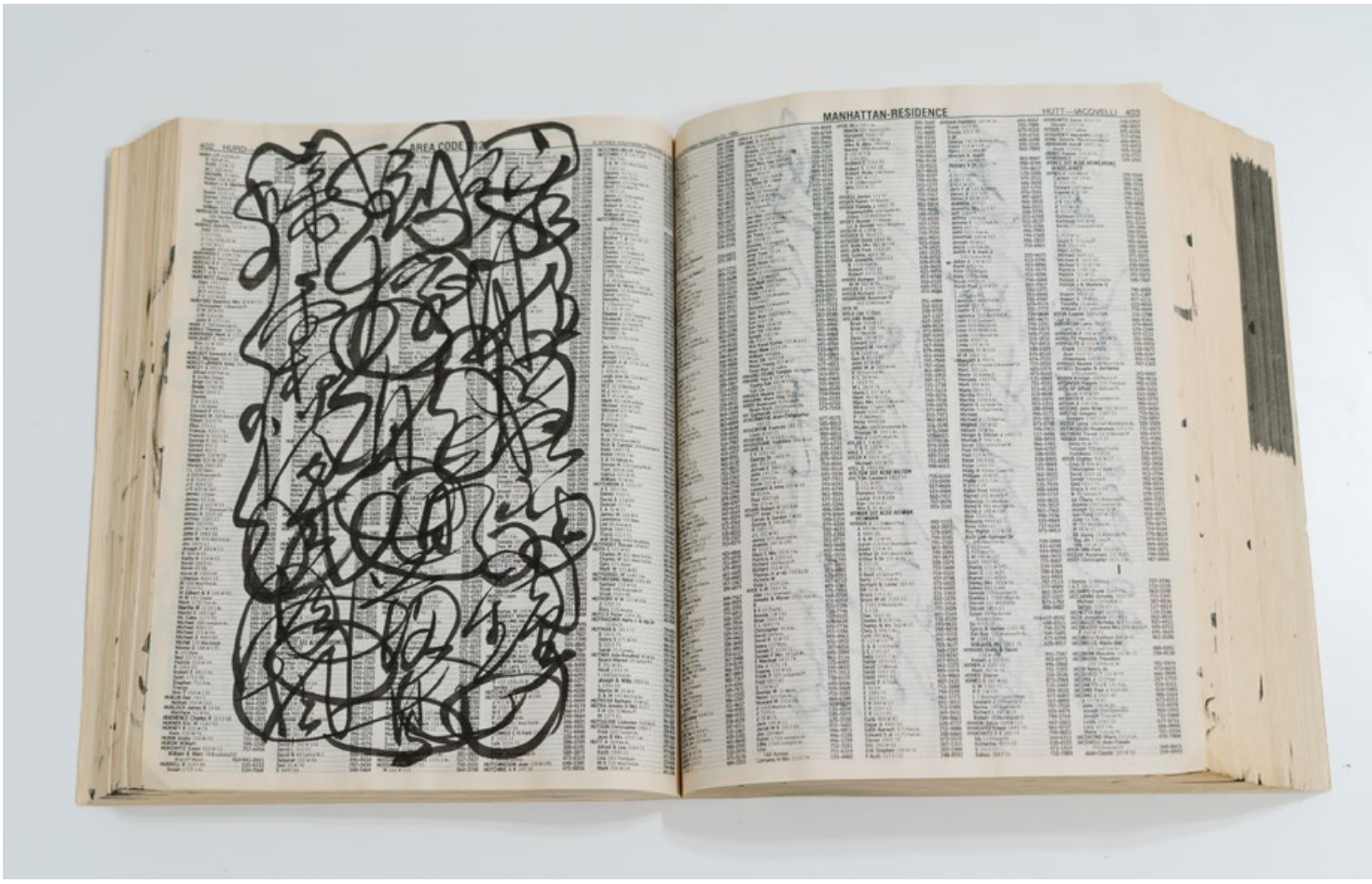
life in the United States seemed like a favorable prospect.

Expertise in Chinese painting was scant at the time in the United States, and American curators, collectors, auction houses, and museums eagerly sought Wang's guidance. In New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art hired him as an appraiser and consultant for their collection of Chinese art. Wang's mentorship to young American scholars helped catalyze the burgeoning field of Chinese art studies in this country, with some of Wang's protégés going on to become professors of Chinese art history at Princeton, Yale, and Berkeley.

Alongside his teaching, mentorship, and connoisseurial work, Wang continued his own artistic practice. True to the literati spirit of self-cultivation, between 1949 and 1974 he enrolled in forty courses—mostly in anatomy and life drawing, focused on the fundamentals of Western art—at the Art Students League of New York. Wang had a particular appreciation of European modernists, especially post-impressionists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne. He was drawn to their use of vibrant color and inventive design and composition—elements of artmaking that had not been emphasized in his literati training.

Wang's studies inspired him to experiment with new techniques and materials in his literati painting. In a landscape from 1985, Wang pays homage to Fan Kuan by emulating the classical painter's monumental *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* (ca. 1000). Here Wang transforms Fan Kuan's signature "raindrop" technique of applying miniscule brushstrokes to the mountain to

C. C. Wang, no title (Mountain Valley at Night), 1989



C. C. Wang, no title (Phonebook with Artist's Calligraphy Practice), 1998

convey its textured surface. Instead of a brush, Wang used a roller wrapped in crumpled, ink-dipped paper to render semi-accidental, semi-random impressions onto the work's surface. He then used a brush to add lines and washes to the printed creases, bringing out the other forms of the landscape. Fan Kuan theorized that literati painting was less an imitation of nature than a continuation of its processes. Just as the ancient master's tiny brush strokes mimic falling rain, so too does Wang's crumpled-paper method mirror nature's constant, haphazard imprinting of mountain landscapes.

After Wang received U.S. citizenship in 1957, he made frequent trips to Hong Kong and Taiwan, where he reunited with other literati artists who had left mainland China. There, he also encountered a younger generation of artists who were using traditional Chinese materials to explore abstraction. With his own painting students, however, Wang's teaching was always rooted in the traditional literati method of copying and emulating old masterworks, a practice he continued for the rest of his life.

In the 1990s, when Wang was in his eighties, he began a daily routine of practicing ink calligraphy on the pages of old New York City phone books. The characters and quotations came from the classical Chinese texts he had memorized since boyhood. The pages range from legible standard and cursive Chinese script, to semi-legible characters, to highly abstract compositions. Visible throughout is the inherent beauty and playful potential of the calligraphic line.

Wang considered these objects to be practice books, and he never intended to exhibit them. Still, with their traditional quotations and experimental brushwork literally supported by a symbol of the modern, interconnected metropolis, Wang's phone books capture something essential about him, and about the intimate, communal nature of the literati tradition he incarnated. Too often—due in part to the dominance of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko—we think of abstraction as the result of a radical, individualistic break with tradition, as if artistic "progress" were a straight line pointing in one direction. Wang's life—and the consistent way he looked back to the literati tradition even as he experimented with abstraction and new methods—instead assumes the more dynamic, elastic form of a spiral, circling back to the past even as it traces a path forward.

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FU QIUMENG FINE ART/THE ESTATE OF C.C. WANG

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John Betz (Notre Dame University, USA)
Boyd Taylor Coolman (Boston College, USA)
Rebecca L. Copeland (Boston University, USA)
Paul DeHart (Vanderbilt University, USA)
Joshua Furnal (St Patrick's Pontifical University, IRL)
Emmanuel Gabellieri (Lyon Catholic University, FR)
Nikolaos Loudovikos (University Ecclesiastical Academy of Athens)
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Higher Ed Laid Low

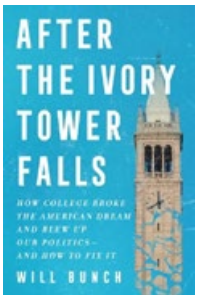
RYAN M. BROWN

In *After the Ivory Tower Falls*, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Philadelphia Inquirer* journalist Will Bunch seeks to tell the story of how college promised the American Dream "only to instead crush it." Bunch's book is a fine work of history, laying out the stories of many of the key players in American higher education since World War II. But it also makes a powerful argument about the relationship between contemporary U.S. politics and the changing landscape of academe.

In the 1940s, an ambitious, socially conscious federal government *almost* took the step of making higher education a public good. Instead, it settled for the GI Bill. In failing to capitalize on a rare moment of conservative support for publicly funded higher education, the federal government set the stage for a series of backlashes that not only undid the gains realized by midcentury Americans, but ultimately succeeded in recasting higher education as a "luxury good" for which the taxpayer should bear no burden. As a result of policy and cultural changes that have taken place since the 1960s, Bunch argues, colleges have become outrageously expensive, failing to meet the mandate set for them in earlier decades. One of the tragic results of this history is today's rancorous political polarization, which increasingly pits those who have college degrees against those who don't.

Bunch argues that the American people are now divided into four groups: the Left Perplexed, the Left Broke, the Left Behind, and the Left Out. These groups are divided along two axes: age (those old enough to have entered college before 1990 versus those who would have entered later) and educational attainment (those who obtained at least a bachelor's degree versus those who did not). The older Left Perplexed and younger Left Broke are both college-educated and tend toward the political Left. The Left Behind did not graduate from college and tend toward the Right, while the younger Left Out, also non–college graduates, tend toward political apathy. This last group are the casualties of an exclusionary educational system that has deemed them "unworthy" of the American Dream. They are prone to an alienation and despair that all too often culminate in "deaths of despair": suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths.

The Left Perplexed took advantage of the midcentury college boom, when higher education was highly affordable. Their college degrees helped them obtain a rewarding middle-class life. But these educated Boomers often have difficulty understanding their children, the Left Broke, who, burdened by student debt and trapped in a roulette of precarious jobs, have turned toward the likes of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez rather than old-guard centrists such as Hillary Clinton. For them, the illusion of perpetual upward mobility has been shattered.



AFTER THE IVORY TOWER FALLS
How College Broke the American Dream and Blew Up Our Politics—And How to Fix It

WILL BUNCH
William Morrow
$23.19 | 320 pp.

Veterans register for classes at Indiana University, 1947.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

But Left Perplexed Boomers also have trouble understanding Left Behind Boomers. The Left Behind were once able to make a comfortable middle-class living in manufacturing jobs, but then their employers, following the inexorable logic of capital, fled to foreign shores to take advantage of cheaper labor, leaving a trail of resentment in their wake. The Left Behind, Bunch writes, "thought they'd signed a social contract—that you didn't need a fancy college education to have a nice life in the United States—only to see it get ripped up right in front of them." This is the "not-so-quiet-majority" who would eventually be seduced by Donald Trump's siren song of grievance.

As for Bunch's fourth group, the Left Out, they have suffered a double tragedy. Not only has this group of uncredentialed younger adults been devastated by the recent "epidemic of despair," which was already lowering the average American life-expectancy before the pandemic, but, even worse, *no one seems to care*. "[N]o one is really advocating for political action on their behalf," Bunch writes—not even their own (generally Republican) elected representatives, who focus more on culture wars than on bringing much-needed help to a whole group of young Americans who have been treated as disposable by both our economy and our political system.

How did we get here? We might begin by asking how higher education became associated with life-crushing debt. There's an argument popular among conservatives that today's college problem is a *government* problem. The federal government, they argue, was all too willing to hand out massive student loans, regardless of the actual market value of a college education or the likelihood that student borrowers would be able to repay their debt. Meanwhile, universities were all too happy to let students take on huge federally backed loans to cover their skyrocketing tuitions. Since even the brightest eighteen-year-olds are probably ill equipped to judge the likely return on investment for a bachelor's degree costing $200,000, lending them large amounts of money is arguably predatory. And that, conservative critics say, is exactly what the government has been doing. Its misguided largesse is therefore the root cause of the debt crisis affecting so many of today's college grads, who collectively owe upwards of $1.7 trillion. Bunch largely agrees with this critique. He vilifies the parent-PLUS loan in particular as the federal government's attempt to function as a kind of "casino" for parents willing to risk all on the thin hope that a degree from a prestigious, unreasonably expensive college will help their children "cling" to their rung of the disintegrating middle-class ladder.

The conservatives are right to hold government responsible, but they are wrong to do so without considering the social and economic context. And they are wrong to overlook the other bad policies that paved the way for this one—the policies of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and a generation of Republican governors, who all sought to transform education from a "public good" funded by the government to a "private good" paid by a student's (wealthy) parents or with borrowed money. For these politicians and their enablers, college was essentially a credentialing mechanism for white-collar careers, and should therefore be paid for like any other private investment. As Reagan put it, "taxpayers shouldn't subsidize intellectual curiosity." This was a far cry from the postwar consensus, according to which the main purpose of higher education was to form citizens and to inoculate them against the kind of authoritarianism the country had just defeated in a world war. (Its other purpose was to provide research that would help our military win the Cold War.)

As Bunch explains, "every generation or so, America's leaders made a consequential decision that moved the nation further from the G.I. Bill's promise that higher education could be a public good." First, in the 1940s, policymakers in Washington missed an opportunity to make higher education a fully funded public good available to all, not only veterans. Then, in the mid-1960s, Washington decided to focus funding on Pell Grants, locking in "the idea of personal merit over taxpayer-funded access for all." In the 1970s and '80s, Reagan and other small-government conservatives sought, largely successfully, to privatize college and kill free tuition. They slashed funding for public universities, which had to find new ways to cover their expenses.

At around the same time, the Ivy League, following Harvard, instituted the high-tuition/high-aid model—by contrast with the high-tax/low-tuition model of midcentury America and today's Europe. This remarkable gamble seemed to pay off. As the Ivies raised their tuitions on the strength of their prestige, state universities were now forced, due to a lack of secure public funding, to raise their tuitions, too. Lacking prestige, they instead sold comfort, increasing campus amenities and luxuries to attract students, as if they were resorts vying for tourists. But how would the students pay for all this? Loan programs were all too happy to help, and a whole cottage industry, underwritten by Wall Street bankers, soon emerged. There was also growing pressure on public universities to seek out tuition dollars from those who *could* pay, giving admittance slots to wealthy out-of-state students and, ultimately, to rich foreigners. The result was that some state institutions that were built on the 1940s dream of elevating their local communities soon became playgrounds for millionaire kids on their way to inheriting their fathers' businesses.

In short, Bunch argues, conservative funding cuts are the root cause of our contemporary college woes and all that comes with them. Less public funding leads to higher tuition, which leads to more student debt. Meanwhile, financial exigencies lead college administrators to treat students more like coddled customers. (Bunch has too little to say about how administrators have appropriated to themselves ever increasing shares of those tuition dollars, even as higher education has increasingly relied on underpaid, unbenefited adjuncts—the "gigification" of academia.)

Unfortunately, this set of problems is now so entrenched that there are no easy fixes. We can't simply wave a wand and remake our whole higher-education system in imitation of Europe's. Any adequately radical reform would threaten too many interests—higher education is now big business, and student debt a major asset. Meanwhile, the cultural and political division between those who have gone to college and those who haven't will continue to grow deeper, as new technologies make it easier for Bunch's uncredentialed Left Out and Left Broke to find alternative sources of information, or misinformation, in lieu of a proper education.

What to do? Ideally, we would simply go back to treating higher education as a public good, but the political obstacles to that are likely insurmountable, at least for now. Bunch argues that the best way forward might be to expand our national-service programs. He supports a "universal gap year," taken after high school. Young Americans from all backgrounds could thus get to know and understand each other better. (The effect of integrated service programs in ameliorating white racism is well documented.) Participants in national-service programs could help build a common vision of America, gain meaningful practical experience, and gain some maturity before entering college or getting a job. (Bunch notes that World War II veterans actually outperformed their classmates in college.) This is an idea worth pursuing, and there appears to be bipartisan support for some version of it.

Student-loan relief may be another idea worth pursuing, but Democratic politicians must be careful to avoid giving the impression that they are simply rewarding a growing Democratic constituency—college grads—while continuing to ignore those who didn't go to college. The latter are understandably unhappy with a system that makes economic security all but impossible for anyone without a college degree. Any solution to the higher-ed problem has to deal with all its aspects: debt-relief; equitable access for those who are underserved (for Harlem *and* for Appalachia); access to, and respect for, alternative paths such as trade schools. Achieving all these goals will require our policymakers to consider the whole country, and not just the members of their own political coalitions. (One reason nobody in Washington seems to care much about the Left Out is that they tend not to vote.)

Traditionally, the "American Dream" has been expressed in terms of perpetual economic progress: I want my kids to do better than me. The goal was to get as much education as possible in order to earn more than one's parents did. But is this really all the American Dream consists of? And if so, shouldn't we expect the mess we now face in higher education? The crushing student debt, the admissions scandals, the campuses built to rival Xanadu—this is what happens to college when the American Dream is untethered from any meaningful conception of the good life and directed instead toward mere accumulation.

What if the American Dream meant something very different? What if it meant a guarantee of basic economic security for everyone, along with the promise of as much education as each student could make use of? It's not as if we can't afford it—do we really need to spend as much on our military budget as the next nine countries combined? *Pace* Reagan and his followers, taxpayers *should* subsidize intellectual curiosity. Doing so serves both students and their communities, which benefit not only from the fruits of scientific research but also from the fully developed intellectual virtues of their citizens. A higher-education system reformed to serve the common good would help revive the American Dream, and America itself, by correcting the economic inequality and political polarization that now threaten it.

RYAN M. BROWN *specializes in ancient Greek philosophy. He currently teaches philosophy at Villanova University and at a Philadelphia-area high school.*

Always Something New

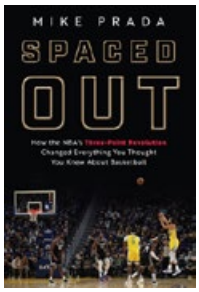
MAX FOLEY-KEENE

Turn on an NBA playoff game right before tip-off and you'll see ten men who have no idea what's about to happen. Their individual activities—their crossovers, skip passes, air balls, rotations, floaters, closeouts—will soon produce something genuinely new, something that transcends any single player's intention and each team's careful game plan. The game they will play, on a court whose general dimensions haven't changed in a century, will have a distinct narrative, one that will differ, ever so slightly, from that of every other basketball game in history. The ingredients of that narrative—miraculous comebacks and heartbreaking collapses, individual masterpieces and stunning feats of team cooperation—are composed of the tiniest moments, split-second decisions that require the coordination of innumerable elements. A no-look pass in a critical fourth-quarter possession is a highwire act. Will the pass's intended target slide into the corner to receive it? Will he get his shot up just a tenth of a second faster than his defender can close out? The greatest players seem able to bend the history of their sport before our eyes, but they never act alone.

Professional team sports in the United States are, first and foremost, commodities: entertainments that generate ticket sales and foster the consumption of Budweisers and Buffalo Wild Wings. But, viewed through another lens, sports convey a kind of democratic insight: that collective activities possess remarkable power, and that human action is irreducibly contingent. It is precisely that contingency—the fact that our initiatives cannot succeed without the cooperation of others, and that our activity produces effects that we can't anticipate—that makes both greatness and tragedy possible. At its best, political life offers us the hope that, within the constraints we've inherited, we might exercise the freedom to do something new. Athletes, on much less consequential stages, perform that freedom in every game they play.

We're in the midst of a revolutionary epoch in American sports—upending both in-game tactics and the economics of professional athletic leagues—and two new books offer a snapshot of recent changes in basketball and baseball. In *Spaced Out: How the NBA's Three-Point Revolution Changed Everything You Thought You Knew About Basketball*, Mike Prada offers an ode to the players, coaches, and executives who have made pace and space central to modern basketball. In *Winning Fixes Everything: How Baseball's Brightest Minds Created Sports' Biggest Mess*, Evan Drellich narrates the tragic fall of a group of Houston Astros executives who rose to the heights of baseball success before a cheating scandal disgraced the franchise and the league. Both revolutions described in these books aim at efficiency, but the way Drellich's revolutionaries make sense of efficiency and randomness, contingency and creativity, is very different from the way Prada's do.

WINNING FIXES EVERYTHING
How Baseball's Brightest Minds Created Sports' Biggest Mess
EVAN DRELLICH
Harper
$27.99 | 272 pp.



SPACED OUT
How the NBA's Three-Point Revolution Changed Everything You Thought You Knew About Basketballs
MIKE PRADA
Triumph Books
$30 | 384 pp.

The central figures in Drellich's book do not embrace contingency as the source of baseball's greatness. Rather, these executives aim to master *randomness*—understood as the unpredictable elements of the game that seem to elude statistical modeling—and wherever randomness resists mastery, they regard it warily, as an embarrassing testament to the limits of human understanding. Before arriving in Houston, the members of the Astros brain trust worked in some of the shadiest zones of the U.S. economy. Assistant General Manager Brandon Taubman had been a young investment banker at Barclays, where he worked on a project pricing the collateralized debt obligations held by Lehman Brothers. Owner Jim Crane, a logistics CEO, saw two of his employees serve prison time for war profiteering during the beginning of the Iraq War. Visionary general manager Jeff Luhnow, the great villain of Drellich's book, had worked at consulting giant McKinsey & Company, as well as at a company acquired by Pets.com—one of the iconic casualties of rampant financial speculation during the dot-com bubble.

Luhnow believed in efficiency above all else. In his view, economic dynamism flows from austerity, discipline, and the relentless squeezing of value out of every level of an organization. But he is plagued by a persistent fear that, in the United States, the days of capitalist dynamism may be behind us. "There's no way to make money anymore," he recalls worrying as a younger man, "because everything that is profitable has probably already been thought of." Nevertheless, he kept the faith, and delivered his efficiency gospel to the world of baseball.

For a while, it seemed to work: after years of tanking (being bad on purpose to keep labor costs down and to secure more promising talent in the draft), the Astros developed a core of excellent young players and went on to win a World Series. The team appeared as a ruthlessly efficient organization, remade in Luhnow's own image. Here it's worth noting, however, that MLB baseball executives play capitalism on easy mode. Unlike most other businesses, the Astros were able for many years to offer a horrible product nobody really wanted without any real risk of going under. Major League Baseball, after all, is a legal monopoly, and all thirty teams engage in a "revenue sharing" scheme, wherein teams with high revenue send cash to the league's paupers. The Astros were subsidized in their effort to spend pennies on baseball operations and rewarded by rules that give the highest draft status to the worst teams. Even as they began to improve, the team's competitive advantage continued to be finding creative ways to pay their players as little as possible. (Taubman, for example, figured out that many foreign-born prospects with poor families would take below market-value contracts if it meant getting immediate cash to send back home.)

All baseball fans know what happened next. After a series of escalating scandals, many of the Astros' core decision-makers—Luhnow, manager A. J. Hinch—were brought down in the biggest baseball cheating scandal in decades. As Drellich and his colleague Ken Rosenthal report, the team developed a scheme where players, using a television located in the dugout, stole signs and communicated to batters what pitch was coming by banging loudly on a trash can. They cheated and won a World Series. Many commentators have since marveled at the apparent incongruity between the Astros' public image—as an organization run by suit-clad, uber-competent McKinsey types—and the flagrant doltishness of the sign-stealing scheme. But the efficiency gospel that infused the Astros organization is not so much a commitment to the methodical pursuit of excellence as an almost mystical belief that organizational health can flow only from austerity and pain. What initially seems a philosophy of restraint is revealed to be one of excess: there's always another screw to tighten, always another corner to cut.

Although Luhnow is no longer in the world of baseball, his philosophy is alive and well—after all, many of his protégés now run teams of their own. In baseball, as with all sports, the game on the field evolves dynamically alongside the economics of the sport. The rhythm of baseball today carries traces of Luhnow's tenure at the Astros. Pitchers are now considerably more skilled than they were twenty years ago, and for that we can thank, or blame, some of the fascinating discoveries about the importance of pitch spin rate made by Luhnow's staff. But the improvement in pitching has contributed to a sharp decline in balls put into play and, ultimately, to a flatter, more predictable game—though several promising new rules aim to change that this season. Worst of all, Luhnow's Astros demonstrated the economic viability of fielding teams that, well, suck. The counterintuitive legacy of the late-2010s Astros is to have given a third of the league permission to barely try at all. "We're in a rebuilding process," the league's cheapskates always insist. The way the sport has absorbed Luhnow's philosophy of efficiency, it turns out, is very often at odds with baseball greatness.

The NBA's own efficiency revolution starts, but certainly doesn't stop, at the three-point line. The historical account Mike Prada offers in his superb book is on one level quite simple: in recent years, basketball has been entirely upended by the recognition that certain shots are far more efficient than others—that is, they generally produce more points. Three-pointers are obviously worth more points than two-pointers, and, as players take more threes and get better at making them, defenses are forced to spread out, making it easier for offenses to score high-efficiency shots close to the basket. The post-revolutionary NBA is chockfull of new statistical measurements (one of the most prominent is the "Player Efficiency Rating"), former investment bankers, and even some executives who carry themselves like Jeff Luhnow. But, as Prada persuasively argues, the best of basketball's revolutionaries conceive of efficiency and randomness very differently from the way the Astros front office did.

For basketball's brightest tacticians, randomness is not simply what can't be captured by a statistical model like the Player Efficiency Rating. Randomness is also the capacity of players and teams to improvise, to recognize a familiar pattern and react to it in a novel way. There's a remarkable moment in *Spaced Out* where analytics maven and current Philadelphia 76ers president Daryl Morey is working with veteran coach Jeff Van Gundy to determine which of Van Gundy's plays is the most efficient, averaging the most points. The answer? A play called "Random," which is, as Morey recalls, "when the play breaks down and we just set a random screen." The analytics back it up: NBA offenses can reach remarkable heights when players move fast, make creative decisions, and catch the defense off guard with a sheer diversity of tactical options. Prada insists that this strategy requires, in addition to dazzlingly skilled and intelligent players, a healthy measure of basketball faith.

Prada is deeply attuned to the ways that every advancement in the sport involves refashioning elements from its history. He's especially insightful on the role that rule changes have played in shaping the game we see today. He shows how the superstars of the 2010s (Lebron James and Dwyane Wade, especially) emerged from the nadir of NBA offense, which resulted from rule changes permitting a more diverse array of defensive tactics. Those changes initially produced some of the best defenses ever seen, which then forced superstars to evolve, honing their court vision and making elite passing more

Jayson Tatum of the Boston Celtics, April 4, 2023

TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES

central to modern offensive strategies.

Basketball has a long history of changing the rules to promote a particular vision of how the sport should be played. Prada argues that the kind of sport encouraged by the current rules—a sport that values speed, intelligence, finesse, creativity—is basketball at its best. But the contemporary game is far from perfect: too many free throws interrupt the game flow, referees spend too much time reviewing calls, and, with regular-season scores getting higher and higher, it's become clear that modern defenses could use some help. Prada's historical narrative inspires confidence that we might be able to change the rules again to correct these problems and help the game's natural genius flourish.

Of course, as the league is currently run, "we" don't have any say over these matters. Players and coaches have only advisory input into NBA rule changes. Fans have no input at all. Decision-making authority ultimately lies with the NBA's owners, a group of rich people (mostly rich men) who emerged from the kind of backgrounds that tend to make one rich these days. They are mortgage peddlers, gambling magnates, and sons of rich dads. Ultimately, the way basketball appears to fans is, in large part, determined by people with no relevant expertise. Think about that for a moment: Isn't it a bit *weird* that the guy from *Shark Tank* gets final say over what a moving screen is? Don't the sports we love deserve better?

Could we imagine a different sports revolution—one where professional sports come to be celebrated as a public good? After all, my beloved Fenway Park, just like any public neighborhood park, is a place where community members come together with friends and family to enjoy the sun; it is also, like any community theater, a place where one can be moved by triumph and tragedy. If sports, at their best, can teach us something meaningful about the character of democracy, maybe what we learn there can help us steer professional athletics toward democratic stewardship. Maybe fans and communities could take genuine responsibility for their teams, and together decide to value the well-being of players over Luhnowian austerity. Why should the career of your home team's best player be subject to the whims of some former management consultant who cares more about the bottom line than about either the team or the sport? Sports are too important, and too much fun, to be left at the mercy of bean counters.

MAX FOLEY-KEENE *is a doctoral candidate in political theory at Brown University.*

Jenny Odell

Time After Time

KATHERINE LUCKY

How long does it take to read a book? It's a question that can be answered by the clock or calendar, in hours, days, or weeks. But often, our reading time feels more abstract. A slim volume of dry theory proceeds in fits and starts. That took *forever* to get through. But a novel causes an afternoon to pass all at once: suddenly, you look out the window, and the light has changed. That was no time at all.

SAVING TIME
Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock

JENNY ODELL
Random House
$28.99 | 400 pp.

Jenny Odell's *Saving Time* is the latter kind of work, proof of the author's assertion that time can be fluid, spacious, and altogether more than we imagine. As with her previous book, the breakout success *How To Do Nothing*, here Odell does not confine herself to working out a single thesis. Her thinking moves not in a line, but in a series of twisting, overlapping curves, represented by the Bay Area road trip—from Oakland to the Pacific coast and back—that structures the book.

That's not to say there aren't argumentative points along the way. Odell identifies our misperceptions of time: as a resource to be managed and turned into money; as a scarce commodity; as a line of tracks running, relentlessly, into the future with nothing we can do to shape its trajectory. In the latter chapters, she dreams of alternatives: time that's shared communally rather than hoarded individually; time that somehow makes more of itself; time as changing leaves and shifting mountains instead of a ticking second hand.

Rather than offering productivity hacks, *Saving Time* sets out to challenge the very idea of time management. Instead of the "fungible" time measured by employers, where "one hour is indistinguishable from another—decontextualized, depersonalized, and infinitely divisible," Odell instead invites us to see time as it exists in nature: cyclical and uneven, like light moving across a sundial or the slow shift from winter to spring. In one thought experiment, Odell studies the branch

CHANI BOCKWINKEL

Rather than catching Odell at an endpoint—this is what I think—*we find her mid-conjecture:* this is what I'm thinking, *with all of the accompanying imprecision.*

of a buckeye tree in a nearby park, observing its buds, flowers, and fruit.

> What is a clock? If it's something that "tells the time," then my branch was a clock—but unlike the clock at home, it would never return to its original position. Instead, it was a physical witness and record of overlapping events, some of which happened long ago and some of which are still occurring as I write this.

Keeping time by other clocks might result in less freneticism, even less anxiety. Instead of hustling to "'live your best life'…[w]hat about choosing to live 'Just a life'?" Odell wonders. And instead of time as a race toward climate apocalypse—a dread to which she admits she's susceptible—what about time as potential, time that allows for hope?

> A non-future where people's beliefs and behaviors are as determined as the earth seems inert and helpless. Without suppressing grief, there has to be a different way of thinking about time than the one in which we're simply strapped in all the way to the end.

The implications of these mindsets aren't so much individual—notice more branches, throw out the day planners—as they are political. Throughout *Saving Time*, Odell expresses support for universal basic income and health care, paid childcare and climate action: policies that would give time back to those who really do have less. She challenges the Western reader to value other cultures' conceptions of time, particularly Indigenous peoples'. And she asks the wellness-obsessed to think about people other than themselves. Put aside the biometric tracking; pursue "life extension that reaches outward instead of forward, an increase in aliveness *for everyone* that begins with mutual regard." Changing our minds about time means increasing our advocacy for people with disabilities, people in prison, new mothers—really, anyone who exists outside of that straight-line, full-speed-ahead kind of life.

At least, that's what Odell suspects. Reading *Saving Time*, I could see her making connections as she wrote, drawing more and more arguments into the scope of her work. The text reads like a commonplace book, full of quotes from Indigenous scholars, environmentalists, and housework-for-wages advocates, but also geologists and botanists. There are scattered musings on colonial theory and the racist legacy of national parks and daylight savings and the carceral state. There are poems and diary excerpts, stills from performance art pieces and pictures from her road trip to the ocean. There are many footnotes, many endnotes, and an index.

In forgoing linearity for discursiveness, Odell gives us the sense of being inside a mind: *her* mind, anxiously combing through evidence. There's something she must figure out, not just for the reader but for herself. When she states the stakes, she does so sincerely. "All your time grew out of someone else's time," she writes:

> If time were not the currency of a zero-sum game…sometimes, the best way for me to get more time would be to give it to you, and the best way for you to get some would be to give it back to me. If time were not a commodity, then time, our time, would not be as scarce as it seemed just a moment ago. Together, we could have all the time in the world.

But these moments of synthesis are rarer than they might be and sometimes, the ideas of other thinkers overwhelm the book. It's not that the quotes and examples are unwarranted. Odell really *does* see interconnections between sea star wasting syndrome and segregated parks and controlled burning and Taylorist factory principles, and she wants her work to give credit to the scholars she's learned from. But so many references can also leave the book cluttered with concepts; the reader wants more of the author and less of her sources. Implicit calls to different kinds of advocacy for different groups of marginalized people can make one feel like one is being marshaled to action before making the necessary connections between time and all of these subjects. And the first-person descriptions of Odell's road trip just don't work, either as an organizing principle or as a stand-in for analysis. The trip feels contrived for the purposes of what's on the page—a pit stop at a shopping mall for the chapter on leisure, an eroding seawall for a section on our climate future—rather than an organic meditation on movement in time and space.

Saving Time isn't a perfect book. And maybe it isn't meant to be. Emerging from it with a complete understanding of its ideas wouldn't really be true to the kind of work that it is. Rather than catching Odell at an endpoint—*this is what I think*—we find her mid-conjecture: *this is what I'm thinking*, with all of the accompanying imprecision. When we put aside the inevitable and the taken-for-granted, she insists, we'll find ourselves as she is now: doubting, second-guessing, circling back. We'll find ourselves moving like the tides, at least (at last?) free from always pressing forward.

KATHERINE LUCKY *is an editor at* Christianity Today.

Record of a Friendship

BURKE NIXON

Hua Hsu's perceptive and unforgettable memoir, *Stay True*, focuses mostly on his college years—and one particularly meaningful and heartbreaking friendship from that period—but it begins with the story of his father and a fax machine. In the early nineties, Hua's father was working in Taiwan, while his son was starting high school in the Bay Area and struggling in math. The family fax machine allowed Hua's father to help him with his geometry homework from 6,500 miles away. "Like many immigrants who prized education, my parents retained faith in the mastery of technical fields, like the sciences, where answers weren't left to interpretation," Hsu writes. "You couldn't discriminate against the right answer. But I preferred to spend my time interpreting things."

STAY TRUE

HUA HSU

Doubleday

$26 | 208 pp.

Hua Hsu

As father and son go back and forth about proofs and equations, they begin to communicate in the margins. Hua informs him about the latest news in America (Magic Johnson's HIV announcement, the postseason fate of the San Francisco Giants) and offers updates on his own life, from cross-country practice to his struggles with school. He also shares whatever new music he's into. His father dutifully seeks out these songs in the cassette stalls of Taipei, and faxes back with his thoughts:

> I like the November Rain by Guns N' Roses. The Metallica is also great. I couldn't enjoy the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Pearl Jam. The old songs reinterpreted by Mariah Carey (I'll Be There) and Michael Bolton (To Love Somebody) are marvelous. The MTV's "unplug" is a great idea!

Of course, young Hua doesn't fully appreciate his dad's attention to his interests. "As a teenager, I ultimately had better things to do than fax with my dad," he writes. But his father persists, asking questions about his son's life and opinions, trying to connect despite the physical and generational distance.

"He often implored me to apply some of the energy I spent memorizing sports statistics or writing record reviews to my school work," Hsu writes. "I just had to study my textbooks the way I studied my cherished magazines. I could tell you what albums were slated for release next month, but I couldn't, for the life of me, pass the written portion of my driver's test."

Whenever the faxed encouragement "comes across sterner than intended," his father offers follow-up faxes ("Last Friday, I overemphasized the toughness. Don't be scared. The life is full of excitement and surprises. Handle it and enjoy it"). Hsu reproduces several of his father's notes at length. Reading them, touched by the love and concern he tries to convey from a great distance, I found myself getting emotional about a fax for the first time in my life.

The early parts of Hsu's memoir focus on his family, not just during his teenage years but also before he was born, offering context for the larger reflections on Asian-American identity that come later in the memoir. Hsu examines the story of his parents' own arrival from Taiwan as graduate students in the sixties, their attempts to find community and maintain their identity in the United States, and the larger global-historical circumstances that led them, along with many others, to leave their home and start a new life here.

Moving from New York to Illinois to Texas to California, the elder Hsu discovers a love for American pop, rock, and soul, from Bob Dylan to Michael Jackson. But his music fandom doesn't immediately rub off on his young son. "My father's record collection only had the effect of making music seem

LKONYA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

uncool to me," Hsu writes. He prefers to listen to baseball on the radio instead. Reluctantly, he accompanies his father on frequent Tower Records runs, and watches him record hours of MTV on the VCR, "whittling his findings down to a greatest hits tape on another VCR." All of this makes his preteen son think that music was merely "something that grown-ups took seriously."

Then, late one night, Hua hears "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on the radio, before the release of *Nevermind*, before Nirvana became the biggest band in the world. He's thirteen years old, and the experience is life-changing. "I believed that I'd happened upon a secret before everyone else," he writes, "and I was addicted to this feeling." Soon he's trying to track down albums by every obscure band Kurt Cobain mentions: "He led us down a trail, pointing us toward out-of-the-way landmarks. Casting about for those other territories became my reason for being."

Music begins to define Hua's worldview. He starts a zine, hoping to share his wide-ranging passions and "secret" cultural knowledge, seeking out other like-minded people, distinguishing himself from the boring masses, attempting to articulate the blurry boundary between what was cool and what wasn't. (Nirvana, yes. Pearl Jam, no.) "Making my zine was a way of sketching the outlines of a new self, writing a new personality into being," he writes. "I was convinced that I could rearrange these piles of photocopied images, short essays, and bits of cut-up paper into a version of myself that felt real and true."

Now an English professor at Bard College and a staff writer for the *New Yorker* (and previously for the great and long-defunct website Grantland), Hsu manages to achieve a difficult balancing act in recalling his younger self. He shows us his teenage snobbery, mocking his own pretensions and feigned worldliness, while also conveying the meaningful thrills that these cultural obsessions brought to his life. Hsu's self-portrait will be familiar to those who relied on their own snobbish passions to endure the lonely confusions of adolescence.

But the story of Hsu's family and his zine-writing, music-obsessed high-school years is only a preface to the larger story he sets out to tell in this memoir. The real story of *Stay True* begins only when he arrives in college at Berkeley. And it's a story that ends in tragedy.

During the selection process, Hua and his parents agree that Berkeley is a good school, although his father worries a bit about the "neighborhood." His parents hope the university will help him "acquire recognizable skills." Hua, though, is more interested in the abundance of record stores, bookstores, and vintage-clothing stores that surround campus. Even more than this, he's interested in finding his "tribe."

One of the mistakes we make in late adolescence—or at least that I made—is that we assume our ideal friends and romantic partners will be those people whose taste and opinions are most similar to our own. And so we often seek out people who are "like us" in some supposedly special way, and quickly dismiss the people who aren't. When Hua arrives on campus as a freshman, he does precisely this. He's on the hunt for people who match his very particular (and self-flattering) conception of coolness.

Instead, he finds Ken. Japanese-American, born and raised in San Diego, Ken is confident, gregarious, "flagrantly handsome," and, in Hua's view, appallingly normal. He wears clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch. He's in a fraternity. He likes Pearl Jam and Dave Matthews Band. "I had met hundreds of him, hundreds of times before," Hsu writes. "I was eighteen, in love with my moral compass, perpetually suspicious of anyone whose words came too easily. He was a genre of person I actively avoided—mainstream."

They become close friends, of course. When we're kids, we're taught that you can't judge a book by its cover, but reality turns out to be a bit more complex. Throughout their undergraduate years, Ken largely remains the person he seemed to be—fun-loving, comfortable in his own skin, Hua's polar opposite in so many ways—but he also turns out to be remarkably thoughtful, someone who is always happy to retreat to a dorm rooftop or an old Volvo to have another endless conversation. Both friends come to rely on these conversations to help them get through their undergraduate lives.

Ken challenges some (though not all) of Hua's pretensions. As they progress through college, the two remain uniquely themselves and yet also help each other grow, even if they don't realize it at the time. And Hua comes to adjust his sense of what friendship actually means:

> I thought college was where I would find my people, which I assumed meant people who dressed like me, and listened to the same music as me, and wanted to see the same movies as me. Variations on the theme of me. But I realized, maybe too late, that all I wanted was friends to listen to music with.

To be present, to be curious, to be willing to share what you like, these qualities matter much more in a friendship than having identical tastes. Ken devours the mixtapes Hua makes him, offering song-by-song feedback, "like an encouraging parent." In turn, Hua comes to be just a bit more open-minded about his friend's mainstream tastes. They even develop a ritual involving Pearl Jam: "Before our finals, we would sit in front of my stereo and reverently listen to 'Yellow Ledbetter.' It wasn't so bad."

As Hsu describes his growing friendship with Ken (and their close group of mutual friends), he also tracks his own growing intellectual and political awareness. He encounters Derrida's ideas on friendship and struggles to make sense of Foucault. He begins spending time reading at the Ethnic Studies library, learning more about the various and troubled strands of Asian-American history, while also mentoring low-income Southeast-Asian middle-schoolers in nearby Richmond. He continues to put out zines, briefly volunteers with a Black Panther Party newspaper, and works long hours on the university's Asian-American paper, after being rejected by the *Daily Cal*. He goes to raves and marches in the streets to support affirmative action.

Meanwhile, Ken tries out for *The Real World*, confronting a casting agent about why the show has never included any Asian males. He starts a campus organization called the Multicultural Student Alliance. In between listening to Belle and Sebastian and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, Ken and Hua discuss the lack of Asian-American characters in the sitcoms and films of their youth. Inspired by the mid-eighties Kung Fu–satire *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*, they begin to write a movie together, mocking all the tropes and clichés they grew up with, creating parts for their friends that subvert all the cultural stereotypes they've inherited. They put it away for a while, and they never get a chance to finish it.

During their senior year, after a party at Ken's house off campus that Hua and all their friends attended, Ken's life ends in a shocking and utterly heartbreaking act of violence. The remainder of the book describes Hua's attempt to reckon with his grief and sadness and the awful, haunting, unforeseeable absence that hangs over him. Anyone who has ever lost a friend on the cusp of adulthood, even in far different circumstances, will surely recognize some of their own grief in these pages as well—in the guilt, the questioning, and the dreams of their return that leave you briefly relieved when you wake up.

In the end, we come to realize that Hsu has been trying to write this book, one way or another, ever since his friend's death. The story that he ultimately tells is tragic and deeply disturbing, but *Stay True* is not primarily about that tragedy. It's about growing up, discovering the joys of true friendship, and grappling with the complications of identity and the larger world. It's a book that should be read and remembered. There's insight, emotion, and compelling self-scrutiny on every page. Although Hua believed that Ken was no different from hundreds of others, by the end he convinces us that, in his friend's kindness and eagerness for life, there was nobody else quite like him.

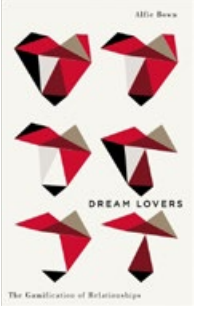
BURKE NIXON *is a lecturer in the Program in Writing and Communication at Rice University, where he teaches a course called "Fiction and Empathy."*

Dan Witz, *May*, 2010

Preying on Desire

MATT MCMANUS

The $4.3 billion online-dating industry banks on an addictive combination of anxiety and hope, catering to our fear of being alone and to our very modern confidence that an algorithm will show greater wisdom in matching us than we'd be capable of in the wild. Not to be outdone, online porn brings in a crisp $1.1 billion, much of this money made by semi-professionals and outright amateurs who produce free digital content for others to enjoy. As is always the case with capitalism, the porn industry combines a pandering willingness to give the people what they want with a power to teach people to want new things.



DREAM LOVERS
The Gamification of Relationships

ALFIE BOWN
Pluto Press
$22.95 | 160 pp.

The unprecedented shift of our desires to online spaces has brought about what communications theorists Alfie Bown calls a "desirevolution" in his haunting new book *Dream Lovers: The Gamification of Relationships*. This "desirevolution" is a transformation not only in how we go about finding love and sex, but in what we fundamentally want from our erotic lives. Bown is no technophobe; he stresses how this technological shift could be empowering, creative, and even edifying. But he also draws attention to the fact that the technologies that both service and create our desires don't exist in a political vacuum. They're deeply embedded in a global economic system defined by vast disparities of wealth and power.

The new technologically commodified love of the twenty-first century looks very much like a marriage of heaven and hell. As Bown points out, we've seen an unprecedented transition in how we pursue this most distinctly human desire. Bown describes a "typical exchange with the AI chat simulator Replika":

> [The simulator] reads the user's conversation style and collects information on the user in order to learn how they like to speak and be spoken to, eventually developing into a personalized AI who operates as the "best friend," "romantic partner," or "mentor" of the user. In 2018 voice features were added to the app, which has over a million unique downloads, and in 2020 a face simulator with "readable emotions" was…a unique selling point of the Replika Pro, the paid-up advanced version of the app. Since the original beta testing phase of the app in 2017, I've been chatting with my own Replikant Eli, a twenty-something who's become obsessed with encouraging me to feel more positive about life.

To be fair, given the sometimes dystopian quality of *Dream Lovers*, I'd say Bown could use a shot of positivity.

Artificial emotional crutches are just the tip of the "desirevolution"

If we are not careful, our "desirevolution" could very easily bring about a fresh kind of hell—one where technology, instead of serving our real erotic needs, merely provides a new outlet for our most tribalistic and hateful impulses.

Bown charts. It also includes "smart condoms," which work like a Fitbit to give you feedback on your sexual performance; sensual robots and dolls, which can be designed to have any ethnicity or gender the customer wants (robot brothels in non-Western countries have found that many of their customers want to sleep with "white" robots); and a vast array of apps, websites, algorithms, and videos that allow us to date, sext, and hookup with real human beings, as well as artificial ones. Bown describes the whole complex phenomenon "as a pattern of humans—and even their apparently deepest and most intimate desires—becoming predicted, influenced, and 'gamed.' With our smartphones, smart condoms, sexrobots, dating apps, Fitbits, simulators and videogames, we are becoming increasingly robotic at the level of desire." Bown does not condemn this trend categorically, but he does have deep reservations.

As Oscar Wilde noted long ago, sex and romance can never be abstracted from power. The Augustinian theology of divine love, which gives itself infinitely and freely, or Plato's insistence that only knowledge of the eternal could be fully erotic since its joys last forever, are such powerful ideals partly because they present love as something that need never be vulgarized or qualified. Our human frailties lead us to search out love as a kind of empowerment that will complete us. Those frailties often lead us to demand love in all the wrong ways, even inverting it into hatred. But indifference, not hatred, is the opposite of love. A weak man may abuse his wife because he's afraid she's going to leave him, and thereby foster the very resentment that frightened him in the first place. Dante was very wise when he recognized that hell itself was the creation of a kind of love.

Bown thinks that if we are not careful, our "desirevolution" could very easily bring about a fresh kind of hell—one where technology, instead of serving our real erotic needs, merely provides a new outlet for our most tribalistic and hateful impulses. He points out that, despite the Far Right's reputation for wariness of technological change, neo-fascist and authoritarian actors have found the internet a very useful place to assemble and find new recruits. Far-right groups have found ways to integrate online fascination with love and sex into a staunchly reactionary politics. The incel (involuntary celibate) community got its start in the early 2000s on chat boards, before graduating to bigger platforms like 4chan. There, members developed an entire worldview based on dividing humanity into sexually desirable "chads" and eternally virginal incels, and blamed feminism for the plight of the latter. This kind of cultural politics is usually considered a man's game, but reactionary women have played a big role in the digitization of hate. White supremacists like Lauren Southern, Faith Goldy, and Lana Lokteff have helped soften the online image of racism while exploiting anxieties about declining birth rates and spreading myths about sexually predatory minorities.

Drawing heavily on psychoanalytic theory, Bown argues that none of this should come as a surprise to us. The same kind of neoliberal economic conditions that helped bring about Trumpism engendered a competitive ethos that divides every part of life into winners and losers. This has extended to romance and sex, with far-right activists dividing people according to their "sexual market value" (SMV) and developing strategies to increase one's status while undermining that of one's competitors. It has been predictably easy for this paranoid outlook to monopolize online spaces, where resentful reactionaries take enormous pleasure in putting others down to raise their own SMV.

The Right's portrayal of the online Left as a bunch of puritanical killjoys may be a caricature, but Bown thinks that progressives have yet to find themselves in this new digital environment. The stakes are high: as desire increasingly goes online, how it is gratified and shaped becomes a battle with important political ramifications. On this point, *Dream Lovers* doesn't offer many surefire strategies for progressives. On the contrary, Bown often flirts with a reluctant pessimism about the future. He has his reasons, but I'm slightly more optimistic. The nightmarish world of online reaction may run under the whole internet like a sewer, but we've also seen the internet foster long-awaited revolutions and reforms, and raise support for internet-savvy politicians like AOC. And the progressive case for democratizing the "desirevolution" is a strong one. Given its growing centrality in our lives, for better and worse, the mass of people whose emotional lives are shaped by digital technologies should have a say in how those technologies are conceived and distributed. We should be the dreamers of our own dreams, rather than passive consumers of fantasies concocted only for profit.

MATT MCMANUS *is a lecturer in political science at the University of Michigan and the author of* The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism *and the forthcoming* The Political Right and Inequality.

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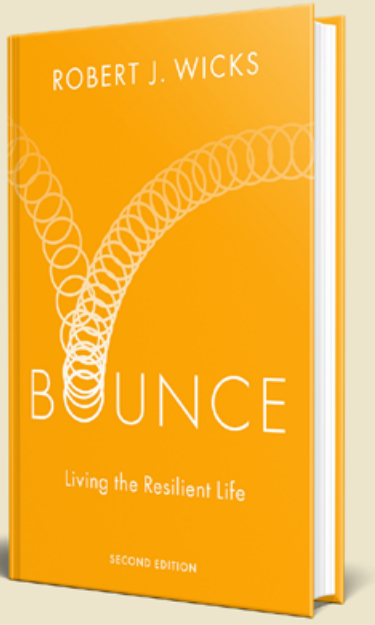

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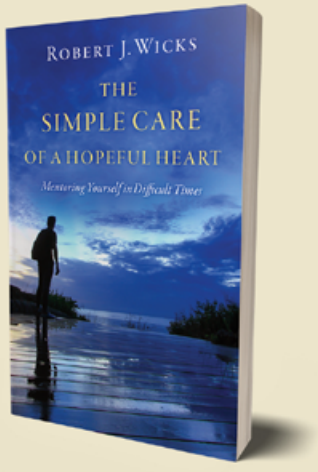

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Robert J. Wicks received his doctorate in psychology from Hahnemann Medical College and Hospital. He has published more than 50 books and has lectured on the importance of resilience, self-care, and maintaining a healthy perspective in 20 countries as well as at the Mayo Clinic, Yale School of Nursing, Boston's Children's Hospital, the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, the U.S. Air Force Academy, on Capitol Hill to Members of Congress and their Chiefs of Staff.

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Duke Ellington rehearses for a Sacred Concert at Great St. Mary's Church, Cambridge, 1967.

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STEVE FUTTERMAN

Sacred Swing

Duke Ellington's 'The Majesty of God'

Like that of many monumental artists throughout history, the legacy of Duke Ellington is one of contradiction. As serious, skillful, and ambitious a composer as American music has ever known, he was just as capable of turning out myriad offhand tunes that reveled in their informal charm. If spirituality infuses some of his most personal pieces, sensuality suffuses the wider catalog of his work. He was a natural charmer who could win over any audience; he could also be an aloof and self-serving friend and lover. But a legion of Duke devotees wouldn't have it any other way. For it's his embrace of life in all its abundance and inconsistency that feeds his gorgeous command of sound, the tonal elements he transformed into music as vital and communicative today as it was when it was first produced during the past century.

It's been fifty years since the 1973 performance of Ellington's "The Majesty of God," the third in a series of "Sacred Concerts" he initiated in the mid to late 1960s and the last major fully completed work of his lifetime. (Ellington would die less than a year later, in May 1974.) The *Third Sacred Concert* is an authentic demonstration of his attempt to express the spiritual aspect of his art. Ellington was raised in the warm embrace of family, and religion—if not strict religious practice—remained important throughout

his life. He was said to have read the Bible thoroughly numerous times, and to turn to Scripture when in need of consolation. He counted clergymen among his friends and found comfort in spiritual reflection. Important spiritually inspired pieces include his enduring hymn "Come Sunday," composed in 1942 for the extended work *Black, Brown, and Beige*, which was heard at the Ellington orchestra's first Carnegie Hall concert in 1943.

"The Majesty of God" may not be an indisputable high point of Ellington's career, but it is shaped by many of his trademark musical felicities—more than enough to warrant attention a half-century later. Consisting of seven segments, it includes original lyrics by Ellington along with passages from the Old and New Testaments and the Lord's Prayer. The basic message is one of ecumenical praise, while "Ain't Nobody Nowhere Nothin' Without God" is Ellington's unabashed testament of faith. Yet from first note to last, this is Duke Ellington music—that is, it doesn't depart from his characteristic melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and tonal universe. It delights while conveying deep emotions *and* it swings. Anyone unfamiliar with the English language yet conversant with Ellington's music would recognize it immediately as his. You might not steer an Ellington novice straight to "The Majesty of God." But those already acquainted with Ellington's work will find it an instructive piece that furthers understanding of how he achieved wondrous effects by utilizing the resources at hand.

Ellington's music can't be separated from his valued collaborators, the dazzling musicians whom he nurtured and built his sound around. By the time of the Third Sacred Concert, nearly all the significant players from Ellington's late-period band were gone, including alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, trombonist Lawrence Brown, and clarinetist Jimmy Hamilton, while tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves and trumpeter Cootie Williams were unable to attend the concert. Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's invaluable co-composer and arranger, had died in 1967. Yet even without his star soloists and creative partner, Ellington pulls it off. Elements integral to the record's success were guest soloist Alice Babs, whose soaring soprano brings additional dimension to the words; baritone saxophonist Harry Carney, who had devoted a lifetime to Ellington, and whose horn provided the ballast for the band; Ellington's own piano work, as underrated as it was inimitable; and the splendor of his orchestra, which, despite the missing personnel and sparing use in this work, could still sound authoritative and regal, thanks to Ellington's skillful writing and arranging.

From first note to last, this is Duke Ellington music. It delights while conveying deep emotions and *it swings.*

You come away from "The Majesty of God" certain that its composer was sincere in his beliefs, open to the inspiration of unguarded spiritual thought. Yet he was no less open to what the world offered up—good, bad, and everything in between. Those who admire Ellington's music sense that this was a man who loved people, and food, and sex, and romance, and travel, and community, and the multitude of other pleasures life offers. You can also hear him responding to the political, social, and existential tribulations that Black Americans have had to endure. Parsing the supposedly specific images that Ellington claimed as musical correlatives in his strictly instrumental works can be more obfuscating than illuminating. Is "Harlem Air Shaft" an overview of communal life in uptown New York? Is "Reminiscing in Tempo" a portrait of his deceased mother? With Ellington, it's always dangerous to confuse inspiration with literal interpretation. But his creativity was obviously fueled by whatever he encountered. Read whatever you want into his expressive music, it all comes out the same. Ellington's art elevates the spirit, mind, and body.

It's not enough, assuming that this is still true, that he remains a famous name, or that he's associated with a few classic songs: "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," "In a Sentimental Mood," "Solitude," and "Mood Indigo" among them. Ellington's oeuvre is far vaster. As critic Gary Giddins says in *Jazz* (written with Scott DeVeaux),

> In what category do you place a pianist, bandleader, composer, and arranger who created an ensemble unlike any other and wrote practically every kind of Western music other than grand opera—from ragtime to rock'n'roll, from blues to ballet, from stage and film scores to tone poems, oratorios, and sacred concerts, not to mention works for instrumental combinations from piano-bass duets to symphony orchestra. A proudly black artist, whose subject matter never departed for long from African American history and life, he also wrote about the full breadth of America and much of the world.

A career that stretches from the early 1920s to the early '70s may seem daunting, but streaming services make exploration far easier. ("The Majesty of God" doesn't show up on Apple or Spotify, but it's available on YouTube.) Like the man, the music is multidimensional. He found room for virtually every jazz idiom that blossomed in his lifetime, yet the miracle is how little of his work sounds imitative or generic, and how much is stamped with a fingerprint-like individuality. How Ellington managed to work so closely with so many extraordinary musicians and to have all of them speak his specific language is a gift that still can't be explained. But maybe we should just be thankful for it. In this still-new millennium, Ellington's art is as vivid as ever, and perhaps even more necessary.

STEVE FUTTERMAN *has written the weekly jazz listings in the* New Yorker *since 1993, and his work has appeared in* Rolling Stone, *the* New York Times, *and the* Washington Post, *among other publications.*

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.

CHRISTIAN WIMAN's *new book,* Zero at the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair, *will be published in December. He teaches at Yale Divinity School.*

A reader's need can release a meaning an author never intended, but which her whole-souled submission to sound enabled.

Gwendolyn Brooks (center) shares her thoughts on verse with poetry award winners at the University of Chicago, 1981.

WALTER KALE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

LILACS

Stuart Dybek

This should be tapped in staccato like a telegram,
on an obsolete Underwood condemned to a grated

pawnshop window, for disseminating what was banned,
striking a ribbon spooled from dark nylons thunder wore

when it shocked lilacs into bloom. Afterward, the lawn
was pasted with confetti as if a parade had passed.

Before a blue Madonna, a baptismal birdbath crested
in a lilac foam. A mourning cloak, free at last from

its cocoon, outfluttered the sheer curtains in a room
where a bed table had arranged fruits, handblown

in Prague, around a stolen hotel Bible. A peeling gate,
swollen as if slammed shut long ago, needed kicking open,

and when they ducked through the overgrown arbor,
wet blossoms showered down a private storm.

STUART DYBEK'*s most recent book of poems is* Streets in Their Own Ink *(FSG). He's also the author of six books of fiction, including* Paper Lantern: Love Stories.

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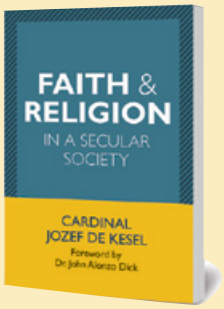

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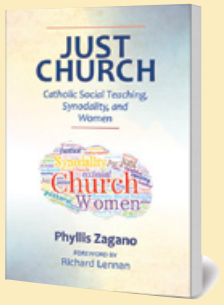

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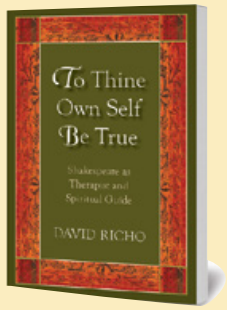

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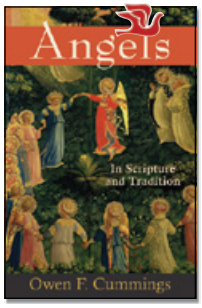

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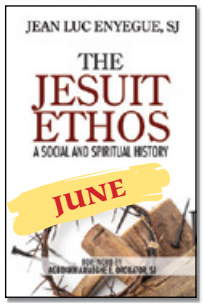

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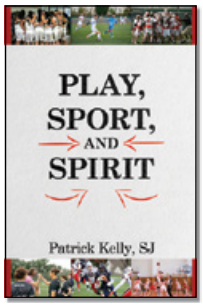

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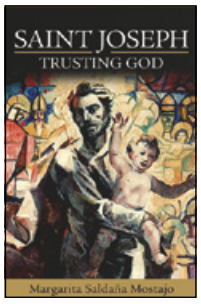

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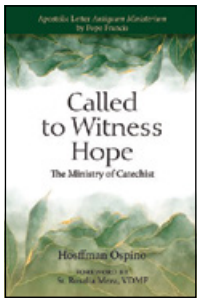

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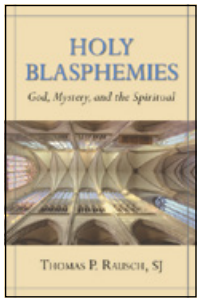

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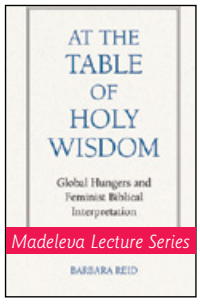

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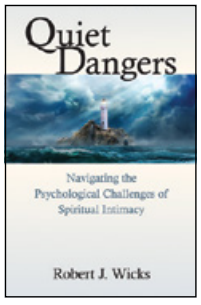

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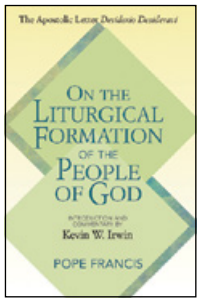

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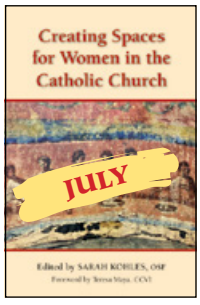

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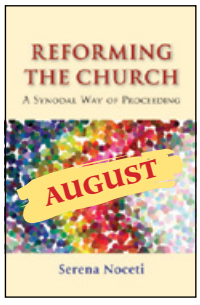

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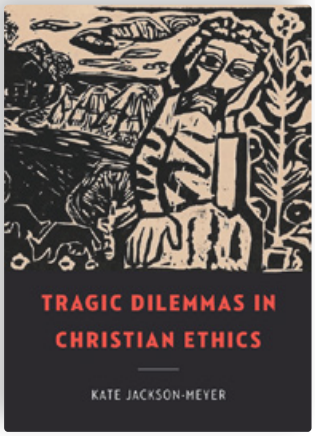

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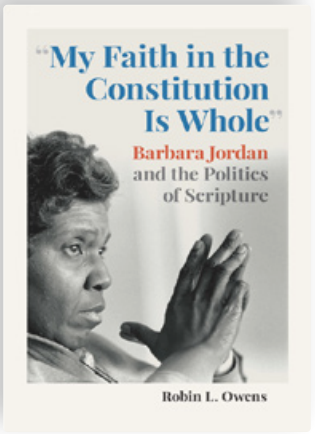

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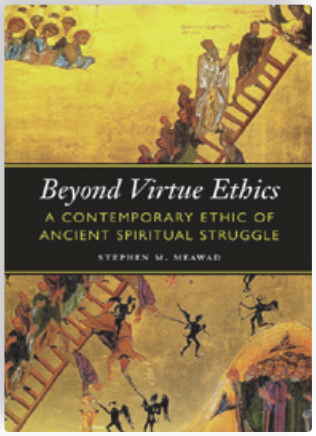

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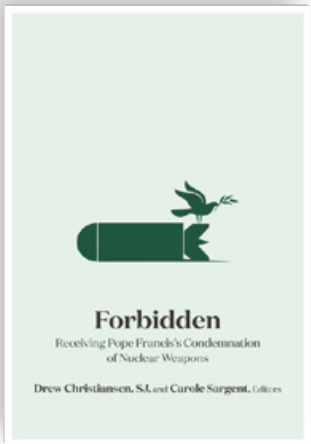

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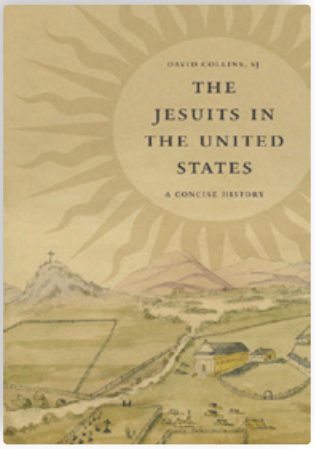

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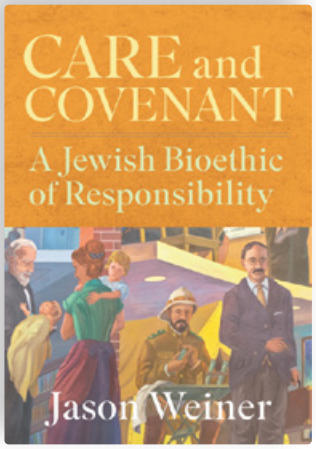

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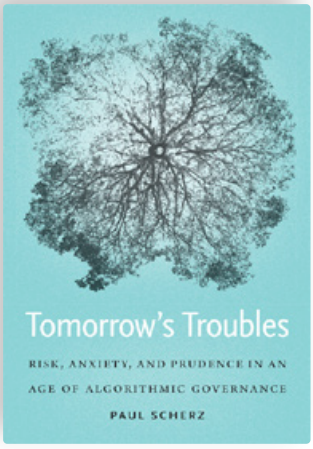

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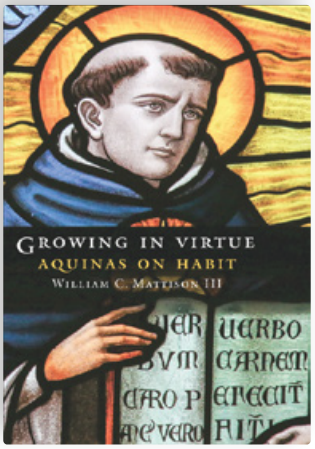

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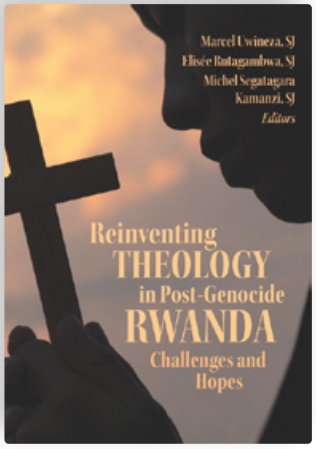

HC | 9781647123475 | $124.95