

# critique

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2014 Issue 5

## **POLITICS AND PERSPECTIVE: POSSIBLE PATHS AND PERILS**



## CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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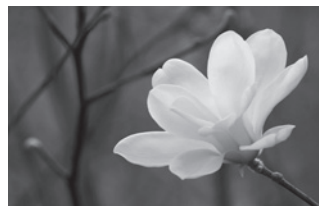
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# When Salt Blames the Rot



*Reality TV to me is the museum of social decay.*

[Gary Oldman]

*We are rapidly reaching the point in Western consumer societies where people confuse freedom with choice, as they are dazzled daily by an ever-expanding array of external choices in consumer goods and lifestyle options. But the pursuit of freedom has led to a surfeit of choices and a scarcity of meaning and value—a point at which choice itself, rather than the content of any choice, has become the heart of freedom. The result is that modern people value choice rather than good choice.*

[Os Guinness]

*Little round planet in a big universe  
Sometimes it looks blessed  
Sometimes it looks cursed  
Depends on what you look at obviously  
But even more it depends on the way  
that you see*

[Bruce Cockburn]

From a Christian perspective, society in a fallen world is always seen as less than perfect. That's not unusual—it's also usually lacking in the eyes of those who serve other gods and ideologies, whether conservatism, progressivism, atheism, or any of the traditional or self-made religions.

If you listen closely to how the problems in society are described, you will usually find that blame for the decay is assigned, either implicitly or explicitly. Conservatives blame liberals, progressives blame libertarians, libertarians blame the lack of freedom imposed by conservative and progressive activism, atheists blame the imposition of authoritarian dogma, and so it goes.

Now listen to Christians as we address the same issue—who do we blame?

Although this is anecdotal, in my experience it is at this point in the conversation that many Christians reveal that a worldview other than Christianity acts to shape their mind and imagination. It is often one of the worldviews or ideologies I just mentioned. When we assign blame for the social decay we see around us, we often do it in terms virtually identical with those expressed by conservative, progressive, or libertarian pundits. Or, more often, we simply blame non-Christians. In other words, we usually blame people different from ourselves. They are to blame.

John R.W. Stott addressed the phenomenon with his usual biblical clarity in *Authentic Christianity* (1995):

*When men reject what they know of God, God gives them up to their own distorted notions and perverted passions, until society stinks in the nostrils of God and of all good people.*

*Now Christians are set in secular society by God to hinder this process. God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else.*

*The real question to ask is: where is the salt?*

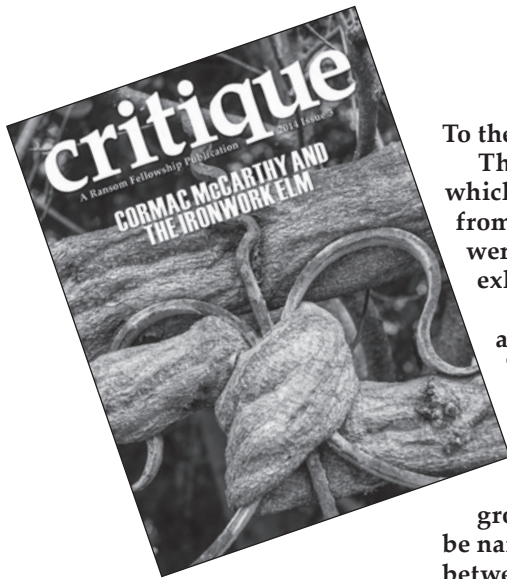
If Stott is correct, and I believe he is, then we Christians tend to assign blame incorrectly for the social decay we see around us. The problem is not them, but *us*. Daniel exhibited this understanding admirably when he prayed about his society (Daniel 9).

Of course, even if we adopt Stott's perspective, we must be careful how we express it. The point is not to insist that Christians would solve the problem if they were involved, because we can't know that. Nor is the point to insist that, if Christians had been involved in the first place, this social difficulty would not have arisen, because we can't know that either. Both statements reek of arrogance.

The point, instead, is to agree that real problems exist in society that keep people from truly flourishing, and that it is at those points of tension the church should be engaged—but we usually aren't, and that is to our shame. ■

**Sources:** [www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com); A Free People's Suicide (2012) p. 60; "Child of the Wind" on Nothing but a Burning Light (1991); [dailythought@langham.org](mailto:dailythought@langham.org) (#621, August 20, 2014).





To the editor:

Thanks so much for *Critique* 2014:3, which came today. I'm recently back from eight days in Poland, which were a bit intense, worthwhile, and exhausting.

The three poems you published are lovely but they are not haiku. They are short nature poems. As you probably know, the haiku is a rather strict form with three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables. It must have foreground, middle ground, and background; it must be narrative and have a "turning" between the second and third lines.

More later. I'm praying about your move and changes. God bless you and Margie, dear brother.

Much love in Jesus,  
Ellis Potter  
Switzerland

Response by Scott Schuleit:

Thank you for your e-mail.

Though definitions for haiku poems can vary some, your definition is, probably, technically correct (at least about the three lines and syllable count). The haiku, like any other poetic form (such as the villanelle, sonnet, or sestina) is, more or less, strict. Your response raises questions that literary critics have debated about for a long time. What constitutes a poetry or prose form? What rules surrounding a specific form must be enforced to maintain it? How much room is there within a specific form to depart from a strict tradition? Purists, of course, might say that no departure from the strictness of the form is allowed and if even one rule is violated, it cannot be labeled within that

tradition. Others, would disagree with this. For example, Gary Hotham is widely considered to be a master of American haiku. By the way, he is also a Christian. I would heartily recommend his book: *Breathmarks: Haiku to Read in the Dark*. If I were to hold precisely to a traditional definition of what constitutes haiku, then Mr. Hotham should not even be considered a haiku poet at all, much less a master. At the end of the book, Mr. Hotham discusses haiku in a short chapter entitled: "Why Haiku?" In that chapter (which can be read as a sample chapter online), Mr. Hotham gives some thoughts towards defining haiku and within his less traditional view, the three poems published in *Critique* 2014:3 certainly fit, I think, under what he believes constitutes haiku poetry. Having said all of this, perhaps my loose interpretation of the haiku form is too loose and, therefore, it would be more accurate to describe the three haiku (as my dear brother Mr. Potter did in his e-mail) as three "short nature poems," but at this point I'm going to retain the haiku label.

Thank you for provoking me to think about these things.

Sincerely,  
Scott ■



## POETRY

# Three Haiku

### Mary

Magnolia blossom  
Giving beauty and fragrance  
Fades into freshness



### Apple blossoms rise

Apple blossoms rise  
And fall always in the world  
And inside my mind  
  
You already are  
Do whatever you want to  
In Christ with others

### Smoked Glass

Purely beginning  
Burning through various deaths  
Our hearts turn to ice.  
  
*Falsely beginning  
Purified by Spirit's fire  
Our hearts melt to flesh.*

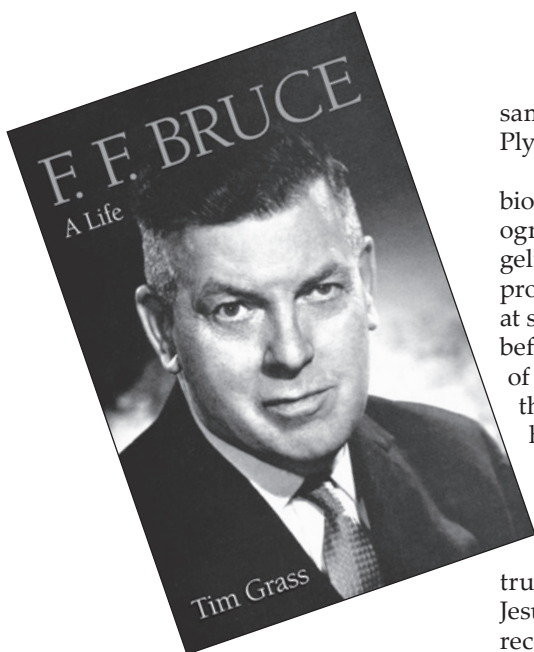


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**Ellis Potter** is a former Buddhist monk, now a minister, counselor, teacher and author of 3 Theories of Everything. He worked for many years with Francis Schaeffer at L'Abri Fellowship, Switzerland, and was the pastor of the Basel Christian Fellowship for 10 years. With his wife, Mary, he founded Eastern European Renewal (EER), an evangelical mission to Central and Eastern European countries.

# A Gentle, Accessible Scholar



My first memory of F.F. Bruce (1910–90) was his book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* It was his first book, originally published in 1943, and has rightly become a classic. I read it while I was in college, and the book shaped my understanding of holy scripture, the Christian faith, and the significance of doubt.

I had been raised in a church community where expressions of doubt were discouraged and interpreted as signs of disbelief. When I had raised the question that makes up the title of Bruce's book, it was assumed there either was hidden sin in my life, or that my devotional practices were lacking, or both. Bruce in *The New Testament Documents*, in contrast, exhibited a fearless willingness to submit faith and the Bible to thoughtful, careful, patient scholarship, making the results of that study accessible to ordinary believers. Reading his words was a bracing experience, an important milestone in my quest for reality, so it was a shock to discover that he was part of the

same church community as I was, the Plymouth Brethren.

*F.F. Bruce: A Life* by Tim Grass is a biography, written by someone who recognizes Bruce's significance as an evangelical biblical scholar and mentor. A prolific writer and teacher, Bruce taught at several universities in Great Britain before becoming Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester. As he began his academic career, N.T.

Wright says, "there were virtually no other scholars of his eminence who were prepared to stand up and be counted as believers in the truth of the New Testament and the Jesus of whom it speaks." Grass also recognizes Bruce's significance as a kind and admirable man, someone who took Christ seriously and so understood his call to godliness as crucial to what it means to be a Christian who flourishes as a human being.

It is this mixture of uncompromising scholarship and persistent gentleness that makes *F.F. Bruce: A Life* worth reading even for those previously unacquainted with the man. As you read you will see demonstrated a number of things worth careful reflection by us all:

First, there is Bruce's *solid and careful thinking*. This was a man who believed the Bible passionately and who was yet not merely unafraid to think, he was eager to do so. His notion of Christ's lordship included the intellect, the life of the mind, and the history of ideas. He did not hesitate to take challenges seriously, was unafraid to disagree, and delighted in the truth regardless of who proclaimed it.

The story of Bruce's *quiet and un-moving commitment* to the Bible is both remarkable and worthy of imitation. He seemed unhurried in his attempt

to address difficulties, mistaken ideas, and misguided intellectual fads, but he did not waver in unbelief as the process of discernment progressed. He demonstrated the intellectual freedom that a commitment to Christ's lordship confers, and that many today—both believers and unbelievers—consider impossible.

And finally, *F.F. Bruce: A Life* is a study in *compassionate faithfulness even in the face of disagreement*. Bruce disagreed with many of the Plymouth Brethren's unique doctrines, but remained in fellowship with them. Over many years Bruce emphasized agreement, showed gratefulness for the movement's admirable distinctives, and he found civil, loving, inoffensive but clear ways to express his disagreements. The branch of the Plymouth Brethren in which I was raised dismissed Bruce for his "liberalism," but the part that was less anti-intellectual embraced him. He befriended liberal scholars, learned from them, and defended them when they were dismissed as unworthy of attention. The Christian world is far richer for the commentaries, books, and articles that flowed from his pen; and, when I recently culled my library, I was certain to keep every title authored by Bruce.

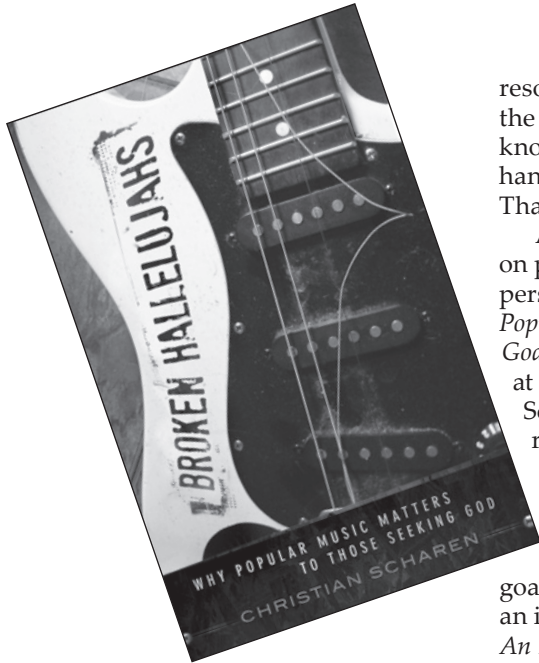
Few of us may be scholars or academics, but the qualities exhibited by F.F. Bruce should characterize us all. Seeing them demonstrated in someone is worth the time it takes to read this excellent biography. ■

**Recommended:** *F.F. Bruce: A Life* by Tim Grass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2011) 227 pages + chronology + bibliography + index.

**Source:** N.T. Wright in forward to *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (1943, 1981) p. ix.



# Popular Music in Theological Perspective



Christians who wish to be discerning in engaging our world will need to pay attention to popular music.

Some imagine popular music to be little more than a form of entertainment, a distraction from more important pursuits. It actually serves a far more vital role in our culture. It is true that some concerts are mere spectacles, massive light and dance shows in which the music is sometimes almost an afterthought. But this is only the proverbial visible tip of the popular music iceberg. In stark contrast, many bands and musicians produce music that embodies the hopes, fears, dreams, and deepest yearnings of listeners.

Sometimes when I lecture on music, young adults will bring me a CD of “their music.” It is rarely music they have written or performed. Instead, most often it is the music they have chosen from albums with which they

resonate most deeply. When I accept the gift, I handle it with care because I know that in handing it to me they are handing me a glimpse into their heart. That is a precious thing.

A book that can help us reflect on popular music from a Christian perspective is *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God* by Christian Scharen, who teaches at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minn). Scharen is less than convinced—rightly, I believe—by many of the efforts of evangelicals to tackle this topic, and he explains why in *Broken*. It is not a polemic work, however, and Scharen’s primary goal is to explore, develop, and apply an insight that C.S. Lewis proposed in *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender,” Lewis argued. “Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)”

Scharen argues this does not mean setting aside our ability to discern, but rather it is the desire to be open to our neighbors and the music that expresses their beliefs, expectations, values, and experiences. Scharen points out that Lewis references Mark 8:35—“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Scharen continues:

*It is a paradox at the heart of Christian life. Once transformed toward the neighbor rather than literally being stuck on ourselves, we “delight” to enter others’ beliefs, passions, and imagination, even when we feel they are untrue, depraved, or lacking all realism. Lewis makes clear that this is not for the sake of gratifying*

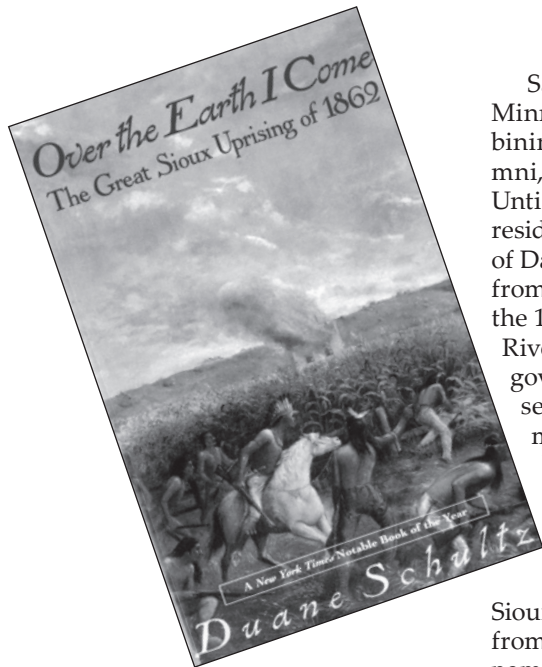
*some voyeuristic curiosity about the other—their psychology or history or moral convictions. Nor is it to perform some critical “autopsy” on them in order to come to a shortcut to judgment about their worth. It is not that kind of knowing (what Lewis calls *savoir*) at all. It is knowing (*connaitre*) “in order to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre.” One senses here that his larger aim is both dislocation of the self and at the same time healing, seeking exactly through the dislocation a wholeness that comes from being made one with God in Christ, and thereby awakening to a world “crowded” with the presence of God. [p. 143]*

Demonstrating what he means by reflecting on the music of Sigur Ros, Arcade Fire, and others, Scharen tries to help Christians be discerning rather than dismissive judges or thoughtless imbibers. He argues that “a theology of grace views all as broken, and God’s work through the cross as reaching into every space of abandonment and brokenness, responding to every cry, with a mercy and love that reaches deeper than the despair, pain, and sorrow.” [p. 136]

I recommend *Broken Hallelujahs* as worthy of careful reading, discussion, and reflection. Engaging it thoughtfully will sharpen our skill in cultural discernment, even at the points where we may disagree or see things a bit differently. ■

**Recommended:** *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God* by Christian Scharen (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2011) 156 pages + notes + indices.

# Stolen Land



After 33 years living in the same house, we moved to a town named Savage. We live on stolen land.

*From Tierra del Fuego to Ungava Bay  
the history of betrayal continues to today  
the spirit of Almighty Voice, the ghost of*

*Anna Mae  
call like thunder from the mountains—  
you can hear them say  
it's a stolen land*

Savage is located south of Minneapolis, which was named by combining the Dakota Sioux word for water, mni, with the Greek word for city, polis. Until the seventeenth century, the only residents in the area were various bands of Dakota Sioux. Our home is 18 miles from Fort Snelling, which was built in the 1820s on the bank of the Mississippi River in an attempt by the Federal government to encourage white settlers to move into the area. Eighty miles in the other direction is New Ulm, settled in 1854 by German families, one of which founded the August Schell Brewing Company in 1860. New Ulm was the setting of a fearful battle in the Sioux Uprising of 1862. Eleven miles from Savage is the town of Shakopee, named after the chief of a band of the Mdewakanton Dakota nation. Savage is in Scott County, and the county directly to the west, Sibley, is named after a commander of the Minnesota militia that was sent to fight the Dakota in the Uprising.

*Apartheid in Arizona, slaughter in Brazil  
if bullets don't get good PR there's other  
ways to kill  
kidnap all the children, put 'em in a  
foreign system  
bring them up in no-man's land where  
no one really wants them  
it's a stolen land*

Lawyers were involved in the purchase of our new home, so it's all legal. All legal, that is, until you go far enough back in time and discover that the land was essentially stolen from the Dakota by white European settlers.

I am aware of the arguments that say the settlers were merely defending their lives and land in the Uprising; that there were treaties deeding the land to settlers signed by Dakota chiefs, that the first open hostilities in the Uprising of 1862 were perpetrated by young braves, that attacks on homesteads included torture and the slaughter of infants and women. That was the story I learned in school. When the full history of the period is considered, however, a far different picture emerges.

*Colonel Sibley was not the only person  
interested in obtaining reinforcements.  
So, too, was Little Crow. He planned  
to attack the rich prize that was Fort  
Ridgely on Friday. His scouts had told  
him that no new troops had reached the  
fort, but he knew that reinforcements  
must surely be on their way. He was  
certain that Friday would be his last op-  
portunity. If he did capture the fort then,  
the war would be lost.*

*To take it, however, he needed more  
braves. His hundred warriors had not  
been enough. He wanted the men of  
Shakopee and Red Middle Voice. They  
were the ones who had wanted the war in  
the first place, the ones who had argued  
for it with such passion at his house only  
the previous morning. They were the ones  
who had shamed Little Crow into leading  
it. Yet once Shakopee and Red Middle  
Voice had instigated the war, they had  
taken no part in it in the one way that  
might have assured victory. Instead, they  
had unleashed their braves in small bands  
to terrorize the settlers. They spurned  
Little Crow's strategy, his plan to fight  
in the white man's way by attacking the  
soldiers. They had wasted the chance for  
an early victory, and now Little Crow did  
not know where they were.*



Little Crow summoned the members of the Rice Soldiers' Lodge to his village and complained to them about the lack of support from the two war chiefs. The Soldiers' Lodge, he argued, must join in the attack on Fort Ridgely, and he asked them to find the war chiefs and tell them to send their braves. He sent out runners to the other chiefs of the Wahpetons and the Sissetons to inform them of the time for the assault on the fort.

Come, he urged them, and bring your warriors. Kill the soldiers and open up the valley. Kill the soldiers and share in the rich harvest of the goods to be had at the fort. Kill the soldiers and the other whites will run so far away that the Sioux will once again reign over the lands that were stolen from them. Kill the soldiers and the whites will not dare to come back. Kill the soldiers and live as Dakota warriors were meant to live, free to roam as their fathers and their fathers' fathers lived. Kill the soldiers, but it must be done tomorrow. The fate of the Sioux for all time depends on it. Kill the soldiers and sing the Dakota chant of defiance.

Over the earth I come,  
Over the earth I come,  
A soldier I come.

Over the earth I am a ghost. [p. 142-143]

*Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* seeks to tell this important story fairly, and it is not a pretty one. I recommend it for several reasons.

It records the history of this sad episode in American history without submitting the story to some political agenda. *Over the Earth* is history, not ideology. I cannot take responsibility for

the actions of the Dakota, but I can, and must take responsibility for the actions and decisions of Washington, D.C., and the State of Minnesota. Doing that means I must admit that we committed atrocities against the Dakota, repeatedly broke the treaties we had forced them to accept, stood by as officials, traders, and the military lied to them and treated them as less than persons made in God's image.

As a Christian who believes my Lord calls his followers to be agents of reconciliation, I am committed to try to hear the voice of the powerless. Here that means digging deeper than the stories I heard in school. I cannot allow history to simply be written by the victorious.

I believe that my love for my country must not be maintained by closing my eyes to the failures of my nation. The holy scriptures present Abraham, Joseph, and David as heroic characters but the Bible is also unstinting in revealing deep flaws in all three. If we are to be agents of justice now, we must be willing to learn from the past, even when that learning might be painful or embarrassing.

*If you're like me you'd like to think we've  
learned from our mistakes  
enough to know we can't play god with  
others' lives at stake  
so now we've all discovered the world  
wasn't only made for whites  
what step are you gonna take to try and  
set things right  
in this stolen land*

*stolen land—but it's all we've got  
stolen land—and there's no going back  
stolen land—and we'll never forget  
stolen land—and we're not through yet*

[Bruce Cockburn, "Stolen Land"  
on *Waiting For A Miracle* (1987)]

*Over the Earth I Come* is accessible as a book of history, written so as to seem almost like a novel. It tells a story all Americans should know because the Sioux Uprising of 1862 is, whether we like it or not, part of our story. It tells of the Uprising, what led to it, and what flowed out as a result. The ripples continue to this day, some for blessing but most for curse.

By the way, the City of Savage was not named after anything involving this episode in the past. Formerly known as Hamilton, it was renamed in honor of Marion Willis Savage who owned a racehorse, Dan Patch, who never lost a race and broke speed records 14 times during his career. Kind of disappointing, I know, but there it is. ■

**Recommended:** *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* by Duane Schultz (New York, NY: St Martin's Press; 1992) 284 pages + notes + bibliography + index

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# POLITICS AND POSSIBLE PATH

by Timothy Padgett

You're a reasonable person. When it comes to politics, while you do tend to vote for one party more than others, you don't think of yourself as particularly beholden to any. Even as you've watched with dread as the "election season" has bloated from a few weeks leading up to every other November to, now, essentially a nonstop gabfest driven ever faster by the 24/7 news cycle, you've worked hard at keeping an open mind. Political parties may be a necessary evil, but you strive to keep the shrill tones of partisanship from your civic participation. Yet, one day, you noticed that you had become what you so decry in others, and it happened so very slowly, so very gradually that, like the frog in the proverbial kettle, you didn't even notice your fall until it was far, far too late.



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# PERSPECTIVE: IS AND PERILS





It was like this. An election was coming up, and you wanted to be cautious how you proceeded. You had friends on either side of the contest, and you chuckled at their passion. Maybe you even had a flush of pride, comparing their zeal with your own careful detachment, but you stuffed this unseemly feeling down. After reading up on the various candidates, you came to the conclusion to support one in particular. It wasn't that you couldn't see the good in the other guy, but, all in all, you were comfortable with your choice.

Then it got more complicated. The friends whose "side" you picked were overjoyed, and they praised you for your intelligence and for coming to your senses. You might have enjoyed the compliment, but you tried to downplay any impression that this was a clear black and white issue. Your other friends, in contrast, were incredulous. "How could you even think to vote for that guy?!?! We thought you were a reasonable person!" Now, that last bit hurt. You didn't begrudge them their choice, so why all this animosity?

You wanted to show your friends that it wasn't a matter of abandoning logic, so you began to point out the reasons you'd drawn on to make your decision. This shouldn't have been too hard. You'd done your homework so, even if they disagreed with you in the end, surely they'd respect your decision once they'd heard your reasons. Yet this was to no avail, as your now-opponents proceeded to berate you and offer what were, at least to you, the flimsiest reasons for supporting their side.

As the calendar slipped closer to Election Day, the situation only seemed to get worse. You tried to reason with your erstwhile friends, but there seemed

no way to get through to them. The more you offered solid and careful thinking, the more they seemed to slide into incoherency. Rather than following any semblance of rationality, these "friends" were now preaching the worst kinds of fallacies and personal attacks. This bothered and angered you greatly. If their ideas weren't squelched, other people might get carried away. Whether you ever admitted it to yourself or not, you finally gave up on logic and fought fire with fire. This election, which you previously approached as a detached observer, now mattered too much to wait on the niceties of polite debate.

This kind of thing can happen to anyone, but it presents special problems to Christians. Now, few believers will think, or at least admit, that they hold that any political party enjoys God's unqualified blessing, and we at least give lip service to the idea that our love for fellow believers in the eternal church trumps our loyalty to any transient faction. And yet when it comes to politics, do we not find ourselves slipping into the sorts of practices that we so oppose in principle?

Among the many biblical principles brought into discussions of this sort, there are two that seem to stand out. Pretty much all of us can comfortably say that we believe them, but it is rather a more complicated question whether we think our political opponents live them out. Herein lies the problem. Though we may see ourselves as following the straight and narrow, it becomes hard to stay true when all about us seem to be crossing line after line.

*The first principle is the call for the*

*church to act as a prophetic voice to the culture.* This is the simple recognition that we live in a fallen world, and that part of the task of God's people is to speak accordingly. Now, there is a great deal of disagreement about what this should look like, but there is for all of us some issue that we think demands our public voice of protest. Abortion, poverty, war, or what-have-you: we find in the Bible examples of the people of God speaking out.

*The second principle is the call for the church to speak with respect.* While the importance of the image of God in all human beings makes this an issue in our dealings with anyone, when it comes to politics the centrality of respect is redoubled because of the biblical call to respect one's leaders. Considering that some of the leaders in the Bible were not the best of men, this is a powerful rebuke to those today who deride their elected officials.

So, if we all agree on these things, why do we continue to come into so much conflict with one another? If we all think there are some things worth bringing into the public sphere, why do we get upset by another's "politicizing the gospel"? If we all think that everyone should be treated with dignity, why do we feel like someone else is demonizing "our guy" but never feel like we are going too far in our condemnations of theirs? Part of the problem is that we tend to approach this single goal of respectfully engaging in political discourse by multiple paths. When we see other Christians working with a different approach, judging them by ours, they seem to come up short. The irony being that at such times, they are looking at us with the same attitude of concern.

Certainly, there could well be

innumerable roads towards responsible political engagement, but here we'll deal with only three. These terms should be held loosely in one's mind, as they are only to help us understand the problem, but Christians trying to do the right thing in politics tend to fall somewhere on the spectrum from quietism to moderation to advocacy. The goal with each of these is to avoid partisanship in our dialogue, and, though we all condemn it, we must always guard against it. Even though nobody goes around saying, "You know, I'm not really interested in listening to the other guy's point. I'd rather blindly follow my own understanding and be entirely unfair to others," it is precisely because none of us wants to think we could ever act in that way that we are in the most danger of doing so.

*Quietism* is the stance that the best way to avoid acrimonious debate is to avoid debate altogether. Looking at the mess that we make of electoral issues, the desire simply to stay out of it or at least keep from adding to the carnage is a powerful one indeed. It should be kept in mind that quietism here does not mean withdrawing from the world or some failure to perform civic duties. Rather, it simply means that some Christians have decided that the wisest course is to keep political choices to oneself as much as is feasible.

Now, the benefits of such an approach are plain to see. If you're not engaging in public discussion about political issues, you certainly will not be accused of stirring up rancor. You can do your homework and keep abreast of the issues of the day and then vote according to conscience, all the while making sure you don't lead anyone to think you have confused the mission of the church with the platform of a party.

There is a great deal of wisdom to this stance, and, frankly, we'd all be better off if we spoke less and listened more.

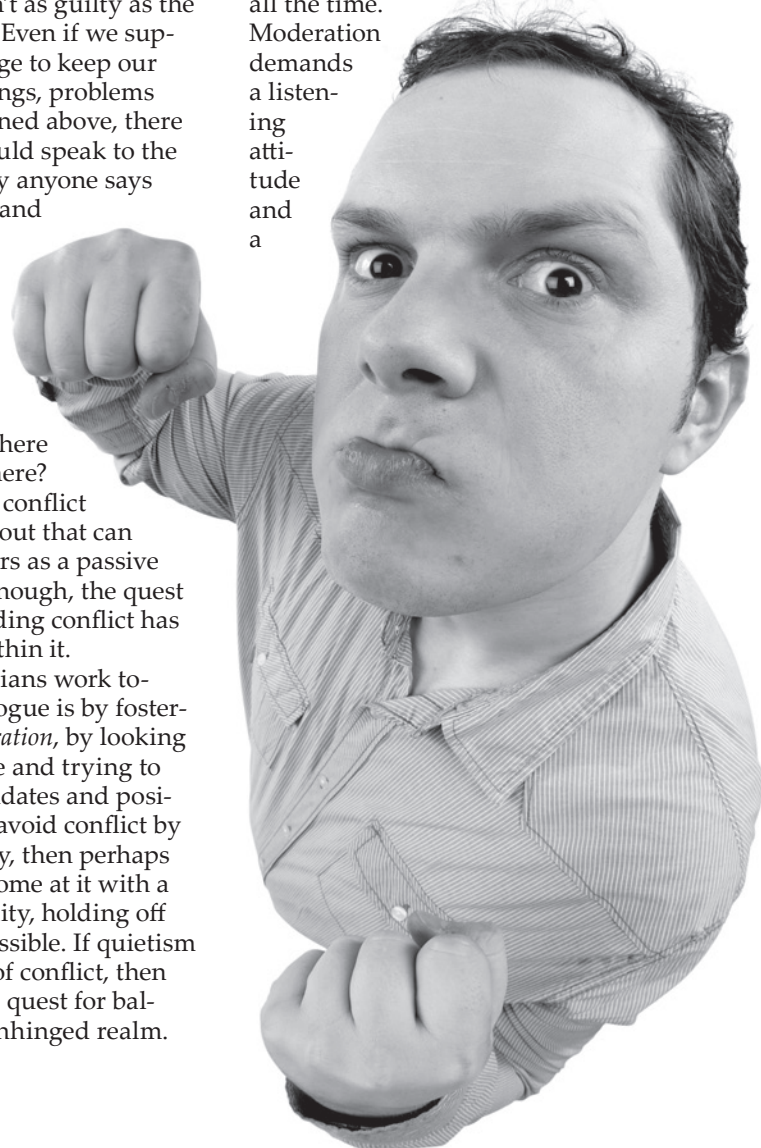
However, this does not mean that there are not problems with quietism. For one thing, though we may not give anyone the impression we have conflated "Christ and Candidate" because we haven't said anything along those lines, this doesn't mean that, in our heart of hearts, we aren't as guilty as the most strident partisan. Even if we suppose that we can manage to keep our minds clear of such things, problems still remain. As mentioned above, there are times when we should speak to the watching world. Hardly anyone says nothing about politics, and we can find ourselves cherry picking the issues that we will speak about as opposed to those where we remain silent.

Why did we decide to address this topic over here but not that one over there? Soon enough we find a conflict in our refusal to speak out that can be seen by our neighbors as a passive complicity. Ironically enough, the quest for peace through avoiding conflict has the seeds of conflict within it.

Another way Christians work towards responsible dialogue is by fostering an attitude of *moderation*, by looking at both sides of an issue and trying to see the best in all candidates and positions. Since we cannot avoid conflict by avoiding debate entirely, then perhaps the least we can do is come at it with a disposition of equanimity, holding off judgment as long as possible. If quietism is a passive avoidance of conflict, then moderation is an active quest for balance in an otherwise unhinged realm.

There is a lot of merit in this line of thinking. Common sense dictates that no one group has a monopoly on virtue or vice, so taking the wisdom from both ends of the political spectrum can only be of benefit to all concerned. Partly, this is simply noting that having a bad idea is not the same as being a bad person, and that just because someone is right in one area, this doesn't mean they're right all the time.

Moderation demands a listening attitude and a



willingness to live outside comfortable categories of left and right.

However, just as with quietism, there are some unintentional and perhaps unavoidable problems here, too. Partly because we have grown accustomed to thinking of political choices as being somewhere on a left to right sequence, we tend to think

of taking some from each side leaving as us somewhere in the middle, neither one nor ten, but a good balance.

anced five. This sounds good, all right, but in practice it gets rather more complicated, doesn't it? Think of it this way: If I am conservative on taxation but liberal on gun control while you are the reverse, are we both moderates? Or, even more important than elusive definitions, is threading the middle always the best course of action? Aren't there issues where a moderate, balanced approach veers into compromise? Perhaps the most subtle danger is the creeping sense of pride which can all too easily arise in the hearts of those who seek to live above the fray. "I am not partisan," we say to ourselves, "Such is beneath me." By thinking we are beyond parochialism, we lose the ability to see our own narrow-mindedness.

The third way through the morass is the open attempt to argue for one's positions while keeping the tenor of debate in check. As opposed to mere partisanship, for which

all issues seemingly become a life and death struggle, advocacy recognizes the importance of taking a stand publicly but seeks to do so with humility and respect. Just as a lawyer can passionately argue a case without, necessarily, hating the opposing counsel, engaging in political debate in this manner is done while affording dignity to one's opponent.

The strengths of this position are found in contrast to the weaknesses of the others. Where quietism can be reasonably charged with shirking duty through silence, advocacy speaks as the situation warrants. Where moderation can lead to elitist attitudes by those too pleased with their own sense of objectivity, advocacy recognizes that even the best of us thinks with a slant. When speaking of one's own "side," advocacy calls for the tacit admission that you could be wrong. When speaking of the other guy, it demands that a clear distinction be made between person and policy.

While this may seem like the silver bullet to solve all our problems, this approach comes with its own failings as well. Although it skirts some of its rivals' issues, it partakes of others at the same time. Just as quietism can, through silence, offend those who see it as the time to speak out, so, too, advocacy can unintentionally offend by speaking when others would be more reticent. What is, to me, a clear moment to enter the fray, may be, to you, a sure sign I've confused church and party. When I think I am offering a legitimate and respectful critique of a person in power, you may well believe I am denigrating the leader of my people. In much the same way, just as my own sense of moderation can lead me to think I have moved beyond political vice, so, too,





advocacy makes me think I have taken all necessary precautions and thereby blind me to the way I run roughshod over opponents. Thinking I've done everything to avoid belittling others may be my certain step towards denigration.

**S**adly, we've come full circle. None of these well-intentioned plans solves all problems. There is no silver bullet. There is no sure path to respectful political engagement. Whatever course we take seems to lead us to one storm or another. However, there is reason for hope yet. The problem with these solutions is not that they seek to solve it all but that they seek to solve it all entirely. Though they fail in certain areas, they succeed in others. Perhaps, as with so many other areas of life, the answer is found not in some quick and easy, cookie-cutter plan, but in the harder road of a moment-by-moment life of discernment. Perhaps, rather than trying to come up with a singular answer to this conundrum, we'd be better off if we approached political engagement with a series of questions.

For starters, when speaking of another person or policy, *are we following the Golden Rule?* That is, are we characterizing their beliefs and proposals in the way we would want our own ideas detailed? Could our opponents hear our description of them and say, "Yes, that's what we believe"? We've all seen our own ideas reduced to ridiculous caricatures only to be dismissed, and we know it's unfair when done to us. If others treat us this way, isn't it likely that we, even unintentionally, treat them the same? One of the easiest ways to fail

in this is when we ascribe to others motivations which they themselves deny holding. Does our opponent actually say they want to bring down the security of the nation? Do they claim they are driven by racial hatred? If they don't say so themselves, then who are we to put words in their mouths?

A second question might be, *where do we get our information?* This is something of an elaboration of the Golden Rule question. Are we getting our information about the "other guy" from a reasonable source? To have a positive effect in this realm, it will do us no good at all if our only information about a position comes from people who don't like the idea in the first place. This would make no more sense than if we listened to one soft drink's commercials to get information about its rival. Now, we don't have to take our opponents word on things, but we do need to make sure we're listening to the best and brightest of their "side" rather than simply picking the source that confirms our own worst suspicions.

Third, *how are we pushing our own ideas?* Think about the realm of social media. When we "share" something, are we providing an argument or just a slogan? Political questions are more likely answered by an essay than a multiple choice. Are we providing reasons for our positions that can be hashed out and discussed, or are we simply venting? If the latter, then not only should we refrain from speaking, but perhaps we should evaluate our own ideas.

Fourth, *are we passing what we might call, "The Dinner Test"?* In our debates are we behaving towards others so that we could reasonably go out to eat with them after concluding our time of disagreement? Are we treating people in such a way, even as we sharpen iron

together, that they can tell we see the world as bigger than the next election? There are times, indeed, when we must say to our fellow believers, "You are wrong," but this statement must always be completed by saying, "You are wrong, brother/sister."

Civic duties call, but our human frailties leave us no certain path. Hemmed in by our finite minds and corrupted by a fallen nature, we cannot move forward as though nothing is wrong. These four questions are no more a cure-all than the three approaches noted above. That is not the point. The point is that political discourse is a complicated business, and the wise road is more apt to be found by humble questions than by confident assertions. When looking for the right way forward in political engagement and when the appeal of rash words comes to our minds, we should look to the words of James who wrote, "Know this, my beloved brothers; let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness God requires." ■

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION ON POLITICS AND PERSPECTIVE, BY DENIS HAACK

1. To what extent, and in what ways are you involved in political activities? Are you content with your level of involvement? Where do you fall "on the spectrum from quietism to moderation to advocacy?"
2. Describe someone you know personally who embodies a distinctly Christian involvement in the political sphere of life. How has their example shaped you? Describe someone you know personally who embodies a distinctly unchristian involvement in the political sphere of life. How has their example shaped you?
3. To what extent are you politicized? In other words, when social issues are raised in a conversation—e.g., abortion, war and armed intervention, immigration, terrorism, size of government, gun control, taxation, welfare, etc.—how quickly do you frame that issue, your thinking, and the conversation in political terms?
4. Do you find yourself surprised (or appalled) when you discover that a

close friend or respected colleague supports your candidate's opponent or takes the other side on some important social issue? What does this suggest about you?

5. "When it comes to politics," Padgett writes, "do we not find ourselves slipping into the sorts of practices that we so oppose in principle?" Do you agree, if not about yourself then about the Christians you know?
6. Since we live in a cynical age, cynicism easily creeps into our view of the political aspects of citizenship and society, and is often most easily identified in our humor. So, we enjoy and repeat cynically witty statements.

*Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.* (Mark Twain).

*Politics is so difficult, it's generally only people who aren't quite up to the task who feel convinced they are.* (Alain de Botton)

*Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedies.* (Groucho Marx)

*A group of politicians deciding to dump a president because his morals are bad is like the Mafia getting together to bump off the Godfather for not going to church on Sunday.* (Russell Baker).

*The Democrats are the party of government activism, the party that says government can make you richer, smarter, taller, and get the*

*chickweed out of your lawn. Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work, and then get elected and prove it.* (P.J. O'Rourke).

*In politics, stupidity is not a handicap.* (Napoleon)

What does our enjoyment of them and tendency to repeat them say about us?

7. Padgett argues that two biblical principles need to be applied to this discussion: "the call for the church to act as a prophetic voice to the culture," and "the call for the church to speak with respect." Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. As objectively as possible, state in your own words the definition, pros, and cons of quietism, moderation, and advocacy.
9. Padgett concludes with four questions by which we should evaluate ourselves:  
*Are we following the Golden Rule?  
Where do we get our information?  
How are we pushing our own ideas?  
Are we passing "The Dinner Test"?*  
By this test, how do you fare? What changes in your life might you want to pray about and plan to make?
10. "The point," Padgett says, "is that political discourse is a complicated business, and the wise road is more apt to be found by humble questions than by confident assertions." How might relationships in the church—and without it—be transformed if we all heeded this counsel? If no one else heeds it, should we bother? Why? ■

# A Perfect Blending



I first heard The Milk Carton Kids watching the superb television documentary, *Another Day, Another Time: Celebrating the music of Inside Llewyn Davis*.

Produced by T Bone Burnett for Showtime, *Another Day* is very worth watching—many more times than once, in fact. Featuring the Avett Brothers, Jack White, Gillian Welch & David Rawlings, the Punch Brothers, Joan Baez, Patti Smith, Marcus Mumford, Rhiannon Giddens, and others, it is a 101-minute concert starring some of the best musicians performing today. The film is seamlessly divided between brief interviews with the musicians, scenes as they practice for the concert (with

T Bone and the Coen brothers in the background), and scenes from the one evening concert which the film records. When the Milk Carton Kids sang “New York” the camera panned across the musicians sitting along the wall of the studio. They sat quietly listening, looking almost entranced, and Mumford wiped his eyes when they were done.

*You said it just right I never stay  
Long enough to fight I just run away  
And it's you my love it's you I'm  
running from*

*You were mistaken you are to blame  
Lately I've taken to getting my own way  
Yes, it's you my love it's you I'm running  
from*

*I'll be in New York send for me when you  
want more*

*I'll be in New York without you like  
before*

[“New York” on *Prologue* (2011)]

The voices of Joey Ryan and Kenneth Pattengale blend perfectly, along with the way they play their acoustic guitars, so that's it's hard not to hear them as one. They have obviously practiced to achieve such a flawless sound, yet their music seems effortless. The Milk Carton Kids, Jeff Strowe says on Popmatters.com, have “found somewhat of a magic formula: a set of rich and plaintive voices that impeccably complemented each other in harmony while being held together by vibrant and clean acoustic fingerpicking emanating pleasantly from vintage '50s guitars. It's a simple and familiar formula, one that references folk titans like the Everly Brothers, the Jayhawks, Welch and Rawlings, and Simon and Garfunkel.”

*This don't feel like home anymore  
Nothing's familiar when I walk through  
my door*

*So I thank the heavens or who's ever in  
charge*

*This don't feel like home anymore*

*I don't feel the pain I once did  
One day it just vanished like a milk  
carton kid*

*Or a rooftop set free in a hurricane wind  
I don't feel the pain I once did*

*Home was just a broken heart  
A driveway to park a car  
The memory of a dream long since in  
discard*

*So you won't be surprised  
'Bout the joy in my heart  
This don't feel like home anymore*

[“Heaven” on *The Ash & Clay* (2013)]

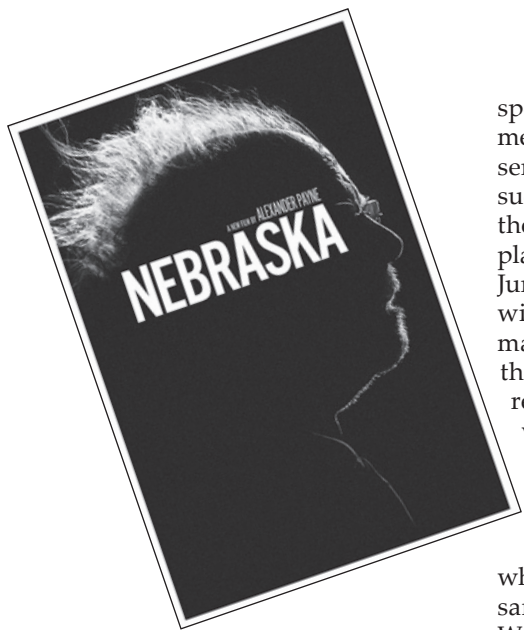
Their lyrics are poignant, sometimes dark, full of loss and aloneness and yearning, not ballads that tell stories but poems that evoke images and memories. Ryan and Pattengale perform as one, blending their voices and instruments in a lovely demonstration that for all the brokenness that haunts our lives and world, we can find a beauty so profound that it speaks directly to our hearts. ■

**Source:** Jeff Strowe online ([www.popmatters.com/review/169623-the-milk-carton-kids-the-ash-clay/](http://www.popmatters.com/review/169623-the-milk-carton-kids-the-ash-clay/)).

**Recommended:**  
*Prologue* (2011) by The Milk Carton Kids; *The Ash & Clay* (2013) by The Milk Carton Kids



# When the Journey Takes Us Nowhere



Woody Grant, played with great sensitivity by the veteran actor Bruce Dern, sets out from his home in Montana to walk to Nebraska to claim his prize. The sheriff finds him walking down the highway and brings him home. "So," his son David, played with quiet dignity by Will Forte of *Saturday Night Live* fame, says, "you told the sheriff you were walking to Nebraska?" "That's right," Woody replies, "To get my million dollars." Woody received a letter for a mega-sweepstakes that he interprets as promising him he's won first prize. All he has to do is show up and claim it, and he intends to do just that. It's a scam, of course, and David realizes that, but Woody doesn't. The receptionist at the sweepstakes office is surprised when they appear. "Does he have Alzheimer's?" she asks David. "No, he just believes what people tell him," David says. "That's too bad," she muses. She gives him a cap as a consolation prize.

Along the way, Woody and David spend time together, they interact with members of the extended family and a series of friends and acquaintances that suddenly take notice of Woody now that they think he's rich. Woody's wife, Kate, played with great comic effectiveness by June Squibb, offsets what could otherwise be the depressing story of an aging man. Her lines are consistently funny, though what she says seems more representative of Hollywood than the vast majority of older Mid-Westerners I have met.

Filmed in black and white, *Nebraska* is a thoughtful and charming film, depicting real people whose lives have been touched by the same brokenness we all experience. Woody has no desire to be rich—he merely would like to buy a new pickup truck, something he's never owned, and be able to replace the air compressor his former business partner, Ed Pagram (played by Stacy Keach) absconded with years earlier. Woody's son David wants to love his father, yet is embarrassed by Woody's conviction that he has won a million dollars. The sudden greed that causes people to suddenly gather around like vultures drawn to a carcass is shown with insistent plausibility.

Roger Ebert wondered, in his review of the movie, whether the director wasn't gently mocking his characters, but I think that is mistaken. A.O. Scott, in his review in the *New York Times*, has it partly right: "This is a comedy, with plenty of acutely funny lines, a handful of sharp sight gags, and a few minutes of pure, perfect madcap. But a grim, unmissable shadow falls across its wintry landscape. The world it depicts, a small-town America that is fading, aging, and on the verge of giving up, is blighted by envy, suspicion, and a general failure

of good will. Hard times are part of the picture, and so are hard people."

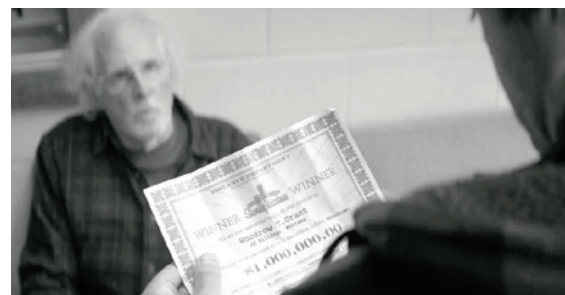
Alexander Payne, the director of *Nebraska* who also wrote and directed *About Schmidt* (2002) starring Jack Nicholson, was born and raised in Omaha, Neb. His roots in the midwest certainly shaped the film, with its wonderful shots of plains and fields and small towns and the people we find there. I never felt, though, that Payne is mocking his characters. Nor did I sense that he intended to make a sociological statement about small town America and its decay. Rather, as in *About Schmidt*, Payne's theme is the journey of life—he is using humor to tell the story of broken people on a journey in a broken world.

*Nebraska*, it seems to me, is a stylized comedy about the dreams and disappointments of a man whose journey turns out to be a trip to nowhere. Can we love people like Woody if we can see their quest is illusory? To some extent, haven't our own pilgrimages been flawed with the brokenness that comes from illusory hopes? Throughout the film, Payne shows us moments when a different choice in the past could have resulted in a different present—don't we feel such pangs of regret ourselves? Haven't we, to our shame, found ourselves drawn to relationships from which we can somehow profit rather than give in sacrificial compassion? And don't most of us wonder if perhaps, when all is said and done, our journey is really going nowhere? ■

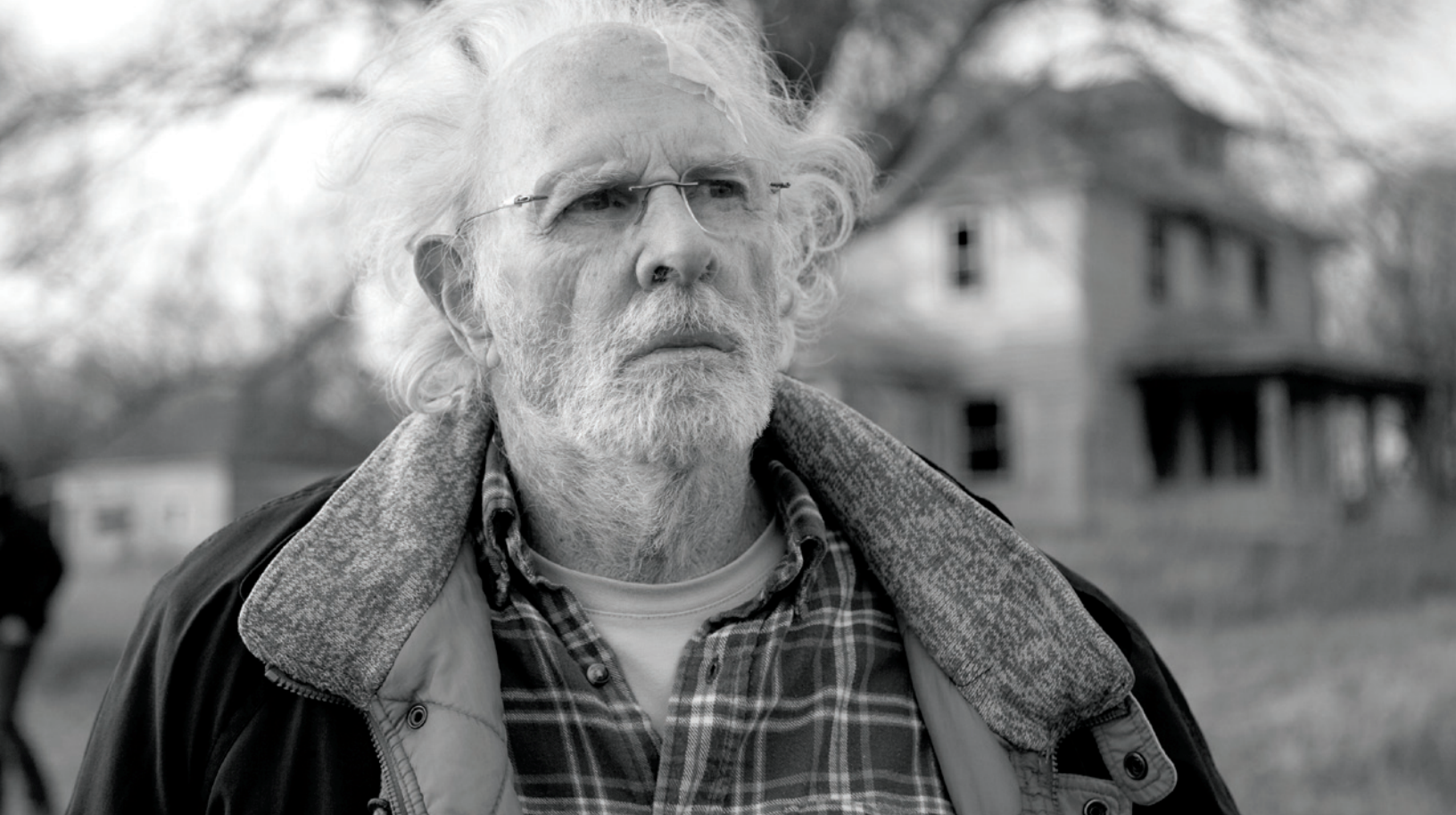
**Sources:** Roger Ebert online ([www.rogerebert.com/reviews/nebraska-2013](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/nebraska-2013)); A. O. Scott online ([http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/movies/nebraska-directed-by-alexander-payne-stars-bruce-dern.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/movies/nebraska-directed-by-alexander-payne-stars-bruce-dern.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0))

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first impression of the film? Why do you think you responded as you did?
2. Consider the film, as objectively as possible, as a work of art. Reflect on the various aspects of cinematic art (acting, script, cinematography, direction, editing, lighting, musical score, etc.). What was used to good effect? Was anything distracting to you?
3. The director, Alexander Payne, chose to film *Nebraska* in black and white. Some people claim to find B&W an aesthetic that detracts from their cinematic experience. Did you find that to be the case here?
4. Imagine the writer and director sitting next to you. As objectively as possible, state in your own words the message(s) communicated by *Nebraska*. No opinions here—the goal would be to listen so carefully to the film that the writer and director would affirm your statement(s).
5. The main characters of the film each play a strategic role in the development of the story. Consider each in turn, identifying each character's strengths and weaknesses.
6. Beyond comic relief, what place did the quest for an air compressor play in the film?
7. Bruce Dern (as Woody) and June Squibb (as Kate) were both nominated for Oscars for their roles in *Nebraska*. Do they deserve accolades for the performance?
8. Most of us think more highly of ourselves than imagining we would be the type to cozy up to someone with money in the hope of gaining some for ourselves. Have there been times, however, when our relationships are determined not primarily by how we might serve but be served?
9. Have you ever found yourself wondering whether your life has real significance? How would you describe that experience? What has helped? To what extent is this due merely to your natural optimism or pessimism?
10. Are there big, or at least significant, choices that you made in the past that you now regret? How do you think your journey would be different if you had chosen differently?
11. To what extent do you find it difficult—perhaps even impossible—to act as a faithful and constant friend to someone pursuing an impossible dream?
12. When we see broken people in this broken world with more than the usual clarity, how do we continue to love, even at cost? What might that cost include? What do we expect from family and friends when they see us with clarity?







**Film credits—*Nebraska***

**Starring:**

Bruce Dern (Woody Grant)  
Will Forte (David Grant)  
June Squibb (Kate Grant)  
Bob Odenkirk (Ross Grant)  
Stacy Keach (Ed Pagram)

**Director:** Alexander Payne

**Writer:** Bob Nelson

**Producers:** Doug Mankoff, George Parra, Neil  
Tabatznik, Julie M. Thompson and others

**Music:** Mark Orton

**Cinematographer:** Phedon Papmichael

2014, USA, 115 minutes

Rated R (for language)