

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Psychologist Robert Emmons has developed a 5-fold measure of "spiritual intelligence."
At a time when spiritualities proliferate, discerning Christians should ask what it measures.

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Editor's Note



A Dark Oval Stone

It's always a delight when a Contributing Editor to these pages publishes a book, and yes, it is definitely an added pleasure when the author is my daughter. Marsena Konkle's first novel, *A Dark*

Oval Stone, has been released by Paraclete Press. The novel was a finalist in the Paraclete Fiction Award, judged by Leif Enger, author of *Peace Like a River*.

The novel transports us into the life of a young woman, Miriam, whose life is suddenly interrupted by the death of her husband. Bearing the scars of a guilt-ridden Christianity from her mother, Miriam must face her grief and loss with the faithful love of her brother, Steven. At the funeral she meets Svetlana, a stranger who cares for her with gentle understanding, and as their relationship grows Miriam discovers there were things about her husband she hadn't known. *A Dark Oval Stone* is a story haunted by death, as our lives actually are, if we stop to pay attention, but death does not have the final word. Miriam's life reflects reality in our broken world: always messy, always beyond our control, and always interrupted by both curse and blessing. As we watch her pilgrimage unfold we see faith meet fear, so that grace becomes the real interruption, quietly affirming life in a world so insistently out of joint.

"Marsena Konkle's debut novel," author Bret Lott says, "is a moving look at the way our lives twist and turn in the seemingly cold and random way they do, only to have revealed to us, finally, the safekeeping—in good times and bad—that God has held us in all along."

Perhaps the best introduction to *A Dark Oval Stone* are the words that are included in an epigraph to the novel, lyrics from Bruce Cockburn's song, "The Charity of Night":

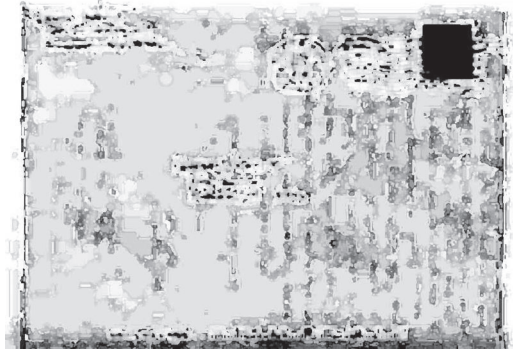
*Wave on wave of life
Like the great wide ocean's roll
Haunting hands of memory
Pluck silver strands of soul
The damage and the dying done
The clarity of light
Gentle bows and glasses raised
To the charity of night*

For more information on *A Dark Oval Stone*, and a discussion guide for the novel, visit online (<http://www.marsenakonkle.com>). ■

—Denis Haack



Dialogue



re: Narnia, Dylan, & Kicking darkness

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

To the Editor:

I'm surprised at the absence of a review of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Sincerely,

Rob V. Page-Wood
via email

Denis Haack responds:

You aren't the only one to mention the fact we haven't reviewed the film, Rob, but I appreciate your writing—it gives me the chance to respond. There are far too many good movies to review, so I must prioritize what we're going to cover. My primary concern is to review films that meet three requirements: they should be well crafted in terms of cinematic art, they should offer a window of insight into our post-Christian culture, and they should be a good point of contact to engage our non-Christian friends about the issues that matter most.

For far too long Christians have conceived of engaging their neighbors with the gospel as inviting non-Christians to join a Christian conversation. There is a place for that, of course, as in inviting non-Christians to come to church—assuming the service and sermon are shaped by a biblically missional perspective. Still, a primary approach that Paul used in Acts was not to launch new Christian conversations in the towns he visited, but to join conversations that were already in progress. This is why he went to the synagogue and the marketplace when he first visited Athens (Acts 17:17). Our neighbors and friends are already talking about movies and the issues that they raise. Film is our postmodern equivalent to the Athenian marketplace. So, we want to primarily review films that will fit that paradigm. If *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is prompting that sort of serious conversation among non-Christians, I've missed it. I'm not saying we won't review it, but at present it isn't the highest on my list.

To the Editor:

Thank you for your piece on Bob Dylan's music [http://ransomfellowship.org/haack_byfaith_Dylan.pdf]. I too have been a listener since the late '50s and many of his lyrics are "implanted in my brain." I'm a C&W fan too, praying the listening public can hear the longing & heartbreak in that genre as well. With so many songs detailing the consequences of putting your hopes in "earthly relationships" and then trying to hide the pain and lift the spirit in alcohol etc. apart from God, I know the Holy Spirit is at work. I wonder whether Hank Williams or George Jones actually heard those hurtin' song lyrics, many of which they've lived thru themselves.

God Bless,

Linda Dove
Stirling, Ontario
via email

To the Editor:

In the midst of reading *Critique* #6-2005, I was driven to my desk and my checkbook. I want to encourage you, brothers and sisters whom I have never met, and yet soul-mates in the cause of Christ, to keep on keeping on. To misquote Bruce Cockburn (and my apologies to all), you all continue to "kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight." In my heart and mind I am convinced that God has you all in the palm of his hand. Stay faithful, stay strong, be encouraged and keep kickin'!

God bless you,

Steve Smyth
Blairsville, GA

Measuring Spirituality

Given the wide-spread interest in spirituality today, it probably isn't surprising that a psychologist has proposed a way to gauge "spiritual intelligence." Robert Emmons teaches at the University of California (Davis), and suggests five characteristics for measuring how a person's spirituality actually affects their life, or as he puts it, how their spirituality facilitates "everyday problem-solving and goal attainment." In other words, Emmons' five points gauge to what extent a person's spirituality—assumed to be an unseen, unmeasurable quality of life—is lived out in practical ways that can be observed and measured.

Here is Dr. Emmons' list:

1. *The capacity for transcendence. Highly spiritual persons perceive a reality that transcends the material and physical.*
2. *The ability to sanctify everyday experience. Spiritually intelligent persons have an ability to invest everyday activities, events, and relationships with a sense of the sacred or divine. They consider its implications for their understanding of self, others, nature, and life. For the spiritually intelligent person, work is seen as a calling, parenting as a sacred responsibility, marriage as having spiritual significance. I write this chapter in St. Andrews, Scotland, a short walk from the opening scene of Chariots of Fire. The film portrays Eric Liddell's reflection on the spiritual significance of running: 'When I run, I feel His pleasure.'*
3. *The ability to experience heightened states of consciousness. While engaged in meditation and certain forms of mystical prayer, spiritually intelligent persons experience spiritual ecstasy. They are receptive to mystical experience.*

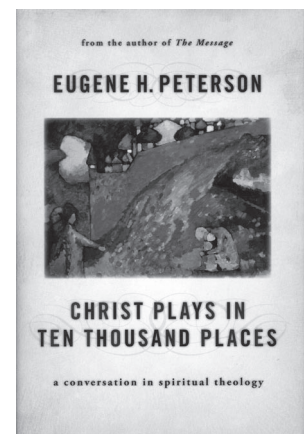
4. *The ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems. Spiritual transformations often lead people to re-prioritize goals. If spiritual intelligence is indeed a form of intelligence, it will also lead people to cope more effectively with problems and to lead more effective lives, with higher levels of well-being.*
5. *The capacity to engage in virtuous behavior. Spiritually intelligent people have an enhanced ability to show forgiveness, express gratitude, feel humility, display compassion.*

Given the fact that spirituality is often a topic of conversation with those who may or may not share our deepest convictions and values, Dr. Emmons' list is an opportunity to engage in some thoughtful discernment. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources: Dr Emmons' five-fold list appeared in "Looking at spiritual IQ" in *Context: Martin Marty on Religion & Culture* (April 15, 2003; Volume 35, Number 8) pp. 4-5.

Recommended reading: *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* by Eugene H Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) 338 pp.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? What would you point to in your life for evidence this is true? What difference does your spirituality make in your life?
2. Do you believe a person's spirituality should facilitate everyday problem-solving and goal attainment? Why or why not?
3. What texts of Scripture suggest a practical link between one's spiritual life and the details of ordinary, everyday life? How does the Scriptural teaching align with Emmons' list?
4. Apply Dr Emmons' list of five signs to yourself—how do you rate? Which of the five are especially evident in your life? Which are most conspicuously absent or lacking?
5. What do you agree with in Dr Emmons' list? What would you challenge? Why? Is there anything you would subtract from the list? Add to the list? Why?

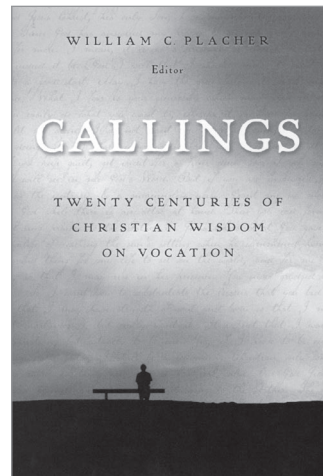
Questions continued on page 5...

...QUESTIONS CONT.

6. Reflect on the difference between seeing life in terms of “pilgrimage” versus seeing it in terms of “progress.” Both imply motion, but progress brings with it a sense of achievement which may not always be evident as a pilgrimage unfolds. Slogging through an endless circle of hard times, for example, may be essential, even central to one’s pilgrimage but it may reveal precious little progress, especially if the difficulties seem pointless and achieve nothing that we can measure or sense. Which of the two—pilgrimage or progress—seems most closely related to your notion of spirituality? Why?
7. How do you define spirituality? Why? Does your definition include the “spiritual yearning” or “spiritual experience” of those who do not share your faith? Why or why not? If it does not, how would you define their spirituality? How would you communicate this to them? Is spirituality a continuum for all human beings, regardless of their particular beliefs, behaviors and values? If not, why not?
8. Although I have no data for this, my sense is that for many people today the yearning for some growth in or experience of spirituality is of great importance to them. What evidence do you see of this? If you had to choose between growing spiritually and expanding your mind, which would you choose? Between growing spiritually and increasing your health and fitness? What do you do to grow spiritually? What do you do to expand your mind? What do you do to remain fit? Which, practically, has the greater priority in how you plan and use your time and energy?
9. “The spiritual,” Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) wrote, “is the parent of the practical.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
10. “The spiritual life,” Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) wrote, “does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Briefly Noted:

Feet in time, footprints in eternity



by Denis Haack

“The Christian understanding of motivation is one of the deepest, richest, and most distinctive parts of the faith,” Os Guinness says. “Partly expressed in such notions as serving God, pleasing God, and glorifying God, it is developed most fully in the biblical doctrine of ‘calling.’ The Christian notion of calling, or vocation, is the conviction that human existence contains a life-purpose and a life task, namely that all we are and all we do—our identities, gifts, and responsibilities—have a direction and dynamic because they are lived out as a response to a calling, or summons, from God.”

It is hardly surprising, then, that Christian thinkers have often returned to this topic in sermons, books, lectures, and letters. In *Callings*, William Placher, a professor of Humanities at Wabash College, compiles excerpts from over the centuries, dividing them into 4 periods: the early church (100-500), the Middle Ages (500-1500), the Reformation (1500-1800), and the post-Christian world (1800-the present). Though the thinkers excerpted do not always agree, each of them is committed to the notion that meaning and significance is ultimately related to fulfilling one’s calling from God.

Callings is a rich resource, especially for those of us who do not have easy access to a large university library. Here in one volume are Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine; Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas, and Thomas á Kempis; Martin Luther, John Calvin, and William Perkins; Soren Kierkegaard, Dorothy Sayers, Karl Barth, and so many more. We recommend it especially for those who teach and mentor. ■

Book recommended: *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* edited by William C. Placher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) 443 pp. + index.

A landscape of



In 1994 three teenagers formed a band in Iceland, naming it after the sister of one of the band members, Sigur Rós, which is Icelandic for “Victory Rose.” In 1997 they released their first CD, *Von* (“Hope”). It was well received, but primarily in their homeland. Beginning in 2000, however, they won a world-wide following with wider distribution of their albums, positive attention in the

music and popular press, by opening for Radiohead, by having one of their songs on the soundtrack of *Vanilla Sky*, and with concerts in Britain, Europe, the U.S., and Japan.

That much of the story of Sigur Rós (pronounced SI-ur rose) seems unremarkable. Other bands have taken similar paths to popularity, and Iceland was already on the pop culture map with the music of Björk. A closer look—and listen—however, reveals another part of the story of Sigur Rós that needs telling, not just because it’s true and interesting, but because it’s essential to understanding both their music and their popularity.

*Behind a vessel of clouds,
a sun wakes up from its lethargy
Refreshes itself with some little raindrops
Plays with the hot flames of the fire
Makes rainbows*

“Hafssól” (“The Sun’s Sea”) on *Von*

There is an ethereal, atmospheric sound to the symphonic-rock music of Sigur Rós. Their stated intention is to bring listeners into “the beautiful landscape of their homeland with their music.” They do that, and more.

The *New York Times* referred to *Takk* (meaning “Thanks”) Sigur

Rós’ latest CD, as “another set of awestruck, shimmering songs that

circle through a few stately chords while evolving from near silence to unabashed pomp.” *Rolling Stone* says Sigur Rós allowed listeners “the pleasures of melodies that sounded like they had floated into the room from another planet.” Using strings, a wide variety of strangely intriguing sounds, a haunting falsetto, and numerous instruments, their music invites us simultaneously to the strange, the sublime, and a spirituality rooted in the earth.

*Our Mother, who art in Earth,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
On us as it is in you.
As you send Thy angels every day,
Send them to us as well
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those
Who trespass against you.
And lead us not into sickness,
But deliver us from evil,
Because yours is the earth
And the body
And the health
Amen.*

“Hún Jörð” (“Mother Earth”) on *Von*

The lyrics of Sigur Rós are as enigmatic as their music—some tracks are purely instrumental, but those with lyrics are sung in either Icelandic or “Hopelandish,” a language the lead singer makes up as he goes along, blending vocalizations into the swirling, soaring music. Fans are encouraged to post their “translations,” and the band has said the best or most popular interpretations will eventually become the “official” lyrics. Their Icelandic lyrics translate

into a series of images where impressions rather than distinct ideas seem to float in the imagination. We are invited into

a soaring sound rooted in a wild, starkly beautiful world which contains secret hints of a deeper reality.

Their music invites us to the strange, the sublime, and a spirituality rooted in the earth.



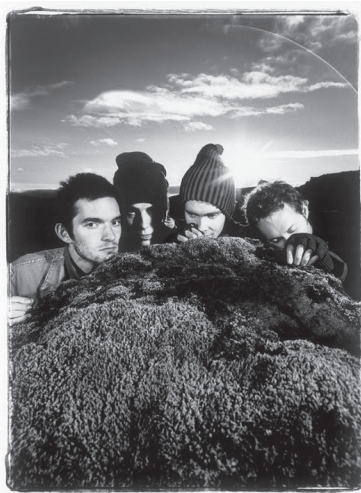
stark beauty

In *Pitchfork*, music reviewer Brent DiCrescenzo probes into the ancient pagan myths of Sigur Rós's homeland to gain some insight into their music. "Icelandic lore tells of the Hidden People who live in the crags and lava of jagged mountains," he notes. "Descended from the ancient guardian spirit, the Hidden People come in many forms. The tiny *blómaálfar* dwell in flower blossoms while the common *búaálfar* reside on farms. Even in this modern age of cellphones and helicopters, Icelanders continue to believe that the Hidden People are still out there somewhere. Construction workers even curve roads around rumored dwellings of the Hidden People. How can a modern people find faith in such fantasy? A heavy cloud of Norse mythology and a breathtaking raw landscape explains much of it. The indigenous music of Sigur Rós can only perpetuate such a religion... Sigur Rós effortlessly make music that is massive, glacial, and sparse. They are Hidden People. Children will be conceived, wrists will be slashed, scars will be healed, and tears will be wrenched by this group. They are the first vital band of the 21st Century."

Like Radiohead, Sigur Rós seems more intent on making music they (and their fans) love than producing songs that will make it to the top of the charts. It wouldn't surprise me if their music is found far more often on iPods than as individual hits on the radio.

*Now that you're awake
Everything seems different
I look around
But there's nothing at all
Put on my shoes, I then find that
She is still in her pyjamas
Then found in a dream
I'm hung by (an) anticlimax
She is with the sun
And it's out here
But where are you...
Go on a journey
And roam the streets*

We are invited into a soaring sound rooted in a wild, starkly beautiful world which contains secret hints of a deeper reality.



*Can't see the way out
And so use the stars
She sits for eternity
And then climbs out
She's the glowing sun
So come out
I awake from a nightmare
My heart is beating
Out of control...
I've become so used to this craziness
That it's now compulsory
"Glósóli" ("Bright Sun") on Takk*

I wish you were in my living room, because I'd introduce you to Sigur Rós by having you watch the music video for "Glósóli," which can be viewed online (www.sigur-ros.co.uk). A wonderfully simple yet creative film, we watch children on a strange yet enticing pilgrimage in the starkly beautiful and wild

countryside of Iceland, drawn inexorably to something beyond. What is this pilgrimage? What is the relationship of the video to the lyrics of the song? How is it

that the lilting music of the song seems to invite us to a similar leap of faith?

As a Christian I am drawn to Sigur Rós because in their music I hear an echo of my own heart. A deeply felt yearning for the something more that is hinted at beyond the narrow horizon of the islands we call home. The knowledge that as human beings we are invited to something beyond the broken beauty of the life we have known since birth. The invitation is innate, unrelenting, and certain, built by God into the fabric of our humanness and the glory of creation. We may try to drown out its quiet insis-



by
**Denis
Haack**



Tuned In cont.



Not just any leap of faith will do—some end not in the clouds but in crumpled wrecks on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

tence with noisy busyness, but we can not deny it. Sigur Rós has heard the invitation and now seeks to capture it in music.

What seems to be missing in the lovely music of Sigur Rós is the understanding that the pilgrimage they invite us on is not a safe one. Not just any leap of faith will do—some end not in the clouds but in crumpled wrecks on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. The voice of mystic and Scripture are united: not every path leads to the light and most leaps of faith end badly. It is not the quality of our trust that finally matters, but what and who we trust. ■

~Denis Haack

Recommended CDs:

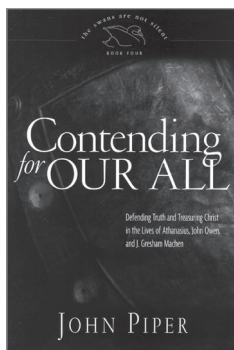
Sigur Rós *Takk* (Geffen Records; 2005).

Sigur Rós () (Fat Cat Records; 2002).



Briefly Noted: Learning from Christian Heroes

by Denis Haack



Once each year, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church (Minneapolis, MN), introduces us to one of his theological heroes. He sketches an overview of the hero's life and then suggests lessons we might learn, taking seriously both the strengths they exhibited and the weaknesses they failed to conquer. *In Contending for Our All*, the fourth in a series, Piper publishes his messages on Athanasius (298-373), John Owen (1616-1683), and J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937). "Contending for our all," Piper concludes, "cannot be done in a way that contradicts the character of our all—namely, Jesus Christ. This means that when we contend for the fullness of Christ with our lips, we must confirm the love of Christ with our lives. [Athanasius, Owen, and Machen] knew this and labored to practice it."

We recommend *Contending for Our All* (as well as the rest of the books in this series) to you. ■

Book Recommended: *Contending for Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* by John Piper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2006) 174 pp. + indices.

And the Earth Was Unearthly



A review of *King Kong*

by Marc LiVecche

Beauty and the human tragedy

"And lo, the beast contemplated beauty and she stayed his hand."

Kong Credits

Starring:

Naomi Watts (Ann Darrow)
Jack Black (Carl Denham)
Adrien Brody (Jack Driscoll)
Thomas Kretschmann
(Captain Englehorn)
Colin Hanks (Preston)
Jamie Bell (Jimmy)
Andy Serkis
(Kong, Lumpy the cook)
Evan Parke (Hayes)
Kyle Chandler (Bruce Baxter)

Director:

Peter Jackson

Screenwriters:

Peter Jackson
Fran Walsh
Philippa Boyens

Producers:

Peter Jackson
Fran Walsh
Jan Belkin
Carolynne Cunningham

Original Music:

James Newton Howard

Director of Photography:

Andrew Lesnie

Sr. Visual Effects Supervisor:

Joe Letteri

Makeup, Creatures, Miniatures:

Richard Taylor

Runtime: 3 hours, 7 minutes

Release: Universal, U.S.A. 2004

Rated: PG-13 for frightening
adventure violence and
some disturbing images.

Aboard the S.S. Venture, a young sailor looks up from his reading and asks the first mate, "It isn't an adventure story, is it, Mr. Hayes?" It might as well be *Kong* director Peter Jackson himself who responds, "No, Jimmy, its not." The two are talking about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but the statement is every bit as much about *King Kong*, and through it Jackson alerts us to a critical caution—we'll miss the point of the story if we mistake *Kong* for adventure alone.

Now, it is a wild trip of a movie to be sure. Adhering to the same basic storyline of the 1933 original, Jackson's *Kong* follows vaudeville actress Ann Darrow as she embarks with a film crew to a land thought only to exist in seafaring legend. Soon enough, we find them in the grip of the macabre carnival that is Skull Island's daily battle of survival—which means breathtakingly extended brontosaurus-stomping; giant-bug-chopping; man-eating-worm-sucking; T-Rex-chomping and chest-thumping action sequences that are nothing short of astonishing. "The original *King Kong* is my favorite movie of all time," says Jackson, "I just thought a version of this wonderful story told with the technology we have today would be a really amazing thing." With all the adrenaline Jackson blends an equal amount of humor, stirring characterization, rousing music, and surprising warmth drawn together in a schmaltzy, old style melodrama supporting his belief that "the foremost responsibility of filmmakers is

entertainment." *Kong*, Jackson happily admits, "is escapism, and incredible spectacle, and amazing special effects." But it's also so much more.

First, it is a tale of two islands, Skull and Manhattan, and the struggle to survive is equally precarious in the depression-era New York

jungle. The juxtaposition of these two cultures helped convince Jackson to keep the original film's time-frame. "It gives a little kick sideways into a slightly fantastical realm," he says. "I think that there's no real sense of mystery or discovery in the world anymore. Yet in the 1930's, you could believe that there was one tiny, uncharted corner that hadn't been discovered." This sentiment is echoed by Hayes in a voiceover as he quotes Conrad, "The earth seemed

unearthly... We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free." *Kong* is very much about what happens when humanity comes into contact with unencumbered mystery. Like Conrad before him, Jackson takes care to show that neither an in-



Darkened Room cont.



dustrial civilization nor an emergent one necessarily has an upper hand at addressing life's basic questions; and, in fact, he suggests that both civilizations fail to properly respond to the monstrous that, in Kong, is also monstrously beautiful—and this sets up what for Jackson is really at stake. “At its soul,” he says, “it’s a story of relationships and empathizing with this huge beast. Even though we’ve tried to keep him as this very noble, brutish, frightening gorilla, I hope that we have presented him in such a way that you can engage emotionally with him and feel the tragedy of his story, because that is what’s at the heart of the film.”

The foundation for this tragedy is suggested in one scene showing the bones of Kong’s ancestors, through which Jackson conveys the terms of Kong’s existence. “He’s the last of the huge gorillas that live on Skull Island,” Jackson notes, “the last surviving member of his species. It must be one of the loneliest existences you could possibly imagine.” Kong is the solitary warrior on an island that quickly puts to rest our previous notions of cruel, brutal

and short. While also bearing the physical scars of battle, Jackson is adamant that Kong carries deeper wounds as well, “I’m imagining he’s probably 100 to 120 years old by the time our story begins. And he has never felt a single bit of empathy for another living creature in his long life.”

Enter Ann and maverick filmmaker Carl Denham, barely enduring life at the height of the Great Depression. Desperate to earn enough money for food, Ann is tempted by the opportunity to descend into adult burlesque. That she does not

is a significant moment; she is unwilling to use her beauty as a bartering tool and she becomes a reliable moral compass for the drama ahead. Denham, on the other hand, hell-bent on preventing his producers from killing his film, proves himself willing to risk everything he—and everybody else—has to meet

his needs. Denham lies in order to convince Ann to embark with him on the Venture, thereby setting in

motion her fateful meeting with Kong. It doesn’t get off to the best of starts. Ann is sacrificed by the primeval Skull Island tribe as an appeasement gift to Kong. Nevertheless, she manages to outlive her predecessors, first by fighting back at Kong and then by entertaining him. It is a testament to the filmmaking genius

of *Kong* that this moment is so subtly underplayed that it actually works. The relationship is further cemented a short time later in an extraordinary action sequence that climaxes with Ann stuck between a hungry T-Rex and Kong. As the combatants face off, Ann chooses to move beneath Kong, declaring him as her protector. Thus knighted, Kong proceeds to unhinge the T-Rex’s jaw-set. From this moment on, Kong is her champion.

They retreat to a high-mountain refuge. There, the sunset opens up before them and Ann, contemplating both

It is a powerful reminder that just as important as being loved is the ability to love.

it and the gorilla, beats softly on her chest and calls it “beautiful.” It is as much about Kong as it

is the dwindling light. It is also a tender allusion to the film’s climax when Kong, scared and cornered, again retreats with Ann to the highest perch he can find, this time atop the Empire State Building. There, the night passes into twilight and in the face of the rising sun Kong beats slowly on his own chest, signaling that he has understood both the beauty in the world and Ann’s allusion to it. Ann and Kong have learned to step outside their own subjective existence and to relate to another. It is a powerful reminder that just as important as *being* loved is the ability *to* love. That Jackson has found a way to allow this love to be reciprocal is not only his most significant departure from the original *Kong*, but it is also what allows the transformation in behavior between Kong and Ann—from their first terrifying meeting to their last tearful departure—to be every bit as believable as it heartbreaking.

Peter Jackson has a deep personal stake in the story. He saw the original *King Kong* when he was nine-years



old, and the event made him want to be a filmmaker. For thirty-five years he dreamt of bringing Kong back to the big screen. “I feel very obligated to him, because he really did start my career off; and in a way, if I can do him honor by telling his story well today,



then I’m returning something of the favor that I owe him.” Inherent in this is a caution that resonates throughout *Kong*—particularly in the film-within-a-film motif—and that is found in an accusation made of Denham after he has captured Kong and put him on display like a circus freak: he so often “destroys the things he loves.” Unlike Ann, Denham’s misplaced ambition leads him to make beauty a mere commodity. That our reaction to beauty so often kills it is an over-

arching theme in *Kong*. Jackson is no stranger to it. Having brought Middle Earth to life, he knows when he is treading on sacred ground. As if to underline this, Jackson cast himself in the role of one of the gunners on the biplane that finally shoots Kong dead. What is he saying about directing a film he so desperately loves? Perhaps that to attempt to tell a story well is to risk telling it badly. Here I find myself with a personal stake as well.

Having recently married I think I know something of this myself. I fell in love with a person, all her own, with whom I desire to share the rest of my days. Yet, in each of them so far, how often have I faced the temptation of trying to reshape her in my own image? Why do I do this? Why is it somehow sometimes frightening to ponder spending the whole of my life with a real person, so unlike me? Why is Trinitarian love—where there is real unity without uniformity—so rare? In becoming the gunner, I think Peter Jackson knows that filmmaking—like a husband’s work—is a perilous thing; and it is best pursued barefoot, with one’s shoes kicked off.

Peter Jackson has proved several times now that fantasy can be rooted more deeply in reality than much of what passes as realism.



Peter Jackson has proved several times now that fantasy can be rooted more deeply in reality than much of what passes as realism. *Kong* works because it tells the tale of the denizens of two islands that are starved for transcendence. That *Kong* tells this story by

portraying a wild-trip of a journey both into a far-off, mythical land and into the nearer-by (though just as nearly inaccessible) inner workings of the human soul makes it that much better. Both islands are the poorer for Kong having passed-away; just as both are richer for his having passed-through. ■

~Marc LiVecche

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. *King Kong* can be seen as a tale of two islands—Skull and Manhattan. How are the two islands similar? What are the challenges to survival each poses and how do the respective islanders navigate these challenges?
2. Do you see beauty in Kong? How do you react to beauty? Can beauty ever point us toward the divine? Is beauty sometimes threatening? Why? Are there risks to a pursuit of the beautiful? How can these risks be handled?
3. What do you think Jackson is doing with the film-within-the-film device? Is Jackson making statements about the film industry itself or about the role of filmmakers?

This article, along with a full set of 9 discussion questions on *King Kong*, is available on Ransom’s web site at http://www.ransomfellowship.org/M_KingKong.html

Responding to shifting sand

What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done,” the ancient Hebrew poet known as “the Preacher” wrote. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). I’d like to quote that while walking the Preacher through an electronics superstore, complete with ringing cell phones, large screen TVs blazing, the latest gadgets overflowing shelves, and a Bad Religion CD playing over loudspeakers. I’d find that satisfying—even though I don’t like shopping—but there it is.

Of course, I’m doing the Preacher an injustice; he was wiser than my cynical sense of humor suggests (though I’d still love to do it). Read his exquisitely composed work in its entirety and his meaning is clear. He never meant that history was static, nor that human creativity had reached an end. He was arguing that because all people share an essential humanity, created in God’s image, the issues we face never change. Questions of reality, meaning, and morality are not simply optional topics for the few who like discussing that sort of thing. Who are we? What is the meaning of life? What happens at death? Is there a God? How do we determine right and wrong? Even those who don’t like philosophy come to some sort of conclusion about such things, if only subconsciously. Living requires it. The Preacher is correct: the basic questions and issues all humans face do not change.

Some Christians make an assumption at this point, however, that

Christians assume that we can keep using the same arguments to convince each generation of the truth of Christianity. But that isn’t true.

is mistaken. It is this: since the basic questions of life don’t change, and since the good news of Jesus doesn’t change, we can keep using the same arguments to convince each generation of the truth of Christianity. But that isn’t true.

Though the essential issues of human life never change, the specific questions raised about them can—and do—change over time. Which is why asking questions and listening with care are so important in a pluralistic world

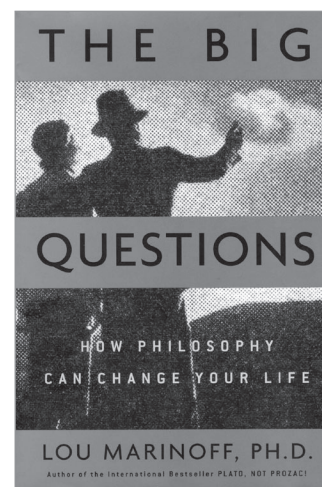
where our neighbors and friends hold beliefs and values different from our own. Each generation has unique formative experiences which mark them, and characterize their entire mind-set and perspective.

For many members of the post-modern generation who are not religious in the traditional sense, a shift has taken place in how they approach the issues of morality and meaning, and the resulting answers they find sufficient and satisfying. Thus, the answers and arguments that were compelling to my generation will be unconvincing to my grandchildren’s generation. If we respond to new questions with old arguments, we make Christianity appear irrelevant.

But let me get more specific.

Morality: a new relativism

Not too long ago, most conversations about morality got down to the question of whether there were absolutes, and how it was impossible to live according to relativism. Now, however, the discussion has shifted. Many who would argue that no religion has the fi-



nal set of absolutes would also claim to hold strong notions of right and wrong. And to live according to them. Many are even convinced that their morality is superior to Christianity’s.

For example, in *The Big Questions*, philosopher Lou Marinoff distinguishes between “ethical relativism” and “meta-ethical relativism.” He not only distinguishes them, but speaks against the first:

A moral relativist believes that goodness, rightness, and justice are all relative to people’s beliefs. In other words, a moral relativist believes not only that the Christians whom Nero fed to the lions were justified in their faith and martyrdom, but also that Nero was justified in martyring them. Moral relativists believe it was a great tragedy that so many innocent civilians died on the hijacked airplanes and in the World Trade Center’s destruction, but they also believe that the hijackers were warriors who were justified in waging their jihad according to their rules. The spread of moral relativism, and

its unfortunate political sponsorship by American and European centers of higher education, has brought much confusion to the Western world during the latter third of the twentieth century. Deprived of a moral compass, among other philosophical tools necessary for examining and understanding belief systems, millions of people find it difficult or impossible to establish a context for current events, no matter how horrific. This often adds travesty to tragedy (p. 14).

Marinoff explains that over the centuries various theories (he identifies 10) have been developed to sort out the difference between good and evil. Once we have come to understand these different approaches to morality, we can appreciate meta-ethical relativism:

Now that you have learned ten different ways of being good, you face a real paradox: how do you decide which ones are better, and which (if any) is best? The problem is that we can't decide which theory of good is better or best until we know the meaning of good itself. If you were thoroughly indoctrinated early in your life, or if you have settled on a particular ethical theory for some other reason, then you don't have this problem. But if you are a thoughtful person, you may conclude that no single ethical theory can be stretched to cover every moral contingency. The only alternative, then, is to suppose that different ethical systems work better in different situations. This approach is called meta-ethical relativism.

Meta-ethical relativism is not the same as ethical relativism, which supposes, subjectively, that anybody's ethics are as

valid as anybody else's and, accordingly, that anything at all is permissible in a given situation. Ethical relativism says that Robin Hood is correct to believe that he is doing right, while the sheriff of Nottingham is also correct to believe that Robin Hood is doing wrong. If you have a problem viewing the very same action as both right and wrong, then you are not an ethical relativist.

But is there an objective perspective that provides a wiser and more trustworthy moral compass? That's where meta-ethical relativism comes in to help us discover which ethical system among those mentioned above—and the unmentioned, and the variations on each—does three vital jobs. First, it must resonate with your moral intuitions. Second, it must mesh with your background experience of ethics. Third, it must help remedy the problem itself. There are no easy answers here, and there's an art (as well as an effort) required to answer the question 'Which ethical system do you think is best in your case—and why?' (p. 46).

The mistake many people make in all this, Marinoff argues, is to imagine that ethics is a "subject like mathematics." It isn't, he says.

Simple algebraic equations (like $x + 2 = 3$) have unique solutions. There is one correct answer, which we can easily find, and infinitely many incorrect ones, which we can reject. Ethics more closely resembles two variable algebra, with equations like $x + y = 3$. Here we find infinitely many correct solutions, with interdependence between x and y . It makes no sense to ask, 'What's the correct value of x ?' unless you first

specify a value for y . Similarly, people who wonder 'What's the right thing to do?' need to specify something about their own moral intuitions, or their background ethical theories. Then we have a personalized context—your context—for exploring 'rightness.'

In theory, there are any number of ways of thinking about goodness, rightness, and justice. In practice, one alternative may be more viable than others, but it has to make sense to you, resonate with your intuitions and experience, and function in your particular case. Sometimes you may have to choose between doing the right thing for the wrong reasons and doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. But in the end you have to take your own stand (p. 26).

The technical terms—ethical relativism and meta-ethical relativism—aren't necessarily widely used or known. The distinction Marinoff draws here is important, however, because people are living it and believing it.

The standard argument against ethical relativism is two-fold. First, it is self-defeating because if everything is relative, so is this initial assertion. And if there is no final right and wrong, there is no way to stand against the obvious evil which occurs all around us.

Not surprisingly, this two-fold argument is not compelling to those who have accepted some form of meta-ethical relativism. Nor do they necessarily feel their sense of morality is weak or inferior; indeed, they may be convinced it is sufficient, satisfying, and perhaps superior.

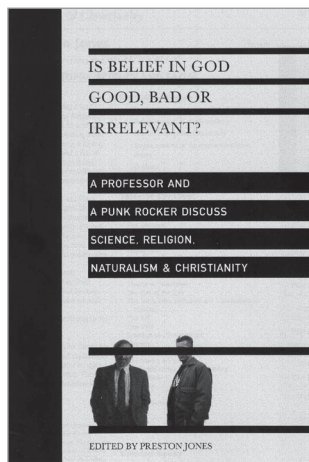
Meaning: a new significance

In a similar way, it used to be assumed that if there is no God, if we are noth-

Reading the World cont.

ing more than matter + energy in an impersonal universe, then there is no meaning to life. Which is neither sufficient nor satisfying, because human beings simply can't live without a sense of significance.

But now consider this. In *Is Belief in God Good, Bad, or Irrelevant*, Christian historian Preston Jones (PhD, University of Ottawa), and Bad Religion musician and evolutionary biologist Greg Graffin (PhD, Cornell University) discuss the difference between proximate and ultimate meaning. By proximate meaning



they are referring to a “sense of meaning or purpose derived from action in the observable world.” By ultimate meaning they are referring to a “sense of meaning or purpose derived from belief, and from acting on belief, in a reality beyond or greater than the observable world” (p. 40).

Graffin feels no need for a sense of ultimate meaning in life:

I have never concerned myself with ultimate meaning, but I have a deeply meaningful life. I am privileged to have a deep effect on the

way lots of people think—most importantly for me, my two children. I have a wonderful circle of friends and a loving interpersonal relationship with my girlfriend. I was never baptized, never aware of a single story from the Good Book, never programmed by religious teachers, and never concerned about life after death. Rather, naturalism teaches one of the most important things in this world: there is only this life, so live wonderfully and meaningfully (p. 40).

Graffin is convinced his position makes more sense than the Christian's insistence that God brings true, ultimate meaning to life.

It seems that most people want to believe there is more meaning in the universe than actually exists. There is a strong emotional drive to find meaning, which might be 'hard-wired' in our brains or a cultural universal found in all human societies perhaps. This drive leads many people to accept religion readily because theologies reassure us that indeed there is an ultimate meaning and an ultimate purpose to human life.

I never accepted such myths, probably because I was surrounded by skeptics in my upbringing. Yet still I believed that I led a meaningful life and that I mattered in some way. As I grew up I realized that I mattered a lot less than I thought. By this I mean only that as I grew more worldly and empathetic I learned that there is a world out there that exists and functions

regardless of my presence and influence. To me, this is a part of growth and maturation, a humility that develops with age and experience.

I think there are all sorts of realities that we learn as we mature, and we are forced to rewrite our world views. I was never taught any of the traditional religious world views. That is the reason the world began to make sense for me rather late in life, during my studies of natural history at university. The world became more meaningful to me as I learned about the fragility and complexity of our ecological communities and geological processes. I felt like I was a part of a great biological tradition and I felt lucky to be able to witness the 'grandeur of life' with a deep appreciation for its intricacy and knowledge about its functioning. The deep sense of satisfaction I got, and still get, from studying and participating in nature, leaves me perfectly content with the proximate meaning of it all.

Even though I can't formulate any ultimate meaning for it all—I know I am just a small part of it and I will soon be dead and so will my offspring—I know that the studying, teaching and sharing of natural history provides a lifetime of meaningful enterprise for me. I don't feel empty or at any kind of loss from my conclusion that life has no ultimate purpose. Passing on proximately meaningful traditions and rituals is enough for me. It always has felt like enough for me. Maybe that will change, but I

doubt it. As I have learned more I have felt an even greater pull toward my conclusion that there are no ultimates.

The so-called 'existence' of notions that there is more than this world alone I whole-heartedly reject. It might be that we are taught poorly as kids. It might be a symptom of our imperfect education that we are told there is an ultimate meaning to things. What if our society stopped passing along inaccuracies by removing such language from the learning curriculum? Would the notion of ultimate purpose cease to exist? I believe strongly that it would be virtually nonexistent in society. We can live with proximate purpose alone and still live fully satisfied lives without the mythology of ultimates. I believe humans would feel just as emotional and loving and caring in the absence of ultimates as they do going about carelessly thinking that a better world awaits them when they die. I think that we, like other social organisms, use proximate meaning and proximate purpose to get through life. Ultimates are an invention of theology, and one we cannot easily shake from our culture (p. 139-142).

Engaging the shift

We may be tempted to argue as Christians, of course, that both these positions are not real solutions at all to the great human dilemmas of morality and meaning. That meta-ethical relativism is still relativism, so that nothing, no matter how heinous, can truly be considered wrong or evil in a final, absolute sense of that term. That proximate meaning is not true meaning, in any ultimate way, but merely the passing sense of some meaning without any suitable foundation for it to

rest on. And we may think of other challenges to raise.

And they might be worth raising. But I would suggest that we shouldn't be surprised if our challenges aren't very compelling to the people with whom we are talking. For whatever we happen to think of their position concerning morality and meaning, they find it both personally sufficient and satisfying. Perhaps our probing will cause them to reconsider their position, but then, perhaps not.

But if that is so, how do we proceed? How do we engage such friends with the gospel?

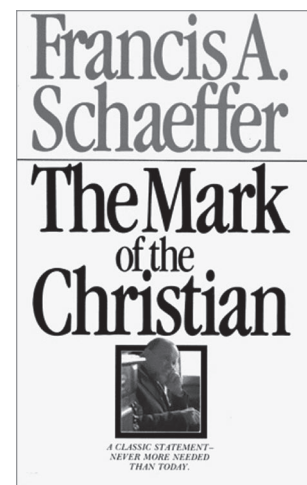
By remembering that the point is not winning arguments over morality and meaning. It might be that they sense no need there, and are unmoved by the biblical alternative, but that does not mean God can not still be at work drawing them to himself by his Spirit. It could be, for example, that their greatest need is to befriend a Christian who proves that not all Christians live narrow, judgmental, negative, withdrawn, uncreative lives.

Whatever the case, we must see this conversation as not at a standstill, but just beginning.

We can eagerly learn philosophy from Marinoff and evolutionary theory and music from Graffin, and cherish them as friends. We can continue to ask

probing questions about their views and we can welcome their challenges to what we believe. We can live authentic lives before them, think more deeply about all these issues, give the gift of unhurried time, and find winsome ways to share more of the biblical Story with them.

And we can remember that the final apologetic, as Francis Schaeffer wrote in *The Mark of the Christian*, is not developing a killer argument, but love. In fact, as



John 17:21 teaches, if non-Christians can not see authentic love demonstrated by Christians, Jesus says we can not expect the world to believe that Christian faith is true and worth embracing.

And so we circle back to the fact that there is nothing new under the sun. Engag-

ing our culture with the gospel is exactly what it has always been. It is about a quality of life, a reality of Christian love and community which reflects grace with such authentic-

ity that we demonstrate, not perfectly but substantially, that God exists and that he can be known through Christ. ■

~Denis Haack

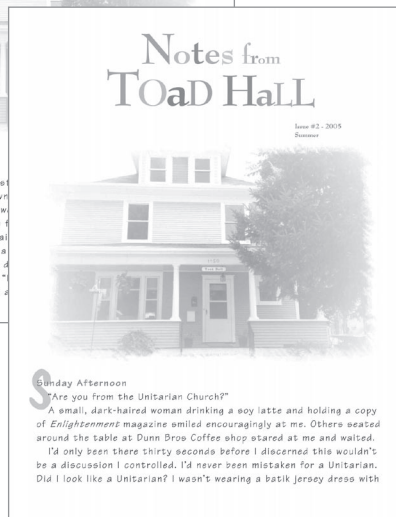
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On the Web

Notes from Toad Hall—Issues #2-2004 and #2-2005
Ransom Fellowship's quarterly printed publication,
in which Margie Haack reflects on what it means to
be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/P_Notes.html



Heaven Discussion Guide by Jeremy Huggins
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2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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