

critique

A Ransom Fell

2013 Issue 1

A person with long, vibrant red hair is shown from the back, wearing a light gray tank top. They are holding a pair of large, tan-colored over-ear headphones with both hands, framing their face. The background is a plain, light color.

HEARING
AMIDST THE
CLAMOR

CRITIQUE



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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.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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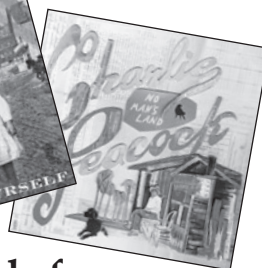
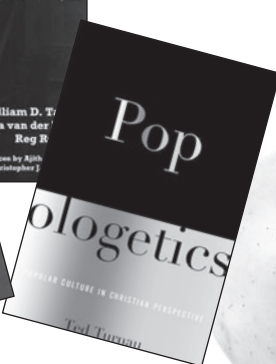
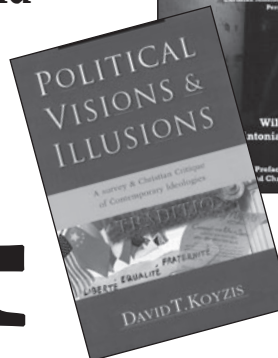
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A Very Comfortable Alienation



There is a phenomenon slowly spreading over the social landscape that is worth noting. I suspect it's been around since the moment our first parents disbelieved God's word. Regardless of that, it is here, now, and like any infection, it can spread largely unnoticed and very quietly. In that sense it reminds me of the stories I've read about the spread of the Black Plague so many centuries ago. No one notices anything and then there it is.

The phenomenon I am referring to is the tendency, or ability, to become comfortable with the alienation that is our common legacy as fallen human beings.

We know relationships are broken, that we are alienated. A gap yawns between us and the rest of creation, between us and the unseen spiritual realities that press into the seen world, between us and those closest to us, and even between us and ourselves. On the

one hand we probably can't concentrate too much on this state of affairs, not because it is so unpleasant (though it is that) but because it is too dangerous. Even if we can't prove it, somehow we have the sense that death dwells in the heart of our alienation. How I yearn for these gaps to be bridged, for the day when I can pass through a day without stumbling across reminders that, in Walker Percy's memorable phrase, I am, and feel, lost in the cosmos.

There are so many ways to get comfortable with our sense of alienation: busyness, power, medications, technology, self-confidence, religious practices, political, or economic, or social ideologies. Fill your life until there are no margins and suddenly you feel less alienated. And so we do.

But then, planted firmly in space-time history, is the cross. Rather rude instrument of torture if you must know, brutal and horrific. Some do not know of it, others ignore it, and others have perverted the history into a sentimental event, full of nice feelings. The cross defines our alienation—from God, creation, others, and within ourselves—as so extensive that when God entered human history to fully identify with us and provide hope he had to endure the brokenness of death meted out as cruelly as possible, by being impaled on a cross and left to perish, betrayed by friends, a king rejected by his subjects, knowing that even God had turned his back. The cross names our alienation and its extent, clearly and sharply.

This is why the cross is so offensive: it does not allow us to be comfortable. "It alienates alienated men," theologian Jurgen Moltmann said, "who have come to terms with alienation."

There is a sense in which it seems only natural to come to terms with our alienation. We can't solve it, so we can't live without it, yet we can't really live with it, either. So we do the best we can, which is to ignore it, act like it isn't so bad, or drown it out so it isn't all that noticeable. On the other hand, it speaks of the one point—almost the only point, it seems—with which every religious and philosophical tradition agrees: Alienation is rampant, suffering exists, things are out of whack, gaps and cracks appear even in the most precious and perfect of things we hold dear.

But that is hard to face, so, we come to terms with our alienation by manufacturing a measure of comfort.

The irony is that for more than six decades I have lived wanting to be comfortable, and now I come to the conclusion that if achieved, it might not be the best for my soul. What is best for me is the discomfort of the cross, a reality that brings me, in the end, great comfort. ■

Source: Jurgen Moltmann in The Crucified God quoted by Christian Wiman in "Varieties of Quiet" in Image (Number 73) p. 92.

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

Hello! Greetings from the quiet north side of Knoxville, TN. I have been following your ministry for several years and have finally worked up the courage to introduce myself.

I am a pediatrician by trade (along side my husband and partner, Greg) and a stepmother/bio mother/adoptive mother to five amazing girls. Our oldest starts college this year, the middle two are starting high school and middle school, our adopted daughter is still living in Haiti; and the baby, thank God, is starting second grade this year. Why share all this? Well, I have been happily surprised for the past two or three years, every time I receive an envelop from Ransom Fellowship. I have absolutely NO idea how I wound up on your mailing list—well, that’s not entirely true, I think the Holy Spirit orchestrated it—anyway, in this year of BIG changes I am living, I want to say thank you for the blessings that are *Notes from Toad Hall* and *Critique*. Each time one arrives I don’t read it until the house is quiet and I have time to savor the well-crafted words and thoughts. I am by turns challenged, reassured, reminded, comforted. I pray God allows me just such an opportunity to share bits of my life someday. For now, I keep my nose pointing carefully forward and my feet moving one breath at a time. Thank you for allowing a glimpse into your world. I pray to share a glass of wine or a cup of coffee someday, that God graces me to say thank you to you both in person.

Abbey Blackmon
Knoxville, TN

To the editor:

I’m so encouraged by the regular appearance of *Notes from Toad Hall*, and *Critique*. It’s great to know that believers like you are thinking hard about how to interact with the culture around us.

Thanks!

Rebecca Raffensperger

Via e-mail

To the editor:

Good morning, Denis.

Thanks for your essay on gratitude [*Critique* 2012:6].

The new Dylan album [*Tempest* (2012)] has a lot of good stuff in it. One of my favorites is the refrain in “The Narrow Way” that captures the trajectory of the way of grace: *It’s a long road, it’s a long and narrow way / If I can’t work up to you, you’ll surely have to work down to me someday. How fitting for Advent and the Incarnation.*

My first awareness of the significance of gratitude came from Francis Schaeffer (in *True Spirituality*, I think... or, maybe *The Mark of a Christian*) who said (in essence), “The evidence of spiritual maturity is: are you willing to be content, and are you able to say thank you.” That simple statement profoundly reoriented my perspective and recalibrated my goal-setting. How can all of life be *for* God if it is not *from* God...and if it is from God for his glory and my good, how can I not be grateful? (Sadly, I repent again that I live with extravagant and persistent ingratitude.) Yet, gratitude (the unsentimental variety) is as much a determined and disciplined act as it is an effusive rush of good feeling. The whole posture of gratitude is one of reception rather than performance, and that of course calls for a huge

re-ordering of life—once again, in the kingdom of God, Jesus overthrows the norm and stands life on its head.

Gratitude is at the very heart of Christian worship. The Eucharist is our relentless thanksgiving to God for his indescribable gift. What does it say about the character and structure of worship that it should flow toward Christ and the Table of gratitude? What does it say that so much of our worship does not lead to the Table?

Does anything guard our heart against idolatry more than gratitude? I was stunned to discover the prominence Paul gives to gratitude in Romans 1 (not exactly what I would intuitively think of as a go-to text for gratitude):

Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:21–23)

The consequences of failing to live with gratitude are not only spiritually destructive but also personally devastating...even dehumanizing. Ingratitude darkens the mind leading to self-deception, self-justification, self-glorification, and self-worship. Gratitude and the companion action of worship (“honor him as God”) keep us from the worst kind of narcissism. Ingratitude blinds us and persuades us that God does not possess sufficient glory to be worshiped or thanked, and that we as humans do not possess that

glory conferred upon us by the God of glory. Consequently, we will look to anything else other than God as the source of glory and we will desperately experiment with every conceivable human invention to acquire a glory that will fill the hollow in our souls.

Who could imagine that saying thank you to the person who held the door for you at the post office this morning could help reshape the trajectory of your life?

Can I imagine how the focus and texture of my life would be transformed by thinking less about what I expect God to bring into my life and by thinking more about receiving all of his gifts with gratitude? *The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21).*

I’ve been mulling on some of these thoughts for a while and am glad your essay prompted more thought about them.

May I say again how greatly we give thanks to the Lord for you and Margie—for your lives, your friendship, your work, your creativity, your kind encouragement, your joy and contentment, your hope...and for introducing us to cast iron. You are quite truly in my hand each time I hold my 14 inch Wapak skillet, and I give thanks.

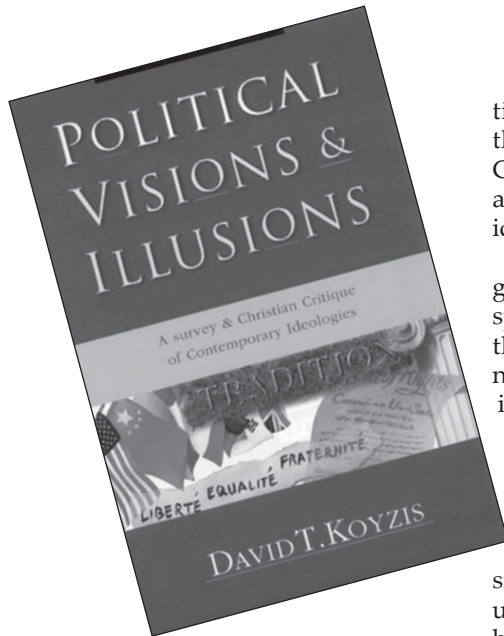
Grace and peace,
Steve Froehlich
Ithaca, NY

Denis Haack responds:

Welcome to our little community, *Abbey*, and thank you, *Abbey* and *Rebecca*, for your kind and gracious words. We’re very grateful you took the time to write.

And thank you for your kind comments, *Steve*, and for your thoughtful reflections on gratitude. It can be easily dismissed as merely an issue of proper manners until its true nature is revealed, and you do that unpacking well. That it would be a bulwark against false gods and against losing our way in our pilgrimage in time tends to focus my attention. It seems like a small thing yet has cosmic significance. I guess that’s what we should expect, having been called into existence and then called into relationship by God—if that’s the essence of our being, then gratitude is the only proper posture. I’m grateful (really!) that you wrote. ■

Ideologies and Idolatries



I have found the last couple of election cycles in America to be disappointing. Not because of the astounding amounts of money raised and spent, though the totals strike me as intolerable, if not obscene. Not because of who happened to be elected or defeated, because I am not particularly enamored with any of the candidates. Not because of the relentless flood of political ads since I don't watch much TV and use the mute for commercials. Not because of the endless pontificating by pundits expositing the latest poll, even though most of the blather was neither news nor informative of very much except what was going on in their own heads. And not because of the negative advertising, though I find it sad since I am under no illusions about the dangerous lack of civility that characterizes American society.

I found the last couple of election cycles disappointing because they revealed, once again, how many Christians have become captive to and committed to various political ideologies.

I know I am treading on dangerous ground here. Not because I am afraid to speak of political realities, but because there is a real danger that those who need to read the book I am recommending here will refuse to if they find my comments about politics not to their liking. So here is my plea: if you are a Christian and concerned about the political sphere of life, no matter how active you are politically, please consider reading this book. Even if you end up disagreeing with the author—I think he is correct, but even if you disagree, you will have engaged in some serious reflection on Christian faithfulness in the political sphere of life.

The book is *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* by David Koyzis. The author defines what an ideology is, critiques five primary ideologies powerfully at work today (liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism), shows how biblically all political ideologies are idolatries, and then charts a way forward for discerning Christians who wish to be faithful members of God's kingdom while we wait for the return of the King. Os Guinness, in a quote for which I have lost the source—if you know it please send it to me—sums up the larger issue brilliantly:

Christians simply haven't developed Christian tools of analysis to examine culture properly. Or rather, the tools the church once had have grown rusty or been mislaid. What often happens is that

Christians wake up to some incident or issue and suddenly realize they need to analyze what's going on. Then, having no tools of their own, they lean across and borrow the tools nearest them.

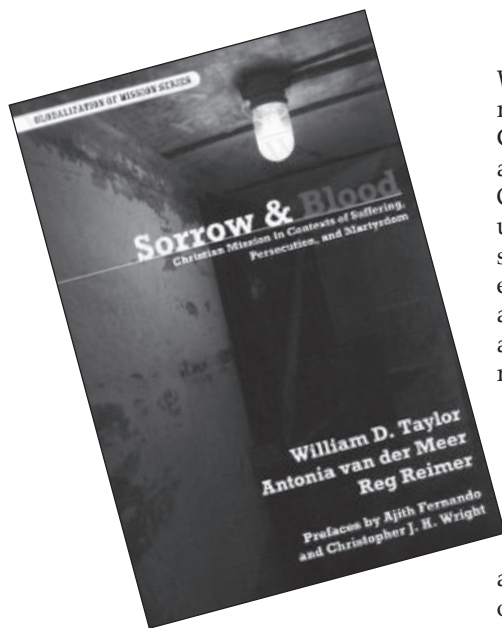
They don't realize that, in their haste, they are borrowing not an isolated tool but a whole philosophical toolbox laden with tools which have their own particular bias to every problem (a Trojan horse in the toolbox, if you like). The toolbox may be Freudian, Hindu, or Marxist. Occasionally, the toolbox is right-wing; more often today it is liberal or left-wing (the former mainly in North America, the latter mainly in Europe). Rarely—and this is all that matters to us—is it consistently or coherently Christian.

When Christians use tools for analysis (or bandy certain terms of description) which have non-Christian assumptions embedded within them, these tools (and terms) eventually act back on them like wearing someone else's glasses or walking in someone else's shoes. The tools shape the user. Their recent failure to think critically about culture has made Christians uniquely susceptible to this.

Political Visions is designed to help resolve this unfortunate state of affairs, particularly at the point where Christian faithfulness touches on the world and life of politics. Reading it will not solve the problems of the next election cycle, but it will help you see, understand, and act from a perspective more deeply informed by the truth of God's word. ■

Book recommended: *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* by David Koyzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2003) 267 pp. + bibliography and index.

A Story Imperfectly Known



When I was 9 years old, a man I had never met or even seen died with four friends, none of whom I had met, in a place far removed from where I was living. I heard the story soon after the event occurred, and read about it later when one of the men's wives, Elizabeth Elliot, wrote *Shadow of the Almighty* (1989). It was, if memory serves, the first time terms like *persecution* and *martyr* entered my consciousness. The story helped shape my imagination and expressed in a vibrant way some of the values and ideas that would later become guiding principles for my life. A few years ago a friend traveled to Ecuador, up the Curaray River in the jungle to the spot where the five men died. There he picked up a stone as a gift for me, an ordinary rock a little smaller than my fist. It sits on my desk as I write.

Occasionally I hear the word *persecution* used. Sometimes it is used in a general way, that persecution occurs against Christians in Africa or Asia.

Which is correct—though in those regions persecution is not limited to Christians but extends to Muslims and other religious believers as well. Occasionally the term persecution is used to refer to some negative pushback some Christian has experienced. The event precipitating the pushback is usually some witnessing technique admired as “bold” by the Christian but that is really just a form of bullying.

The apostolic word on the topic of persecution is clear. “Remember those who are in prison,” the author of the epistle to the Hebrews writes, “as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (13:3). Thousands of Christians have been martyred for their faith over the last few decades but, since the vast majority are not Americans, we rarely know their stories well enough to obey this text. And as Americans we often do not have a thoughtfully biblical understanding of what persecution means.

One place to begin is with an impressive book, *Sorrow & Blood*, published by the World Evangelical Alliance. With chapters authored by Christians from around the globe, *Sorrow & Blood* reviews the data, looks at the topic through the lens of Scripture and theology, provides a series of specific stories, and ends reflecting on how Christians and the church should respond faithfully in a world where religious freedom is often in short supply. Each chapter includes resources for further reading and a few thoughtful reflection and discussion questions if small groups—say, mission committees, elders, deacons, interested believers—decide to read the book together.

“I have to say,” Christopher Wright says in his preface, “that I often feel

a fraud and a coward when it comes to the issues addressed in this book. I know virtually nothing of suffering for my faith in my own life, so who am I to talk about it? All I can do is to keep informed, aware, and prayerful for the increasing number of sisters and brothers in Christ all over the world for whom suffering in one way or another is simply the normal and expected Christian life, and others for whom extreme suffering and degrading death is the gateway to a martyr's crown.”

One more thing: sometimes important stories and studies are life affirming even as they prompt horror or sadness within us by forcing us to face what life is really, finally all about. So it is here. ■

Book recommended: *Sorrow & Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom*, edited by William Taylor, Antonia van der Meer, and Reg Reimer (William Carey Library; 2012) 529 pages including index and appendices.

RESOURCE

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Popular Culture in Christian Perspective



Some of you may recognize the name Ted Turnau. On Ransom's Web site you can find an eBook by Theodore A. Turnau, *Reflecting Theologically On Popular Culture As Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation*. As the title suggests, it is a scholarly piece, an essay that was originally published in a theological journal. I sought permission to post it on our site because, in it, Turnau unpacked with biblical fidelity the theological lens through which we should see the world of popular culture.

I am aware that not all Christians are drawn to reading works of serious theological scholarship, nor do they necessarily need to. Some of us believe our calling includes bridging the gap between the world of scholarly theology and the world of the pew, just as your calling requires you to read material I would likely either skip or

fail to comprehend. As a community of God's people, we can each be faithful and enrich one another's understanding of things without falling into the trap of feeling guilty that we haven't—and won't—read everything. It's a relief, when you think about it.

But now Turnau has published a book, *Populogetics*, that I want to recommend as widely as possible. Though a thoughtful scholar, Turnau writes in terms that are practical, accessible, down-to-earth, and up-to-date. "The main question that drives this book," Turnau states at the beginning, "is, How should we as Christians engage non-Christian popular culture?" *Populogetics* will sharpen our skill in being discerning, help us see and hear with greater clarity, identify mistaken approaches that are popular in Christian circles, and be better able to shine the light of the gospel on the idolatries that keep so many of our neighbors and friends in bondage and that subtly threaten our souls as well.

Popular culture affects us and those around us on the level of world-view—the assumptions we make about reality every day—often without our realizing it. This worldview effect is both obvious and elusive: we know it happens, but we don't often stop to think about what it means. How should we respond when our worldview is challenged? Though it might be tempting to move to a high and lofty mountain to avoid popular culture altogether, such a tactic usually doesn't work; you only end up creating another type of popular culture. Rather, I believe that a Christian's proper response to a worldview challenge from popular culture is to ask questions, to understand from a biblical perspective what popular culture is and how it works.... A biblical

worldview helps us to sort out the good from the bad. Our task as Christians, then, is to respond to popular culture as a messy, deeply meaningful mixture. And I believe the only appropriate response to something that messy and that meaningful is apologetics.

Populogetics would be a great text for classes and small groups, important reading for church leaders, parents, and educators, as well for all those who simply want to think through what faithfulness looks like living in a culture that is suffused (Turnau's term) with popular culture.

When biblical authority is slighted or popular culture is deemed insignificant—errors too often committed by evangelicals—21st century Christian faithfulness is undermined. Human beings made in God's image express their deepest fears, hopes, and yearnings in the art they produce, and today popular culture is central to this cultural dialogue. Turnau recognizes the vitality of popular culture and knows that because God has spoken in Scripture we have a plumb line by which to uncover the idolatries and ideologies that seek to seduce us away from the truth. In *Populogetics* he explores the meaning of popular culture, identifies insufficient ways of engaging it, provides clear instruction in being discerning, and helps believers see how the gospel speaks to the deepest questions of life. This is a book that will help ordinary Christians move from understanding to gratitude to obedience to faithful witness. ■

Book recommended: *Populogetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* by Ted Turnau (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2012) 321 pp. + sources + indices.

The Sorrow and Hope of Homeschooling

by Preston Jones

I've been reading biographical sketches of Christian women who lived in the late Roman Empire. A theme the sketches have in common is rejection: rejection of status, comfort, wealth—of the world generally. To sleep voluntarily on a worm-infested mat and to wear itchy, bug-infested underwear were marks of sanctity.

In the sketches' background is the unraveling of the Roman Empire—barbarian assaults, the faltering of law and stability, and a political order that had lost its way and thus its meaning. The rejection one sees in the Christian ladies' lives is presented theologically, but the social crumbling they lived with always lurks. Their rejection of the world seemed more appealing as society grew less attractive. Better to pull the plug on one's aspirations in this world and prepare for what's to follow.

I reflect on this because it reminds me of something I see today. My wife and I homeschool our fifth and second grade children. As a volunteer, I am teaching a history and geography class for homeschooled kids between the ages of 8 and 11.

Homeschooling is great and also stressful. It brings the comforts of flexibility and also the tremendous expenses of paying for tutors, books, and everything else, in addition to the taxes that pay for public schools. We are committed to homeschooling, not for ideological reasons but because we feel certain that our kids are getting a better education than they would otherwise. It's exhausting, but we don't see another alternative in our context. And when I hear my kids speaking Spanish, or hear from my daughter's Mandarin teacher that she's doing well, I feel a sense of accomplishment.

But there's no question that underlying the homeschooling impulse is a sense of rejection. The homeschooling movement comprises a growing population that, in a fundamental sense, has given up on a basic part of society. We homeschoolers don't believe that many public schools educate well. And even if some do, the heartbreaking pathology of the general culture often squelches the good work serious teachers aim for. We assume that too many education bureaucrats care more about their own careers than they do education. We don't trust the government to deliver this basic service. When I hear Christian parents say that they send their kids to public schools as cultural "missionaries," I feel the point has been made.

As it happens, the greatest teacher I ever had, at any academic level, was a public school teacher. But I remember him as a person who struggled heroically on education's behalf in the face of frivolity, ill-will, mediocrity, and bureaucratic hostility.

Given the educational crisis facing the country and acknowledged by all political leaders, parents have to do something. My wife and I have opted for homeschooling. To this point I'm glad about that choice. But there is also the recognition that, in doing so, my family is sending a message to the society as a whole: "we give up on you." Surely any society that hosts a critical mass of such people bearing such a message is in trouble. Such is the sorrow of homeschooling.

But then I recall what became of some of the Christian communities founded in the wake of Rome's unraveling. In them, great texts were preserved. In them, learning was preserved. In them, art was possible. In them hospitality and refuge could be found. Some

of them were communities of light. In these communities, key elements of civilization were preserved for the future.

Such is my longer-term hope for the little planet of homeschooling. The question isn't whether my children will be missionaries. All Christians are missionaries. The question is when and how well-prepared they will be when they face the spears and tsetse flies of the wild world.

Homeschooling doesn't work for most people. It's difficult and expensive and it sometimes fails. For some, public schooling is great. I'm no crusader. But I know that the world generally, and this country in particular, needs well-educated, decent, civil, and thoughtful people. Our world would be better if Christians were generally perceived of as decent, civil, and thoughtful.

Such people—such Christians—aren't born, and they don't magically appear. They are made. We have to do something. ■

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Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University in Arkansas and, from time to time, at Universidad Francisco Marroquín in Guatemala.



HEARING AMIDST THE CL

1. ON LEARNING TO HEAR

A couple of years ago I published an essay on Art House America that I titled, "On Learning to Hear." As I wrote it I realized that the theme could be my epitaph: *Here lies Denis Haack who spent a lifetime learning to hear.*

Given the more than six decades I've been at it, I'm not certain how well I've done. How can something so simple be so elusive? Still, I'm convinced it's a worthy task for more reasons than I have words to say. But if you want a reason, how's this:

Let everyone with ears listen!

Jesus said that (Matthew 11:15), and it doesn't take a lot of fancy exegesis to realize that he was convinced that some people would listen to him but not hear. Not a very comforting thought if, like me, you think him worth hearing.

Besides, I suspect we've all met people who do not listen. They are always talking, often witty, and always inserting themselves to lead the conversation, but rarely asking questions and listening—really, actively listening—to the answers. Whenever someone tells them something, their response is, "I know," or "I've already thought of that." And any negative feedback is met defensively, with excuses, or reasons why you, not they, are the one that is mistaken.

I don't want to be like that.

Others are never completely present, always distracted by something or other, by work or technology, or by the chatter inside their own heads. Always busy, the brief moments they spend with you are tightly measured, the demands of a clock lurking in the foreground.

I don't want to be that way.

Others are knowledgeable but only versed in one side of a position, so they do not give the opposing ideas a fair shake or demonstrate that they've thought through things deeply enough to know how richly layered the truth actually is. They've heard their side, and assume that having heard it, they know what the other side is like and so do not need to listen with care.

I don't want to be like that, either.

I want to learn to hear, and to keep on learning it.

In *The Lost Art of Listening*, psychologist Michael Nichols captures the bitter essence of what it is like not to be heard.

We think of ourselves as individuals, but we are embedded in networks of relationship that define us and sustain us. Even as the most independent adults, we have moments when we cannot clarify what we feel until we talk about it with someone who knows us, who cares about what we think, or at least is willing to listen.

Contemporary pressures have, regrettably, shrunk our attention spans and impoverished the quality of listening in our lives. We live in hurried times, when dinner is something we zap in the microwave and keeping up with the latest books and movies means reading the reviews. That's all we've got time for. Running to and from our many obligations, we close ourselves off from the world around us with headphones, exercising strict control over what we allow in.



CLAMOR: FOUR REFLECTIONS

In the limited time we still preserve for family and friends, conversation is often preempted by soothing and passive distractions. Too tired to talk and listen, we settle instead for the lulling charms of electronic devices that project pictures, make music, or bleep across display screens. Is it this way of life that's made us forget how to listen? Perhaps. But maybe the modern approach to life is the effect rather than the cause. Maybe we lead this kind of life because we're seeking some sort of solace, something to counteract the dimming of the spirit we feel when no one is listening.

Here's an interesting conversation starter the next time you have friends over for dinner. *Describe the last time someone really, truly, fully listened to you.* And then—it goes without saying—really, truly, fully listen to each other.

2. ON TOO MUCH TO HEAR

It can be hard to hear when there is too much sound in the background, and when there is too much to which we want to listen. At first glance they seem to be the same problem, but they aren't, really. Too much sound is the problem of noise, and too much to listen to is the problem of finitude.

Human beings tend as a species to be rather resilient when it comes to noise. In many cases we learn to listen selectively, instinctively focusing on the sounds we wish to hear from the cacophony that threatens to drown them out. My son claims he could hear the voice of his coach yelling instructions amidst the clamor of screaming parents, also issuing instructions, often contradictory to the coach's wishes, along with the usual dose of encouragement and criticism at soccer games. People whose houses are near highways report that,

after getting used to it, the noise of the traffic no longer registers. We shared a lovely dinner with friends one time in the urban center of St. Louis, MO. A few hundred feet from their apartment building were the raised tracks of the commuter train system and, while we ate, trains rumbled by in both directions. What was interesting was not that the rushing roar did not stop the lively conversation that occupied us over the meal, but that our hosts did not seem to notice the noise at all. And I remember how my wife would sleep through the siren of a police car screaming past our home and then awaken at the quiet whimper of our newborn child.

Somehow, without necessarily planning to have it happen, the background noise in each case is filtered out so that the sounds we want and need to hear are brought into focus. It's almost as if we can magically transform noise into quiet within our consciousness.

Still, noise matters: I may recognize a song when it comes on in a crowded restaurant, but subtle highs and lows or the delicate blend of instrumentation are usually lost in the background noise of laughter, conversation, and chefs and wait staff going about their duties. I know the song and the musicians, but something is missing in the hearing compared to what I enjoy in the quiet of my office or at a concert. Our hearing is fragmented, dimmed, perhaps even confused and garbled when the sounds we cherish or need must compete with static or urban clamor or the droning of some machine. Even voices get lost this way.

So, being twenty-first century human beings, to our instinctive ability to selectively hear we add the wonder

**“THE DEVIL HAS MADE IT HIS BUSINESS
TO MONOPOLIZE ON THREE ELEMENTS: NOISE, HURRY,
CROWDS. HE WILL NOT ALLOW QUIETNESS.”**

[Elisabeth Elliot]

of technology. We have over-ear ear-phones, in-ear headphones, ergonomic ear buds, and if you wait a few weeks, some new invention that isolates us in an envelop of silence so we can listen to what we want, safe from intrusive, outside noise. Human contact, human civilization, and the sounds of nature—all the background noise that had been incessantly assaulting us like an aural plague simply disappears.

It's an incomplete and faulty solution to the problem of background noise, of course. That is true of all technologies' fixes, though that's no reason to despise or dismiss technologists and their projects and inventions. All technology comes at a cost. It still might be worth it, but we should be willing to do some simple calculations to be certain. Taking my iPod with me as I walk along the creek near our home allows me time to listen to new albums but means I won't hear the calls of the red-winged blackbirds in the reeds at the creek's edge or the cry of the kingfishers as they career down to the water to snatch up a minnow.

So I must choose, and if I live by casual default, never making such calculations, my life will be poorer. But this is hardly a novel inspiration, is it? Faithfulness for the Christian means living intentionally, and that involves working enough margin into our time for a bit of reflection now and again. Being in safe community helps since it is there that the exchange of ideas can prompt some creativity and the reassurance that we are not facing the world alone.

Still, though our solution to background noise contains both blessing and curse, we've at least launched some

ways to try to handle it. It would be nice if the noise itself decreased, but that seems unlikely. People who have moved into rural locations find that the steady sprawl of our consumerist society slowly creeps into every available space. I know of no serious study that suggests we should expect this trend to reverse itself any time soon.

The second problem, where there is far too much to which we want to listen, is both more vital and more intractable. Here the problem is how to hear what is important instead of what is merely urgent at a time when messages arrive incessantly and insistently, each appearing out of the grid with their own beep or ring or snatch of song.

I think I can say without much fear of contradiction that our technology has actually made this second problem worse. There has probably always been far too much to listen to that we would like to hear, but in the past the messages arrived slowly and singly, or in bunches small enough that we could sort through them leisurely. Now every message, no matter how trivial or vital, arrives with the same intensity and with the same ability to interrupt.

The problem is that we are finite creatures and so cannot take in everything at once. If we try we stumble into what's called stimulus overload, which I am told is not pretty. The issue is complicated in that just because something is merely urgent, not important, it doesn't mean we can ignore it. A great deal, probably most—sometimes all—of what I deal with each day falls into the merely urgent category: all the mundane, ordinary things that form

the practical tapestry of everyday life. This is where we live and, as Christians, where we are called to live under Christ's Lordship for God's glory. The point is not to try to escape into some realm of the important to accomplish extraordinary things, but to be faithful in the ordinary and the routine. So the urgent may be merely urgent and not all that important, but it isn't insignificant, if you get what I am saying.

This week we invited some friends to have dinner with us at Toad Hall. They are moving from Rochester soon and it was important to us that we have a final evening to talk and to say goodbye. It took multiple e-mails to arrange things, first our invitation and then some dates, and finally plans were set. I doubt that the angelic hosts held their breath as plans for the dinner materialized. This was not, as things go, exactly an event of cosmic prominence. Still, in the flow of our days, it was significant, the meeting of friends and an attempt, no matter how small, to be faithful as we live moment by moment in the presence of God, the Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Does that make sense? I hope so because it's at this point that there is an interesting twist in the path to understanding.

The twist is this: I will comprehend the significance of ordinary things and be able to practically and meaningfully find my way through the myriad details of everyday life only as I am increasingly rooted in the important things that matter most. Which means—going back to the problem I am discussing—there is far too much to which we need to listen and, if we don't hear what is truly, really important, we will eventually fail in our hearing of the merely urgent and mundane. The urgent will begin to crowd



out the important, and soon we will lose our way. We won't necessarily realize we are lost, because we'll be busy and productive and efficient, but lost is definitely what we'll be. The only thing that keeps us from wandering off the path of faithfulness in the face of urgent, routine demands are ears keenly tuned to what is actually fully important.

This is why the problem I have identified—that there is far too much to which we want to listen—is so crucial. We cannot and should not stop listening to what is urgent, but we must not miss the important, the things that matter most. Make that mistake and, as the postmodern generation would put it, you are screwed. Actually, that's not precisely the term most of them would use, but you get my drift—and mentioning this made you think of that term, so there it is.

The biblical documents of the first century are rightly called ancient, but that is a measure of time not relevance. When Jesus challenged his listeners to be certain they were hearing rightly, he could have been speaking to us all these centuries later. Sorting out what needs to be heard from the background noise, and being certain we have heard what is important so that we can discern the meaning of the merely urgent, remain essential tasks.

Speaking of the important, one other fact is worth noting. In our world, one solution to the problem of the important versus the urgent has been the promotion of something called experts. They are specialized, narrowly focused, with expertise in some field that enables them to issue guidance to the rest of us. You might guess from my rhetoric that I am not much impressed by the claims of

experts. That is true. Not because I don't believe in them, but because today they are believed in too much. In narrow—very narrow—areas of technical skill, say surgery, or plumbing, experts are very helpful. In the rest of life—in all the parts most essential to our humanness—we need not experts but wise mentors, and that is an entirely different thing. It is true that expertise can be packaged to look like wisdom, but once you know the difference, listening to the opinion of an expert is nothing like hearing the teaching of a master. For the Christian, life and death can hang, literally, in the balance.

3. ON NOT HEARING

My assumptions and prejudices, bubbling just below my consciousness can close my ears to voices and messages because I dismiss them before receiving them. Conservatives do this to liberals, and vice versa, all the time. Believers do it to unbelievers; unbelievers do it to believers, and so it goes. I assume I know the right way to think about this topic, am confident you are wrong, and so only half listen (at best) while figuring out what killer argument I'll use to take you down. Or maybe I'm a bit uncertain of what I think myself, and so find ways to keep the encounter from ever occurring—I don't want you naming my uncertainty publicly. My view of things then becomes a sound proof barrier behind which I isolate myself from you and from what you have to say.

It can become so bad that we don't ever realize how isolated and unwise we have become, or how many possibilities


for learning and growing we have spurned without knowing it. Even the voice of our master can be missed in this way. We assume we know what he will say, assume we are well enough informed to distinguish between his word and that of some foolish myth from the pit, and so we decline to hear. We forget that his word is always new, always surprising, often discomfiting, and always to be heard afresh.

The prophet Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord to the ancient Hebrews in such terms:

*Hear, you deaf;
and look, you blind, that you may see!
Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as my dedicated one,
or blind as the servant of the Lord?
He sees many things, but does not
observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear.
The Lord was pleased, for his righteousness' sake,
to magnify his law and make it glorious.
But this is a people robbed and
plundered,
they are all of them trapped in holes
and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey with none to
rescue,
a spoil with none to say, "Restore!"
Who among you will give ear to this,
will attend and listen for the time to
come?*

[Isaiah 42:18-23]

At the time Isaiah (c. 740 BC) spoke these words, the people of Judah were not bound in jails or robbed by plundering marauders. Rather they were bound within their own refusal to listen and robbed of flourishing because they were dismissive of listening to God's word. Isaiah's prophetic ministry spanned the



**“WE NEED TO FIND GOD, AND HE CANNOT BE FOUND
IN NOISE AND RESTLESSNESS. GOD IS THE FRIEND OF
SILENCE. SEE HOW NATURE—TREES, FLOWERS, GRASS—
GROWS IN SILENCE; SEE THE STARS, THE MOON,
AND THE SUN, HOW THEY MOVE IN SILENCE.”**
[Mother Teresa]

final years of the eighth century BC, the years leading up to the invasion of Judah that would result in the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC) and the period of exile in Babylon.

The Israelites didn't hear God's word because, ironically, they had heard and trusted God's word. They knew the promises in the Scriptures: that God would fight their battles for them so they need not fear foreign armies (1 Samuel 17:47; Ecclesiastes 9:11), that God gave them the land by his might not theirs (Deuteronomy 3:18-22), and that the royal line established in Israel was to last forever. They had heard that, when David was anointed king, God's promise spoken through the prophet Nathan was clear. *Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever* (2 Samuel 7:16). So certain were they that God had spoken these things—and that they knew the meaning of his words—that the words of seers like Isaiah that foretold destruction and exile and the overthrow of the kingdom by invading warriors hardly seemed worth listening to, and so they didn't. They were, after all, believers, and probably busy besides. I wonder if history ever repeats itself for the people of God.

Our systems of thought, our worldview commitments, and our theological and philosophical convictions are all important and helpful and needful. But if not kept fresh and alive, they can make us deaf.

4. ON HEARING THE SILENCE

Be still, the Almighty says. Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10). Not hard, yet so difficult. It's the sort of silence I need if I am to hear rightly and fully.

Outside one of my childhood homes was a large pine tree. We were living in a duplex in the second story of a house. My memory suggests the tree in our backyard was a blue spruce but I don't trust that. That memory may be a later accretion since I've long thought blue spruce to be one of God's better creations. In any case, the lowest branches of this tree hadn't been trimmed back and so formed a tent over a patch of ground covered by a soft if slightly prickly carpet of pine needles. I found I could push through the wall of branches and be in a place where I could hear clearly yet remain hidden. It was not that I wished to spy, though there were times I did that, as all do. In this case, however, nothing ever happened in our backyard and I don't remember ever slipping under the tree to spy on anyone or anything. It was, rather, a place to which I could retreat and feel safe from being judged. The reason I loved that quiet place under that pine tree was that there I was hidden from the prying eyes of others.

I could hear but not be seen. In a world in which “children should be seen but not heard,” my place under the tree helped right the balance.

It was there I learned to love the song of birds. Even the chirping of sparrows was not discordant to me, but singular cries to be heard, to be noticed. They would take dust baths a few feet from me and, as long as I was still, they never noticed and took alarm. The robins were mostly silent while I watched, running along the ground to suddenly stop, head tilted, pouncing and snatching up an earthworm from the soil. When two

robins met, there would be sharp calls of displeasure and they would part. Blue jays, always ready to give alarm, didn't seem to notice me beneath the branches but would let me know when the dogs from down the block, nasty untrustworthy creatures, were on the prowl.

Beyond the birdsongs, I never heard anything of significance from my secret hiding place beneath that pine tree, but something far more significant occurred. Sitting there alone, away from the watchful eyes that constantly scanned my existence to identify my next failure, my next sin, I discovered and learned to hear silence.

Silence is not merely an absence of sound. A person can be quiet but not be silent. True silence is a state of soul that is so antithetical to twenty-first century life and culture that relatively few ever make the journey. It requires a willingness to be unproductive, in the consumerist sense of that term, in order to be, for a few moments at least, content. It is a deeper productivity, a place where being is its own justification and where possibility seems to hum in a melody that is distinct and hopeful but unheard.

As I learned to hear the silence, I learned to hear so much that is usually drowned out by strife and busyness and the noise in the background. The songs of birds were one, and the stories and questions in my own heart and head were another. It was there under that tree that I first wondered, since I believed in God, whether I would ever hear him.

I did not have words to name these things as a boy, but they shaped me. Looking back on it now brings to mind the image of receiving a series of mysterious postcards that hinted at a reality beyond the here and now. They each bore a message that I strained to make



sense of, could not, but occasionally brought out the cards to remind myself that something was out there.

The safety of the spot was crucial. The rest of the time I was always keenly aware of being watched, of being on trial, of being judged, and always falling short. Perhaps this is where my introversion began, or was nurtured. In safety I could be content to be, and I could hear so much in the silence that I had never dreamed was there to be listened to. For brief moments I had stopped trying to please and, instead, in my own childish way, relaxed into the mystery of being. I heard nothing except a resonance in my soul that nourished flickers of hope that in a world loud with disapproval I might yet hear words of acceptance.

Many years later, after Margie and I had been married, we attended a two-week study-retreat led by John Alexander of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He was a gentle man, with a passion for allowing the gospel of Christ to shape one's life so that grace permeated every little aspect of existence. The retreat was held at a lovely, isolated camp on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. We were surrounded by wilderness on one side and water on the other two. It was before the days of cell phones, so interruptions were few. Margie and I had arrived weary from hard work, she was pregnant and not feeling well as a result, so the good food, leisurely Bible studies, lively teaching, wonderful conversations, and the chance to catch up on sleep all were deeply refreshing.

One morning Alexander announced at breakfast that our day would be given over to a retreat of silence—he called it a ROS. When breakfast ended he asked

that we refrain from talking, except where absolutely necessary. The kitchen staff had prepared bag lunches for us. We were to pick one up and, taking with us only a Bible, a hymnbook, and a notebook, we were to go off where we could see no sign of human presence and activity and spend the day alone. It was, as the name said, a retreat of silence.

Later, when we gathered for vespers in the evening, I discovered that the other participants had similar experiences to mine. The first couple of hours had been easy. Lovely surroundings in nature, the delight to have nothing expected of us for an entire day. Then we had read our Bibles and prayed. And then we ran out of things we wanted to read and pray about, and the day had only begun. So we ate early, before noon, more just to have something to do. And still there was time. Time to live in silence.

How could something so simple be so elusive?

I felt like I was in a battle. I wanted to slip into silence, but found I had trained myself to fill every moment with noisy stuff that kept blundering around loudly, insistently in my consciousness.

It was later in the day that I suddenly realized that silence had overtaken me. I could be simply content to be, and in those moments I could listen.

I heard the keening cry of seagulls, the rustle of field mice scurrying through the grass, and the sound of wind in the leaves. And I heard phrases from the Scriptures I had read earlier in the day, arising unbidden in my imagination like little echoes on which I could reflect and accept as ancient wisdom, now my own.

But mostly, I simply embraced and heard the silence.

That evening, Alexander encouraged

us to plan at least a half-day ROS each month into our schedules. He said it would serve to keep idols at bay and allow us respite from a world that had set itself in opposition to God's kingdom.

Over the years, I confess, I've followed that wise counsel only fitfully.

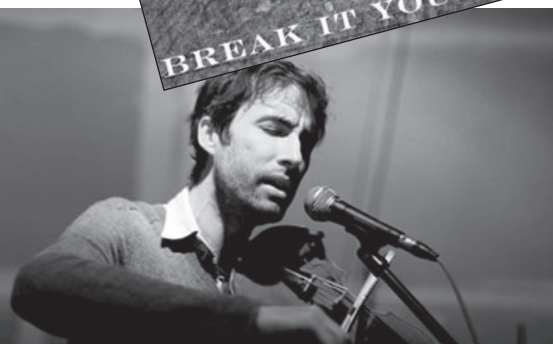
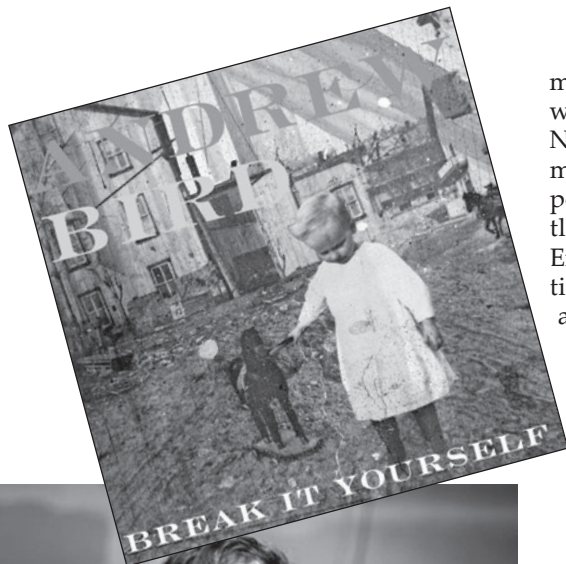
Twentieth-century Quaker Thomas Kelly wrote, "Over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. We have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than all this hurried existence, a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power. If only we could slip over into that Center! If only we could find the Silence which is the source of sound!"

In a world where so much is broken and needs to be fixed, where so many demands noisily compete for our attention, and where we have so little time, perhaps the most radical way to trust God, to honor our King's sovereignty, and escape the clutches of own insecurities is to set aside time to simply be—and perhaps in those brief moments we will actually begin to hear both the silence and the important.

Sources: "On Learning to Hear" is available online (www.arthouseamerica.com/blog/on-learning-to-hear.html). The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen can Improve Relationships by Michael Nichols (New York, NY: Guilford; 1996) pp. 1-2. Kelly quoted in Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2010) p. 80.

TUNED IN: ANDREW BIRD, *BREAK IT YOURSELF*

Mistaking Clouds for Mountains



This week I went to my first Andrew Bird concert. I have his albums so knew I would enjoy the music, but I had no idea how electrifying the evening would be. Bird's passionate singing and playing, intriguing lyrics, lush instrumentation, and beautifully creative melodies and sounds blended together to provide two hours of nonstop music that seemed like a dream that passed in seconds but keeps on echoing in the background of memory.

"Over a nearly 20-year career," Jon Dolan writes in *Rolling Stone*, "Chicago singer, songwriter, and violinist Andrew Bird has built a rep as one of indie rock's

most beguiling light touches—a dude who makes Jeff Tweedy look like a Nordic death-metal pyro. Fusing elements of jazz, Celtic folk, and chamber pop while softly talk-singing—or whistling—tunes with titles like "Scythian Empires," he might be gratingly pretentious, if he wasn't so unobtrusively amiable."

I've always liked Bird's music, but the concert gave me new ears to listen to his latest album, *Break it Yourself*. It is conceived with rich complexity, both lyrically and musically.

*Here we go mistaking
clouds for mountains
Here's the thing that brings
the sparrows to the fountains
Here's the thing that makes you run
to the highlands
Here we go mistaking
clouds for mountains
Autonomy*

Having graduated with a degree in violin performance, his touch on the violin, alternating with a second violin he plays as a fiddle—that he both bows and plucks—is exquisite. His whistling appears effortless and sounds ethereal, and there are few musicians that use looping to better advantage. In the concert we attended, Bird first appeared on stage alone, and using a variety of instruments, his voice, and whistling, laid down looped layers of melody that built up into a rich performance that, though long, could have gone on almost indefinitely as far as I was concerned. How one man could produce such beauty was mesmerizing.

*Beekeeper sing of your frustration
In this litigious breeze
Of accidental pollination
In this era without bees*

*We keep breeding desperation
In this era of thieves
Who keep stealing respiration
From the tenderest of trees*

There is an air of mystery about Bird that I suspect he encourages, though not in the crass sense of promoting a particular image of himself. In an interview it was mentioned that some critics have called him "willfully obtuse." To which Bird replied: "I'm not the most direct person, and so it makes sense that my songs aren't terribly direct either. The path needs to be encoded. I'm not a confessional singer/songwriter; I've always been into defining a different way to say it, a different way to twist it. Meanings that serve several purposes help protect my own privacy for one, and also when I have to play these songs every night, you can find something in it every night."

There is something very postmodern about that, and attractive, too. It reminds us that words and music can have meaning without being necessarily limited to only one meaning. It is in this space that reflection flourishes and questions are nourished. For fully satisfactory answers, we will have to drill down a bit deeper, down to the true source of beauty. ■

Source: Rolling Stone online (www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/break-it-yourself-20120306); interview online (<http://thequietus.com/articles/08125-andrew-bird-interview>).

Album recommended: *Break it Yourself* by Andrew Bird (Mom + Pop; 2012).

Grit, Gumption, and Faith



My office window looks out over the front yard of Toad Hall. I can see the thistle feeder where the goldfinches gather, and I can see the arrival of the UPS truck. Having offices at home means we are visited regularly by drivers delivering things we've ordered, and I always feel slightly disappointed when the truck passes by without stopping. One thing they deliver are CDs, and I almost always stop what I am doing to load whatever arrived into iTunes so I can listen to the new music.

One CD that arrived recently is Charlie Peacock's *No Man's Land* (2012). "These songs," Charlie writes in the liner notes, "are inspired by the grit, gumption, and faith of my grandparents." His ancestors, who settled in Louisiana in the early 1800s, were, if these songs are any measure, the sort of people who left a strong legacy of music, family, and hard work.

Over the past few months I have felt a weight in my soul over events that represent loss I am not prepared to experience but over which I have no control. When I first heard "Only You Can," it seemed I had found a kindred spirit, someone who could assure me I am not alone.

*I've been lost, I've been found,
now it feels like I'm falling off the grid
Is there no great God in heaven
watching the drama go down?
I used to trust there was
now I wonder where he is
I can work on the mind
but what about the feelings?*

Like all the songs on *No Man's Land*, there is deep wisdom embedded in the lyrics, wisdom born of Charlie's living within the story of Scripture over many years. This is not a religious album, in the narrow sense of the term, but it is music that quietly radiates something of God's glory in a musical expression of the disappointments, hopes, and surprises of ordinary life. The instrumentalists and vocalists backing Charlie up are first rate, and lend a sound to the album that is both creative and reassuring that home might be possible, even in a broken world.

The loss I bear involves someone, a dear friend, who is dying though he is far too young to die. Cancer has ravaged

his body, though no one knew of its insidious existence until six months ago. Now the doctors say he does not have that much time left to live. Yet, with good humor, generosity of spirit, and quiet faith my friend hopes for better things.

*Well I've had my hand in
everything and nothing at all
I'm runnin' like a whirlwind
while waiting for the call
I'm trippin' in the darkness
lit up like the sun
I'm falling for a vision
till my body comes undone*

This is what I see in my friend. It is what I wish for myself. It seems to me to be a sufficient summary of a life lived well.

Charlie is a friend of mine, but I would have written this even if I didn't know him. His background in jazz, lovely voice, and richly simple arrangements make this CD the sort of music I keep going back to, and will for some time to come. ■

CD recommended: *No Man's Land* by Charlie Peacock (Twenty Ten Music; 2012).

When Beauty is a Curse



I'm not certain how many people today have been exposed to Grimm's fairy tales in their original form. The Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, published the first collection in 1814, with revised versions appearing in later decades until the seventh collection included 211 stories. Their books collected folk tales that had previously survived only as an oral tradition. Today, however, when most people think of the stories I suspect they have in mind the sentimentalized versions popularized by the Disney cartoon movies. Full of romanticized

settings, glittering costumes, glorified images of poverty or deprivation, song and dance numbers, and very happy endings, the Disney versions are well suited to a comfortable consumerist society in which the harder aspects of existence are safely kept out of sight and out of mind. The original tales, in contrast, were never sentimental, or, more accurately, any sentimentality was balanced with a dose of darkness even when the ending was happy. In their take on reality, life was full of danger, evil was real, death lay in wait, dark forces preyed on even the young and innocent, people could get lost and never be found, often things weren't really as they seemed, and unless a rescuer appeared there could be little reason for hope. They also included some highly questionable elements, like in "Snow White," why the prince would want to take the lifeless body of the heroine in her glass coffin home to his castle. In any case, the power of the stories is evident in the fact that they continue to be remembered and told by succeeding generations—somehow these extremely simple tales speak of matters that seem to matter.

When *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) was released, I did not go to see it in the theater. For one thing, I feared that two of the three main characters, Kristen Stewart as Snow White and Chris Hemsworth as the huntsman, might be flat as actors. Now that I've seen the film, I must say my suspicion was confirmed. Neither brought nuance to their roles and neither made me care much about their characters. The third main character, however, more than makes up for their lack, and possesses such a fierce power on the screen that it can be truly said that she steals the

show. Charlize Theron as Ravenna, the stepmother and wicked witch, is worth the price of admission many times over. Her ability to use her entire body to express a wide range of emotion, from murderous rage to gentle persuasion to heart stopping fear, illuminates the screen and moves the story along with thrilling intensity. Theron's skill and giftedness as an actor is simply breathtaking. Still, this is not the reason I decided to review *Snow White and the Huntsman*.

One thing the movie does brilliantly is to take the essence of *fairy tale* seriously. The dark forest is rendered just as we imagine it, so that trees become fearsome and menacing and the path is so confusing as to be scary. And the enchanted fairyland is so, well, enchanted that it becomes simply enchanting. Special effects and CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) are used well in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, so that they support the story and the characters but never seem to call attention to themselves. I especially appreciated the special effects involving Ravenna: flocks of crows swirling in or out to allow her to transport herself, the way the mirror flowed and dripped, the way she sucked the life out of young women for the sake of vanity. But this is still not the reason I decided to call attention to the film.

The reason I decided this film was worth attention goes back to a central element in the story itself. It is this: the reason the stepmother/wicked witch is evil is that she has accepted a lie. The lie is that youthful health, beauty, and vitality is a pearl of great price, worthy of pursuing above all else, or at least a goal so worthy as to allow it to define your lifestyle.

In the film, Ravenna uses potions and baths to maintain her youthful beauty. Watch the commercials and ads that appear on television and in magazines, and you will catch a glimpse of the zeal that animates her. She also uses magic, which today has been replaced by a far more powerful source of transformation, medical science. The radical notion is not that Ravenna is wicked, but that it is the relentless quest for youthfulness that is the fount of her evil. Once adopted, it defined her values, shaped her identity, and destroyed her soul.

The scenes in which Ravenna gazes into the magic mirror reminded me of the wall displays of magazines at an airport—row upon row of beautiful people and none of them you. Apparently the German folk who told and retold the old tales before Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm wrote them down believed that something this seemingly benign, a desire to fool aging and hold onto youthful looks and vitality could transform someone into a paragon of wickedness. It's called ancient wisdom.

Ancient wisdom in a fairy tale—*Snow White and the Huntsman* may be an old tale, but it is one that needs to be told and retold in the 21st century. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your impression of *Snow White and the Huntsman* after watching it for the first time? Was it different from what you expected?
2. What elements—set construction, locations, costuming, plot, music, action, special effects, etc.—were included in the film that made the viewer feel this is a fairy tale? To what extent were these used effectively?
3. Find a copy of the original Grimm fairy tale, "Little Snow White," on which this film is based. (One good, free, online source is: www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Brothers_Grimm/Margaret_Hunt/Little_Snow-white.html). In what ways is the movie version different from the original story? What might be the significance of the differences?
4. To what extent does the depiction of evil in *Snow White and the Huntsman* coincide with a biblical understanding of evil, sin, idolatry, and temptation for the Christian?
5. What is the process by which a proper concern for and stewarding of health and looks cross a line into a form of idolatry? Is it possible that our postmodern world is imbalanced in its view of youth and aging? What would a more proper balance look like? How do you know?
6. What is the significance of Ravenna being Snow White's stepmother? How do viewers from broken and blended families respond to the idea?



BACK PAGE: DARKENED ROOM: *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN* (CONTINUED)

Credits for *Snow White and the Huntsman*

Starring:

Kristen Stewart (Snow White)
Chris Hemsworth (The Huntsman)
Charlize Theron (Ravenna)
Sam Claflin (William)

Director: Rupert Sanders

Writers: Evan Daugherty, John Lee Hancock,
and Hossein Amini

Producers: Gloria Borders and others

Original Music: James Newton Howard

Cinematographer: Greig Fraser

USA, 2012; 127 minutes

Rated PG-13 (for intense sequences of violence
and action, and brief sensuality)

