

*JOURNAL OF THE*  
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*VOL. 41*



## Faculty Forum President's Letter

The current “spirit of the age” is characterized by strong ideologies and a reluctance to engage in a free and open exchange of ideas. It is also often marked by insensitivity toward the struggles of those who are different and a willful ignorance of the lessons of science and history. It is in this context that I am increasingly grateful for the voices of the faculty of Union University. Each academic year my colleagues faithfully guide their students in expressing informed and thoughtful concern for the well-being of their neighbors, for human society at large, and for the planet that our Creator has entrusted to our care.

The *Journal of the Union Faculty Forum (JUFF)* continues to serve as an effective vehicle for their collective voice. I want to thank our contributors and our editor for this latest edition. I hope that you enjoy it.

The Faculty Forum continues to serve its constitutional role as a vital channel of communication between Union's faculty and administration, through which “the faculty express its interest and concerns.” On behalf of myself and the other officers for this academic year (2021-22)—Brian Glas (Vice President), Savannah Patterson (Secretary) and Christine Bailey (*JUFF* editor)—I want to thank you for your interest and involvement in Faculty Forum.

Troy D. Riggs



# A Word from the Editorial Board

We, the students of the Professional Editing, Proofreading, and Publishing class, proudly present to you the 2021-2022 *JUFF*. This year's *JUFF* is a product of sweat, literal tears, lots of red ink, and caffeine addictions. We hope you enjoy reading this year's collection, which includes topics from barn raising to Wes Anderson. We would like to specifically thank Dr. Bailey for having the patience to teach us the art of editing and introducing us to the world of publishing.

# A Word from the Editor-in-Chief

As your Editor-in-Chief, I am thrilled to present the 41st volume of the *Journal of the Union Faculty Forum*. Truly, the credit belongs to an impressive team that worked so diligently to bring you this year's *JUFF*. Both faculty and students collaborated on the publication from start to finish. My Professional Editing, Proofreading, and Publishing class had the privilege of collaborating with visiting professor Kayla Stanz's Typography class on the journal's design. Together, we are proud to present this quality publication that is both aesthetically pleasing and rich in content. Further, a special thank you goes to the faculty members who contributed to this issue.

Christine Bailey  
Professor, Department of English

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**GENERAL SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

A new volume of the *Journal of the Union Faculty Forum* is published during each fall semester. The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, artwork, and scholarly articles in various academic disciplines. Submissions should be in a MS Word format with a 12-point font. The journal accepts MLA, APA and Turabian documentation formats. Acceptance is determined by the quality of the work. While the submission period for the Fall 2021 issue is now closed, you may submit your work for Vol. 42 (Fall 2022 issue). Please email submissions to [cbailey@uu.edu](mailto:cbailey@uu.edu).

## Barn Raising, Not Battle, in the Christian College Classroom

Julie Powell

After a lifetime spent living in a somewhat rural area of West Tennessee, I am fully aware that the barn is a central component to the activity on a farm or ranch. This structure becomes a lifeline to all the activity that surrounds its walls, from housing animals and equipment to hosting the essential chores required for the operation and maintenance of the property. Without a properly erected barn, a farm risks becoming inefficient in its processes, and its life-giving production is hindered. Understanding the vital role that the barn plays in farming operations, the concept of a barn raising was established in the 18th and 19th centuries as a collective way for a community to join forces to erect this large and costly structure, which required more labor than one family could usually provide. Those who benefited from the donated labor could then return the favor by assisting someone else when the time arose to construct another barn. Although the effort needed to construct a barn is mostly provided through heavy machinery today, the Amish still practice this tradition of assisting community members by continuing the barn raising practice (Scott, 2012). It is this barn-raising concept that I introduce here as imagery for creating a culture of hospitality, empathy, and humility in the college classroom, specifically when addressing the issue of facilitating classroom discussions among students.

**Barn Raising**

In their book *Charitable Writing*, authors Gibson and Beitler (2020) use the concept of barn raising as a surprising metaphor for what a healthy and engaging discussion might look like in a college classroom. The authors compare the collaboration, hospitality, empathy, and humility present throughout a barn raising with the fighting, one-upmanship, and discord of a war or battle. With these differences in mind, the researchers ask readers



to consider that the better choice for approaching discussions might be to lean towards the barn raising idea. Rather than viewing a discussion as competition (a battle) where one side is declared the winner, perhaps a more collaborative effort (a barn raising) is needed, during which one side's idea is refined and improved, eventually becoming a shared idea between both sides.

The contrast presented by Gibson and Beitler originated in the 1980s with McCormick and Kahn (1982) who provide us with a description for barn raising that lays the foundation for embracing the concepts of hospitality, empathy, and humility in the college classroom.

In frontier America when a family needed a barn but had limited labor and other resources, the entire community gathered to help them build the barn. The host family described the kind of barn it had in mind and picked the site.

The community then pitched in and built it. Neighbors would suggest changes and improvements as they built. (p. 17)

Mirroring the authors already mentioned, Bob Logan further describes barn raising as an event “almost like a party—a break from everyone’s regular routine. Typically, the barn raising began with a breakfast together, during which everyone shared the great anticipation of what they planned to accomplish” (2021, para.1).

What resonates most with me, and the premise for applying this concept to a classroom discussion, is emphasized in Logan’s description of the day’s events:

After breakfast, work commenced. Everyone had a role to play.

Grandma might take care of the little children. Older children had assignments like gathering loose nails or carrying water to workers.

Teens and adults brought supplies, nailed or sawed boards, or supervised the construction-according to their skills. Together, they raised the barn in one day. (2021, para. 2)

What a picture of collaboration and teamwork! In a barn raising event, each person contributes their strengths to ensure that the result is stronger than what any individual could accomplish in isolation. But what might this barn raising concept look like when applied to academia?

Although there are numerous valuable insights in Gibson and Beitler’s *Charitable Writing* that can be applied to a college classroom, I will focus on where they offer support or the concept of a class discussion that embraces the barn raising mindset rather than that of a battle. According to these scholars, “the formula [for an argument or discussion] runs like this: an argument seeks to persuade an audience to adopt a position...using solid evidence and sound reasoning” (2020, p. 87; Jacobs, 2017). This quote perfectly describes my expectations when engaging in classroom dialogue or in a conversation with friends and family. The desired outcome is perhaps to represent one opinion more favorably than another, yet during the process, there is a back-and-forth exchanging of ideas with the collective goal being an improvement of the original opinion. Oftentimes, people perceive my attempt to “argue” as critical and combative rather than as an intellectual exchange; however, my intent is to participate in a barn raising, during which collaboration is rewarded, and discussion isn’t viewed as a battle or war between two sides.

Gibson and Beitler (2020) share Alan Jacobs’ assessment that, in our current culture, argument is viewed as battle. The researchers explain that when we accept this problematic approach to argument or debate, people cease to be people because they are, to us, merely representatives or mouthpieces of positions we want to eradicate, then we, in our zeal to win, have sacrificed empathy: we have declined the opportunity to understand other people’s desires, principles, dreams. And that is a great price to pay for supposed ‘victory’ in debate. (p. 89)

In contrast to this bleak outcome, teachers, by practicing the approach of a barn raising, can shift the tone from competition to collaboration.

Rather than accepting the idea that engaging in debate or discussion is battle, what if we viewed an argument as more akin to a barn raising? Instead of failing to see others “as creatures formed, like us, in the image of God,” what if we call a ceasefire? We then embrace McCormick and Kahn’s barn raising metaphor, which acknowledges “human limitation” and recognizes that the “final product is stronger thanks to mental and manual efforts of other contributors” (Gibson & Beitler, 2020, p. 92).



When we view a discussion in this light, we build on what others are sharing rather than viewing conversation as a contest.

In contrast to a more individualistic approach, McCormick and Kahn (1982) “urge us to think about an academic argument as a communal activity in which ideas are shared” (p. 93). They note that, within a barn raising approach to conversation, “your ownership of your ideas is productively undermined,” “ideas become communal goods rather than individual possessions,” and “arguments are to be experienced as construction sites rather than battlefields” (p. 93). At the end of the day, the result of a successful barn raising is an improved idea, a more encompassing perspective, and, hopefully, a more innovative approach to a problem.

Personally, higher education has been a barn raising experience for me, where teachers exchange ideas, disagreements are viewed as acceptable, and differences serve as a springboard for further conversation—not battle, but genuine, empathetic dialogue. In my mind, I see that flourishing Christian organizations possess an opportunity to implement the barn raising concept in departmental meetings, administrative gatherings, town hall meetings, within individual conversations, and in the classroom. Further persuading me that this approach might be effective in classroom discussions, McCormick and Kahn (1982) explain that “students, building on colleagues’ ideas” are able to “maximize the chances of freeing their own flexibility and creativity,” which leads to a more hospitable environment for sharing ideas (p. 18). And as Parker Palmer (2017) offers in *Courage to Teach*, in good discussions and conversations, everyone is learning, even the facilitator.

### Hospitality

One of the outcomes of a barn raising experience that engages in the practice of hospitality is that people feel seen, heard, and welcomed, which ultimately leads to feeling valued. In their research on how to teach students to practice hospitality toward each other, Burwell and Huyser (2013) provide us with not only the roots of Christian hospitality but also with educational theory on transformative learning. As educators, we need to move into a deeper understanding of how the barn raising approach in

the classroom reflects the values presented in Scripture, rather than accepting that today’s understanding “of hospitality [has] been reduced to Martha Stewart’s latest ideas for entertaining family and friends and to the services of the hotel and restaurant industry” (Pohl, 2002, p. 34). Burwell and Huyser emphasize the fact that we also tend to think of hosting as something that is practiced among friends, family, and acquaintances; whereas Scripture embraces a mandate to welcome the stranger, even in a classroom setting. “Hospitality to needy strangers distinguished the early church from its surrounding environment. Noted as exceptional by Christians and non-Christians alike, offering care to strangers became one of the distinguishing marks of the authenticity of the Christian gospel” (Pohl, 2002, p. 36). When teachers encourage the practice of accepting strangers, then students enrolled in a college course, especially during a class discussion or debate, can be encouraged to practice hospitality by listening to others and building on their ideas, thereby utilizing the barn raising approach to collaboration and construction.

As a college classroom creates an atmosphere of collaboration and construction, it becomes a transformational setting of lifelong learning. When we combine content from *The Hospitable Leader* with the barn raising approach to conversation, we are asked to merge seemingly unrelated ideas that could be applicable to a college classroom. By combining these ideas, I believe we can make valuable applications for how a leader approaches any setting, from a Fortune 500 company to a college classroom. In *The Hospitable Leader* (2018), Smith writes that

Hospitable leaders—especially in today’s world—must seek permission from followers in order to lead them. We must invite people in. We must welcome them to the table. We must create conditions in which people want to be led. We cannot lead people from here to there if they have not first been welcomed here. (p. 4)

The barn raising approach embraces a setting of hospitality where students not only feel welcomed but also desire to participate in the collaborative experience of the class.

So, what actions can we select which will make students feel welcomed in our classes? What behaviors might be more akin to a barn raising than a battle? Thinking beyond the everyday behaviors that



promote social etiquette such as greeting students by name and smiling, how do the best teachers conduct their class? According to Bain (2004), the best teachers create a classroom where an idea called “controlled floundering” is accepted. This method suggests that “students encounter safe yet challenging conditions in which they can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again without facing a summative evaluation. They learn by doing and even by failing” (p. 108).

Norman Eng (2017) describes the same concept in *Teaching College*, calling it “expectation failure,” and it remains a vital key to learning, particularly for Gen Z as they begin to understand how they learn (metacognition). When we “create space physically, emotionally, relationally” that is hospitable, the result is an “environment where people and dreams flourish” (Smith, 2018, p. 6). By allowing students to share their thoughts and ideas in a hospitable environment, they are given permission to make mistakes, to flounder, or to figure out how they and others learn. Then, they can regroup and improve on what they initially proposed.

Sharing other ways to create a sense of hospitality, Bain (2004) compares the classroom to a home. In a home, each family member has a sense of commitment to each other and to good stewardship of the physical space. “Exceptional teachers ask their students for a commitment to the class and the learning” (p. 17). Some leaders refer to this same concept as buy-in, asking followers to engage in the process together, working towards a common goal. There may be times that we must approach our classroom as a joint learning space where both the teacher and students develop habits that last a lifetime. We see these habits demonstrated in a barn raising, where people may be literally contributing to someone’s home, but there is a collaboration that takes place to accomplish a shared goal.

Bain (2004) offers an extensive look into *What the Best College Teachers Do* that can be useful in other settings as well. When you combine Bain’s findings with the proposed actions of a *Hospitable Leader*, such as inviting people to a seat at the table, we find some unique approaches that allow us “to get up every day to do everything in [our] power to help [emerging adults] see their God-inspired dreams come true,” and this growth flourishes in the setting of a hospitable space (Smith, 2018, p. 72).

## Empathy

In addition to creating an atmosphere of hospitality, a barn raising approach to the college classroom might be an opportunity to narrow what is known as an empathy gap, which refers to people failing to understand the perspective of another. Sherry Turkle (2015) outlines this idea in *Reclaiming Conversation*, during which she shines a light on the way that technology is changing our ability to experience empathy for others. If we are not intentional about taking specific action to teach the essential skill of empathy, we may create a society that lacks the ability to disagree in a healthy manner, especially when an apology is necessary. Turkle emphasizes that spanning the empathy gap becomes even more relevant in specific situations. Specifically, she references the act of apologizing, saying that

a face-to-face apology is an occasion to practice empathetic skills.

If you are the penitent, you are called upon to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. And if you are the person receiving the apology, you, too, are asked to see things from the other side so that you can move toward empathy. (2015, p. 31)

Lessening this gap with practices such as a face-to-face apology is where taking the approach of a barn raising can build empathetic skills when people are not in agreement on their ideas.

As someone shares an idea in a class discussion, even if others disagree, it becomes a shared idea, ideally bridging any empathy gaps that exist. As McCormick and Kahn state:

[The idea] now becomes my project, and I set about helping you build it, helping us build...You are not the lonely defender of that idea but part of a taskforce whose job is to develop it to its fullest potential, to make the best possible case for it. It is not your idea anymore; it belongs to the [group]. The energy which might have gone into conflict, or into polite challenge-and-defense-now is directed toward a common goal. (1982, p. 18)

This building of empathetic skills might provide the foundation that allows collaboration between people to accomplish so much more than one person might on their own.



As Turkle (2015) continues to emphasize the need for a barn raising, or hospitable environment, she explains that “conversation exposes us in two ways. First, face-to-face conversation brings risk. Face to face in real time, we’re less predictable and less guarded,” producing the need for a hospitable environment in which we can share (p. 36). Turkle describes the way texting and online chatting have threatened true friendship and empathy because they allow us to plan and curate the versions of ourselves that we bring to our discussions:

When we’re removed from facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, and when we have time to consider and edit our replies, we don’t face the risk that face-to-face conversation naturally brings. So we don’t risk being known as someone less than perfect. (2015, p. 23)

My hope is that many of us in higher education will take on the challenge to reclaim conversation through classroom discussion, so that we can coach our students and children to develop essential skills, such as emotional intelligence, that allow us to disagree with others, work through conflict, and experience empathy.

### Humility

In order to participate in a barn raising, a person must be willing to place another’s needs above her own or even, in some cases, accept help from peers when needed. Both situations involve the virtue of humility—one of the critical requirements to listening well and creating a hospitable space, either in a classroom or workplace. In *9 Things You Must Simply Do*, Dr. Henry Cloud (2007) suggests that all leaders need to possess the virtue of humility. When someone displays a flourishing life, including personal and professional success, they are likely embodying a spirit of humility. Cloud encourages us to consider how humility contributes to success in work and relationships, and a college classroom might be an ideal location to reflect on these ideas of what it means to be a person of humility.

In his efforts to describe how a humble person performs, Cloud reveals that a modest individual concentrates on just being, “who he or she really is, a human being like everyone else, avoiding the need to be more than that” (2007, p. 193). To illustrate this concept, Cloud shares the story of Ryan, who was venturing out to sell soap in China by getting a job on a

rice farm. Because Ryan had previously achieved success selling laundry soap in other countries, it would have been easy for him to assume there was nothing else for him to learn. Instead, Ryan approached the job with a spirit of humility, even though a prideful person would have “assumed or acted like he did know” (2007, p. 194). While working on the rice farm, Ryan discovered the true needs of the Chinese rice farmers had more to do with water than soap. As a result of his willingness to learn, he was able to direct his company on how to create the best product to fit what the people truly needed. What if, in our conversations and discussions in Christian higher education settings, we began to focus on what we needed to learn?

In an attempt to gain insightful feedback from my students at the end of the semester, I pose two questions in a course evaluation: “What have you learned from someone else in this class?” and “What do you hope someone has learned from you?” I deeply desire my students to grasp the importance of contribution and hospitality. My intent is for students to reflect on how they added value to an individual in a spirit of humility. Does this approach not demonstrate the barn raising style of building others up rather than trying to take them down?

While looking at the important ways that humility contributes to success, Cloud reveals that “humility identifies with others,” which is an outcome that occurs after bridging the empathy gap as well (2007, p. 197). While experiencing a tough time in a business deal, Cloud asked God for guidance when an inquisitive friend phoned. He was afraid to open up about the situation, fearing embarrassment at this perceived business failure. Rather than ridicule Cloud for his snafu, the friend shared how common it is for successful people to have struggles and to navigate through these types of issues. In his reflections on their discussion, Cloud remembers that

knowing that this is a part of the path of success, and that even very successful people go through loss, failure, and crises, gave me the courage and hope that I had not had before. God had answered my prayer for guidance in a way that I never would have foreseen by giving me a moment with a friend. (2007, p. 197)



In my mind, I imagine a hospitable classroom where humble students are there to support each other through the struggle to share ideas, to embrace the failure to articulate their ideas well, and to demonstrate empathy—since we all have things to learn—and to then help each other construct ideas that can be articulated in a meaningful way.

With the support of those around them, students will find it easier to embrace humility and accept that everyone makes mistakes. In a hospitable atmosphere, we can see our failures “as a part of the process itself... [Humble people are] not surprised that they make mistakes, and as a result, they can identify with others who do, give to them, and not judge them wrongly” (Cloud, 2007, p. 197). Through authentic humility, people can mentor others in learning grace and acceptance, especially emerging adults who will make frequent mistakes, and genuinely guide them to flourish by “extending themselves to serve others, giving of themselves” (p.198). Humble people create relational equity in others over time by giving of themselves, which paints a picture that we should all attempt to emulate. As he continues to elaborate on this idea, Cloud further describes humble people, revealing the following:

They create true networks of care in their lives. They experience high quality relationships as a result of their high quality of giving and understanding. People appreciate them, and their lives are full of love, both in the workplace and personally...their giving is pure... They give freely because they truly do identify with others. And because they give freely, not to get anything in return, they are truly appreciated and do get a lot in return. (2007, p. 198)

These characteristics described by Cloud mirror the hopes that I have for all of the emerging generations who will walk through the campus doors, that hospitality, empathy, and humility will be modeled and taught throughout their classroom experience.

### Meaningful Conversation

After embracing the barn raising approach to create a culture of hospitality, I propose that it is possible to engage in meaningful classroom conversations. By using the spiritual values of hospitality, empathy, and humility, professors can begin productive conversations, especially in the

Christian classroom. To understand the significance of meaningful conversations, I look to the positive psychology approach of appreciative inquiry. In their book *Conversations Worth Having*, Stravos, Torres, and Cooperrider (2018) explain “how to have conversations that are productive while strengthening relationships and generating possibilities for a future that works for everyone. Conversations worth having energize people. They foster efficiency, fuel meaningful engagement, and generate creative possibilities” (p.16). Don’t we all need more places that inspire us to make a difference in our world?

In the future, when I drive along our rural roads in West Tennessee and see the barns among the rolling hills of green grass, especially those painted in a vibrant red, my mind will return to the concepts presented in this essay. The idea that discussion in my classrooms can be implemented in the same fashion that the Amish raise a barn—through hospitality, empathy, and humility—gives me hope that emerging generations can succeed in engaging in meaningful conversations, especially when sides do not agree. The world tells us that disagreement must look like a battle, with all the ways this approach harms and injures the participants. However, the barn raising method recognizes that God has given us a better option. Hopefully, the idea that “our organizational lives and the lives of others flourish or flounder, one conversation at a time” will motivate us to consider a barn raising classroom (Stravos et al., 2018, p. 20). Creating an atmosphere where students feel safe to not only share their ideas, but to possibly alter and build on them, will allow them to engage meaningfully with the outside world. By reclaiming productive and meaningful conversation, we model the barn raising ideal that fosters hospitality, empathy, and humility.

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Julie Powell is currently a professor in the Department of Physical Education, Wellness and Sport at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. With an emphasis on encouraging others to live a healthy and flourishing life, Dr. Powell's current research interests include emerging adulthood, mentoring, life satisfaction, and specifically

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## Healthcare and Missions: A Holistic Approach *Reflections from the Mission Field*

Jennifer Sanderfer

When I lay in bed the night before our family boarded the plane to move to Senegal, West Africa, to serve in healthcare ministry among an unreached Muslim people group, tears streamed down my face as one question echoed through my heart, “What have we done?” Together, with my fellow nurse practitioner husband and three children, we were leaving everything behind to start a new chapter in our lives, which left me feeling both excited and terrified—this was our Elisha moment. After sensing God’s call on our lives to join Him in ministry in Senegal, we sold our home, cars, and furnishings, said goodbye to our friends, family, and jobs that we loved, and stepped out in obedience, leaving nothing behind.

Our five years in Senegal were not filled with glamorous stories of multitudes coming to know the Lord. Working among a fatalistic, folk-Islamic community was difficult and discouraging at times. Still, I am eternally thankful for the experiences and relationships gained during our time among the Wolof and for the opportunity we were given to dig deeper into understanding holistic ministry and healthcare.

One of the questions that my husband and I continually discussed together as we worked in our community was: “What does holistic healthcare look like among the Wolof?” Substitute any other community in place of “the Wolof,” and one is faced with the same question that many healthcare workers worldwide probably find themselves asking almost daily. Engaging in sustainable, relevant, and life-changing community health is a complex and challenging task at a basic level that can seem impossible in the face of cultural differences. A glance at the current state of health and poverty around the globe in the developing world gives us a picture of the great need related to healthcare. Millions of people representing 10% of the world’s population live on less than \$2 a day. Additionally, the



discrepancy in life expectancy between impoverished nations and those in the developed world differs by almost 20 years (Baffes, Jagannathan, Kitzmueller, & Betcherman, 2021). The mortality rate of children under the age of five is 7.9% in poverty-stricken sub-Saharan Africa compared to 0.9% in Europe and Central Asia (“Mortality Rate,” 2020). Lastly, according to the World Bank and World Health Organization (2017), “Half the world lacks access to essential health services” and “100 million are still pushed into extreme poverty because of health expenses.”

Digging deeper into some specific factors contributing to the challenge of meeting the tremendous needs in these communities within this complex problem, we see a shortage of healthcare workers worldwide to the count of 7 million, with some communities having only one surgeon for every 250,000 people (Allen, n.d.). We also see a rise in non-communicable diseases, which are now the leading cause of death worldwide. Cardiovascular disease accounts for the most deaths, followed by cancers, respiratory disease, and diabetes (Lankester & Grills, 2019). In surveying adults in a rural Wolof village, we found approximately 30% of adults suffering from high blood pressure of 140/90 or greater, significantly higher than the desired measurement of 120/80 or less. Additionally, each adult had an average BMI of 20, well within a healthy range of 18.5 to 24.9, and an average weight of 60 kilograms (132 pounds).

These numbers and statistics became a tangible expression of need and suffering through various life experiences we witnessed in our rural town. We saw our neighbor continually spend limited resources seeking medical help at a facility four hours away in the capital city for the residual effects of a stroke he had suffered three years earlier. At the time of his stroke, our neighbor received little education regarding his recovery or disease process. We saw it in the sudden death of our neighbor, pregnant with her second child, due to an unknown cause leaving behind her husband and five-year-old daughter. We saw it in a neighbor whose child could not walk, likely due to cerebral palsy, yet was being told by people in the community to seek help from a local Islamic leader for healing from an evil spirit which was causing the child not to walk.

Through moments like these, we began to understand in a visceral way that the barriers to promoting health do not rest solely in fighting viruses or bacteria or parasites. Instead, the obstacles are primarily our cultural norms, habits, and behavior patterns that make us susceptible to disease. They are the stress factors of our lifestyle that produce excessive wear and tear in our lives. The social, economic, and political structures confine people to conditions unfavorable to health and keep them from participating in the full benefits of abundant life.

Dan Fountain (2014), in his book *Health for All*, summarized the task before us well. He explained that we do what we do as humans because of what we see ourselves to be—our personal reality. To encourage people to make changes favorable to health, we have to start with them as they see themselves. This approach requires an “inside out” approach to healthcare. Our preoccupation as healthcare providers must shift away from being disease-oriented toward being health-oriented, in which we seek to engage in healthcare and not just “sick” care. Our inside-out approach must be grounded in investing in relationships built on trust that open the door to share the truth about God’s intent for all people—to be healthy and restored in Him physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This can be facilitated naturally through a shift that focuses on holistic healthcare.

Such an approach proves valuable when considering that non-communicable diseases contribute to more avoidable deaths than any other group of illnesses and have replaced infectious diseases as the leading cause of death and disability (Lankester & Grills, 2019). Community-based health care cannot prevent all death and disability. Still, it can significantly prevent premature heart disease, strokes, type-2 diabetes, and cancer because these health problems share several common behavioral risk factors, including tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and harmful use of alcohol (Lankester & Grills, 2019).

There are significant challenges and barriers to engaging in this “inside out” approach that must be carefully and prayerfully considered. Not only did we speak a different heart language than our Wolof friends and neighbors (although we worked hard to bridge that difference), but the way we looked at and interpreted the world around us was different.



### 1. We must be willing to listen and learn.

We must listen and learn more about how our communities view their world and beliefs related to health. We must spend time learning the heart language of those we seek to work among, knowing that healing the body starts with speaking to a person's heart. Fostering a spirit for learning also helps combat a long history of paternalism that often permeates many communities in the developing world.

One of the dangers and tragedies of slipping into a paternalistic relationship pattern is that it often robs you of seeing the beauty of the connecting points for holistic health that are already present within the culture. In the Wolof culture, a predominantly agricultural society, *saawo si* is the strip of land around a farmer's field that is left empty to allow herders to pass through with their animals while not damaging any crops. Some might be tempted to approach this knowledge with the idea of designing a program to help maximize land usage and crop yield or to plant trees or other plants to use as a natural wind barrier. The reality is that these ideas in and of themselves are good and necessary in many developing countries. However, when we pause and ask God to help us see this situation as He sees it, we can see a beautiful picture of stewardship—stewardship of relationships between the farmer and herder, stewardship of seeds and land ensuring that none are damaged. From this knowledge, we gain an opportunity to share God's Truth concerning stewardship within the context of their reality and speaking to their heart.

### 2. We must strive to develop relationships built on trust, love, and respect.

Working in healthcare, we can often fall into the trap of engaging in vertically oriented health programs. These programs typically focus on a single topic or health problem that is easy to design, manage, monitor, and deliver. They are also more efficient to implement and are dependent on clinical guidelines. However, they often undermine the community itself; they tend to impose a western healthcare model and are often inefficient at the community level. Sadly, they are also often unsustainable once donors or funding stops or the missionary leaves (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

As we face these challenges, we try to remember that the core of holistic community health is as follows:

To see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships to bring glory to God. These things tend to happen in highly relational, process-focused ministries more than in impersonal, product-focused ministries. (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 81)

Often this means engaging in “be-ing” rather than “do-ing,” which can be such a struggle in healthcare but must not be minimized. When our neighbor's young daughter-in-law died in her second trimester with her second child, we were at a loss as to what we could do while also struggling with our feelings of anger and frustration at the perceived avoidable death. As seen in the Wolof culture, we visited the matriarch in her room giving her our condolences; we lent our mats and gave water to be used for visitors as they came to offer their condolences; we sat with the visitors as the community grieved together in silence; we gave money to contribute to the meal that was prepared. At the end of the day, we felt emotionally drained and continued to struggle, saying to ourselves, “I wish there was something I could have done.”

As we processed this experience more, we began to see that even amidst a tragedy, God revealed that when we are distractedly focused on the tasks, we can often miss the unique opportunities we have to be with people where they are in that moment. We can miss the experience of being with others in their brokenness, suffering, pain, hope, and joy, knowing that through being together, we can share the Good News that God is not distant, God is good, and God loves us all. And often, as happened in this experience, we find that trust is built in relationships and proves to be more meaningful than anything we could have done.



**3. We must commit to spending time daily praying for wisdom in our efforts, for opportunities to share God's Truth through healthcare, and, continually, for the hearts of our friends and neighbors to be transformed through salvation in Christ.**

Many communities in developing countries have a worldview grounded in fatalism—everything is the will of God, all good things and all bad things. This aspect of worldview contributes to “the passive acceptance of difficult living conditions with no consideration of how those conditions can be improved (Fountain, 2014, p. 92). This reactive, fatalistic worldview makes change and development extremely difficult.

*Holistic health rests in seeing a worldview transformation that can only occur through Christ.* With this transformation, we will begin to see a restoration of the whole person as we consider how to involve the family and community in the healing process. We will start to see a restoration of relationships as we consider the impact these relationships within the family and community have on one another and the importance of forgiveness in the healing process. We will begin to see a restoration of the spiritual relationship with Christ and see lives infused with the Living Hope (Fountain, 1989).

We are thankful for the privilege we had to work among the Wolof people! We are grateful for the ways He used our healthcare skills in holistic community health and always for the ongoing transformation we see in ourselves as God works in our own lives.

**Yàlla na leen Yàlla barkeel.  
(May God bring you blessings.)**

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Sanderfer grew up in West Africa as a missionary kid from the ages of 4 to 18. Her heart for missions and healthcare led her to pursue her Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from the University of Texas at Arlington. She later received her Master of Science degree (nurse practitioner track) from Vanderbilt University, and

she has maintained an active certification as an Acute Care Pediatric Nurse Practitioner. Over the years, Jennifer has been involved in short-term and long-term medical missions in several countries, including Peru, Cameroon, Guinea, and most recently in Senegal, West Africa, from 2015 to 2021. She has been married to her fellow nurse-practitioner husband, Kody, for 22 years and enjoys reading, baking, spending time outdoors, and spending time with her three children, Kaia, Kamryn, and Micah.



## Phos Hilaron

Justin D. Barnard

What light there was never seemed enough to dispel the darkness. The unflinching silence of space always seemed to make the days of spaceflight stand still. He stood as though lost in thought, staring out through a small window in his spacecraft. *It wasn't supposed to be this way*, he thought. *Or was it?* Peering into the darkness, his eyes traced patterns in the flickering stars, almost as though his mind was rehearsing the history of light in constellations: a furnace, a pillar of fire, a desert shrub, a flaming sword. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine the beginning. *Let there be light. And God separated the light from the darkness.* Yet as far back as his consciousness could reach, it could not get behind the light in which the cosmos was born.

He opened his eyes. *Was it memory—this rehearsal?* His silent meditation exerted little effect on his face, a countenance every bit in keeping with the settledness of middle age. Yet even an impossible glimpse behind the iridescent light coming from those impenetrable eyes would have revealed a consciousness bearing witness to a measure of weariness gained only by eons of time.

A nearby voice interrupted his thought.

“Do you think they’ll get it?”

As if he couldn’t taste it, the first took another inquisitive drag on the cigarette pinched between his thumb and middle finger.

For a moment, his colleague’s question didn’t register. The outpost he had reached in thought was light years from this interruption. But the haze of pale blue smoke wafting toward his face began to invade part of his consciousness. “What?”

“Do you think they’ll get it?” repeated the second, rolling his eyes.

At first, the smoke seemed to have no effect, aside from being a visible reminder of the reality of his location in space and time. Had the question not interrupted his thought, he might have stared at the stars

forever, wondering whether their eventual story would record hope fulfilled or unrelenting despair. The haze momentarily cleared.

“Will you put that out?” said the second, a hint of exasperation in his voice. “It’s unseemly for someone with your standing. Besides, if we’re going to be stuck here for the next several months, I’d prefer a reprieve from your silly experimentalism.”

“Sorry,” he replied. “After the locals skittered over the hillside, I found a few of these they’d left behind.” His open palm revealed a couple of grungy, partly-smoked homespun butts. “I couldn’t resist a few pulls, since you never know when we’re scheduled for another decloaking.”

He pressed the glowing cigarette butt into the cold, metallic silver plating between two digital console screens. An impish grin appeared on his face as he flicked the butt across the cockpit floor in the direction of his seated colleague.

“You didn’t answer my question,” the second insisted.

The experimental smoker now stared absentmindedly at a stack of papers he had just picked up. “What?”

“My question. Do you think they’ll get it?”

“Who? Get what?”

“The sorcerers,” he said. “Our message?” he added, as though the first had lost the thread of a conversation in progress.

“Oh, yeah—that.” He paused for a moment, looking at the papers he held as if he were trying to imagine how they ended up in his hands. “Yes. Sorry. I’ve been trying to finish these reports on our last excursion. A little distracted at the moment. You know how it is. If I don’t transmit these on time, there’ll be hell to pay.” He sighed, struggling to process his weariness. *Was it merely the paperwork?* He glanced again at the darkness.

“Yeah, I get it. Need any help?”

“Thanks. Almost done, actually. Just trying to complete Form AH2-13.”

“Which one is that again?”

“Oh, it’s just a technical glitch. It seems that after I got the final headcount, we were one short of a squadron. So, I have to complete this form to account for the anomaly. It’s just a matter of noting who was absent, etc. Overall, I thought the assignment was a success.” *Success?* As soon as the word escaped his lips he doubted. *How did it fit?*



“Me too. Though I thought there was a moment near the end when things got a little loud. So, I guess it didn’t hurt to be one short.”

“Agreed.” *Though the paperwork is wearisome.* “But the decibels didn’t seem to detract from the overall sense of expectancy. Besides, we got the point across, and that was the most urgent task.”

Checking a final box on Form AH2-13, the first signed his name at the bottom. “There,” he said with relief. “All set. Now, let’s cross our fingers that this fax machine will transmit across however many parsecs we need fast enough to meet my deadline.”

“And let’s hope the paper doesn’t jam.”

“Yeah. I’ve been after corporate forever to upgrade the instrumentation on this tin can, but it nearly took an act of God just to get a new transmitter for our signals.”

“I hear that some of our former colleagues who left corporate have upgraded to email in their new jobs.”

“I hear that too. But I doubt we’ll go digital. Corporate has a thing for writing: books, scrolls, papyri, even clay tablets.” Feeding the paper into the fax machine, he watched its ancient rollers churn, as though its scrolls were unfolding some prophetic vision. Wheels like living creatures. Light. A crystal expanse, above and beyond which—*Could he reach it?*—brilliance, shimmering radiance, a voice: “Eat this scroll.” The fax machine clicked and hummed.

“So, the sorcerers...” the second interjected. “Do you think they’ll get it?”

The spinning wheels reflected in his steady eyes. “What?”

“Will. They. Get. It.” He repeated each word with increasing emphasis.

“According to our best intel, yes.”

“What intel is that?”

“I don’t know whether I can recall the details. But I remember there was a significant conflict a while back.” The first closed his eyes. A battle scene flooded his mind. He could not see faces, but images of heraldry pressed into his consciousness: a bear, a leopard. He could almost hear the clash of silver and bronze.

“What conflict?”

The question interrupted his efforts to remember on the cusp of recollection. “I’m not sure. What I remember is that one of our own was behind enemy lines for 21 days. I remember because I got dispatched to help. When we finally got him out, he had first-hand intel on all kinds of stuff that corporate wanted: histories, books of magic, maps, astrological charts, tools of divination. Corporate has been processing that data for years, and those at the top are convinced that what we’re doing will work.”

“What about you? What do you think?”

“You mean, do I think it will work?”

“Yeah.”

He hesitated for a moment. What few details he could piece together in his mind did not seem to fit. *Too much darkness. What did it all mean? Has it come to this?* “I don’t know,” he said finally. “It seems like a bit of a long shot to me. But with this ship slated to retire, I guess it’s worth a try.”

The second fiddled absent-mindedly with a couple of dials on the console. “So, do you think I’ll get that promotion?”

“I think you’ve got a pretty good shot. I haven’t read the official report yet, but I’ve heard good things about your last mission. Professional, clean, no glitches.”

“It could have been traumatic for her. She was pretty young.”

“True. But the rumor from corporate is that you managed the emotion of the situation without escalation.”

“Her question surprised me. For a split second, I wasn’t sure what to say.” He paused, as if replaying the episode in his mind, searching for possible regrets. “I guess what I said was O.K.”

“I thought it wise to speak of shadows, even if such words conceal more than they reveal. I’ve heard nothing from the higher ups that would indicate otherwise,” he added reassuringly.

“I was glad to have had some practice a few months before. That old man couldn’t believe it. What a talker!”

“True. But from what I’ve heard, you really shut him up.”

As the soundwaves of his sentence were absorbed into the muffled air inside their spacecraft, the first looked at the console, nervously tapping his finger against the metallic plates where a small pile of ashes remained from his cigarette. Again, he stared into space as though straining to see the past. He tried to recite the words of the poet in his mind: “... the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high.”



*Was there more?* He looked for signs in the stars. The constellations gave no clues. In his mind's eye, he could see nothing but the flow of human empires: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. Like the faint light emanating from the distant stars, the oracles were shrouded in darkness.

"We're coming into sublunary orbit," said the second. "Should I make any final adjustments?"

"According to my calculations, we're roughly where we need to be for now. Let me take a look." He reached for a stack of large papers on a nearby table, shuffled through a few on top, pulled out a large map, and set it on top of the stack. He looked at some numbers on the soft blue console screens, and then went back to the map. Grabbing a compass and pencil, he began to calculate distances and relative positions on the map's intersecting lines. He looked off into space momentarily, as though he were trying to remember where he had put his keys. Then, he muttered a handful of mathematical calculations under his breath. "Well, obviously we're still quite a ways from earth, but as best as I can tell, we're coming in at an angle directly above what on earth would be latitude: 27.1324° N, and longitude: 73.0865° W."

"And that would be where?"

"Right in the middle of the Bermuda Triangle," he grinned.

"Great," replied the second, rolling his eyes. "Is that good enough?"

"From our present altitude, it should be fine. Eventually, we'll need to make some minor adjustments as we move closer to earth. But we've got several months to reach our target. In the meantime, let's power up this thing."

The second began to shift the ship's auxiliary power to a subsystem of generators. As soon as he finished, he turned toward the other and gave a thumbs up. The latter rose from his chair and moved a few feet to his right toward a switch in the wall, covered by a bright pink sticky note. He removed the sticky note, revealing an ON/OFF toggle of polished chrome.

"I can't believe how ridiculous this thing looks," said the first.

"I can't believe you covered it with a pink sticky note."

"Well, it is important. And I didn't want either one of us to flip it ON ahead of schedule."

*What schedule?* He stared at the switch on the wall. Their relative position in space seemed to make time crawl. To his left, he could see the nearby moon. *Lunacy*, he thought. *Was this madness?*

"Well? Are you going to get on with it?"

The first paused, still staring at the switch. The absurdity of the whole situation rose like the moon in his consciousness, as the left corner of his lower lip began to curl into an ironic smile. *Never enough light. And now? Just one more switch.*

"Just flip the switch already!"

"O.K. Moment of truth. Here we go." He placed his index finger on the toggle switch and moved it from OFF to ON. Instantaneously, the subsystem generators surged. The ship's cockpit flooded with soft light coming through the windows above the console.

"It works!" the second shouted, almost in disbelief.

"Honestly, I'm a bit surprised myself. Not sure what I expected. But given how old this rig is I thought it could go either way."

"So now what?"

"Now we wait."

"You mean that's it?"

"At least for the next several months."

"Will it be visible?"

"It should be. This thing is generating enough light to give it an apparent magnitude of -2.7."

"And that means what exactly?"

"It means it won't look as bright as Venus, but probably brighter than most stars."

"And how will we know if it works?"

"Well, that depends on what happens when we reach our target. So, in the meantime, we wait."

He sighed. "I hate the waiting."

"Me too. I've never managed to find engaging ways to pass the time. And unfortunately for me, it appears I'm not allowed to smoke."

[579 days later...]

"What's the name of this game again?" asked the second, flipping a small black stone over and over between his thumb and fingers.

"It's called *Go*," the other replied with more than a slight hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Oh, yeah. Ancient China, right?"

"Yes, ancient China," he quipped, contemplating his next move.

"How did you get it?"



"I won it in a bet."

"A bet!? I thought gambling was prohibited by corporate for someone with your standing."

"Well...technically, I suppose it wasn't gambling. It was more like a dispute."

"I don't think I heard about that. You'll have to explain."

"It was about a dead body. It involved a contest of wills with a person of some significance, and I won. That's all I can say. The rest is classified."

"So, how did *that* result in this game?"

"One of my closest associates heard about the dispute and bet me that I wouldn't win. Now, I have *Go*." He smiled as if relishing a particularly exquisite triumph.

"What would have happened if you'd lost?"

He shuddered. As his eyes narrowed, he looked straight at the second. "I never lose. I *never*. Lose."

"Speaking of losing," said the second, looking as though he wanted to change the subject, "let's hope this assignment doesn't fail. Shouldn't we have heard something by now? Where are we?"

"Well, let's see. I think our total time in orbit, together with our initial trajectory when we made our sublunary descent should put us very close to our target. Hand me that map again, will you?"

The second grabbed a map off a nearby table while the other took some readings off the console screens. As he took the map from the second, the first picked up his compass and began calculating. "Yes," he said, "as I expected. We're now at latitude: 31.7054° N, and longitude: 35.2024° E. Any time now, the subsystems responsible for completing our assignment should override our orbital trajectory, and we should feel..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the ship lurched out of its stable trajectory and began to descend toward earth. As they plummeted through the outermost layers of earth's atmosphere, the first realized that they would reach their target just before sunrise.

No longer in control of the ship, the two stared through the windows with expectation. As they reached the stratosphere, the ship began to slow. They could see that the skies below were clear. Even while they were several miles above the earth's surface, they could begin to make out landscape below.

"There's the coastline," said the second.

"Yes. And there's the Dead Sea."

"How far down do you think we'll go?"

"Not far now."

The ship continued to slow as it descended, coming to a standstill several thousand feet above the earth's surface. All was calm. It was dawn. The ship's beacon still glowed, though the twilight of the rising sun in the east had already begun to dim its luminosity. Only a handful of souls moved about the early morning streets of the small town. Mostly vagrants. A shopkeeper or two. None attending to the brilliant celestial object that had come to rest above their heads.

None, that is, except for a small party of Persian travelers who, as the two could see, now made their way through the silent streets toward the house over which they hovered.

And when the travelers saw the starship, they rejoiced...and going into the house, they saw the child with his mother...

"They got it," said the second, staring out the window in awe.

"Yes. They did."

As the rays of the morning sunrise beamed through the windows of the ship's cockpit, Gabriel sat transfixed. Michael stood and closed his eyes. "Now," he whispered.

At his simple command, the *Starship Bethlehem* instantaneously incinerated in a momentary flash of white-hot light in the morning sky.

But in that moment—in an epiphany of pure intellect more brilliant than the brightness that now engulfed their ship—Michael's vision was restored. He saw a great red dragon cast from the heavens to earth. He saw the dragon pursue the mother who had given birth to the child. But he saw the mother and the child escape. He saw that the dragon's wrath was great, for the dragon knew that his days were numbered. And although the dragon would make war, Michael saw that the child was destined to be like one who would rule over the nations of the earth with a rod of iron. He saw a lamb, standing as though slain; he saw thrones of judgment and a rider on a white horse. And in that moment, he knew their labors had succeeded, for the sun of righteousness had risen with healing in its wings. *The light had finally shone in the darkness, and the darkness would not overcome it.*



Heaving a sigh of relief, his spirit recloaked. *Home*, he thought, *to await the return of the Gladsome Light*.



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His teaching is motivated by the perennial philosophical question: What does it mean to live wisely and well? His scholarly interests and published works focus on issues in philosophy of religion, bioethics, technology and human flourishing, and the philosophical legacy of C.S. Lewis. He is a member of First Baptist Church in Jackson where he plays handbells, sings in the choir, and teaches Sunday School.

## Rutt

A Year Later

Lee Benson

The phone startled me awake.

It always did. Two reasons caused this. One, this was 1964 when phones had a big brass bell buried in the standard black, new-fangled wall phone, and two, my bedroom backed up to the kitchen where our phone hung. It had a 5-foot cord that all preachers had because you never knew when a great sin-soaked sinner would call and the preacher, who was my dad, would have to pull the receiver into his bedroom to assure secrecy. If sin and sinner needed anything, it was secrecy. But, there was another reason. Often when the sinner was desperate, my dad would have to go out into the night to bring God to bear. Nothing like the preacher riding up as God's ambassador to calm the sinner's soul and save them from the fiery flames of hell. Everyone knows sins send you to hell, and the preacher can stop that or at least my dad could. In those cases, my dad would often allow me to ride along to keep him company.

At the time, I always reasoned that dad was just wantin' company, but years later I realized he was wantin' the company of an innocent youngster to prepare him for confrontation with the devil. "No sinner was all that bad," my dad always said, "No need to crucify yourself over this because Jesus already did that."

But the devil, now he's a different beast altogether. He's mean and ain't lookin' to be redeemed. My dad was bigger than the devil; he was the preacher, but when one was fightin' the devil, it would be good to allow an innocent to ride along shotgun.

I heard my dad answer the phone in that sleepy but sincere voice of his. He spoke in his middle of the night preacher voice, soft and sad. Then I heard him hang up the phone get ready to leave.

I eased out of bed, pulled on my britches and shirt from the day before, both still smelling like grass and dirt, and laced on my old leather shoes



still a size or two too big. It was another pitfall of hand-me-downs. I slipped out of my room, trying not to wake my two brothers. I knew the chances of me getting to go would be better if I rode shotgun alone. I had always liked being with Dad on his God work, representing God. Dad was called when all was lost, no hope, and God was someone's last chance. That's about the best job in the world. Bringin' God means bringin' hope no matter what the problem, and I liked being with that man, Dad. I sat on the edge of the couch waiting on Dad to come out of my bathroom.

"Hey, son," he said as he came softly down the hallway. He was a really big man, which all men of God had to be 'cause they had such big jobs to do. Years later, we learned that the cancer that killed him was linked to doctors trying to cure him of the tumor that early on was growing on his pituitary gland. They said this caused him to be so "big-boned," but anyone with a lick of sense would know it was God just preparing him for all the big work He had for him.

"I don't think you need to go along with me tonight." He patted me on the head with his massive hand, and then slowly slid it down till he cupped the side of my head and pulled my chin up to look at me. I knew there was a deep sorrow over him. He always looked deep in me when he knew he was hidin' a sorrow from me.

"Please, Dad. I'm almost seven." Seven was pert near the age God would call me to do His work, same as Dad.

"No, son. You'll need to stay. Go ahead and get back in bed. I'm gonna call Brother Bristow to go along with me tonight."

Brother Bristow! My heart sank. Someone was dead or about to be because Dad never took a deacon without there being someone gone to meet God, and a deacon riding shotgun meant the person hadn't gotten his soul ready.

My dad turned to go into the kitchen, and I could hear him dialing Brother Bristow. I slipped back into my bedroom and shut the door loud enough so that my dad would hear it but that it wouldn't wake my brothers. I had already planned out what I was gonna do: I had seen my older brother slip out our window several times when he was meeting friends to run

around the woods at night, but I was never brave enough to join him. But tonight, my fear was overcome by my religion.

I was old enough to face death—to be present when someone's soul was being prayed into salvation. My dad would be repersentin' the Lord and beseeching Him to go easy on the poor person who was in the last fight against eternal darnation (my dad would indeed say that cuss word). I pushed up the window, eased out into the dark side of the yard, and ran around front to the station wagon.

I opened the door and slid in the back. I laid on the floorboard with my legs over the hump in the middle; my heart was beating so loud I was sure my dad would hear it. I heard the gravel crunching softly as Dad walked slowly to the car; the door opened and shut. Dad started the car, and we began to move. I was scared but knew God would be with me cause we were doing His work. We bounced down the long, gravel driveway and eventually out on the paved road at the bottom of the mountain.

Dad began to hum one of his favorites, "The Old Rugged Cross," and I relaxed a bit as his soft voice eventually joined the hum... "a world of lost sinners to save" and I knew what was on his heart. I began to pray and plead God would spare whoever it was my dad was seeking to save.

I could feel him slowing down and knew we were at the end of the road at Daddy's Creek and Brother Bristow's farm. He stopped. The glow of the headlights on the trees created a soft glow in the car so I could see the back of my dad's head. All was quiet, and I knew my dad was preparing himself. The passenger door opened and Brother Bristow plopped down like he wasn't altogether happy to be a part of what was coming.

"Evening Pastor," he grunted, "who called you?"

"The constable, sober for once, saw the fire down back of Brother Tollett's barn and stopped to warn him. By the time they got back there, the sty was already gone. That old barn wood just goes up in a flash."

"Do they know if he was in there?" asked Brother Bristow.

"No, it was still too hot to check and dark to boot, and I'm imaginin' neither of them wants to be the one that finds him."

"So they called the preacher!" Brother Bristow mumbled, shaking his head in the glow of the dash lights.



“It was my idea to make him a place to live outta that old pig sty.”

“Yeah, for what? So that old drunk could burn himself up in it?” asked Brother Bristow.

“I ain’t looking forward to finding him either, but dadgum it would be good if he’s in some ditch somewhere sleeping one off tonight. You know Rutt, I was always finding him passed out, half-dead from cold or rain or just alcoholed half to death. A roof never hurt anyone and even drunks need a home even if it’s just an old sty.”

“Yeah and now Henry maybe has a burnt up old drunk on his hands.”

When Dad mentioned a fire behind Brother Tollett’s barn, I began to softly cry because I knew what that meant. The previous summer, my dad had found Mr. Rutt passed out beside the old road by Daddy’s Creek. He placed him in the back of our station wagon and brought him home, rolling down all the windows and letting him sleep it off in the back. Afterward, he had called a deacons’ meeting to see if he could find him a place to live. That caused a big stir because everyone knew Mr. Rutt. He was the town drunk and not one of them felt he was apt to get the gospel and receive saving. But Dad always reckoned that love could bring one to God quicker than any sermon and providin’ a person a home was sure a lot of love.

They finally agreed to fix up an old abandoned pig sty that Brother Tollett had and let him move in there. My dad, brothers, and I had worked a day mixing concrete in Mom’s old, tin washtub and had poured a floor in the shed. It stunk to high heaven, but we dug out most of the old stink and then buried the rest under a layer of lumpy concrete (my dad knew pastor-ing but not much about concretin’).

We patched all the holes in the walls with Brother Tollett’s old barn wood and nailed tin over the few holes in the roof. We moved in an old bottom part of a bunk bed and thought we had finished until Mom said it needed a window. She and Dad had words about that because Dad said, “Mr. Rutt won’t know one way or another.” But mom said, “We would know!” And so, we spent the better part of another day sawing a hole in the wall and nailing in an old window Dad found in a closet at the church. Mom made curtains for the window and put some of her good sheets on the bed along with a blanket my Grannie, who’d died before I was born, had made.

I remember the day we moved Mr. Rutt into his new home. Mom had a vase of wildflowers on an old stool she had painted, nice curtains on the window made from a dress my sister had outgrown, and Grannie’s hand-made quilt on the bed. Mr. Rutt just sat down on the bed and cried; his old head buried in his hands, just shaking and shaking. I was right confused, but later Mom told me he was crying cause he was happy that somebody had loved him so much, and maybe that was the path he could finally take to Jesus.

I lay silently in the floorboard of Dad’s Rambler station wagon, hot tears running down the side of my head into my ear, trying with all my might not to make a sound, but I was broken asunder over what was going on in eternity with Mr. Rutt and God. I knew he was in that shed. I knew he was gone. I knew he had burned up and was powerful hurtin’ over the idea of the pain of it all. What if he was in ’em flames now forever and ever?

I woke up as my daddy pulled me off the floorboard and carried me into the house. He smelled like wood smoke and Old Spice. I had no idea when or how he came to know I was in the back. He was so strong; he could hold me and unlock the door with his big ring of jangling keys that I always dreamed of having one day. He put me down on the couch and pulled an afghan Grannie had made Mom (when she married Dad) off the back of the couch and covered me up.

He sat down beside me and looked at me. “How you doing, son?”

Ok, I guess,” I said, not wanting to ask the question but needin’ to know. “Was Mr. Rutt in the house?”

“Yes, he was son.” There was a long pause as I continued to look at Dad. Although he was looking right at me, he was really looking off somewhere else. “He was somebody, son,” he softly said, patting the side of my head and rising to leave. “He was somebody.”





**Lee Benson**

Professor of Art and Department Chair

Lee Benson is the chair of the Department of Art and Professor of Art; he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture from the University of Tennessee. He says the art he creates must glorify God without having to be explained, and it should be made simple enough to understand but complex

enough to be labeled art. Benson, who has been with Union for 25 years, is a sculptor and co-heads Benson Sculpture LLC with his wife. Together, they produce largescale public works. He writes a daily blog called “Art and Faith” in which he discusses the intersection between visual arts and the Bible.

## An Excerpt from *A Christmas Comedy*—Chapter Five: Bar Bay

Randall Bush

### Summary

The four fantasy novels that comprise “The Christmas Tree Tales” series are aimed at helping children understand the true meaning of Christmas. The novels are set in the fictional Christmas tree world of Arboria where children are magically transported after they hang a mysterious golden angel ornament on their Christmas tree. However, all is not right in this world, for villainous creatures and eccentric characters, who deceive and wreak havoc among Arboria’s Orna folk, lurk about. The Ornas, who are fragile beings with thin skin and hollow hearts, long to be filled with the joy, light, and love of Christmas. However, a sinister dragon named Lesnit has made their plight hopeless by blocking their way to Tree Top where Tree King, the maker of Arboria, dwells. As Lesnit slithers up through Arboria’s lands, he devours the angel stars that guide the Ornas and light their way to Tree King. With the light of the angel stars snuffed out, the Ornas now find themselves cut off from Tree King. To add to their misery, Lesnit leaves behind enormous holes filled with his hungry, dark, hateful fire. He hiccups apples that cause terrible hunger in anyone who dares eat them; and wherever he spits, poisonous mistletoe grows that brings hatred and war. The curse of this world can only be overcome by the true meaning of Christmas that the coming of the Christ child brings.

These novels contain a message that is, at its heart, Christian. If you love Christmas and are concerned about the “war on Christmas” that a culture increasingly hostile to the Christian faith is launching, then you will love these books. If you like adventure, suspense, fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction, then “The Christmas Tree Tales” will provide you with these as well. They are surely fun stories, but they also carry deeper layers of meaning that adults will appreciate while reading them to their children.



In the final installment, *A Christmas Comedy* (Book Four), Arboria's rules have been broken, Gabriel's enchantment has turned dark, and a terrible price must be paid. Can two girls survive the end of Arboria and a journey through its netherworld? They find out when they place Gabriel's magic ornament on an undecorated Christmas tree, and a tunnel is opened into Arboria's afterlife. They learn from their guide, Enoch Vergil (nicknamed Ev) that they have come to Arboria at the wrong time. The rapid approach of 'the Great Divide' harbors the grave danger that the girls may get stuck forever in a realm where nightmares come true. Chapter four ends with Elise and Aubrey being chased by an enormous spider. They are saved in the nick of time when they duck into an elevator that runs up and down the central trunk of the tree world. Unfortunately, the elevator's "up" button does not work. So, they end up having to push the "down" button to get away from the spider lurking just outside the door. The elevator goes down, down, down, and when the door opens, they find themselves in the "bargain basement," also known as "Bar Bay." But it's a terrible place to visit; it's a place where people can easily get stuck forever!

#### Chapter Five: Bar Bay

A gravelly voice yelled, "For the final time, hurry and close that door before you kill us all! How dare you use that elevator! Don't you know it is against the regulations to come that way? You should have come to Bar Bay the way other folks do!"

"What way is that?" Elise asked.

"By seeping through the ground, of course, you ignorant child! If I were able to do so, I would turn you away!"

Elise crept into the entrance of Bar Bay cautiously with Aubrey holding on to her arm. Anxious, they looked around. The sight of dim red lighting and the smell of apple cider vinegar mingled with smoke from recently struck matches assaulted their senses.

Putting the clues together, they decided that "Bar Bay" must be short for "Bargain Basement," and what a strange looking place it was, too. Its entrance resembled a Victorian museum, containing everything from shrunken heads to the claws of dodo birds to petrified dinosaur eggs.

The place was also crowded with the kind of unusual paraphernalia that one might expect to find inside a Victorian museum. The sheer variety of

oddities was mind-boggling. Crammed into open cases and lying on shelves built out of rough, splintery wood were the skeletons of various animals. These were poised in crouching positions, as though they were ready to lunge at unsuspecting shoppers. Stuffed birds of prey—crows, owls, hawks, buzzards, and ravens—dangled from the ceiling by wire; and an assortment of worn-out stuffed animals with matted fur—victims of bad taxidermy by the looks of them—lay scattered about on tables or stuck in cubbyholes. All were eerily still and silent until Aubrey said, "We're sorry about the door."

Somehow, these two little words "we're sorry" flipped some kind of devilish switches on inside the stuffed animals. Electricity crackled through their limbs. Gears, wheels, and springs engaged. The bizarre menagerie began crawling, walking about, or swinging aimlessly about the store on wires suspended from the ceiling. Next, a two-headed stuffed cat screeched from both of its mouths in a dissonant duet that caused the girls to have to cover their ears. This horrible feline scream, in turn, sparked rapid-fire, vicious, and unstoppable barking from the heads of an enormous three-headed stuffed dog. Next the vultures, ravens, crows, and the skeleton of a pterodactyl began to caw, screech, hoot, and crow.

"Just look at what you've done!" the Bar Bay greeter yelled above the fray. He held a long pole in his right hand and waved his left arm wildly about at the screeching animals. "You've set off the alarm system! Do you have any idea what I will have to go through to turn the blasted thing off?"

Frantic, he rushed about, trying to prevent the inhabitants of this strange zoo from breaking out in mutiny. At length, when he managed with a great deal of effort to settle them down, he scolded Aubrey: "You should never, never say those words here! Never, do you hear?"

"What words? 'We're sorry'?" Aubrey asked.

This set off the same reaction in the creatures as before.

The greeter's face, already furrowed with furious frustration, now flashed with anger as well. "YES! THOSE WORDS! YOU SILLY LITTLE FOOL!" he screamed back at her. "Why did you say them again after I warned you not to? Perhaps I should have the authorities come and arrest you for a felony. It's a felony, you know, to set off false alarms. If I were to report you, you would go straight to jail."



Aubrey fought to hold back tears.

“She couldn’t have known that,” Elise broke in, coming to her defense. “We just got here, so how do you expect us to know what your silly rules are? What kind of a greeter are you anyway? You’re certainly not nice like the old gentlemen at the superstore where my parents shop.”

“What kind of establishment do you think this is?” the greeter shot back. “This is a bargain basement I’ll have you know!” He clenched his teeth and seethed in silence for about fifteen seconds until he recovered his composure. Then he said, “Enough of this delay. Show me your Shopper’s Card, and I’ll let you in.”

Elise and Aubrey stared back at him blankly.

His facial expression turned furious. “Shopper’s Card!” he demanded.

“We don’t have one,” Elise said.

The color of the man’s face deepened to beet red, and he appeared ready to chew the girls’ heads off. “Why do you people always come unprepared?” He growled. “How did you think you were going to shop without your card? Very well, come with me. I will get you registered.”

“But what if we don’t want a Shopper’s Card for your dirty old Bargain Basement?” Elise asked. “We’ll just get on that elevator and go back to where we came from!”

The greeter laughed cruelly. “The ‘up’ button on that elevator has not worked for several thousand years at least. You are stuck here, so you might as well get your Shopper’s Card without putting up a fuss.”

“I don’t want a Shopper’s Card,” Aubrey informed him.

“You will HAVE to get one!” The greeter told her, grinning like a shark. “If you’ve arrived in Bar Bay, then you have already agreed to our terms and conditions. Otherwise, you would not be here.”

“So, you’re telling us that we have no choice? We have to get a Shopper’s Card?” Elise asked.

“Duh,” the greeter returned, making a stupid face. “What makes you think you have a choice? There are no choices in Bar Bay but to shop. Don’t you understand that when you chose to come here, you used up your very last choice? Your choice is now made, and it cannot be unmade! You will get no more chances to make any more choices, except to buy!”

“I’ve never heard of forced shopping, before,” Aubrey whispered to her sister. “Surely they can’t make us buy anything!”

“And I’ve never heard anything so silly in all my life,” Elise said, so that not only her sister but the greeter could hear. “We’ll show him. We’ll just leave.” She grabbed Aubrey by the hand, and together they hurried back to the elevator.

Elise frantically pushed the “up” button; every time she did, it would light up. However, when she released her finger, the light would go off and the elevator would not come. The button failed to call the elevator. No matter how often Elise pushed it, the elevator door remained closed.

“The cellphone,” Aubrey whispered in her ear to remind her. “Try that.”

With nervous fingers, Elise reached into her pocket and grasped the device that their host Ev (Enoch Vergil) had given them while they were with him in the tunnel that led them from their world into the Christmas tree world of Arboria. This was after they had broken the rules by placing Gabriel’s magic ornament on the undecorated Christmas tree. Elise tried calling, but every attempt either brought a busy signal or an automated response saying, “I’m sorry, but the party you are calling is out of range. Please hang up and try your call again.” This she did numerous times with no success.

The greeter, meanwhile, stood by grinning with his arms folded; he calmly observed the girls’ frantic but futile efforts to escape. Finally, he approached them, held out his hand, and screamed in their faces, “For the last time! Shopper’s Card!”

“Okay, okay,” Elise said. “We’ll get one of your silly cards. But we certainly won’t buy anything from your nasty old shop!”

“We’ll just see about that,” the greeter returned. “We’ve never had anyone come here who didn’t find at least one bargain they could not pass up. I’ll just give you a little time. Then you’ll see exactly what I mean.”

Now, the greeter was not entirely truthful with the girls, for there had been at least one person who had escaped without buying something from Bar Bay. That man was Enoch Vergil, whom they knew as Ev. The girls, however, did not know this and, indeed, had no way of knowing. What they also did not know was that any person who bought anything from Bar



Bay would be doomed to buy more, like a gambler who gets addicted to gambling after slipping just one small coin into a slot machine.

To make matters worse, Elise tried and tried calling Ev and texting him, but nothing worked. The girls could only hope that he, at some point, would realize their predicament and come looking for them. For the present, however, they had concluded that they had little choice but to cooperate with the greeter and go through the rigmarole of obtaining their Shopper's Cards.

"Okay," Elise said. "Go ahead and help us get the stupid cards. But just remember. It doesn't mean we will buy anything."

The greeter flashed an evil grin and then brought them up to a red line called the "Styx Line," which had been drawn directly below a banner that read "Welcome, all!"

What the girls did not yet know was that the greeter's name was Mr. Charon, and that the red line labeled "Styx," in fact, had nothing to do with "sticks" at all, as they first imagined. If they had learned more about Greek mythology, then they would have known that this was a red line that you should never cross, just like Aubrey knew not to open Pandora's box.

Elise's and Aubrey's ignorance had now put them in very serious danger, but something else would further complicate the bleak situation in which they were soon to find themselves: like so many things in Bar Bay, what was horrible tended not to become obvious until it was too late.

Deep in their hearts, Elise and Aubrey had a nagging feeling that they would be making a grievous mistake by crossing the red line, but already they were becoming curious and, perhaps, even a bit excited about the prospects of what might lie ahead for them as they went to explore in this grand Bargain Basement. After all, they were fairly certain that they would not buy anything, so what would it hurt to look? They decided against their better judgment to disobey their consciences; grabbing each other's hands, they stepped across the "Styx Line." As they crossed, the greeter's face began to change. His ears seemed a bit more pointed, and for the first time they noticed hair sprouting from them. His nose also seemed to bulge, and his teeth were badly decayed.

"Oh, how silly of me," the greeter said, looking down at his shirt pocket. "I forgot to put on my nametag this morning." He reached in and

pulled out the tag. Written on it in strange, rune-like letters was his name: "Mr. Charon."

Though the letters looked scary, the girls thought nothing of the name. However, the minute the greeter clipped on his badge, they heard an enormous cracking sound directly behind them. They quickly turned and saw that the small red line they had just crossed had become an enormously wide, dark, and muddy river. Indeed, parts of it, when viewed from a certain angle, appeared to be the color of blood. At a very great distance from where they now stood, they could barely make out the elevator door and the entrance to Bar Bay where they had stood only moments before.

The girls panicked and began to weep. Not entirely unsympathetic to their plight, Mr. Charon handed them each a handkerchief and said, "Wipe your tears away with these. They are called 'lethe-kerchiefs.' They will help you forget the reason for your tears." As before, the girls did not know the Greek myth about the stream of forgetfulness where a person's soul was plunged after he died. That stream was called "Lethe," and the "lethe-kerchiefs" Charon provided them had been washed in that very stream.

The girls received the "lethe-kerchiefs" without a thought and wiped their eyes, but something about the cloths acted upon them like an anesthetic. They felt disoriented and momentarily forgot how they had even arrived in Bar Bay. Indeed, they now no longer cared to escape as they earlier had wished to do.

"Okay," said Elise, "where do we go next?"

"To apply for your Shopper's Card," Charon replied, "we'll need for you and your sister to go through what we call 'hope abandonment counseling.'"

"What in heaven's name is that?" Aubrey asked.

Charon frowned. "A word of caution," he warned. "That word you just used—it is banned here, too, just like the others you foolishly used."

"What word?" said Aubrey.

"The 'H' word!" he said. "You might as well have dropped an H-bomb on the place as to have used that word."

"Sorry," she said, though she wondered what could possibly be so bad about the word "heaven." She might have guessed more about where they



were had she or her sister seen the other side of the welcome banner when they had crossed the “Styx Line.” They would have endured anything, suffered whatever might lie ahead, to swim back across the enormous river to save themselves. It read: “Abandon all hope, you who enter here.”

Charon led them next to the “Hope Abandonment Counseling Center.”

When they arrived at the entrance to the center, Charon said, “You two have wasted enough of my time. I’ve got more customers to greet, and I’m sure that they, unlike you, have come to Bar Bay in the right way.” He held out his hand to receive his gratuity from the girls for escorting them to the counseling center.

“What?” Elise said. “Surely you don’t expect us to pay you for walking across your silly line, do you? Doesn’t Bar Bay pay you to greet customers anyway?”

Mr. Charon’s ears appeared more pointed and hairier than at first, and his bulbous nose pulsed. “Not pay the ferryman?” He snarled and clenched his yellow, rotten teeth. “Don’t ask me for a return trip whatever you do! You will be sorry you didn’t pay me!” He stooped down in the mud and, with his finger, scribbled a zigzag.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Aubrey asked.

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough,” he said. “You’ll be sorry you didn’t pay me!”

The girls did not know that Charon never ferried persons back across the Styx; but even so, they had no money to pay. They watched as he trudged across the riverbank, climbed into his boat, and rowed back by himself across the enormous gulf. It was then that the mud along the riverbank where Charon had scribbled the zigzag began to bubble and hiss. The faces of creatures made entirely out of mud began to take shape. Then, these creatures pulled themselves free from their mud prison and crawled toward the girls.

“Quick!” Elise exclaimed. “Let’s get into the counseling center before the zombies grab us!”

The girls rushed in, slammed the door, and bolted it shut. Outside, the mud creatures clawed at the glass, leaving a filthy smear of mud on it. The girls heard them squeal with high-pitched voices that sounded like fingernails scratching a chalkboard.



**Randall Bush**

University Professor of Philosophy

Randall Bush is University Professor of Philosophy and former director of the Interdisciplinary Honors Program at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. He is an ordained Baptist minister, who holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, a Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Oxford in England. He is an accomplished pianist, organist, and vocalist. He enjoys writing hymns and poetry. He has taught gourmet cooking, done mission work in the Houston inner city, lived on a West Texas ranch, and served as a part-time minister in a British Baptist church. He has also served numerous churches as a Sunday School teacher, pianist, organist, minister to youth, minister of music, minister of education, and interim pastor.



## An Excerpt from *The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*

Kelvin Moore

### Synopsis

*The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* chronicles the life of Ulysses America Johnson, known to almost everyone as “Am.” From humble Alabama beginnings, Am invents a dining table that can remove millions of pounds of waste products from landfills, oceans, waterways and landscapes. With seed money generated from this pro-ecological invention, along with his chemist friend Jefferson Marrow, Am eventually becomes the CEO of a world-class pharmaceutical behemoth earning billions of dollars annually. Am, initially a kind and generous person, morphs into one possessed by a desire for alcohol, prostitutes and pornography. He transforms from a person concerned about humankind into one only concerned for himself. He neglects family and friends and even abuses both. He mutates from one committed to easing some pain and suffering in the world to one actively creating it. This radical transformation is motivated by one thing: greed.

*The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* mirrors the loss of moral compass for innumerable Americans. This novel will coerce readers into recognizing the need for real change in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Is anything other than the future of the American Empire at state? Can Am (and America) be saved?

### An Excerpt from *The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*

The sun shone brightly that Sunday morning as Am woke. His parents allowed him to sleep late on Sunday—but only on Sunday. Am had to get up early weekdays, even in the summer, with no school. The family had chores to perform on Saturday and always got started on them early.

“Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” his father quoted Benjamin Franklin. The family, all three of them, religiously adhered to the advice of Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack* in this regard.

After breakfast, Am dressed quickly for worship and went outside. Jefferson often met him in Am’s front yard and the two tossed a baseball, always careful not to get dirty. Am and Jefferson both knew their mothers would not be happy to see their son’s church clothes dirty.

Normally, promptly at 10:30, Am’s parents would exit the house. His father would be wearing a suit, along with a white shirt and tie. His mother would be wearing a neatly ironed dress. Am would join them as the trio waved goodbye to Jefferson. At times, Jefferson would ride with them to worship. But, at approximately 10:10 that morning, Am’s father opened the front door and spoke.

“Good morning, Jefferson.”

“Good morning, Mr. Johnson.”

“Will you excuse Am for a few minutes?”

“Sure. See you at church, Am.”

Jefferson handed the baseball and glove to Am and skipped across the street to his house.

“Will you come back inside for a moment?” his father asked.

Am made his way back to the house, a bit confused. He joined his father on the sofa in the small living room.

“Today is a big day in the life of our church.”

“Isn’t every Sunday a big day for us?” Am asked.

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Johnson replied, “but today is an especially significant day for us. Do you know why?”

“No, sir,” Am answered honestly.

“Today, we have the opportunity to give money to meet some real needs.” Mr. Johnson recognized the confusion on his son’s face and continued. “Today, our church is accepting money to help dig a well for people who don’t have water.” Mr. Johnson paused and carefully considered his words. “Am, generosity is an important part of who we are.”

Am sat in silence.



“Your mother and I want you to know how important it is for us to share what we have with those who have less. We share our time. We share our gifts. Part of that sharing means we give our money as well. We are not wealthy people, but we can give. Today, we have the opportunity to give some of our hard-earned money to people who need water.”

Am’s father paused again. Believing generous parents tend to rear generous kids and selfish parents tend to rear selfish kids, Mr. Johnson continued.

“And we, the family, will give and give generously today. Not a lot of money overall but, for us, a lot of money. Do you understand?”

Am nodded.

“We aren’t rich, but we will give a lot for us,” Mr. Johnson said.

Am thought the lesson was finished.

After a pause, Mr. Johnson continued. “Am?”

“Sir?”

“Do you think there is anything you...can give?”

Am thought a minute then exclaimed. “I have money in my piggy bank I can give!”

Mr. Johnson accomplished what he desired and remained quiet.

Am spoke again, this time asking a question. “How much can I give? I have almost \$20.”

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had discussed this very item. A prepared Mr. Johnson spoke. “You can give whatever you want to give.”

Am sat quietly. He finally spoke. “I think I will give \$5.”

This pleased Mr. and Mrs. Johnson greatly. While they wanted to teach their son generosity, they didn’t want him to give everything he had. Mr. Johnson knew Am, when he became an adult with a family of his own, would have bills to pay. Giving everything could cause Am, his wife and family, hardships. Mr. Johnson wanted Am to give generously but with prudence.

Promptly, at 10:30, the three exited the house and got into the family automobile. Am’s mother, aware of the discussion Mr. Johnson had with Am, spoke to no one in particular. She wanted to support and reinforce the message.

“We have that fundraiser at church today.”

“For the well,” Am said, “I am glad we can help.” Am echoed, almost verbatim, the words of his father a few minutes before.

“We will be making a donation, Am,” his mother said. She paused before Am spoke.

“I will be making a donation too.”

“Really? That’s very nice.”

“I have almost \$20 in my piggy bank. I plan on giving \$5.”

“That is very generous, Am,” his mother said.

“We are raising a philanthropist, Mother,” his father said with a twinkle in his eye.

Am’s father and mother sat near the front of the worship center with Am and boys seated near the back. Their minister spoke that day of love and generosity, anticipating the donation. The pastor reminded his church members of offering plates placed at the rear of the sanctuary. Each family filed back and donated their money. Since Am sat near the rear of the sanctuary, Mr. Johnson swelled with pride as he saw Am empty his pockets of pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters.

*Five dollars*, Mr. Johnson thought.

He was so proud of Am.

At the age of twelve, Am received the first and only physical discipline his father ever gave him.

Am, along with Jefferson Marrow, Tommy Chandler, Melvin Thompson, Ronnie Petticord and Frank Evans, walked from home to school and back again each day. None lived more than a few blocks from school, and they were, after all, in the 6th grade now. A large oak tree, central to all six boys, stood in the backyard of Frank’s house. They gathered there every morning at 7:30 and started the short walk. After a few weeks, Frank’s father built a small hut, complete with a bench, closed on three sides for the boys to gather during inclement weather. The parents encouraged their boys to ride the bus in such weather, but the boys pleaded for the grand adventure of walking. In the end, all the parents surrendered.



Almost every day, without their parents' approval or even knowledge, Am, Jefferson, Tommy, Melvin, Ronnie, and Frank took a detour of a few blocks to the Halverson General Store, a locally-owned establishment offering all sorts of things intriguing to twelve-year-old children. Mr. Halverson always greeted the boys upon entrance. After a few visits he inquired as to their names. From that day forward, he called the boys by name: "Good afternoon Jefferson, Tommy. Melvin, did you have a good day at school? Ronnie, you and Frank look well today. What can I help you with, Am?"

The boys often had a bit of spare change for a soda, a pack of crackers or a candy bar. If they didn't have enough money individually, they pooled it, bought a soda and passed it around, each taking a drink until the can was empty. The crackers were an easy divide: a pack contained six, one for each boy. Mr. Halverson loaned the boys his pocketknife for any candy bar dividing that needed to be done. This responsibility fell to Ronnie, for whatever reason. He unwrapped the bar and laid it on Mr. Halverson's counter and carefully divided it, returning the knife to Mr. Halverson. Ronnie took this responsibility seriously, and Mr. Halverson never heard one of the boys complain because he felt his share smaller than other shares.

If Am ever bought a personal soda or candy bar, he drank it or ate it before arriving home. He knew his mother wouldn't approve of eating candy or drinking soda before dinner. Sometimes, one of boys bought a toy for a few coins—a toy that normally broke before they arrived back at the oak tree.

On this particular day, the boys had enough money for each of them to purchase something. Am thought it unusual, a little strange even, when Jefferson insisted they pool money for a candy bar. After much discussion and debate, the boys agreed. Ronnie unwrapped the bar as Mr. Halverson removed his pocketknife, opened the blade and handed it to Ronnie. Tommy, Melvin, Frank, and Am gathered around Ronnie at the counter, anticipating their share. Mr. Halverson leaned over the counter, watching

the proceeding as he did when the boys purchased a community candy bar. Am noticed that Jefferson hadn't joined the group but lingered in an aisle. With everyone absorbed with anticipation of that bite, just one bite, from the afternoon candy bar, Am made eye contact with Jefferson. The latter smiled a mischievous grin and winked at Am as he slipped something off the shelf into his pants' pocket. Am knew Jefferson had orchestrated the theft—he created the opportunity and then exploited it. Jefferson's move horrified Am. Jefferson immediately made his way, quietly, to the rear of the group of boys, eagerly wanting his portion of the candy bar. Mr. Halverson never took his eyes off Ronnie, admiring his surgical skills.

On the way home, Jefferson calmly removed a pack of crackers from his pants pocket.

"Hey, where did you get those?" Frank asked.

"Stole 'um," Jefferson said, ever so casually.

"No way!" Ronnie said.

"Shut your mouth!" Tommy said.

"Did so! I did steal 'um, right out from under Ole Man Halverson's nose. Am saw me. Didn't you Am?"

"Is that true Am? Did you actually see Jefferson steal those?" Melvin asked.

Am, almost sick to his stomach, merely nodded yes.

"That's cool," Tommy said.

Frank laughed aloud and took a cracker from Jefferson.

For several days, the boys bought a candy bar, a single candy bar, nothing more. As Ronnie paid for the item, Jefferson stole something as Mr. Halverson took their money. If Mr. Halverson ever suspected, he never indicated. Although feeling guilty to the point of not sleeping at night, Am fought off the desire to bellow out: "Mr. Halverson, Jefferson is stealing from you!"

"What did you lift today, Jefferson?" Frank asked as the boys got out of sight of the Halverson General Store.

"TWO packs of crackers," Jefferson displayed proudly.

"That's nice," Tommy said, "twice the amount, TWO crackers for each."



Jefferson distributed two crackers to each boy and wolfed down his two. Although he didn't want to, Am ate them out of peer pressure. He couldn't say he actually enjoyed them.

"OK, boys," Jefferson said as the boys sat in the hut underneath the massive oak in Frank's backyard, "it's time you started taking some of the risks. No risk—no reward."

"What are you talking about?" Frank asked.

"You five, for weeks now, have been eating crackers that I have been stealing. That is right, is it not?"

The other four nodded in agreement as Am tried to figure out where the conversation was headed.

"Why are you enjoying all the benefits of munching on delightful delicacies that I stole, without investing anything into obtaining 'um?"

"Come again," Melvin said.

"It's time you boys started taking some of the risks."

Am sat quietly, still puzzled.

When no one said anything, Jefferson perceived their confusion and spoke.

"It is time you started stealing."

A moment passed before Frank spoke.

"OK. That's fair."

Frank rose, placed both hands on his hips, surveyed the assembly, and spoke forcefully. "Tomorrow, I steal!"

"And me the next day," Tommy said, matching Frank's enthusiasm. Am thought Tommy sounded especially eager to join Jefferson's ring of thieves.

"I will go next," Melvin said.

That left Am and Ronnie.

"Since Ronnie always carves up the candy bar as Mr. Halverson watches, having someone else do it might create some suspicion. Am, that leaves you—only you," Jefferson said.

Am thought he would lose his two crackers right then and there. The five boys sat, and Jefferson stood in silence.

"Am?" Jefferson asked.

"I think Am is too chicken to steal," Frank said.

Jefferson sat beside Am, put his arm around and pulled him close. He spoke. "Not ole Am here. He ain't chicken. He will steal, won't you, Am?"

Am detected a menacing tone in Jefferson's voice, making him uncomfortable. He offered no reply.

The next afternoon, the boys bought a single candy bar. Mr. Halverson gave Ronnie his knife as Am, Jefferson, Tommy, and Melvin gathered. Frank took a few steps away from the group. Am watched as Frank pocketed something.

"Another candy bar?" Jefferson said, sounding disappointed, as the boys sat underneath the massive oak.

"Shut up, Jefferson," Frank said, "you don't have to eat your part if you're so all bent out of shape over a Mars bar."

Jefferson smiled and tossed the nugget in his month.

The following afternoon, Tommy pocketed three packs of crackers.

"We mustn't be greedy," Jefferson scolded, "lest Ole Man Halverson get suspicious."

"Sorry, Jefferson," Tommy said, "I thought you would be pleased."

"That's OK, Chandler," Jefferson said, "You did well kid."

The following day provided Melvin his first opportunity to delve into the dark underworld of lawlessness. He pocketed a pack of crackers, a single pack of crackers.

"Your turn tomorrow," Jefferson said, all seated underneath the oak.

"What about Ronnie?" Am said, attempting to buy him more time to give consideration as to how he might allude this distasteful task.

"Shut up, Johnson," Frank said, "we have discussed that. You know Halverson expects to see Ronnie divvy up our candy bar."

"I think Am is chicken," Melvin said.



Tommy rose and started flapping his arms, strutting and clucking like a chicken. Jefferson worked his magic once more. He sat beside Am, pulled him close, and spoke. “Am ain’t no chicken. Are you, Am?”

Am said nothing.

Jefferson continued. “Am will steal. Tomorrow. Eh, Am?”

Am felt a knot in his stomach.

Am couldn’t remember a longer night. Most afternoons, after a busy, tiring school day, Am went home to play catch with his father. Am always had chores to do. All that activity normally translated into a restful night’s rest. Am normally slept well, all night, every night. But not this night.

Am spent most of the day considering ways to avoid Halverson’s General Store that afternoon. He considered avoiding the boys, simply walking home alone. He considered feigning illness, a toothache perhaps. Am knew he might be able to avoid the General Store and this “rite of passage” for a few days, but he knew he couldn’t avoid it for long. Jefferson would see to that.

*I might as well get this done*, Am thought as the six boys moved to the General Store.

Frank paid for the single candy bar. Mr. Halverson handed his knife, always with the blade opened, to Ronnie. Jefferson, Melvin, and Tommy gathered around Ronnie and Frank. Mr. Halverson leaned on his counter. Am intentionally stood at the back of the circle and slowly moved to an aisle, once removed, from the effort to divide the candy bar.

Am intended to grab whatever happened to be the closest to his right hand as he dangled it by his side. He hoped whatever he touched initially was something small. Something that could be quickly concealed in his pant pocket.

Completely absorbed in the task at hand, Am failed to hear another customer enter the General Store. In response to the customer’s question, Mr. Halverson came out from behind the counter just as Am pocketed his “rite of passage.” Am stood petrified, hoping, praying Mr. Halverson hadn’t seen anything. Mr. Halverson answered the customer’s question. He then slowly approached Am and spoke.

“Am, what do you have there?”

“Excuse me,” Am managed to say.

Behind Mr. Halverson, Jefferson Marrow, Tommy Chandler, Melvin Thompson, Ronnie Petticord, and Frank Evans were nowhere to be seen.

“There, in your pocket. What do you have?”

“Nothing,” Am lied.

“Am, what do you have in your pocket?” Mr. Halverson insisted.

Am dropped the pretense and removed the item from his pocket. He stood, embarrassed, shaking, with the item laying loosely in the palm of his right hand. He felt his eyes moisten.

“A mousetrap?” Mr. Halverson spoke, “Why would you steal a mousetrap, Am? Does your family have a mouse problem at home?”

Am could only manage a very weak “No, sir.”

“I am disappointed in you, Am,” Mr. Halverson said.

After what felt like fifteen minutes, Mr. Halverson spoke. “What do you think I should do with a boy who steals?”

Am couldn’t manage a single word.

“I will give you two options.”

“Yes sir.”

“You can work here at the store for a week, after school, 3:30 till closing at 5:00—five days.”

“Or?”

“Or I will tell your father.”

Am needed no time in making his decision. “I will work.”

“Then I will see you tomorrow at 3:30.”

Now, Am had the challenge of getting his father to allow him to work after school.

Am tossed a baseball with his father before his mother called them to dinner. Am remembered nothing he ate and nothing they talked about. He chose his timing carefully before broaching the topic.

“Dad, do you mind if I work at the General Store for a week, after school?”

“What?” his dad said, “Where is this coming from? If you need a little money we can do that, depending on how much you need and what you need it for.”



“Did Mr. Halverson ask you to work?” his mother asked.

“Well, sort of,” Am responded, in a sort-of lie.

“What does that mean?” his mother asked.

“I have an interest in business,” Am said, continuing the charade.

*Already stole and told one lie, Am rationed, more lies aren’t going to matter at this point.*

“Really?” his father said. “An interest in business?”

“Yes, sir.”

His father thought for a moment. Am knew he suspected something other than his son’s newly-expressed interest in business, but his father said nothing. Am’s father looked at his wife. Seeing and hearing no objection from her, he spoke. “Well, Mr. Halverson is one of the nicest men we know...”

“Upstanding man in our community,” Mrs. Johnson offered.

“That too,” Mr. Johnson nodded in agreement.

“I suspect he could teach Am a lot about business,” his mother said.

“Alright, you can work,” his father said, “but if your grades suffer, you work no more. Deal?”

“Deal,” was all Am could say. He thought his heart would explode in his chest at any moment.

For the next five days, 3:30 till closing at 5:00, Am worked for Mr. Halverson at Halverson’s General Store. His father was correct. Mr. Halverson was one of the nicest men Am had ever met, excluding his own father. And for the entire week, Jefferson Marrow, Tommy Chandler, Melvin Thompson, Ronnie Petticord, and Frank Evans were nowhere to be seen at Halverson’s General Store.

Am got home that evening about the same time his father arrived from work. They tossed the baseball until dinner. Mr. Johnson aided his wife in cleaning the kitchen before asking Am to join him on the front porch. Am’s legs dangled off the swing as his father gently stroked his back.

“I want to ask you something Am.”

“Yes sir.”

“Why did you want to work for Mr. Halverson?”

Am felt his throat and stomach tighten. “Sir?”

“I went by Halverson’s store today, just to express my appreciation to him. When I told him, I appreciated him asking you to work, he looked surprised, just for a fleeting moment, but I noticed the surprise, nonetheless. Therefore...I asked him why the surprise. You know something Am. That man, Mr. Halverson, is a terrible liar! Never done enough of it to know how I am sure. He stumbled all over something and in the end, said nothing. Nothing at all. Therefore, I am asking you... again. Am, why are you working for Mr. Halverson?”

Am saw no way around the issue.

“Because I took something from his store.”

“What do you mean you took something from his store?”

“I took something from his store...without paying for it.”

“You mean you stole something.”

“Yes, I stole something.”

“Why?”

“On a dare from Jefferson Marrow, Tommy Chandler, Melvin Thompson, Ronnie Petticord, and Frank Evans. A ‘rite of passage’ they called it.”

Am thought his father might inquire about this rite of passage forcing Am to either lie additionally or give up the boys. When Am’s father didn’t inquire, Am said nothing about four of the boys stealing from Mr. Halverson while the other boy provided cover. Am’s father continued rubbing his son’s back. “Have you apologized to Mr. Halverson?”

Am, considering that for the first time, spoke. “No, sir. I haven’t.”

“Then you will do so, tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I will meet you back in this swing after dinner tomorrow night. This matter isn’t closed.”

“Yes, sir,” was all Am could manage.

Am was nervous. If Mr. Johnson detected that, he never indicated.

Am arrived at Halverson’s General Store at 3:30, donned his apron and grabbed a broom as Mr. Halverson waited on a customer. In minutes, the happy customer exited, leaving Am alone with Mr. Halverson.



“Good afternoon, Am.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Halverson.”

Am continued sweeping as Mr. Halverson dusted shelves, whistling easily.

“Mr. Halverson?”

“Yes, Am.” Mr. Halverson continued dusting, never looking in Am’s direction.

“Can we talk?”

Hearing Am’s question, Mr. Halverson correctly perceiving the seriousness of the moment, stopped dusting and turned to Am. “Sure. What’s on your mind, young man?”

“I want to apologize.”

Mr. Halverson said nothing, giving young Am as much time as he needed. It seemed, to Am, like seconds turned to minutes, which then turned to hours. Am hoped a customer would enter the store, easing the apprehension he felt and ending, or at least shortening, his apology time. No one entered the store.

*It’s just me and him*, Am thought.

“I apologize for stealing from you. That was wrong. I knew it was wrong, and I stole anyway, but I won’t ever steal from you or anyone else, ever again.”

Am didn’t realize he had enough strength to do that.

“Am, do you want to know what I think?”

Am braced himself for Mr. Halverson’s wrath. He thought he saw tears in Mr. Halverson’s eyes as the elderly man emerged from behind the store counter. He gently mussed Am’s hair and spoke softly. “For the few dimes and nickels that mousetrap cost, I say you have learned a valuable lesson. A life-long lesson. A lesson that can serve you well, regardless of what path you choose. Always carry that lesson with you, Am.”

Am knew Mr. Halverson for many years after that conversation. Am would learn to love him almost as much as his own father. Never again did Mr. Halverson speak to Am of the fact that the latter once attempted, on a lazy school afternoon, to steal a mousetrap from him.

After dinner that night, as pre-arranged, Am sat on the porch, in the swing with his father. His father rocked the rickety swing back-and-forth as Am’s feet dangled several inches off the wooden porch. When his father hesitated, Am initiated the conversation.

“I apologized to Mr. Halverson today.”

Mr. Johnson merely nodded. After a few minutes of silence, Mr. Johnson spoke. Later in life, as Am matured, he realized his father had anticipated, even welcomed this teachable moment. His father spoke.

“Personal responsibility, Am, is very important. God created the heavens and the earth. He created man and woman and placed them in the Garden of Eden. God placed them there with one, only one, responsibility: not to eat fruit from one tree. Imagine Am, only one responsibility and that responsibility was something they were *not* to do. God didn’t instruct the man and the woman to plow and plant the back forty acres or go to a sofa factory and work until 5:00 each day. Wouldn’t it be nice, Am, to get up on Saturday morning with only one responsibility and that responsibility was something you *didn’t* have to do?”

Am smiled and nodded in agreement.

His father continued. “But the woman and the man failed in that responsibility. They disobeyed and ate and do you know what happened?”

Am shook his head no because he really didn’t know, for sure, what happened.

“God confronted them, the man and the woman. The man blamed the woman, which, the man said, ‘God had given him.’ Essentially, the man blamed God himself. And the woman? The woman blamed a snake, a serpent. Both the man and woman refused to accept responsibility for their personal deeds.”

Another pause.

“Am, prisons around the world are full of people who haven’t learned to take responsibility, personal responsibility for their deeds. You did that today. And that took courage. I am proud of you.”

Am now hoped the matter was closed, but something told him otherwise. Mr. Johnson spoke again.

“Am, I am going to do something I, we, have never done.”

“Sir?”

“I am going to discipline you.”



Neither Am nor his father said anything for several minutes.

“For two reasons.”

“Two reasons...sir?”

“For stealing and...for lying to us. You told us Mr. Halverson asked you to work.”

“That was half-true, sir,” Am said.

“A half-truth is also a half-untruth, a half-lie. And you also told us you had an interest in business. Was that a half-truth as well?”

“Yes sir,” Am managed.

“Two lies and one item stolen.”

After a few moments, Mr. Johnson continued. “Am, discipline is important. Life must have parameters—barriers, things one *mustn’t* do, things one must *do*, things one mustn’t *say*, and I suppose, things one *must* say. And there must be consequences for irresponsible acts. Civilizations simply can’t exist without discipline. I hope you understand.”

In actuality, Am did understand. He stole from Mr. Halverson’s General Store. He was irresponsible and there were consequences in his family for being irresponsible.



Kevin Moore

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Kelvin Moore, a proud Alabamian, has taught in the School of Theology and Missions since 1991. He has published three books and numerous articles. He enjoys reading across a broad spectrum, and he is a woodworker and apiarist. The excerpt included here is one of four novels. He and his wife have been married 37 years and have two children. Combined, his wife, daughter, son and

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## The Plot of Wes Anderson’s Animated Feature *Isle of Dogs* (2018) is also the Plot of Actual American Life Circa 2020/2021

Ted Kluck

Liking and appreciating the films of Wes Anderson definitely places me on a certain kind of Insufferable Hipster Spectrum. Although, liking and appreciating freedom may actually keep me off the same spectrum. Such is the confusing nature of life in these uncertain times.

Anyway, Anderson is the Hipster’s Hipster inasmuch as he makes super self-referential, set-design-heavy, stylized, ironic, postmodern-ish movies set to also-ironic Brit-pop soundtracks. The movies usually happen to be approachable and fun, which is where they break from the standard Hipster Ethics of aloofness and self-absorption (which to my shame I also sometimes embody).

Being a huge fan of Anderson’s first animated feature, *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, I couldn’t wait to see *Isle of Dogs*, which came out in 2018 but which I didn’t view until August 2021 (due in part to a weird Cinemax embargo on the movie but due also to the cares and concerns of life intervening). I knew nothing about the plot until last night.

Here’s what the movie contains, plot point-wise, which reminded me of the last eighteen months:

- A power-hungry politician, doling out Executive Orders like candy, who has the mainstream media in his back pocket (value added: this plot point works regardless of whether you hate Trump or Biden!).
- A designer virus maybe created in a lab to attack dogs, but the ultimate purpose of which was to deliver an election (only works if you hate Biden).
- A political party called The Science Party, which I’m predicting we are a scant few months away from actually having (this plot point is hate-neutral).



- This line: “Brains have been washed, wheels have been greased, fear has been mongered” (I think this one also works regardless of which president you hate).
- A little, try-hard, independent newspaper, which eventually becomes mainstreamed and corrupted.
- Masks! (Only on-screen for a minute, but still!)

In addition to being a reminder of the surrealist hellscape we’re currently living in, the film was primarily feel-good, fun and the deliverer of a happy ending—which is exactly what you’re looking for in an animated feature you watch with your family. But it also begged the question, “Did Anderson somehow see *this* coming?” By “this,” I mean literally every plot point above being actualized in some form or fashion.

The easy answer is that the movie was set in a place in which the above issues may be a little more germane. This is self-evident if you watch the movie. It’s important to note here that I know basically nothing about Japanese politics, but I’ve watched a lot of movies and it’s clear what they were trying to do. The fact that it ended up looking a lot like our country, three years later, was probably just a happy (despair-inducing?) accident.

But it’s also a reminder that life can end up imitating art, or that art can have an eerily prescient take on what life could end up looking like if we’re not careful. I’m reminded of novels like *1984*, *Alas Babylon*, *The Dog Stars* and even (cringe, for Insufferable Hipster Spectrum reasons) *Infinite Jest*. All of those books had shades of or even outright predicted things we’re experiencing now. Especially *Infinite Jest*, which suggested that a constant, steady drip of self-obsessed, self-driven entertainment (i.e., social media) would be the thing that actually kills us (as opposed to a nuclear warhead or a virus).

Anderson’s movies are fun because they lack the typical hipster ingredients of martyrdom and an inferiority-complex-manifesting-as-smugness. They’re not smug movies, which makes them not preachy, which makes them fun.



### Ted Kluck

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Ted Kluck is the author of over twenty books on topics ranging from professional indoor football to the evangelical church. He is a syndicated columnist for *The Jackson Sun* (Tennessee) and *USA Today*, and his journalism has appeared in *ESPN The Magazine* and *Christianity Today*. Ted has

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## Musings from a Soul Scientist

Beth Madison

### Five Smooth Stones

1 Samuel 17:40: “He took his shepherd’s stick and then picked up five smooth stones from the stream and put them in his bag. With his sling ready, he went out to meet Goliath.”

As a child, I loved to find smooth stones for skipping across a stream or carrying in my pocket to rub with my fingers. Even now, I still love the look and feel of smooth stones in their solidity and placement in the nature, art, or architecture around me. Their smoothness seems to help smooth out those tangled emotions and thoughts that are trying to wash me away in their turbulence.

Most smooth stones in nature didn’t start out that way. Their smoothness is a result of many years of wearing away by water or wind on larger rocks already cracked from the pressure of weather, weight, or gravity. The smooth stones have been hewn out and polished by an external power not of their making or control. Yet if the composition of these stones had been any less strong and enduring, they would have quickly eroded into smaller and smaller particles, which eventually disappeared altogether. Only stones made of strong stuff become smooth stones. Their smoothness indicates their innate strength and endurance over time.

I wonder if David knew this geologic principle when he was choosing “five smooth stones” to use in his confrontation with Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40). I wonder if the act of finding these stones and feeling the inherent strength of them in David’s hands helped him trust the strength of his God even more. Some commentators say that David chose five stones not because he doubted God’s power for his aim against Goliath, but because Goliath had four brothers. David’s choices reflected his belief in his God.

Many others in Scripture exhibited strong belief in their strong God, including Noah, Joshua, Esther, Mary, and countless unnamed others in Hebrews 11. Scripture highlights their faith as strong, not the people themselves. Even as a child, I loved to hear of their brave and courageous deeds resulting from their deep and enduring faith. And now, the stories of their lives display an even greater solidness and placement in the past, present, and future of the world around me. Such stories of bravery help to smooth out my tangled emotions and thoughts into a more solid and lasting faith.

The composition of belief for those in Scripture with strong faith stood on the fact that God was indeed Who He said He was—holy, strong, present, able, faithful, just, merciful, gracious, provider, sustainer, and countless other qualities that exist without change over time. Yet if the composition of their belief in their strong God had been any less strong or persevering, their bravery would have quickly eroded away into smaller and smaller particles in the face of trial, eventually disappearing into the disobedience of not trusting God. Their strong God gave them a strong faith. God can and will do the same for us today, especially when we are weak (see 2 Corinthians 12:9).

Only people believing in a strong God can endure the storms of life that try to wash or blow them away over time. Their faith gives them a smooth bravery that can only be explained by their belief that their God is Who He says He is, and that they are whom God says them to be as in 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people. You are the King’s priests. You are a holy nation. You are a nation that belongs to God alone. God chose you to tell about the wonderful things he has done. He called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Brave people rely on God. Brave people trust in God. Brave people know their God. Brave people endure through God. Brave people know that:

**BELIEVING  
RIGHTLY  
ACTIVATES  
VALIANT  
ENDURANCE**



Bravery can't be duplicated; it can only be hewn out and polished by the power of our strong God at work in the lives of those living stone people from 1 Peter 2:5: "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Living stone people trust Him with and from every molecule of their existence. Living stone people know that God has a purpose for good for them in this moment and those moments to come as in Jeremiah 29:11. Living stone people embrace being used as stones for the building of His kingdom to come as in Matthew 6:33. Living stone people trust God to give the strength to overcome this day and the next in expectation for the endurance to hold fast in faith and, thus, to receive a white stone and a new name as promised in Revelation 2:17.

Bravery is seen in those single mothers and fathers dependent on Him for feeding them and their children that day. Bravery is found in workers reliant on Him for control of their emotions and dreams in defeating and depressing work environments or marriages. Bravery is known in patients with chronic illness trusting Him for enough strength to keep moving forward in hope today and again tomorrow. Bravery is lived out by missionaries, pastors, and laypeople seeking Him for light in ever-darkening cities and countries. Bravery is displayed by people hoping in Him for a full life without a spouse or children. Bravery is exhibited by parents clinging to Him while praying for rebellious children along with unnamed countless others just trying to hold fast to Him in the midst of wave after wave of trials threatening to wash them and their faith away.

Yet, those waves and wind that don't wash or blow us away serve to smooth off more disbelief in anything other than our strong God and expose true faith in their wake. And this true faith, in time, unearths a buried bravery that thrives, endures, and inspires others to open their hearts in belief to our strong God. Only our strong God can give us a faith strong enough to choose five smooth stones and to go out to meet our Goliaths.

Joshua 1:9: "This is My command: be strong and courageous. Never be afraid or discouraged because I am your God, the Eternal One, and I will remain with you wherever you go."

1 John 2:24: "So keep on believing what you have been taught from the beginning. If you do, you will always be in close fellowship with both God the Father and his Son."

Dear Father God,

Thank You that You never change. Thank You that You are Who You say You are for now and for forever. Thank You that You alone give the faith to move mountains and to pick up five smooth stones that You made from mountains of the past. Thank You that You can and will make me brave. Please help me to trust You with a strong faith. Please help me to endure and to overcome in expectation of Your plans and Your promises for today and for tomorrow and for forever. I want to run forward in faith against today's Goliaths for only You are greater than any and all of them!

In the strong Name of Jesus,

Amen.



### “May I Tell You a Story Today?”

This is the story of my favorite necklace. It may not look remarkable, but there is a very special story behind it... This necklace was my Great-Aunt Hilda’s favorite necklace because my Great-Uncle Elmer gave it to her (yes, those were their real names, along with her sister Alma and cousin Lula, whom my cousins called “doo-dah”). The gold coin on the necklace is an 1895 five-dollar gold piece, and it was my great-uncle’s first paycheck at his first job at the country store. When he received his pay, he looked all over the store to find something for Hilda, but “nothing was as special as she was” to him. So he ran to her house and gave her the coin to go and buy something, but nothing was as special to her as he was. This coin was a symbol of his love for her. For you see, they met in first grade and fell in love and “never had eyes for anyone else” throughout their over 50-year marriage until he died. They loved each other in the big and the small ways, every single day.

Hilda held onto the coin through the early years of their marriage in the Depression, doing everything she could to save money so she wouldn’t have to spend the five-dollar gold piece. They had many long hard years financially as Elmer worked his way up the ladder at the local bank. Then, when she and Elmer were well-off financially, she bought a gold chain and had the coin mounted on it. The reason she gave me the necklace not long before she died was because I was the oldest grandchild and her favorite. I was the one who got the extra frosting end of the coconut cake. I was the one who got the special early-morning breakfasts of perfectly toasted homemade buttered light bread with crispy bacon, ambrosia fruit salad, and boiled custard. I was the one who got to play dress-up with her fancy jewelry. Yet I never got to wear this particular necklace when I was young since she was usually wearing it herself.

To Hilda, this necklace was tangible evidence of the love she shared with Elmer and the faith they had in each other and in their substantial bank accounts. They didn’t need anyone or anything else. And this is why both of them rejected Jesus all the way to the end of their lives.

They believed their love for each other was enough for anything. Yet, the difficult truth is that neither their love, nor their bank accounts, were enough to save them from anything then, much less for eternity. And this

hard truth slaps me in the face every morning when I put on my necklace and am reminded of them...

To me, this necklace is a daily tangible reminder of the truth of Matthew 6:21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” I want to live like Jesus is my only treasure for today and forever. I want my heart to be completely with Him today and forever. There is no one or nothing that can ever compare with Him! Only Jesus can satisfy; only Jesus can save!



**Beth Madison**

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Dr. Madison teaches science courses in the School of Adult and Professional Studies and the College of Arts and Sciences. Her focus is on integrating environmental science with faith in the classroom, laboratory, and writing. Her two books, *Good Ground: Biblical Illustrations from a Soil Scientist, Parts 1 and 2* are

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# Unity: How Biblical Concepts Influence Musical Performance

Michael Mann

Practicing Jews recite Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as a daily Torah portion of their prayers. The *Shema* begins with a Hebrew word to which the passage is named, “Hear, O Israel.” The deeper translation describes “hear” as a word not attached to simply listening but as a call to act upon what is heard or to apply what is heard to one’s life. The *Shema* proclaims, “The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” Certainly, this passage represents one of many references to the concept of unity as created through the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in addition, the confession that there is only one God.

In the New Testament, we read that Jesus responded to the attempted testing of the Pharisees when asked, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus’ response was a quote from the *Shema*. Further representation of Jesus’s actions of unity in ministry is proven through His divine communication with the Father by His statements in passages like John 14:11, “Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” The Trinity exemplifies the creation of unity. The mandate of the *Shema* and the statement of unity defined through creation and perfect agreement within the Trinity brought me to a revelation of how purposeful listening and attempts at creating unity have a major impact on excellence in music.

Several years ago, I taught at the University of Miami, which has an ongoing reputation as one of the best jazz programs in the country. Its *Downbeat Magazine* awards, Grammy Awards, and nominations dwarf any other jazz schools in the jazz world. As the Marching Band Director of the UM “Band of the Hour,” I decided to arrange a jazz show for one of our halftime performances at Miami’s Orange Bowl, site of the home games of the UM Hurricane football team.

Having this world-renowned jazz program down the hall prompted me to invite the head of the jazz program, Whit Sidener, to come to one of our indoor rehearsals. The goal was for him to listen to our show and rehearse or comment on the style of our music, helping us reflect a true representation of a professional jazz concept through the marching band’s halftime show. I was both elated and nervous when my now dear friend agreed to share his expertise. The stage was set, and the award-winning director came to our rehearsal. His first suggestion was for the band to play through each piece of music so that he could evaluate and make comments to take us to that desired level of jazz excellence.

As I stood by with notepad in hand and high expectations of his professional advice, he began to simply stomp his foot on the beat, answering with a clap like a human metronome. He did this with very little instruction or comments for the band during the better part of the rehearsal. As his portion of his time with us came to an end, I looked at my blank notepad and pondered over what had just occurred.

As he was leaving the podium, he came to me and shook my hand saying, “They will be great,” and in a semi-dramatic pause, he turned to say, “When every person in the room grasps the concept of the same tempo, it will resolve most all of the problems.” As I stared at his back and watched him walk out of the room, the profundity of his comment was like a Scripture of truth and wisdom from the Proverbs. I never forgot that statement.

As years have gone by and with my experience in teaching musicians of all ages from elementary to seasoned professionals, the concept of the *Shema* of hearing, along with a purpose of pursuing unity has been a consistent and ongoing concept for my integration of a biblical example to musical excellence. Creating a better listener and instilling a concept of oneness in sound is essential to all musicians from the time that they begin their studies on their instruments to the highest level of professional performance.

The process can begin with the earliest of ages. In an ensemble setting like an orchestra or any kind of band, there is a transcending moment when individual musicians begin to listen beyond their own playing to what is going on around them. They begin to discover how their part fits into the whole. Hearing has a purpose beyond the limit of what they are doing themselves as individuals and begins to “open up” to the actions



of the other musicians. They begin their own *Shema* of listening with the purpose of applying to action and attempting to be unified with an effort of playing together as a “band of brothers.”

Further, this new listening awareness creates a need for a response to a desire of conceiving tempo in exactly the same way as everyone around them perceives. The Italian term “*tutti*,” which is a musical expression noted in many pieces of music, simply refers to “everyone” or “all.” It is calling for everyone in the group to play the exact same notes and rhythms at precisely the same time. However, in the quest of the highest level of musical excellence, this “*tutti*” passage also requires each and every musician to conceive the tempo exactly the same to achieve true unity. Each articulation, interpretation, balance, volume level, intonation, and musical concept must be of “one” in order for this glory of perfection to be attained. That is exactly what we attempt to do in each and every piece of music that is presented before us.

We are encouraged to embrace unity in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi when he wrote, “Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). Further, at Pentecost in Acts 4:32, “All the believers were one in heart and mind.” Also, in a forthright passage in Psalm 133:1, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.”

One of the greatest honors in my life has been to be a part of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ). The ICEJ hosts the “Feast of Tabernacles” in Israel at various venues including the Dead Sea, the Garden Tomb, and a gathering center in Jerusalem. This biblical “feast,” mandated by God in Leviticus 23:33, describes the command for all Hebrews to return to Jerusalem to celebrate The Promised Land.

This biblical “feast,” mandated by God in Leviticus 23:33, describes the command for all Hebrews to return to Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance of the Israelites from living in tents and wandering in the desert to the entrance into the Promised Land. As one of seven Feasts described in Leviticus, the Feast of Tabernacles is one of three that requires the Jew to travel to Jerusalem for this celebration—a pilgrimage girded with the Psalm of Ascents (Psalm 120-134) as they make their way to the Holy City of God. Even today, Israelis construct tents in backyards and balconies of

apartments and homes to commemorate this celebration. They actually live in their makeshift abodes for the biblical term of seven days.

The ICEJ’s hosting of the Feast of Tabernacles brings thousands of believers from all over the world to this great time of worship and rejoicing. The event includes worship and messages from musicians and pastors represented by over 100 countries from around the world. One of the most unifying experiences that I’ve had in my lifetime has occurred during the worship portions of the “feast.” I have gazed through tears as I watched people of God “from every tongue and tribe” singing high praises to our Lord and King with a unity unlike anything that I have ever experienced. I have often asked myself how such unity was achieved. The answer has simply been a reflection of what Scripture describes as being unified: “One in mind, one in love, one in spirit.” Once anyone has experienced such unity, it is unforgettable and a treasure in one’s soul. I now long for that unity in every opportunity of worship and even beyond.

When unity in music is achieved, excellence exists. When unity in a home, marriage, workplace, or church exists, excellence exists. When each and every musician purposes to sing or play an instrument with intention of being as one, the result of such perfection literally glorifies God and calls the listener to join in on the appreciation of such an achievement.



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Mr. Mann’s duties include conducting the UU Symphony Orchestra and the UU Symphonic Band as well as leading the Percussion program. Mr. Mann supervises the Internship program for Instrumental Music Education majors and teaches courses in Conducting, Marching Band Techniques, Conducting, Marching Band Techniques, Percussion Methods, Advanced Instrumental Techniques, Private Percussion lessons, and Percussion Ensemble. He also serves as Director of the UU “Bulldog” Pep Band.







