


critique

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NOURISHING
GRATITUDE

CRITIQUE



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CONTACT CRITIQUE

www.RansomFellowship.org

1150 West Center, Rochester, MN 55902

info@ransomfellowship.org

ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

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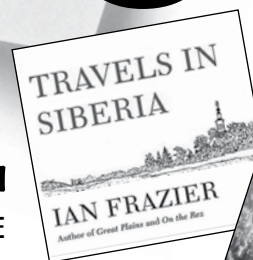
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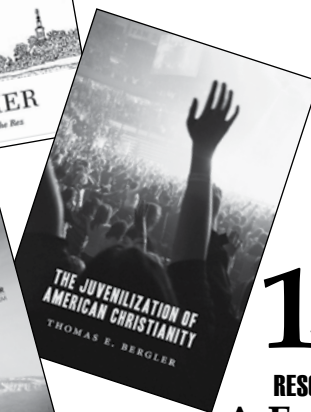
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Discovering your Calling... Slowly

by Denis Haack



Last night Margie read from and signed copies of her book, *The Exact Place*. Anita had filled Toad Hall with candles and flowers, arranged chairs so everyone could hear easily, made individual Angel Pies for each person (the recipe is in Margie's book), and set up a place at the dining room table for the signing. It was lovely, and a lovely evening. People drove in from Iowa and the Twin Cities, and one couple, dear friends, flew in from Connecticut to be here.

I didn't know Margie was a writer when I married her. If I had known, I would have still married her, but still, I had no idea. Neither did she. I knew she was creative and intelligent, but the writing came later. It turns out to be one of her gifts, an essential part of her calling, but it was hidden or unnoticed back in the sixties when we dated.

Some people seem to know from the

beginning what they want to do in life. I've met people from a remarkable array of vocations who tell that story. They seem to be rather decisive, aware of their gifts and interests and what work is most fulfilling to them, and they go for it. Not a bad way to go through life, I suppose, but not a standard for everyone, either. Still, in a society like ours where extroversion is the cultural ideal, the prejudice that everyone should be like this seeps into the church as well. It's worth resisting.

Some people walk through life and discover their calling and gifts as their pilgrimage unfolds. The point is not how fast you uncover such things but whether you are faithful to what you know, to what has been revealed so far. The danger is not missing your calling, but being disobedient, or disdaining your gifts because you'd prefer something else. It's a good formula for becoming increasingly bitter about life.

Tom Nelson in *Work Matters* says that he has found "four diagnostic questions very helpful for vocational direction at any stage of life. We need to ask ourselves: (1) How has God designed me? (2) What life experiences have shaped me? (3) What circumstances surround me? And (4) What do my wise counselors say?"

Even those who were aware of their calling from childhood should reflect on these questions. And they are certainly helpful for the majority of us for whom knowing our calling is a slow path of discovery over many years. I suppose the quick-responders would argue they have an advantage because they haven't wasted time. I'd say the slow path is lovely because the process of discovery is rich with surprise.

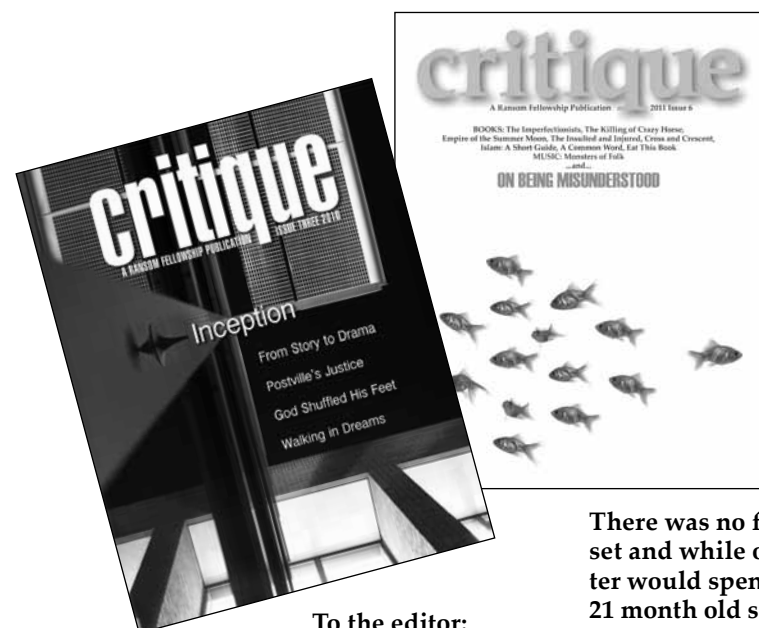
Watching Margie discover her calling as a writer has been fascinating because at times I think I've been more certain of her giftedness than she has. More than once over the years I've been away speaking at some conference. My host introduces me, kindly and thoughtfully, not by reading something I have written, but something that Margie has written. "Please welcome her husband," they conclude, and the microphone is mine.

None of us are very objective about ourselves. We are both finite, and so see ourselves incompletely, and we are fallen, which means we also see ourselves wrongly, at least to some extent. It's been good to walk together with Margie in this process because, when gifts are uncovered, we can have the tendency to disbelieve. Why didn't we see them before? What else am I missing? What if I try and fail? It's nice when friends have more confidence in us than we have in ourselves.

In the September 27, 2012 issue of *Rolling Stone*, there was an extensive interview with Bob Dylan. Mikal Gilmore says to Dylan, "You've described what you do not as a career but as a calling." Dylan's response is both wise and sad. "Everybody has a calling, don't they? Some have a high calling, some have a low calling. Everybody is called but few are chosen. There is a lot of distraction for people, so you might not ever find the real you. A lot of people don't." ■

Source: *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* by Tom Nelson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway; 2011) p. 150.

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

I wanted to drop you a note of thanks for your work. My husband and I get both publications at our home in Gainesville, FL. As a Midwestern girl you always make me miss snow... of course I do love our 85 degrees also.

We both love reading *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. As a mom, I often find myself starting an article while brushing my teeth and then shutting myself in the bathroom to finish in quiet while children run about suspecting I must have gotten lost somewhere in our tiny home. My husband is currently leading a Sunday School reading group at our church on the topic of "Finding Meaning in Work: The Six Day Worker" and used the *Toad Hall* issue [2010:3] on work. It made for a great discussion.

But more than just reading and being encouraged, you both challenge us to be more thoughtful, you all have stepped into our lives in a way you may have never imagined you

might have. Shortly after buying our little yellow cottage near downtown last summer, we got a wonderful used swing set put in our back yard.

There was no fence around the swing set and while our five year old daughter would spend hours swinging, our 21 month old son would go down the slide a few times and then just want to gather up rocks to throw at the street. I was not able to enjoy our back yard in any way as I was trying to keep our toddler out of the road. We decided to build a privacy fence around that section of the yard between the swing set and street. I called several builders and got estimates and designed what we wanted it to look like.

We set the date of having the fence go in shortly after the New Year. A few days after Christmas we took a few days to get away and head to the ocean and I packed the current *Critique* and read it, once again while hiding in the bathroom. Propped against the tub I read Denis' article about building barriers ["Bulwarks of Safety" in *Critique* 2011:6] and realized that my fence would not just keep a 21 month old from throwing rocks at the street, but it would also block out my interaction with my neighbors. We have a lot of foot traffic around our neighborhood because we are in the downtown area. As I read the article, I realized that maybe my fence was more about protecting my children from the neighborhood than what I thought. Maybe I was putting some hope in the protection we would get from this fence, as though nothing bad would happen with this fence around

the swing set, but really around our whole lives, because that's where we are all day for the most part. Building our privacy fence would not only keep us in and others out but your article helped me see that it would also eliminate my ability to get to know my neighbors. Each afternoon my kids love waving at and saying hi to the high schoolers on their way home from school. Playing in our back yard is actually the only way we have met the families around us. That afternoon I told my husband we had to redesign the fence. We talked about the purpose of the fence, and that we still wanted one, just not one that took us away from our neighborhood. We settled on a four-foot picket that allows us to keep the rock-thrower in and away from the street, but we can still see everyone out and about. We are so happy about our choice and feel like you helped us become aware of what a privacy fence might say to the people around us, and our children. We would never intentionally move into the city, only to tell everyone to stay away. Had we not been given the chance to read your words and see what we were about to do, we would have built a fortress around ourselves and missed out on our daily opportunities to wave at weary high schoolers, commuters on their way to the bus stop, university students biking to class, parents walking their kids to school, and neighbors who are becoming friends.

Thank you for the work you do. We are grateful.

Holli Best
Gainesville, Florida

POETRY



Scott Schuleit received a master's degree in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. His poems have appeared in the Spring Hill

Review, The Penwood Review, Christianity and Literature, Critique, and Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal. His non-fiction has been published in several print and non-print publications, including Tabletalk, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Monergism.com, and The Gospel Coalition and Modern Reformation. Scott is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church and an adjunct instructor at South Florida Bible College. He enjoys walking, observing, reflecting, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.



THE INNKEEPER

*points through his doorway
from out of firelight, laughter,
to a cold manger.*

IMMANUEL

*She rips strips of cloth,
placing Him, wrapped, in cradle
of rough, nailed wood, straw.*

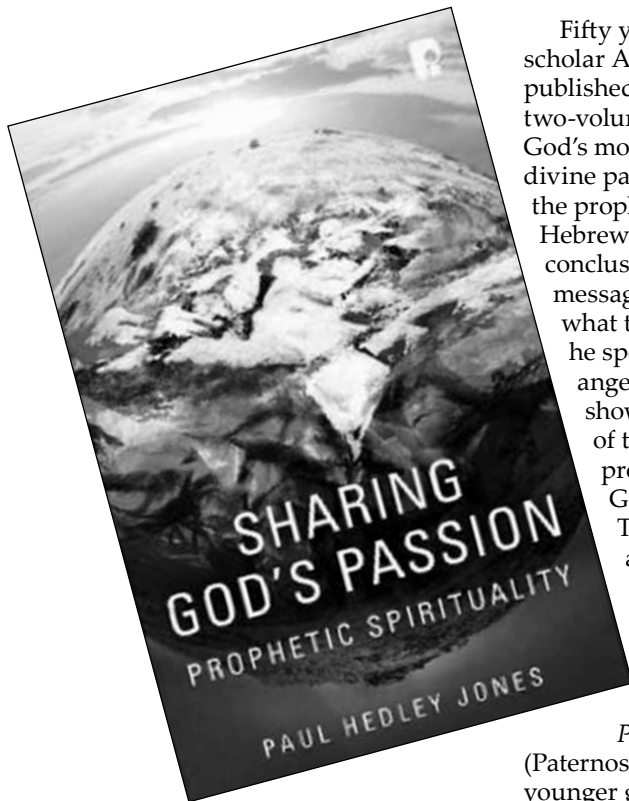
HEROD

*grips jeweled pommel
as the wise men go, anxious
to worship also.*

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The Story of a Passionate God

a book review by Wesley Hill



Fifty years ago, the great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel published *The Prophets*, a sprawling, two-volume study of Israel's gadflies, God's mouthpieces, the bearers of the divine pathos. After years of living with the prophetic texts preserved in the Hebrew Bible, Heschel settled on this conclusion: what lends the prophetic messages their coherence is "not in what the prophet says but of Whom he speaks." God, passionate in anger and yet more passionate in showing mercy, is the true subject of the prophets' witness. Israel's prophets don't so much record God's speech as they inhabit it. They embody God's witness against and for his people, and they bear that people into God's presence.

Standing in Heschel's wake, a new book by Paul Hedley Jones, *Sharing God's Passion: Prophetic Spirituality* (Paternoster, 2012), aims to introduce a younger generation to this perspective on what comprises (depending on how you crunch the numbers) a third of the Hebrew Bible. "As Yahweh's passions are inscribed upon the prophets," Jones writes, "they become instruments in his hands, through whom he breathes divine sentiments of grief (1 Samuel 15.11), jealousy (Exodus 34.14), rejoicing (Isaiah 62.5), and love (Hosea 3.1)." The prophets convey God's message, but they do more than that: they minister God's presence to Israel and, thereby, to us.

Jones' book represents a harvest of some of the best of "narrative theology"—"talking about God through stories"—making that popular academic approach accessible for a wider readership. Although it contains a bewildering diversity of genres such as poetry, aphorisms, annals, and apocalypses, the Bible, Jones contends, is fundamentally a story, charting a plot with a beginning, a rising tension, and a denouement. "When Christian preaching fails to remind congregations of [this] whole biblical story," Jones says, "our sense of identity falters and alternative stories that crown idols as gods become increasingly compelling."

From that perspective, Jones' book embarks on a whirlwind tour of the Bible's prophetic texts. Moses (Israel's first prophet, as it were; see Deuteronomy 18:15), Samuel, and Nathan make appearances, as do the more usual suspects: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah. Lesser known figures get their own chapters: Deborah, Ahijah, Micaiah. And the book concludes with extended treatments of John the Baptist, Jesus (Israel's true Prophet, to whom all

**GOD, PASSIONATE IN ANGER
AND YET MORE PASSIONATE
IN SHOWING MERCY, IS
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the others pointed), and the church itself as a "prophetic community," since "the mission of Israel and the responsibility

of the prophets has been bequeathed to the church." Each study concludes with discussion questions, tailored for church small group meetings or personal devotional reflection.

"ONE'S WHOLISTIC RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD IS THE MOST MEANINGFUL INTERPRETIVE ACT."

Not everyone (including this reviewer) will share Jones' conviction that the prophetic mode of speech requires belief in something like "open theism" (the view that the future is unknown and ungoverned by God because, in a real sense, it does not yet exist to be known or governed). For Jones, "our speech and actions...supply the bricks and mortar paving our way through life," and even God himself has to work around (or with) our free choices to make sure his plans are accomplished. According to Jones, for instance, Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf, for God to relent from his wrath towards Israel, "exposes God's openness to be moved by his human partners."

There is no doubt that a whole raft of Old Testament texts do indeed portray God as responsive, dialogical, relational, and emotional. Yet it would have been good to see Jones interacting with, or at least acknowledging in a positive light, the long tradition of Christian theological reflection—by no means limited to Reformed theologians with a

"high view of divine sovereignty" but shared equally by Roman Catholics like Thomas Aquinas and even Arminian interpreters like John Wesley—which says that such scriptural language must be understood analogically. God, being the Creator and not a creature, is not subject to the vicissitudes of human ignorance and passion; "the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind," as the Bible itself puts it (1 Samuel 15:29 NRSV). In this perspective, while God wills to have our creaturely participation in the plot of his story, he is not dependent on our obedience, or thwarted by our resistance, when it comes to achieving his purpose of showing mercy and revealing his grace in Jesus Christ.

Caveats aside, though, this book is a rich, winsome introduction to the Bible's prophets—indeed, to the Bible as a whole—that will challenge, delight, instruct, and strengthen the church's own prophetic spirituality today. It cries out not just for study but for embodiment—or rather, for the embodiment that is the truest means and goal of biblical study. As Jones puts it, "one's wholistic response to God's Word is the most meaningful interpretive act." Amen. ■

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Wesley Hill is assistant professor of biblical studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Washed and*

Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality (Zondervan, 2010).

RESOURCE

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Nourishing Gratitude: Being T

by Denis Haack

One of the dangers of a comfortable life is that comfort becomes our norm. So, we notice when events dip below that standard, but become so accustomed to it that we begin to take things for granted. One of the first casualties is gratefulness.

Busyness also erodes gratefulness. True thankfulness occurs within the pauses of life, in those moments when a kindness melts our heart or when the beauty of creation overwhelms the flurry of noise and activity we use to distract us from the things that matter most. “‘Crazy-busy’ is a great armor, it’s a great way for numbing,” Brené Brown says. “What a lot of us do is that we stay so busy, and so out in front of our life, that the truth of how we’re feeling and what we really need can’t catch up with us.” And we actually need gratitude. It isn’t just a social nicety, a bit of etiquette that we somehow inherited from prudes who thought up arbitrary and trivial rules of acceptable behavior while sipping tea in china cups with their pinkie extended. Gratitude is part of humanness, and we lose something essential when it is squeezed from our souls.

Swiss writer and philosopher Alain de Botton, author of *The Architecture of Happiness* and *Religion for Atheists*, believes that gratitude is important within a secular perspective, for those who, like him, do not believe in God.

One of the differences between religious and secular lives is that in the former, one says thank you all the time: when eating, going to bed, waking up, etc.

Why does the secular world tend not to say thank you? At the most obvious level, there seems no one to say thank you to. But, more importantly, offering thanks for relatively minor aspects of life risks appearing unambitious and undignified. The sort of things for which our ancestors bowed down, we pride ourselves on having done enough work to take for granted. Would we really need to pause for a moment of gratitude at the oily darkness of a handful of olives or at the fragrant mottled skin of a lemon? Are there not greater goals towards which we might be aiming?

In our refusal, we are attempting to flee a sense of vulnerability. We do not say thank you for a sunset because we think there will be many more—and because we assume there must be more exciting things to look forward to. To feel grateful is to allow oneself to sense how much one is at the mercy of events. It is to accept that there may come a point when our extraordinary plans for ourselves have run aground, our horizons have narrowed, and we have nothing more opulent to wonder at than the sight of a bluebell or a clear evening sky. To say thank you for a glass of wine or a piece of cheese is a kind of preparation for death, for the modesty that our dying days will demand.

That’s why, even in a secular life, we should make space for some thank yous to no one in particular. A person who remembers to be grateful is more aware of the role of gifts and luck—and so readier to meet with the tragedies that are awaiting us all down the road.

I can’t speak for secularists, since I am not one, but I do wonder why we Christians, at least in America, tend to be known more for being negative in outlook rather than for being thoughtfully, humbly, and unrelentingly grateful.

“PIGLET NOTICED THAT EVEN THOUGH HE HAD A VERY SMALL HEART, IT COULD HOLD A RATHER LARGE AMOUNT OF GRATITUDE.”

—A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

Even Jesus, who according to Christians is the second person of the Godhead, was grateful. After he had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead by simply calling him by name, he paused to pray. “And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said,” St. John records, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me” (11:41). This is not the only instance in scripture where Jesus’ gratitude is noted (Matthew 11:25, Luke 10:21). This is hardly surprising since he was rooted in the ancient wisdom tradition of the Hebrews. Thankfulness to God was considered normative in properly receiving his grace (see, for example, Psalm 35:18; 52:9; 107) and in their liturgy of worship were sacrifices brought

Thankful. Again.



to the Lord as thank offerings (Leviticus 22:29; 2 Chronicles 29:31). Their biblical prayer book, the Psalms, is alive with expressions of gratitude and thankfulness. One that is rich with metaphors for beauty and spiritual realities is Psalm 104.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and
majesty,
covering yourself with light as with a
garment,
stretching out the heavens like a tent.
He lays the beams of his chambers on the
waters;
he makes the clouds his chariot;
he rides on the wings of the wind;
he makes his messengers winds,
his ministers a flaming fire (1-4).*

The psalm is an extended meditation on nature, the works of God's hand in the world in which we live and have our being. I have often wondered whether the psalmist had been out alone for a while to write this poem, surrounded by the glories of all that the Creator called into existence and sustains by the power of his word. Psalm 104 observes creation, and gives thanks, properly seeing our lives as intricately set within the circle of life that is the earth.

*He made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest creep
about.*

*The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they steal away
and lie down in their dens.
Man goes out to his work
and to his labor until the evening (19-23).*

The psalm, I believe, is not meant to be an occasional expression of praise,

though it is that, but also an echo of how we should see reality. For in reality we are God's creatures, living in a web of relationships with all our fellow creatures, our very existence a reason for being grateful, world without end.

When St. Paul instructs Christ's followers to live all of life under Christ's Lordship, to his glory, he adds, "And be thankful" (Colossians 3:15). He is essentially insisting that gratitude is characteristic of service to the rightful king. Which only makes sense: if one's life consists of pleasing the one who reigns over all, then true and lasting significance is guaranteed. Calvin thought, given the context of what Paul was addressing, that the apostle wasn't asking us to list the graces we have received as much as pointing out that the people of God should exhibit what he called "sweetness of manners. Hence, with the view of removing ambiguity, I prefer to render it, 'Be amiable.'" Which is precisely what a life of gratitude demonstrates before a watching world. "Through him," that is Christ, "let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Hebrews 13:15). Some Christians have thought this means they should continually be exclaiming "Praise God," but that is mistaken. Trivializing thanksgiving also trivializes the reasons for gratefulness and makes the demonstration seem mindless and insincere. Silent gratitude would be more amiable.

*I'm searching for phrases,
To sing your praises,
I need to tell someone,
It's soon after midnight,
And my day has just begun*

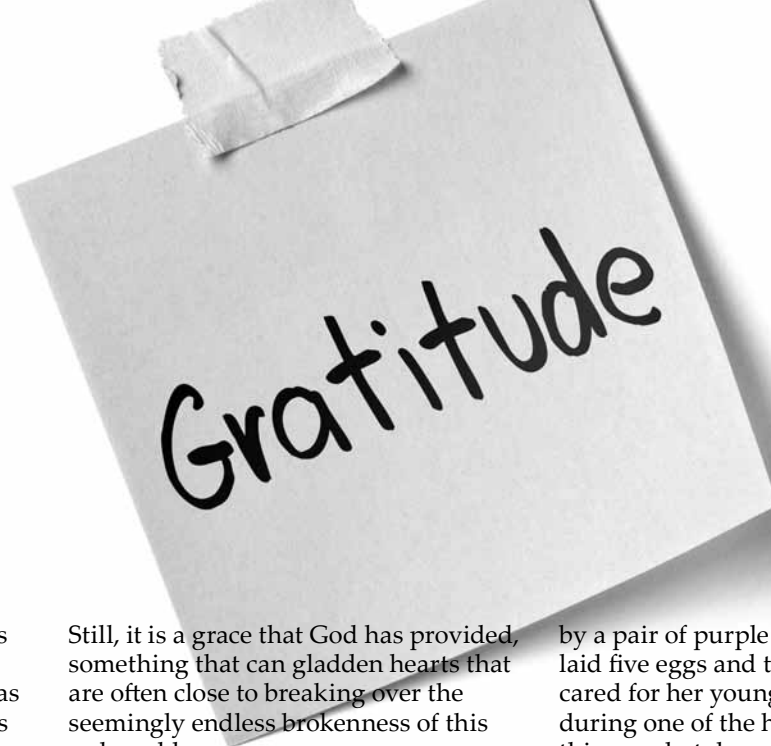
—from "Soon after Midnight" on
Tempest (2012)

**"GRATITUDE IS THE LEAST
OF THE VIRTUES, BUT
INGRATITUDE IS THE WORST
OF VICES."**

—Thomas Fuller

As Dylan notes, the right words do not come easily. When gratitude erupts in awe, our ability to capture it in words often seems to fail, as if we drain away the awe simply by calling attention to it.

I'm not certain when I first became aware of the 104th Psalm as an expansive poem of thanksgiving that ranges across the whole of creation. I was raised around scripture, heard it read at mealtime, in periods of family devotions, and at church. I don't think the psalm registered in my consciousness until I was a bit older and suddenly noticed it mentioned wine. We were stern teetotalers, told the stuff tasted horrible, though I always liked the tiny sip I was allowed at Communion. We celebrated Communion weekly and used a common cup, which permitted an adolescent a chance to take a gulp if your parents had their eyes tightly closed in quiet meditation, which mine usually did. I don't remember being too bothered about the warnings I heard against imbibing (my worldly interests lay in different directions), but one day I became aware that this psalmist apparently not only liked wine, he appreciated



its effects. God is being praised for his goodness, expressed in the bounty of his creation, when suddenly alcohol, as it was referred to in our circles, makes an appearance (v 14-15):

*You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart.*

I asked about the text and heard reasons why it didn't mean what it says. The explanation seemed unconvincing to me, though I am not certain my reason was all that compelling. Let's just say my heart was gladdened by the whole idea.

It still is, as a matter of fact. The variety of wines, white, rose, and red, lend a richness to life that can lift us for a few moments past the merely mundane. I have a friend with whom I share an occasional glass of bourbon, usually Maker's Mark or Bulleit, as we sit on my back porch and talk theology and culture and the surprising appearances of grace. The unhurried hours of conversation are sweet, when we can relax together and simply be.

It is true that alcoholism is a deadly plague, and as a Christian I take very seriously the apostolic word to "not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery" (Ephesians 5:18). Like everything in a fallen world, wisdom is found in moderation, and like all God's good gifts, wine can be abused and misused.

Still, it is a grace that God has provided, something that can gladden hearts that are often close to breaking over the seemingly endless brokenness of this sad world.

The psalmist's gratitude for food reminds me how that, for most of human history and in much of the world today, people have precious little variety in their menu. Many do not have enough. I am not certain why I have been allowed to live at this time and in this place where such variety and abundance is possible, but I do know I have not earned the privilege. This past summer our friends Daniel and Hannah Miller, who run Easy Yoke Farm, an organic farm, used Toad Hall's front porch as the drop-off point for the weekly CSA boxes. (For those who aren't familiar with CSA, it means Community Supported Agriculture. People purchase a membership at the beginning of the season and then each week can pick up a box of fresh vegetables.) The Millers work hard over long hours each day, but the crisp loveliness of the produce is a delight that cannot be put into words. We joked that the contents of our box tended to define our menu for the week, except that it wasn't a joke. One thing is certain: the produce always produced a weekly burst of gratitude in us that was spontaneous and sincere. Now the season is over, and thankfully our basement shelves are lined with jars of canned goods to get us through the winter.

If the people picking up their boxes on our front porch had glanced up into the ceiling corner farthest from our door they could have seen a nest constructed

by a pair of purple finches. The female laid five eggs and three hatched. She cared for her young unflinchingly during one of the hottest periods of this very hot dry summer, standing over her nest, beak open to pant, her wings spread as if to shelter them from the sun. The young grew feathers, welcomed their parents to the nest with gaping, begging mouths, and then one day flew away.

*You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills;
they give drink to every beast of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
they sing among the branches (10-12).*

The female finch always flew away when we opened the door and would perch in a nearby tree, scolding. How much poorer our lives would have been had they not chosen our porch to raise a family.

There is a hard edge in nature, and the heat and drought this summer that reached even the upper Midwest where we live was a searing reminder of that reality. We kept the birdbath filled so the front porch finches wouldn't have far to fly to find water. Or the chickadees that nested in the birdhouse that hangs under the eave on our back porch. Or the robins that nested in our chestnut crab, and the host of sparrows that live in our hedge.

*O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great...
These all look to you,*

to give them their food in due season.
 When you give it to them, they gather
 it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled
 with good things.
 When you hide your face, they are
 dismayed;
 when you take away their breath, they
 die
 and return to their dust.
 When you send forth your Spirit, they
 are created,
 and you renew the face of the ground
 (24-30).

The three surviving baby finches pushed the two eggs that had failed to hatch out of the nest—or perhaps it was the parents who did the deed—we did not witness the event.

**“BLESSED IS HE WHO
 EXPECTS NO GRATITUDE,
 FOR HE SHALL NOT BE
 DISAPPOINTED.”
 —W. C. Bennett**

Just as the lovely purple feathers of the adult finches reflect a hint of God’s glory, the struggle for life in the face of death also provides a hint of realities that cannot be seen but that are true nonetheless. The title song of Bob Dylan’s album *Tempest* is about the sinking of the Titanic. That is a story told and retold so often that one doubts there would be anything new to say, but Dylan has always seen past the details of ordinary experience to the bigger issues that lay just beneath the surface. “The ship was going under /

The universe had opened wide / The roll was called up yonder / The angels turned aside.” The poet of Psalm 104 would know what he means even if the actual phrases were unfamiliar.

It seems impossible to write of nature, its beauty and cruelty without thinking of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. If you haven’t read it, please stop reading this and order a copy—you’ll be grateful, I promise. In this classic work, Dillard lives alongside a stream, Tinker’s Creek, and learns to see. Simple enough, but as she allows us to see through her eyes we learn to see the simple things of existence with greater clarity, and through them, catch a glimpse of the brighter realm that is usually hidden from our eyes.

Dillard’s writing is not the sentimental prose that sometimes passes as “Christian” reflections on nature, simplistic devotions in which observations of creation are turned into little fables with morals at the end. This is solid stuff, the stuff of reality where things come into sharp relief because truth and beauty are not seen as optional. And what she sees is how things are, full of glory yet broken, splendid with light yet awful with cruelty. It is a fallen world, yet it remains the Lord’s. Listen to Dillard as she observes the insects populating the shores of Tinker Creek:

*Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly;
 insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible
 thing after another. I never ask why
 of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of
 almost every insect I see. More than
 one insect—the possibility of fertile*

*reproduction—is an assault on all
 human value, all hope of a reasonable
 god. Even that devout Frenchman, J.
 Henri Fabre, who devoted his entire life
 to the study of insects, cannot restrain a
 feeling of unholy revulsion. He describes
 a bee-eating wasp, the Philanthus, who
 has killed a honeybee. If the bee is heavy
 with honey, the wasp squeezes its crop
 “so as to make her disgorge the delicious
 syrup, which she drinks by licking the
 tongue which her unfortunate victim,
 in her death-agony, sticks out of her
 mouth at full length.... At the moment of
 some such horrible banquet, I have seen
 the Wasp, with her prey, seized by the
 Mantis: the bandit was rifled by another
 bandit. And here is an awful detail: while
 the Mantis held her transfixed under the
 points of the double saw and was already
 munching her belly, the Wasp continued
 to lick the honey of her Bee, unable to
 relinquish the delicious food even amid
 the terrors of death. Let us hasten to cast
 a veil over these horrors.”*

*The remarkable thing about the world
 of insects, however, is precisely that
 there is no veil cast over these horrors.
 These are mysteries performed in broad
 daylight before our very eyes; we can
 see every detail, and yet they are still
 mysteries.*

There were hard things that occurred this summer that I could list—the kidney stone that bent me double was memorable, as was Margie’s hospitalization 1,200 miles from home, and the steady deteriorating of a beloved aunt with Alzheimer’s. And all of that is true, uncomfortable, and even frightening. But this is about gratitude, which does not erase these realities or make them easy, but which keeps them

in perspective. Even in these things the hand of God is not absent, nor has his providence failed. He does not reveal their purpose, which is his right, and I know they are not reason to be ungrateful, because they are not the entire story nor are they the final word in the history of our lives.

Then we notice that the 104th Psalm ends with a statement that jars our postmodern sensibilities.

*Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more! (35)*

That's not the entire ending. The Psalmist waxes eloquent in his appreciation for God's glory expressed in creation and cannot restrain his praise. Still, he includes this seemingly harsh sentiment, the sort of statement that makes many readers uncomfortable with the Bible, and especially with the Old Testament.

I wonder why. There are texts that make me uncomfortable, but this is not one of them. So often the view of God's handiwork is marred with evidence of humankind's greed, a seemingly insatiable appetite to take as cheaply as possible even when the taking destroys beauty, pollutes God's good world, and scars the landscape in irreparable ways. I add my voice to the psalmist's: may these wicked sinners be no more, consumed in the fire of God's renewing, cleansing wrath.

Before I began writing this essay I made a list, scrawled in a little moleskin notebook I carry. We had read a portion of Psalm 104 in corporate worship and once again the lines of this old poem had awakened my imagination. So I jotted down a list that came to mind of things that filled me with gratitude:

- Hearing Norah Jones, Bob Dylan, and Gillian Welch in concert, and the Parker Quartet play Mozart.
- Sweet corn, and watching a single plant just outside our back porch produce around a hundred cucumbers over the course of the summer.
- The publication of Margie's superb memoir, *The Exact Place*, after so many years of faithful, hard work.
- The male wren, which built a nest in the birdhouse after the chickadees moved out, though no female was attracted to his singing and so the nest went unused.
- Anita Gorder's cheerful addition to our work at Ransom, bringing creative landscaping to Toad Hall's yard, fiber art into our living room, Honeysuckle the angora rabbit on our back porch, faithful help in the work needing to be done, and steady community into our lives.
- Friends who have given so generously so that Ransom could continue, and the sweet notes people occasionally include with their checks, notes that encourage us to keep on keeping on in what we are doing.
- An office with two windows, and a desk that allows me to look out of one into a tree in which hangs a thistle feeder, usually surrounded by squabbling goldfinches.

My list could go on—and probably should.

What would be in your list?

And I should draw up such lists far more often.

Of course, for the Christian there is a reason for gratitude that strikes to the very heart of all we believe. Because of

the cross and the empty tomb, we have evidence of God's love. Every other religious system sees god or the gods as beings to appease, where sacrifice or good behavior is the means by which their favor can be achieved. It is a burdensome thing, because never can it be assumed that enough has been accomplished to receive a blessing rather than a curse. In the Christian faith, all this is reversed. Christ accomplished all that was necessary, offers his people free grace, and in response—in gratitude—his people are free to serve and love him. When grace is not understood and when gratitude is absent, legalism takes root and a slow rot enters our souls. The law can never solve the deepest problems or answer the deepest yearnings of the human heart. His initiative and grace surely should evoke our gratitude, and our gratitude is the only proper motivation for our obedience.

The psalmist of the 104th seems to be inviting us to look, and then to look again. But looking takes time, the one thing most of us do not have in sufficient quantities to waste. Around us, the poet insists, are secrets waiting to be discovered, hints of grandeur we have only barely glimpsed, details that have not yet been named. Naming is the essence of the scientific endeavor, the deeply human quest to identify and make sense of the world God has made. It is a quest blessed by God, part of his calling, and it first appears when Adam named the animals (Genesis 2:19-24). No wonder the daughters of Eve and sons of Adam are restless in their effort to continue this quest. Annie Dillard again:

*I had been reading about locusts.
Hordes of migrating locusts have always
appeared in arid countries, and then*



recognize the riches

“WHEN WE LEARN TO READ THE STORY OF JESUS AND SEE IT AS THE STORY OF THE LOVE OF GOD, DOING FOR US WHAT WE COULD NOT DO FOR OURSELVES—THAT INSIGHT PRODUCES, AGAIN AND AGAIN, A SENSE OF ASTONISHED GRATITUDE WHICH IS VERY NEAR THE HEART OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE.”

—N. T. Wright

disappeared as suddenly as they had come. You could actually watch them lay eggs all over a plain, and the next year there would be no locusts on the plain. Entomologists would label their specimens, study their structure, and never find a single one that was alive—until years later they would be overrun again. No one knew in what caves or clouds the locusts hid between plagues.

In 1921 a Russian naturalist named Uvarov solved the mystery. Locusts are grasshoppers: they are the same animal. Swarms of locusts are ordinary grasshoppers gone berserk.

If you take ordinary grasshoppers of any of several species from any of a number of the world's dry regions—including the Rocky Mountains—and rear them in glass jars under crowded conditions, they go into the migratory phase. That is, they turn into locusts. They literally and physically change from Jekyll to Hyde

before your eyes. They will even change, all alone in their jars, if you stimulate them by a rapid succession of artificial touches. Imperceptibly at first, their wings and wing-covers elongate. Their drab color heightens, then saturates more and more, until it locks at the hysterical locust yellows and pinks. Stripes and dots appear on the wing-covers; these deepen to a glittering black. They lay more egg-pods than grasshoppers. They are restless, excitable, voracious. You now have jars full of plague.

Under ordinary conditions, inside the laboratory and out in the deserts, the eggs laid by these locusts produce ordinary solitary grasshoppers. Only under special conditions—such as droughts that herd them together in crowds near available food—do the grasshoppers change. They shun food and shelter and seek only the jostle and clack of their kind. Their ranks swell; the valleys teem. One fine day they take to the air.

In full flight their millions can blacken the sky for nine hours, and when they land, it's every man to your tents, O Israel. “A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them; and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them.” One writer says that if you feed one a blade of grass, “the eighteen components of its jaws go immediately into action, lubricated by a brown saliva which looks like motor oil.” Multiply this action by millions, and you hear a new sound: “The noise their myriad jaws make when engaged in their work of destruction can be realized by any one who has fought a prairie fire or heard the flames passing along before a brisk wind, the low crackling and rasping.” Every contour

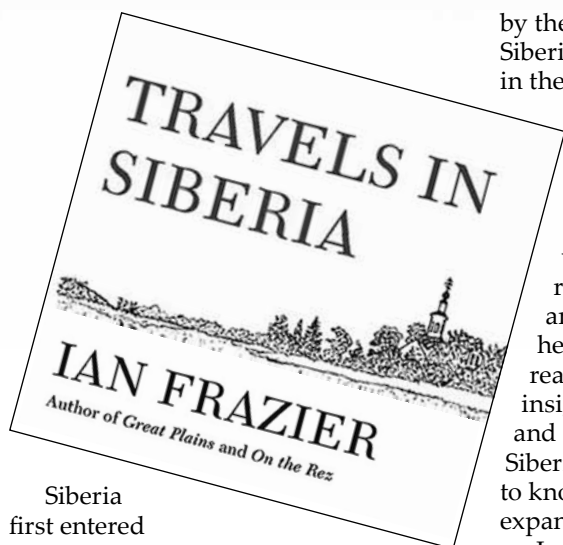
of the land, every twig, is inches deep in bodies, so the valleys seethe and the hills tremble. Locusts: it is an old story.

“The essence of all beautiful art, all great art,” philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “is gratitude.” That strikes me as true, and true for our most personal work of art, our lives. There is a sweet fragrance about gratitude just as there seems, somehow, to be a sourness to a grasping attitude, the sense of entitlement, the boring prattle of complaining, or just a failure to recognize the richness of whatever graces, big and small that have come our way. “When it comes to life,” G. K. Chesterton noted, “the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.” ■

Source: Brené Brown interviewed by Lillian Cunningham in “Exhaustion is not a status symbol,” in *The Washington Post* (October 3) online (www.washingtonpost.com/national/exhaustion-is-not-a-status-symbol/2012/10/02/19d27aa8-0c8a-11e2-bb5e-492c0d30bfff_story.html). Alain de Botton online at *The School of Life* (http://theschooloflife.typepad.com/the_school_of_life/2010/03/alain-de-botton-on-gratitude.html). Calvin on Colossians 3:15 from Calvin's Commentaries, PC Study Bible formatted electronic database © 2005–06 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved. Annie Dillard from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York, NY: Harper & Row; 1974) pp. 63–64, 208–209. Though I tried, I could not find the original sources for the quotes by Nietzsche and Chesterton; I found them online (www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/gratitude.html#1eDYsZrOmJrUqYs4.99)

A Forbidding, Exotic, Abused

by book review by **Denis Haack**



Siberia first entered my consciousness through the writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. My introduction to him came in his brilliantly crafted *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which follows the life of a zek (inmate) over the course of 24 hours in a secluded prison camp far out in the brutal winter cold of Siberia. The story's publication in the Soviet Union in 1962 had been a surprise, coming after Khrushchev made his famous 1956 speech denouncing some of the unspeakable crimes of the Stalin era. Solzhenitsyn's novel, based on his own experience in the gulag as a political prisoner, forced the world to face the systematic injustice and inhumanity of the massive system of forced labor camps that had been established

by the Bolsheviks. The bitter cold of the Siberian winter is almost like a character in the story, and the apparently endless taiga stretching out as far as the eye can see around the camp made escape an impossibility. These two forces of nature act as a metaphor for what happens when people are treated as objects rather than as persons with dignity and significance. Solzhenitsyn helped shape my sense of political reality, told stories that granted me insight into Russian character, history, and society, and in introducing me to Siberia guaranteed that I would hunger to know more about this demanding expanse of land.

Ian Frazier is a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, where I first encountered his work. I laughed (guiltily) at his irreverent "The Cursing Mommy" series (9/4/2009, 1/11/2010, 4/26/2010, 12/20/2010), enjoyed his fascinating report on the unfortunate invasion of Asian carp into American waters ("Fish out of Water," 10/25/2010), and when "On the Prison Highway: the gulag's silent remains" was published in the magazine (8/30/2010) I knew I would have to read the book from which it was excerpted to hear the rest of the story of Frazier's trips to Siberia.

Travels in Siberia is not primarily about the abandoned camps, desolate rough structures surrounded by barbed wire where so many suffered and perished. In fact, very little of the book is about them since Siberia, though forever cursed by the presence of the gulag, is a vast region defined by much more than the prison camps. As he travels—Frazier's made five trips in all, one

a slow driving and camping trek across all of Russia in a highly undependable van with two intrepid Russian companions—Frazier records his impressions of the land and its peoples, visits museums, cities and remote villages, camps by rivers in pristine wilderness and by the roadside near industrial towns with factories belching great clouds of smoke and dust, shares meals with scientists and common folk, and throughout uses his careful reading to tell us the history of a region so large that both the United States and Europe could fit into its space, with land left over. Frazier is a careful researcher and meticulous observer, but the skill I most appreciate in him is that of storyteller. Rather than a record of his travels, he tells stories that capture something of the essence of his days and encounters and adventures in Siberia. It is a long book, full of vivid detail, but I was sorry when it ended.

The stories Frazier tells contain both blessing and curse. The blessing of meeting hardy people who need to work hard to simply survive in a place where frigid temperatures in winter alternate with summers which, though brief, bring both intense heat and smothering plagues of biting insects, great swarms of mosquitoes and flies. The curse of political corruption, economic injustice, and environmental degradation on a scale that is almost unbelievable, both industrial pollution that colors the sky and poisons the land and water, along with endless mountains of trash along highways and creeks, anywhere humans pass and simply leave behind their garbage.

The history of Siberia is both fascinating and tragic. This is where the Mongols came when, under Genghis Khan (and his son), massive armies of



Land

fierce horse riding warriors swept out of the steppes to conquer all that stood in their way to carve out the greatest empire the world had ever known. They laid waste to Russia, destroying entire cities, plundering wealth, and leaving behind a population decimated by slaughter and rape. Siberia is also where the Tsars sent their enemies and suspected enemies, driving tens of thousands into exile before the Communists used modern techniques to increase the horror. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, Siberia has languished in a country where predatory capitalism allows a few to gain enormous wealth while the vast majority remain mired in lives with few choices and often little hope besides somehow cobbling together enough of an income to get by and enough vodka to occasionally forget the hardship.

On one trip during winter, Frazier finds himself with his usual guide, Sergei, in an isolated city in northeast Siberia. As usual in winter, people use the great frozen rivers that crisscross the landscape as highways.

Sergei and I again spent the night in the hotel in Khandyga, in the same communal bedroom as before. A local guy with a Uazik [Russian off-road vehicle] was driving us back to Yakutsk the following morning.

The only excitement of that trip happened on the Lena River. Our driver was a skittish, skinny kid who drove fast, kept to no particular lane, and often hit potholes dead-on. Duct tape held the windows in place, the door handles came off in our hands, and the whole vehicle tended to shimmy to the left or right, crabwise. Sergei sat in front and I sat

in back with three other passengers—a mother from Khandyga and her thirteen-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter. The ride soon made the little girl carsick, which caused the driver concern. He was solicitous when he had to stop for her to throw up, and he sometimes screeched into the parking lots of roadside cafes to buy her tea with lemon and sugar for the purpose of soothing her stomach. Then he'd hop back in the car and we'd go racking off again.

When we turned onto the Lena River, the driver explained that this new route was longer than the previous ice road because there had been an accident on the previous road a month ago—several cars had broken through the ice and six people had drowned. The southbound lane on this new road had a fair amount of irregularities in the ice, and as we were rattling over them the Uazik suddenly sputtered and stopped cold. Traffic backed up behind us immediately with a great honking and roaring that did not let up as people drove around us on the ice. The mother from Khandyga was worried because from here it was several miles to land. I told her not to disquiet herself because Sergei could fix anything. He and the driver were peering under the hood. The driver seemed overwhelmed, but Sergei had taken a piece out of the engine and was strolling on the ice, hunting around.

The mother told me they had lived in Khandyga for seventeen years and often made this trip to Yakutsk. I asked about the coal dust in Khandyga and she said

it was a real problem because clothes got dirty so fast. She and her husband had moved there because of the military base, which back then had more than four thousand vehicles. Her husband was a mechanic, the best one in Khandyga or anywhere, and he believed in repairing vehicles as his mission in life. The village was poor now, with much unemployment, she said, and her children could no longer get a good education there. Sometimes there was not much food in the stores, the streets melted into the permafrost every summer and had to be re-paved, and winter was dark and sooty and very cold. She said she loved Khandyga anyway, especially in the summer, a beautiful time of year, when she and her husband and children sometimes went on four-thousand-mile drives to see relatives in Kazakhstan.

After more tinkering by Sergei, the driver turned the key and the car started and ran at a rough idle. The mother from Khandyga exclaimed in joy, and I said, "What did I tell you?" Later I asked Sergei to describe how he had done it, and he said, "When the Uazik died at approximately four o'clock in the afternoon in the middle of the great Lena River in traffic, the driver opened the hood and found with horror that in a most important part of the engine—the carburetor—a piece was missing. A screw had come off and the small rod that held the float regulating the gasoline level of the carburetor had fallen out and disappeared. Thus, the gasoline stream flew into the carburetor as if from a hose, gasoline was spilling on the ice, and naturally the car would not run.

"What was to be done? I looked all over on the ice road in the hope of finding our missing part. Instead of our part I picked up about half a bucket of other parts, but not the one needed. I



then disassembled the carburetor and it appeared that all we needed was to find a piece of wire or a nail of the right diameter in order temporarily to replace that rod on which the float of the carburetor was set. I did find such a wire nearby on the ice, I cut off a piece of this wire, and I inserted it where the missing part should be. I found a bolt of approximately the right size belonging to some other machine under our car's wheels, and with this bolt's help I fixed the rod in place. In truth, the carburetor did not work so well as before, but nevertheless we were able to drive from the ice road and reach our hotel. Thus I was once again convinced that the Russian car is the most reliable in the world, because it is possible under necessity to replace any part in it with a piece of wire or with a nail." (p. 433-435).

I am certainly no expert on Siberia, but the one criticism I have of Ian Frazier's *Travels in Siberia* is that he does not take adequate notice of the impact Orthodox Christianity has made on the people, its history, the glories of its culture and the problems that now plague Russian society. One thing Frazier notes in this regard is how monasteries sometimes served as shelters during periods of great unrest to keep alive ideas and save precious manuscripts from destruction.

To escape the Mongol influence, a population shift took place in Russia, with people moving into the forests and northward to more remote cities where the horsemen were unlikely to come. Russian culture, too, stunned by the occupation, retreated into its spirituality,

and into monasteries deep in the woods. Russia survived as itself mainly in the monasteries during this hard period. The Mongols, with their unlikely reverence for things of the spirit, allowed the institutions of the Orthodox church to be exempt from taxes; as a result, during these centuries the Russian church did all right. Some Russian historians say that the spiritual growth and sense of self that Russia found during the Mongol period formed the beginnings of the Russian empire, or that the later Russian state combined the continental vision inherited from the Mongols with Russian spirituality. [p. 124]

True enough, and important, but there is far more to the story of religious conviction and culture than this.

On the one hand, *Travels in Siberia* is as the title says, a chronicle of Frazier's travels in a land in which he is far from home with only a rudimentary knowledge of the language. Yet, as the notes and bibliography show, Frazier has done his research well; but I wonder if the skepticism that is so obvious in the pages of *The New Yorker* perhaps blinds him to an enduring influence that is present but just beyond the edges of his worldview. After noting what he does in the above paragraph, Frazier says he prefers a psychological explanation for the unfolding of Russian society. As a Christian I do not share his difficulty in understanding the Mongol interest in spirituality, nor in their willingness to allow the Orthodox monasteries to maintain their existence during the period they ruled Russia. Frazier's psychological explanation is not without merit but is, it seems to me, insufficient to explain a phenomenon so immense, so vital, and so human.

Siberia, for all its reality and vastness as a place, does not really exist. At least there is no village or city or province with that name. The Russian word, *Sibir'*, apparently comes from two Turkic words (most of Siberia is in Asia) that are closely related to Mongolian terms. *Si* means "water," and *birr* means "a wild unpopulated land." Full of marshes and rivers, great and small, it remains wild; but even when the term was birthed the area was populated, though for obvious reasons very sparsely. The term first appears in a written text that dates to the year 1228, and the reality still stretches out between the Ural Mountains and the Pacific, the Arctic Ocean in the north and Mongolia in the south.

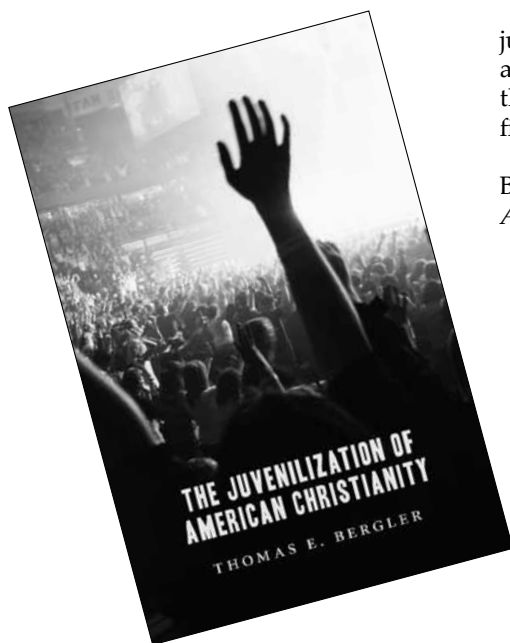
Reading *Travels in Siberia* is like taking a leisurely road trip with a well-informed guide but without having to endure the inconveniences of travel in a place where conditions remain rough (to say the least) by American standards. It is a region where both people and land have been abused, and so its true wonder—what Frazier refers to as "the incomplete grandiosity of Russia"—awaits the day when it can be appreciated and lovingly used and cared for as it should be. May that day come soon. ■

Books recommended: *Travels in Siberia* by Ian Frazier (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2010) 471 pages + notes + bibliography + index.

NOTE: A LONGER VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE CAN BE FOUND ON THE RANSOM WEB SITE. GO TO WWW.RANSOMFELLOWSHIP.ORG.

A Faith Stuck in Adolescence

a book review by Denis Haack



In the 1940s, experts predicted the decline of religious belief in America, and had the survey data to back up their predictions. At the end of the Second World War, leaders—religious and political—became increasingly concerned that the nation faced two threats that could destroy all that America stood for. From without the Communists threatened to seduce young people into their cause, and from within a decadent popular culture threatened to subvert faith and virtue. The defeat of the Nazis had proven that young people could be on the cutting edge of change, learning to lead, and willing to risk their lives for what was right. In a movement that spanned the diverse spectrum of Christian churches, religious leaders launched an emphasis on youth ministry never before seen in the history of the faith. The emphasis was wildly successful, in most cases, but produced an unexpected and unintended result: the

juvenilization of American Christianity, a condition that remains with us in these opening decades of the twenty-first century.

This is the thesis that Thomas Bergler advances in *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*.

Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages. It begins with the praiseworthy goal of adapting the faith to appeal to the young. But it sometimes ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith.... Adolescents have good developmental reasons for at least sometimes thinking and acting in an immature fashion. But it is harder to explain why adults feel free to neglect the character traits of Christian maturity.

A juvenile faith is characterized by an assortment of traits. There is an emphasis on one's personal relationship with God, so that if an expression of faith does not make a believer sufficiently happy, they will shop for another. Older or traditional forms of faith are deemed inauthentic, or too dogmatic, and the rituals and institutions of the faith should be entertaining or at least consistently interesting. Being spiritual is more important than being religious. A search for truth is usually more central than a body of settled doctrine, and it is assumed believers need to choose beliefs and practices that make sense to them. Religious teaching should help people live more effectively, and the idea of Christian maturity sounds suspicious compared to personal growth. Successful churches and ministries adapt to popular cultural styles and provide lots of opportunities

that are stimulating but not restrictive.

After introducing his thesis, Bergler traces the growth of youth movements and ministries over succeeding decades. In separate treatments he traces this development within a mainline church (Methodist), the black church and community, the Roman Catholic Church, and the evangelical community (which usually involved parachurch organizations). His research is detailed and meticulous, revealed in the fascinating history he unfolds. Having grown to adulthood during this period, I learned a great deal about what was transpiring around me over the years, and to which I was mostly oblivious. This history may be too detailed for most lay Christians, but would be worth careful reading for anyone involved in church leadership. His thesis on the other hand, is something every believer should be willing to consider. If it is true that working to make the faith appealing to adolescents slowly transformed the landscape of the church so that it remains frozen in spiritual immaturity, all who want to grow to maturity in Christ should be concerned. Bergler includes a brief section near the end of the book on the "taming of juvenilization" which, though thoughtful, is inadequate, obviously only the beginning of the work and reflection that needs to be done.

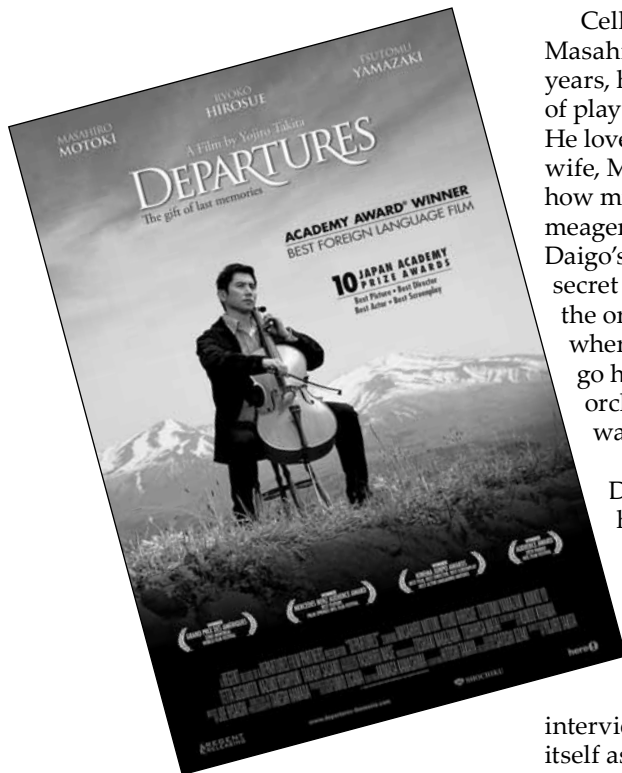
Bergler's warning should be heeded. It may not be the final word on all that's wrong with the American church, but his analysis is too compelling to ignore. ■

Book recommended: *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* by Thomas E. Bergler (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; 2012) 229 pages + notes + index.

NOTE: A LONGER VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE CAN BE FOUND ON THE RANSOM WEB SITE. GO TO WWW.RANSOMFELLOWSHIP.ORG.

An Awkward Time

a film review by **Denis Haack**



Cellist Daigo Kobayashi (played by Masahiro Motoki), after practicing for years, has finally achieved his dream of playing in an orchestra in Tokyo. He loves his cello, but has not told his wife, Mika (played by Ryōko Hirosue), how much it cost—too much for their meager income. Then, early in the film, Daigo's dream is shattered and his secret is revealed. After a performance the orchestra owner comes backstage where the musicians are preparing to go home. He bows stiffly, says, "The orchestra is dissolved," turns and walks away.

Orchestra gigs are rare, so Daigo decides to return to the home left to him in the north of Japan when his mother died. His father abandoned the family when Daigo was a boy, and the betrayal weighs heavy on Daigo's soul. He looks for work and finally decides to interview at a company that advertises itself as "Departures," thinking it must be a travel service. It turns out to be a misprint for "Departed"—this company, in a tender, elaborate, respectful ceremony prepares dead bodies for their coffins. At first Daigo is repulsed by the very idea of the work, but the manager of the company assumes the role of mentor so quietly and effectively you almost miss the superb way Daigo comes to see the importance and dignity of the work.

Departures won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for 2009, and richly deserved it. The acting, though at times a bit overly dramatic to American eyes, is purely Japanese and the soundtrack is beautifully effective. The subplots, essential to the main story and well developed, help characters develop so that we care about these ordinary people trying to make sense of life in the face of abandonment, disappointment, and finally death. The characters are from another country than I am, speak another language, do things I have never witnessed, and hold cultural values foreign to what I am used to. Yet the issues explored are so profoundly human and the stories told are so wonderfully real that I identified with them. Though it is about death and preparing the body after death, never is *Departures* morbid or grotesque. We see people grieve and then watch Daigo learn to bring a ceremony of beauty and simple care into their mourning that helps them move towards resolution. This ceremony of "encoffinment," where the body is prepared for cremation is like a ballet of gentle care and delicate modesty performed before the grieving family. Never have I seen dead bodies treated with such deep respect. Never have I seen such a physical act help grieving people mourn their loss.

"The enterprise of undertaking is deadly serious," Roger Ebert says in his review of *Departures*, "but has always inspired a certain humor, perhaps to mask our fears. The film is sometimes humorous, but not in a way to break the mood. The plot involves some

developments we can see coming, but they seem natural, inevitable. The music is lush and sentimental in a subdued way, the cinematography is perfectly framed and evocative, and the movie is uncommonly absorbing. There is a scene of discovery toward the end that has tremendous emotional impact. You can't say it wasn't prepared for, but it comes as a devastating surprise, a poetic resolution."

It took me a few minutes to get used to the distinctively Japanese aspects of *Departures*, and as always, reading subtitles changes the experience of watching a film. Still I found this film touching, deeply human, and, without being preachy, able to cause its viewers to think about one of the biggest questions human being must face. Death, mourning, and the societal customs surrounding them are reflections of convictions and values, and sometimes, as in America, powerful economic forces at work in the marketplace. Especially since none of this is usually something we wish to reflect much on, it is easy to allow the status quo to remain, for blessing or for curse. We can be thankful for artists like *Departures* director Yôjirô Takita who give us reason to think about it all before we are plunged into grief ourselves. ■

Sources: Roger Ebert online (<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090527/REVIEWS/905279995/1023>); A. O. Scott online (http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/05/29/movies/29depa.html?_r=0).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. What did you find most surprising about *Departures*?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. Based on *Departures* (admittedly a small sample) what seem to be some of the differences between Japanese and American cinema?
4. If my memory is correct, at no point in *Departures* is the question of an afterlife addressed. Do you think this detracts from the film? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast the "encoffinment" procedure displayed in *Departures* with the funeral arrangements normally undertaken in American society. Are we served by having the body whisked away after death and prepared out of sight of the mourners? Not too long ago, dead bodies were washed and prepared for burial by close friends and family members—what is gained by such customs? What might be most healthy and helpful for the grieving people who must deal with the death? What might best reflect a Christian respect for the body?
6. In the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott takes a rather dim view of the film: "Overlong, predictable in its plotting and utterly banal in its blending of comic whimsy and melodramatic pathos, *Departures*... operates, from start to finish, in a zone of emotional safety, touching on strong feelings like grief and loss without really engaging them, and wrapping itself in a protective membrane of tastefulness... There are touching moments, and some well-observed local details and a few interestingly eccentric minor characters. But every turn is signposted so far in advance that you may find yourself wishing for a fast-forward button to confirm your hunches about what's going to happen. Life is too short to spend two hours waiting for confirmation of what you already knew and didn't really believe in the first place." Discuss.
7. Since all of life for the Christian is to be lived to God's glory, what would it look like to die well, and have final arrangements that will help your loved ones grieve well?

BACK PAGE: *DEPARTURES*



Film credits for *Departures*

Director: Yôjirô Takita

Writer: Kundô Koyama

Producer: Yasuhiro Mase

Cinematographer: Takeshi Hamada

Original music: Joe Hisaishi

Starring:

Masahiro Motoki (Daigo Kobayashi)

Ryôko Hirose (Mika Kobayashi)

Tsutomu Yamazaki (Ikuei Sasaki)

130 minutes, Japan (subtitled); 2008

Rated PG-13 (for thematic material)