

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2016 Issue 4

THE UNCOMFORTABLE PATH TO MATURITY



COMFORT ZONE

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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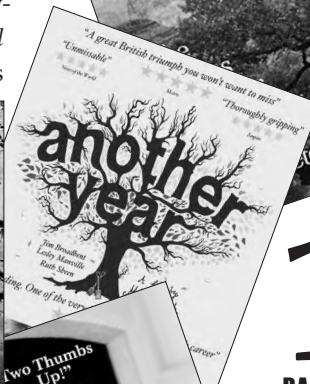
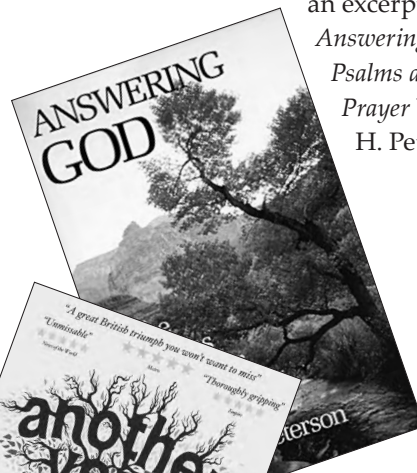
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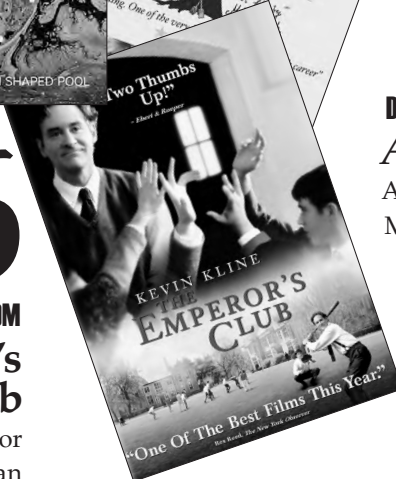


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A Poetic Endnote on Sleep



I know that some people think me a little compulsive for always glancing through the endnotes of books by authors I respect. Endnotes aren't for reading, I've been told, and there is truth in that. But over the years I've come across some good things in endnotes—books that should be read, authors I've mistakenly ignored, little asides that didn't make it into the text of the book but that are worth reading. This time, I happened upon a poem.

"I don't like the man who doesn't sleep," says God. / "Sleep is the friend of man. / Sleep is the friend of God. / Sleep is perhaps the most beautiful thing I have created, / and I myself rested on the seventh day...."

The poem, it turns out, was written by Charles Peguy (1873-1914), a French writer who, if I had ever heard of before, I don't remember. Shot and killed in the opening days of World War 1, a monument was erected near the spot where he died. Somehow his poem caught the attention of Eugene Peterson, who included it as endnote #4 to Chapter 5 of his book, *Answering God*.

"He whose heart is pure, sleeps, / And he who sleeps has a pure heart. / That is

the great secret of being as indefatigable as a child, / of having that strength in legs that a child has. / Those new legs, those new souls, / And to begin afresh every morning, ever new, / Like young hope, new hope. / But they tell me that there are men / Who work well and sleep badly. / Who don't sleep. What a lack of confidence in me. / I pity them. I have it against them...."

Peguy understood that to think of sleep as a biological function, a physiological respite to prepare us for the next day's labor, is to be blind to the true beauty of reality. In sleep we place ourselves in the hands of God and demonstrate what we mean when we claim to walk by faith and not by sight. The Hebraic perception of day and night sees each new day beginning at sundown. That's why the creation narrative has it that "evening and morning, the first day," and on through the week. We begin each new day not with work, but with sleep, so all the world can see that, from the perspective of biblical faith, it is God's work and not ours that is definitive, primary, and essential.

"Like the child who innocently lies in his mother's arms, thus they do not lie / Innocently in the arms of my Providence. / They have the courage to work. / They haven't enough virtue to be idle."

When I was younger someone told me they thought I was addicted to my own adrenaline. It was a highly offensive notion. It was also true.

"To stretch out. To rest. To sleep. / Poor people, they don't know what is good. / They look after their business very well during the day. / But they haven't enough confidence in me to let me look after it during the night. / As if I wasn't capable of looking after it

during one night. / He who doesn't sleep is unfaithful to Hope. / And it is the greatest infidelity."

If the final line of Peguy's poem seems untrue, or a bit of an exaggeration, or perhaps an overstatement for the sake of poetic effect, one thing is certain: we do not know much of God, or faith, or sleep. ■

Source: Quoted in *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* by Eugene H. Peterson (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 1989) pp. 146-147



To the editor:
Denis,

Received the latest *Critique* [2016:2] and as usual immediately read it cover to cover. It's always welcome and always full of thoughtful excellently expressed writing, but you have exceeded yourself with "Seeing Beyond the Traces"—an essay that is a deeply beautiful meditation, a transcendently expressed prose poem.

Thank you for sharing it.
Cecilia Lieder
Via e-mail

Denis Haack responds:

Thank you for your kind and generous words, Cecilia. Little traces of hope are precious wherever they appear.

To the editor:
Dear Denis,

We meet briefly several years ago in St. Louis, Missouri. Shortly after our visit, I requested to receive your publication *Critique*. My undergraduate training was in music and I continue to explore and love the intersection of art and faith. Thus, I was encouraged to hear about your work.

I do realize the church has much to learn and grow into about art and I want to encourage that in my teaching and work.

But even with my high regard for art and a deep concern that the church embrace it, I could not appreciate Edward Knippers' article, "Serrano's Piss Christ Reconsidered" [2016:2]. I think he's wrong to view the work so positively. I also think it was unwise for you to put a photo of that piece of so-called art on your cover. I could elaborate or explain but, at this point, I'd prefer not to.

Sadly, I'm writing to ask you to

remove me from your mailing list.
Name withheld by editor

Denis Haack responds:

I wish you had elaborated and explained your reasons. That would have given us a chance to explore the topic, and even if at the end we agreed to disagree, we would have had a deeper understanding of the issues involved. Since you didn't give your reasons, I certainly won't speculate on what they might be. But your e-mail brings to mind an idea that might be worth mentioning. I'm happy to remove you from Ransom's mailing list since we don't wish to send our publications to anyone not wishing to receive them. But may I suggest that Christians should resist the natural tendency to only read publications with which they agree. In a pluralistic and fallen world, we need to engage ideas with which we disagree, and to do that well we need to hear the most thoughtful expressions of those ideas. Reading a Christian apologist's take on Buddhism, for example, might be both helpful and important, but to learn about Buddhism we will need to listen carefully to a devoted, thoughtful Buddhist. Some ghettos have no walls but are equally isolating.

To the editor:

Dear Ransom (Margie and Denis)—

I can't tell you the number of times that I have paused, prayed, or had a change of thought from reading *Letters from the House Between and Critique*. I have passed on my copies to my best friend and would like to add her to your mailing list for her birthday.

Thank you.

Dixie Moore

Bainbridge Island, Washington

Denis Haack responds:

Thanks so much for your encouraging note, Dixie, and we hope your friend enjoys the publications she will receive from us. ■

Finding Silence

Sometimes silence can communicate far more than words can imagine. In St. John's Revelation, the last book in the biblical canon, the apostle is granted a glimpse into the unfolding of the final resolution of all things. Justice is to be achieved, righteousness is to cover the earth, and heaven is to work backwards to undo the pernicious effects of evil. For that to happen, a scroll sealed shut with seven seals has been given to the Lamb, who tears the seals open so that the severe mercy of God's redemption can cleanse and heal and restore and renew. "When the Lamb ripped off the seventh seal," St. John says, "Heaven fell quiet—complete silence for about half an hour" (8:1).

"We are not a people given to silence," Stephen Faulkner notes.

We don't have the patience, though silence surrounds us infinite as space, both through time and distance, reaching out between the burning stars and their volcanic planets and passing beyond icy moons and into the impossible reaches of the cosmos. Pascal said, "The eternal silences of these infinite spaces frighten me" (Pensées). And well they might. However we understand the vast silence, it is clear that we will soon pass into it. (p. 31)

We meet mystery in silence, but prefer a noisy existence where mastery, not mystery, is our quest.

[W]e have banished the quiet of Sundays. Through the morning: television political talk shows. Through the afternoon: football, baseball, tennis, golf. Through the evening: Sixty Minutes. Nature. Movies. News. Sports analysis without end.

Even our churches are filled with planned talks and discussion groups and teaching

sessions and sermons and small talk and lessons and computerized media presentations backed by piano arpeggios and organs multitasking prestissimo, and strumming guitars and rock bands wailing and recorded pop thump-thumping. And some of this might be necessary to liturgy and community, but who anymore walks into a quiet cathedral to wait and listen and pray? (p. 33) ■

Source: "The Signs of Silence: Many Have Glimpsed a Mystery in the Quiet Intervals" by Steven Faulkner in *Touchstone* (March/April 2016) pp. 31-35.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What comes to mind when you think of *silence*? What does this suggest about you?
2. The ancient Hebrew prophet Zechariah seems to have had a vision that prefigured the one by St. John: "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord," he told the people of God, "for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (2:13). Why might silence be the proper response to the presence of the Almighty? Have you ever entered into this silence?
3. In contrast, the Hebrew poet fears the silence of God: "O God, do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! (Psalms 83:1). What does the silence of the Almighty suggest? Have you ever suffered the silence of God?"
4. What does it suggest of a culture if it does not provide room to enter "a quiet cathedral to wait and listen and pray?" In what ways will such a society be subtly misshapen? What dangers does this society hold for the person who wishes to flourish as a human being before the face of God?
5. What role does silence play in your life? Are you content with this? What

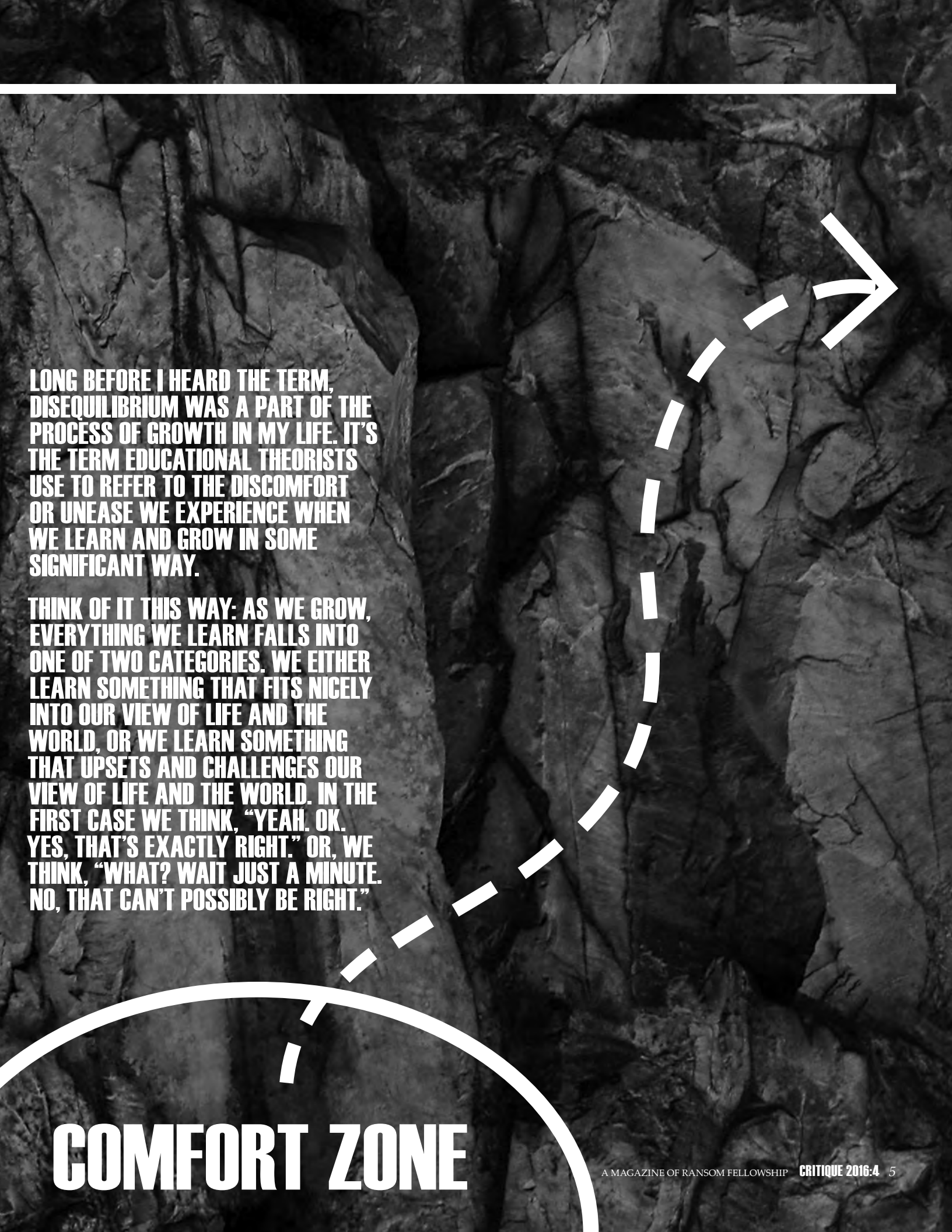
plans might you want to make?

6. In his article, Faulkner quotes Max Picard: "Silence is today no longer an autonomous world of its own... It is a mere interruption of the continuity of noise, like a technical hitch in the noise-machine...the momentary breakdown of noise" (p. 32). Discuss. Why do you think this is? Is it possible that the gospel requires God's people to reverse this social reality?
7. What image, or vista, or color, or visual setting comes to mind when you think of *silence*? Why is this so? What does it suggest to you about yourself?
8. For further reflection, watch and discuss the documentary film, *Into Great Silence* (2005, Philip Gröning).

Source: "The Signs of Silence: Many Have Glimpsed a Mystery in the Quiet Intervals" by Steven Faulkner in *Touchstone* (March/April 2016) pp. 31-35.

READING THE WORD


THE UNCOMFORTABLE PATH TO MATURITY



LONG BEFORE I HEARD THE TERM, DISEQUILIBRIUM WAS A PART OF THE PROCESS OF GROWTH IN MY LIFE. IT'S THE TERM EDUCATIONAL THEORISTS USE TO REFER TO THE DISCOMFORT OR UNEASE WE EXPERIENCE WHEN WE LEARN AND GROW IN SOME SIGNIFICANT WAY.

THINK OF IT THIS WAY: AS WE GROW, EVERYTHING WE LEARN FALLS INTO ONE OF TWO CATEGORIES. WE EITHER LEARN SOMETHING THAT FITS NICELY INTO OUR VIEW OF LIFE AND THE WORLD, OR WE LEARN SOMETHING THAT UPSETS AND CHALLENGES OUR VIEW OF LIFE AND THE WORLD. IN THE FIRST CASE WE THINK, "YEAH. OK. YES, THAT'S EXACTLY RIGHT." OR, WE THINK, "WHAT? WAIT JUST A MINUTE. NO, THAT CAN'T POSSIBLY BE RIGHT."

COMFORT ZONE



The first kind of learning—when things fit neatly—is usually pretty comfortable. The new idea, person, or experience is truly new to us, but somehow it also seems like we may have known it all along, even though we didn't. The pottery teacher demonstrates how to score the clay to make the effect we are wanting, or a lover tells a story from the past that is exactly what we expect of them—all new, and yet each fits without trouble into what we already know.

The second kind of learning, in contrast—when things do not fit—can be disorienting and even deeply troubling. The idea, person, or experience is not only new to us but somehow doesn't seem right. It challenges us, our thinking, our view of things, and it doesn't fit into our sense of how things are. The more we're convinced it's true, the more troubling it is. We'll have to change our mind about things, rethink things in order to make sense of it, and that's upsetting. Upsetting enough, in fact, that, when we can, we usually find ways to keep from experiencing this kind of learning altogether. It's why we prefer to read commentators who share our views and spend time with people who are like us and who share our opinions. It's why Christians tend to read books on Buddhism not by committed Buddhists but by Christians who wish to demonstrate that Buddhism is deficient as a worldview.

Disequilibrium, then, is the term used by learning theorists to refer to the state of unease, sometimes severe, that occurs when a person experiences or learns something that does not fit their preconceived view of life and reality. This dis-ease prompts us to seek some way to restore equilibrium (another of their terms), which we naturally all

prefer. Equilibrium is restored, they say, in one of two ways: We can either change or transform our worldview to include the new information, or we can reject and suppress the new data in order to maintain our old, inadequate frame of reference, thus refusing to learn and grow. It's not merely that we all experience periods of disequilibrium as we grow (though we do), but that truly transformative personal growth cannot and does not occur apart from it. We grow most significantly when our assumptions and ideas are challenged and we are forced to expand how we think about and see life, truth, and reality.

As I've aged, I've assumed that personal growth would become easier since I've gotten past the hard lessons you have to learn when you're young. Not true. Disequilibrium is not just for the young, nor do we outgrow the need for it. Disequilibrium ceases, apparently, only when significant learning and growth ceases.

The Christian will recognize that disequilibrium is essential to Christian spiritual growth. Both personal experience and biblical revelation reveal that repentance and conversion are often accompanied by deep uneasiness, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. In Psalm 51, a poem of repentance, David identifies his unease metaphorically as broken bones (51:8) that God must mend, and as a fear of being cast away from the divine presence that God alone is able to satisfy (51:11). "The sacrifices of God," David muses, "are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart" (51:17). This statement is remarkable because, if true, David's disequilibrium is not just noticed by God but precious to him, accepted as a loving gift to the divine.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism

says, "Christ fills the office of a king in making us his willing subjects," but in this case I prefer the older version. "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself" (#26). Being *subdued* by the rightful king—is exactly right. My hubris makes me uneasy about being too much on my knees.

The Christian life is to involve a change in thinking, perspective, and life in a process of being "transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2). And St. Paul reminds the Christians in Thessalonica how they "turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9) upon coming to faith in Christ. This was a transformation of belief and life, he said, that was so widely noted, he need not comment on it (1:8). And God's word is depicted in scripture as being a force for disequilibrium. The author of Hebrews notes, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). This text does not describe a painless operation, but one we believe is necessary and essential to God's saving grace and to the believer's growth towards full maturity—emotional, relational, spiritual, and cultural.

I would argue that Christian faith not only recognizes disequilibrium as a legitimate part of learning in a broken world, but it embraces it as a necessary aspect of growth.

Disequilibrium is a central concept in the cognitive learning theory of Jean Piaget (1896-1980). In studying how children learned, he identified "a process leading from certain stages of equilibrium to others, qualitatively different, and passing through multiple



‘non-balances’ and re-equilibrations.” Piaget observed that periods of disequilibrium produce growth by motivating a person to figure out how to make sense of what they are learning. Thus these disruptions of equilibrium, though uncomfortable, were valuable if a person was to grow towards maturity. Disequilibrium is not merely an occasional phenomenon in childhood, but rather an ongoing and essential experience if significant growth in knowledge is to occur over the course of a lifetime.

He pictured the process of learning with four simple terms: schema, assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium. *Schema* refers to the “cognitive structures” or mental categories an individual develops in order to name, organize, provide meaning for, and make sense of reality. It is similar to what we mean by a person’s worldview. *Assimilation* occurs when the learner’s environment presents new information or data that is absorbed seamlessly and without conflict into their existing schema. Some new data, however, does not mesh with the individual’s existing schema but instead conflicts with the mental categories they have in place. This requires *accommodation* to occur, whereby the existing schema is refined, made more elaborate, or even changed so greatly as to represent an essentially new schema. When either assimilation or accommodation is complete, the person is once again in a state of *equilibrium*.

Piaget recognized that no one’s worldview (schema) fully accounts for all of reality, so ongoing assimilation, disequilibrium, and accommodation over a lifetime of learning are necessary if a person’s understanding is to become increasingly adequate and mature. Though we all naturally prefer

equilibrium to disequilibrium, uninterrupted unruffled, easy equilibrium would represent the end of really significant learning and transformative growth in a person.

Disequilibrium is the term that best describes a deeply disorienting period I experienced in the sixties. What I was learning and experiencing in college did not fit what I had been taught by my religious upbringing. My cognitive unease—to use the terminology of the learning theorists—soon spiraled into a crisis of faith. My schema (worldview) had been formed by a dispensational fundamentalism in which a sacred/secular dichotomy was not just assumed, but was explicitly taught. Though I didn’t know it at the time, the tradition in which I was raised was profoundly Gnostic. Spiritual activities (e.g., reading the Bible, prayer, witnessing) were to be preferred over the things of the world (e.g., reading a novel, movies, art). One time my father found me reading a novel and asked with obvious distaste, “why read a good book when you can read the best book?” The college classes I most loved—art, anthropology, literature, history, and philosophy—were all subjects I had been warned were most firmly rooted in a secular, not a sacred realm of existence. Thus, my schema dismissed culture as having no eternal significance and identified my love of such things as proof of a dangerous worldliness that had crept into my soul. To ask about such things was not encouraged and, when I did, great concern was expressed over the lack of depth in my devotional life.

I remember one day on campus sitting in stunned silence at the end of art appreciation class. Slide after slide had been projected onto a huge screen in front of the room while the professor,

in a monotone, had recited facts and ideas about each work of art, speaking with his back to the class. At the end, the lights came back on, the professor walked out, and, overwhelmed by the beauty I had seen, I realized I had not taken a single note. I wondered why I had never felt this amazement while I dutifully performed my daily devotions of prayer and Bible reading. Since it was not safe to ask questions, my questions morphed into doubt, and began to slide towards disbelief. It was not long before I was wondering if Christianity could possibly be true or relevant to life in any meaningful way, and that threw everything I knew and believed and lived into a sense of chaos.

It is difficult to describe my unease or sense of disequilibrium without sounding a bit melodramatic. It went on for several years and was profoundly demoralizing and disconcerting. Though it motivated me to pursue the truth, at times I feared there was no way forward that did not involve rejecting my faith, and thus everything that had so far provided meaning. One path—championed by church leaders and family members who feared where my questions would take me—was to simply dismiss my newfound appreciation for culture as unbiblical. I tried, but could not dismiss my questions. Instead, my doubts deepened, and I yearned to find answers so that things could fit together and make sense. Existentialist philosophers, all the rage, caught my attention when they identified permanent dis-ease as the innate human condition.

My disequilibrium was resolved as I accommodated—unconsciously at first, very slowly, after much reading and reflection, painfully, and with great intellectual and spiritual wrestling—a

A COMFORT ZONE IS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE, BUT NOTHING EVER GROWS THERE.

new schema. One of the first glimmers of hope came as I read the newly published book by a strange man named Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (1968), who wore knickers and mispronounced words. It was difficult to face the fact that I had been taught unbiblical ideas, and more difficult, to face the fractured relationships that resulted when I moved from what I had been taught, from a Gnostic spirituality to biblical orthodoxy. In the end, however, in a way I now understand as quietly superintended by God's Spirit, my schema was transformed so that my love for art and culture was no longer dismissed as worldliness but could be embraced as essential to true Christian faithfulness.

"We grow," James Plueddemann notes, "as we wrestle with the issues and problems of life in light of the Word of God." Since God's word in creation, scripture, and Christ speaks to all of reality with equal truthfulness, the precise source of the disequilibrium that motivates us to grow does not matter. That art professor identified himself as an unbeliever, but he was mightily used of God, and I have long wished I could thank him for that class.

Both Job and Habakkuk can be read as extended case studies in disequilibrium, ordained by God so that each would come to a clearer understanding—a new schema—of God and his ways. The first involved a personal crisis, the second an international one, but both induced a transformation of perspective. On the other hand, the wicked king Ahab was reduced to going "about dejectedly" when confronted by the prophet Elijah with God's word of judgment (1 Kings 21:27). Ahab refused to learn obedience, adamantly holding onto a schema of belief and patterns of

behavior that led not to human flourishing but to destruction.

James Hanigan observes that Isaiah's vision of God in the temple (Isaiah 6), St. Peter's encounter with Jesus at the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5), and St. Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) were decisive, "converting" events. Since coming to know Christ is central to Christian faith, Hanigan argues, such encounters are normative for the Christian, though they need not include miraculous elements. They can, he says, be understood...

as events of cognitive and psychological disequilibrium. They involve a process of being thrown off balance—it is noteworthy, that both Peter and Paul fell down—and then restored to equilibrium on an entirely new basis, which requires considerable getting used to. One way then of describing the Christian way of life is as a gradual and complete change of the equilibrium of the self.

Disequilibrium involves unease, but the unease need not always be severe, nor does the disorienting dilemma need to be of epic proportions. We might hear something in a sermon that contrasts with what we thought a certain scripture means, or we might hear something about someone that does not match what we had known about them. Our unease might be so slight that the new information is simply buried in the busyness that infests our days, until what we have learned perhaps reappears with new urgency. Living with contradictory information is hardly an unknown phenomenon. King Herod, it is recorded, "feared John [the Baptizer], knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed,

and yet he heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20). This is said about a man who never actually acted on the truth of John's message.

Perhaps, for example, someone was convinced upon reading Denver Seminary professor Douglas Groothuis' comment in *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick* that, "the [Harry] Potter series is steeped in a thinly disguised occultism." If so, they just might experience a bit of disequilibrium upon reading of Covenant Seminary professor Jerram Barrs' enjoyment of and appreciation for the Harry Potter books in *Echoes of Eden*. "Christians should thank God," Barrs says, "for J. K. Rowling and for her clear presentation of the central values that are at the core of Christian faith and practice." Though different believers will likely react differently to the discovery of this set of contrasting views, it is plausible that, for at least some, a measure of cognitive unease could result. This is not necessarily a "converting" experience, but it can still be embraced as an opportunity for significant learning and transformative growth.

It is worth noting that Piaget's approach to learning was rooted in a distinctly humanistic perspective. This caused him to see infants as blank slates, with initially empty schema that are subsequently molded by their environment. In this view, knowledge is reduced to mere data, and the process of learning is a naturalistic interaction between the organism and its milieu in an impersonal universe. This set of presuppositions does not render his observations on human learning false, since a person made in God's image lives in the reality created by God even if he happens to refuse to

acknowledge it. From a Christian perspective, however, a naturalistic perspective is always a diminished one, since it reduces the richness of reality to only that which can be made subject to scientific experimentation. In contrast, a Christian understanding of human learning is far more dynamic. It affirms the revelation of truth from God in creation, in scripture, and in the person and work of Christ as an expression of God's essence, mission, and work. It insists that learning involves the work of a convicting, active, and personal Holy Spirit, under the providence of God in the midst of a creation that bears the marks of its Creator in learners that bear his likeness. This view means that knowing and doing are irreducibly related, and that there is responsibility in knowing. By definition then, our understanding of disequilibrium as Christians will always be set in a more expansively vibrant context of a supernatural universe, even if that context is not always explicitly noted in the discussion.

Over time, then, in large issues and small, we are being confronted with new facts, ideas, data, and experiences. At no point is this process apart from the superintending ministry of God's Spirit, even if we remain in the dark concerning his purposes. Thus, for example, we read that "the Spirit...drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness" to be tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12). This was an experience of deprivation and conflict—and we can assume, disequilibrium—that ended only when "angels waited on him" (1:13). Whether our new learning occurs during a period of spiritual conflict involving temptation, or in being confronted by a friend about some wrong we have committed, or in discovering the scriptures are opening

our mind and heart to mysteries we have never before imagined, we can confidently believe that our disequilibrium is marked by the Spirit's presence even if all we can see at the moment is wilderness. If we seek to escape this process because we prefer to sidestep the unease, we are intentionally shutting ourselves off from growth. Doing so imprisons us in a perspective that to some extent denies or ignores some of the truth of life and reality, revealed in creation, scripture and Christ. In the midst of busy lives, it can be tempting to sidestep the unease of disequilibrium for the sake of personal comfort, failing to comprehend that our dismissiveness is resisting the grace of the Spirit in leading us on to greater maturity.

Jesus used probing questions to intentionally introduce disequilibrium in his listeners. When he asked his listeners who "proved to be a neighbor" after telling the story of the man mugged en route to Jericho, he forced his Jewish hearers to identify with a Samaritan who, by the cultural prejudice of that day, could not be "good" (Luke 10:24-37). Jesus also used expressions in his teaching that were so disturbing to his hearers—e.g., "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:54)—that his disciples grumbled and some even ceased following him altogether (6:66). This text demonstrates Jesus' willingness—even insistence—to induce cognitive unease in those who sought to follow him. "The better we understand" Jesus's sayings, F. F. Bruce observes, "the harder they are to take." One Sunday, Rev. Ewan Kennedy, in an exposition of John 8, showed how Jesus "systematically pushed their buttons" to help his hearers face the truth. "If God is offending you by what's in the

text," he said from the pulpit, "it is a sign that God is dealing with you. If you are comfortable with God's word, get nervous!"

Kevin Kelly, the former editor of *Wired* magazine, considers disequilibrium to be so essential that he included it as one of his "Nine Laws of God." The laws are his attempt to capture the essence of creativity in a technological society, with one law being, "Seek persistent disequilibrium." "Everything difficult," Scottish preacher and storyteller George MacDonald (1824–1905) insisted that it "indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces, checks some tendency to abandon the strait path, leaving open only the way ahead."

During the discussion period of a workshop I led on disequilibrium at a conference, a man told the story of the death of his son. A soldier who had served in Iraq, the young man had returned to a warm welcome from family, neighbors, and the members of the family's church. Then, one day when apparently his memories were overwhelming, the young man took his life. The father said the believers in the church weren't certain how to respond, and after the funeral their reticence caused them to act towards the family as if nothing had happened. They acted naturally because they didn't know what else to do. The man spoke without bitterness, but described the soul wrenching loneliness he and his wife have endured since their son ended his life.

From the perspective of Piaget's learning theory, this man's friends, fellow believers, and neighbors sensed that to try to reach out to him and his wife would necessarily involve a period of disequilibrium. They didn't know

what to do, or how to do it, and walking intentionally into such a situation is never easy. I can identify. What should I say to this grieving couple? What should I be careful not to say? What questions should I ask, and not ask? What should I offer to do, or not offer? Could I simply be adding to their difficulties by inserting myself into their life? What if what I say and do and ask turns out to be all wrong—how can I learn what I should say and do and ask, and am I willing to go through learning it? What if I offer but they really need someone else? And what if I offer to help and they ask me to do far more than I have time or energy to give? And couldn't befriending them require me to bear the burden of their grief, when I already feel burdened enough by the disappointments of my own life?

As I listened to this man's story I felt great grief, and my grief increased when I faced the fact that I would likely have abandoned this dear couple just like their friends and neighbors did. I would prefer to not disrupt my equilibrium with the difficulty of walking into an experience fraught with so much potential pain. It's not that I would necessarily think about the situation this explicitly. I probably wouldn't. It's just that the couple would represent pain and uncertainty and the unknown, and that would probably be enough, along with my own busyness, for me to act like nothing had happened.

The fact is that I'm not sure I'm willing to learn what I would need to learn to be the sort of friend I wish I could be to them. I would probably sidestep the disequilibrium and have plenty of reasons why I'd made the correct choice.

The biblical imperative, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the

law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), can be fulfilled very differently by different members in Christ's body, given their calling, gifts, and closeness to the bereaved. In such a setting it is also to be expected that most will have no idea how best to befriend and care for the grieving family. This means a few will need to intentionally walk into disequilibrium, to learn how to be a friend, what to do and not to do, and how to be a safe place for the couple to lament, to cry, and perhaps to rant, even against God. It will likely be an enduring disequilibrium in order to love another. It may even include someone approaching the couple only to learn that it might be best not to be one of those who will walk beside them in their grief. However the story unfolds, the disequilibrium we endure for the sake of another could rock us deeply, causing us to learn things about others, ourselves, relationships, God, and about the reality of living in a pain-ridden world that transforms us in ways we had not imagined, nor necessarily desired.

In this we are following Christ into a broken world. He intentionally accepted the Father's will that, in his pain and endurance, there would be grace to mend the awful wounds afflicting God's good creation. In this light, the cross is the final disequilibrium in human history, and it is a cross we are to take up if we claim to follow him.

As Christians, we can be a safe place for disequilibrium. The issue is not whether disequilibrium is occurring, but whether people feel safe to bring their disequilibrium to us. People must be safe to name their honest questions and know they will not be met with shocked expressions or stock answers, but with honest listening. "In order

for men and women to become mature, connected knowers," Richard Butman and David Moore note, "we need an atmosphere of community where questions can be raised and heard, where voices are freely expressed and not silenced, and where students are given opportunity to think aloud, including the freedom to express their doubts."

Sadly, some venues in the church will perhaps never be safe places. A group whose members are quick to mention that "all things work for good" at any hint of difficulty may never be a place where more reserved individuals torn up by brokenness will feel free to share their story.

Rather than casting around to find situations in which we will experience disequilibrium, we can seek to be attentive to the opportunities that already exist in our neighborhood, our workplace, and our church. In each case we may need to walk into a situation in which we are uncertain of how to proceed, and unsure of ourselves. We will need to listen carefully, ask questions, and listen some more. And we will need to be supportive of those intentionally undergoing disequilibrium for the sake of others. Since we may not know how to be supportive, we'll need to have the courage of our convictions.

As I look around me, so many possibilities come to mind. Wounded people like the couple whose son took his life. Intentionally seeking to bridge the racial divide that in such a deadly way fractures our society with violence, killing, protest, and destruction. Former Senator Bill Bradley has posed a question I find uncomfortably challenging. "Ask yourself," he says, "When was the last time you had a conversation about race with someone of a different race?"

**DISTURB US, LORD, WHEN
WE ARE TOO WELL PLEASED WITH OURSELVES,
WHEN OUR DREAMS HAVE COME TRUE
BECAUSE WE HAVE DREAMED TOO LITTLE,
WHEN WE ARRIVE SAFELY
BECAUSE WE SAILED TOO CLOSE TO THE SHORE...**

**DISTURB US, LORD, WHEN
WITH THE ABUNDANCE OF THINGS WE POSSESS
WE HAVE LOST OUR THIRST
FOR THE WATERS OF LIFE;
HAVING FALLEN IN LOVE WITH LIFE,
WE HAVE CEASED TO DREAM OF ETERNITY;
AND IN OUR EFFORTS TO BUILD A NEW EARTH,
WE HAVE ALLOWED OUR VISION
OF THE NEW HEAVEN TO DIM...**

**DISTURB US, LORD, TO DARE MORE BOLDLY,
TO VENTURE ON WIDER SEAS
WHERE STORMS WILL SHOW YOUR MASTERY;
WHERE LOSING SIGHT OF LAND,
WE SHALL FIND THE STARS.
WE ASK YOU TO PUSH BACK
THE HORIZONS OF OUR HOPES;
AND TO PUSH US INTO THE FUTURE
IN STRENGTH, COURAGE, HOPE AND LOVE.
AMEN.**

— Sir Francis Drake (1540–96)

Helping to bring civil discussion in the fractious political debates that cause neighbors to see one another as enemies. And in a religiously pluralistic world, developing genuine friendships with people who do not share our deepest convictions, values, and lifestyle.

The disequilibrium you may need to embrace will likely be different from the disequilibrium I need to willingly walk into for the sake of the gospel. But we both need to know that, in this, we are following Christ into the world and taking a step that leads through discomfort and by God's grace into maturity. ■

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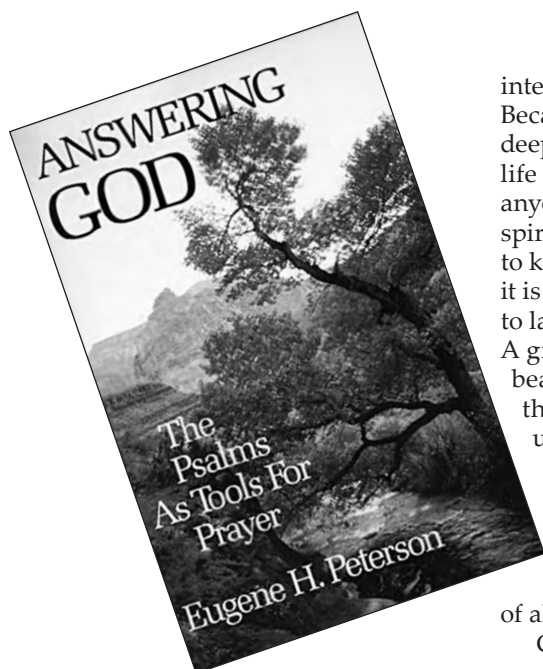
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The Gnostic Life



There are always people who talk a good deal about prayer but don't go near the creation theater. It is not that they don't know about it or can't afford the price of admission. They stay away on principle. Some of them go so far as to say it is immoral, and urge their young and any others they can influence to stay away also, lest they be corrupted by it. A convenient label for these people is *gnostic*. Most gnostics have never heard the word. Gnostics don't carry membership cards. There have been a few times in history when gnostics formed an identifiable sect and did outright battle with the theater-going church but, for the most part, gnosticism is a tilt of soul, a tendency of spirit that doesn't call attention to itself as such. People who pursue excellence with God and decide on a life of prayer are particularly vulnerable to being influenced by it.

The gnostic line is quite convincing when we first come across it. There is an ascetical earnestness and mystical

intensity that catches our attention. Because these people seem to be so deeply concerned about the inner life and to know so much more than anyone else about the graduate levels of spirituality, we are attracted and want to know more. But beware the gnostics: it is difficult to dislike them, harder still to label them, for the forms are protean. A great deal of what they say and do is beautiful. But there are two elements that, through their influence, insinuate themselves into the prayer of faith. These elements are corrosive and can be fatal: contempt for the material and lust for the secretive. "Gnosticism," says Virginia Stem Owens, "is still the biggest lie of all."

Gnostics despise matter. Most are courteous in their contempt, but their politeness of expression doesn't mitigate their dogma. Matter is, after all, mostly dirty, inconvenient, and an impossible drag on their aspirations to rise into the realm of spirit where they can contemplate pure beauty, truth, and goodness. In the scale of being, matter is lower and detracts from what is higher. It is also the source of most trouble. If there were no *things*, there would be neither theft nor covetousness. If there were no flesh, there would be neither gluttony nor fornication. The enormous amounts of time that gnostics are required to spend on domestic affairs is felt to be wasted on the material—washing dishes, doing laundry, taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn, cleaning out the gutters. It stands to reason (gnostics are big on reason, not quite so ardent in common sense) that the less they are involved in the material the more they can be devoted to the spiritual—appreciating beauty, contemplating truth, cultivating feelings of goodness, and

loving the universe. Deep within them, they all have a sense of being that it is in exile, a nightingale soul caged in their skeleton of cartilage and bone, compromised intolerably by the conditions of this passing world.

The gnostics delight in secrecy. They are prototypical insiders. They think that access to the eternal is by password, and that they know that password. They love insider talk and esoteric lore. They elaborate complex myths that account for the descent of our spiritual selves into this messy world of materiality, and then they map the complicated return route. They are fond of diagrams and the enlightened teachers who explain them. Their sensitive spirits are grieved by having to live surrounded by common people with their sexual leers and stupid banana-peel jokes and vulgar groveling in the pigsty of animal appetite. Gnostics who go to church involuntarily pinch their noses on entering the pew, nervously apprehensive that an insensitive usher will seat a greasy sinner next to them. They are, however, enabled to endure by the considerable compensation of being "in the know" (gnostic means "the one who knows"). It must feel good to think that you are a cut above the common herd, superior to almost everyone you meet on the street or sit beside in church. ■

Excerpted from: *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* by Eugene H. Peterson (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 1989) pp. 74-76.

When True Love Waits



The first song, “Burn the Witch” on Radiohead’s newest album, is in homage to the brilliant British cult classic horror film, *The Wickerman* (1973). A Christian Scottish policeman is sent to a remote island off the coast to investigate an apparent murder, and there he discovers an isolated society given over to Druid paganism. The clash of worldviews ends, as it must, in fiery sacrifice. The film is old in terms of pop culture but more relevant today than the day it was released. The second-to-last song “Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor Rich Man Poor Man Beggar Man Thief” is in homage to the classic mystery novel by John le Carré. If *The Wickerman* is about the final struggle between life, death, and the possibility of redemption, le Carré’s spy story is a struggle in which the hero uses the same deceit and duplicity as his enemy to win for the right; two fabulous tales that seek clear answers but lose themselves in the telling because life is messier than we know.

Radiohead is a rock group for thinkers who care about the real questions, but insist they are not cerebral puzzles but deeply human experiences. *A Moon Shaped Pool* (2016) is not a loud protest against the abyss but a quiet

meditation on reality perched on the edge, asking why and wondering that the silence is so haunted with possible meaning because, against all reasoning, love occurs.

*Hey it's me
I just got off the train
A frightening place
The faces are concrete grey
And I'm wondering, should I turn
around?
Buy another ticket
Panic is coming on strong
So cold, from the inside out
No great drama, message coming in
In the oh-so-smug
Glassy eyed light of day...
I feel this love to the core ["Glass Eyes"]*

The instrumentation is haunting and haunted, with strange percussive noises filling in content that the lyrics can only hint at. Radiohead recognizes not a cold impersonal naturalistic cosmos but a universe with surprises and hints that frighteningly teeter on the thin line between rationality and the world of dreams. The sound is at times almost unearthly, as if we have been invited into a dream that is graced by a love that is both precious yet too small to be ultimately fulfilling.

*This dance
It's like a weapon
Like a weapon
Of self defense
Against the present
Present tense ["Present Tense"]*

The New Atheists, in this view, were the final gasp of a moribund modernity, and those who try to refute them with abstractly pure reason are playing a game no longer in touch with reality as a new generation experiences it. If the faith of the Scottish policeman is

worth considering, he will need to be conversant with ancient prophets who dream dreams and who insist truth is finally relational, personal, and alive with deadly power.

*I'm not living, I'm just killing time
Your tiny hands, your crazy-kitten smile
Just don't leave
Don't leave
And true love waits
In haunted attics
And true love lives
On lollipops and crisps
Just don't leave
Don't leave ["True Love Waits"]*

It is possible to be a pilgrim in a trackless waste or a wilderness that is darkly shadowed yet opening occasionally to being lost in love. At that moment, the one who is lost feels found while still being, in an ultimate sense, lost. “Keep my steps steady,” the ancient Hebrew psalmist asks (119:133) in an epic poem written to celebrate the surety of God’s word. This is not a sudden lapse of faith but the sober recognition that only self-satisfied hubris would lead someone to assert they have the path of life figured out. What is needed, instead, are believing pilgrims who know how to pray that their steps be kept steady along the way of life, as they wander without being lost. ■

Resources recommended:

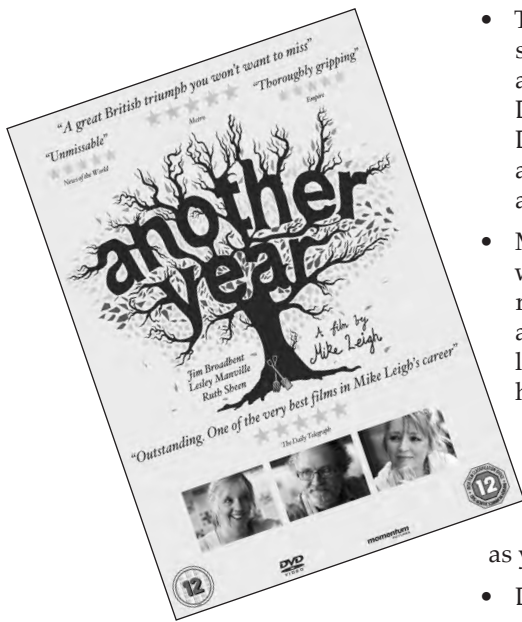
A Moon Shaped Pool (2016), album by Radiohead

The Wickerman (1973), film directed by Robin Hardy

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (1974), novel written by John le Carré

Another Year

by Mark Ryan



Features and First Impressions

- Over at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mick Laselle writes about 'Another Year' that it "is not for Mike Leigh beginners. It's long and seems longer; it's depressing on an epic scale...." Across at the *Chicago Sun Times*, Roger Ebert states, "Leigh's 'Another Year' is like a long, purifying soak in empathy." As you reflect upon the film, what is your first impression? Is this film depressing or empathetic? If you like neither of these, then what mood or emotion would you say characterizes this story? What sense or feeling now lingers with you?

- This movie has a rather minimal storyline. Instead, it is structured around the four seasons of the year. Did you miss an obvious narrative? Did you feel this added to the film and to appreciating its emphases and characters?
- Mike Leigh is a British writer-director who has produced a series of films respected for their instinct, insight, and sympathy. He is frequently lauded for his gifts of observation, humor, and depiction of bruised humanity. In what ways (or in what scenes) did you see these kinds of traits?
 - What other films came to mind as you viewed this film?
- Did your viewing this film draw you back to life experiences or social interactions you have witnessed or been part of?

Key Characters and Story Resolution

- Aside from Tom and Gerri, who are the main characters in the story? In what season of the year and in what condition of life are they introduced to us? What do we know about these people? (e.g. What is their occupation? What is their relationship to Tom and Gerri? How well do they relate to others? Which needs are made known? How does the way in which Mary and Ken dress help us understand their difficulties/need?)
- Concerning the various friends in Tom and Gerri's life, what would you say is their collective struggle? What cautionary message do you hear and see illustrated in these characters lives?

- Tom and Gerri's marriage and home life is the center of this film and stands in marked contrast to their friends. How would you describe this couple and the nature of their relationship? How would you describe the relationships they sustain with others?
- From the point of view of much contemporary cinema, Tom and Gerri's marriage is a rare treat; this couple is comfortable, wise, happy, loving, and living in complete accord. What do you think of their married life? Did this seem a caricature of real life, or a comforting reminder of what marriage ought be?
- Frequently, the characters that Leigh writes and directs allow us to see ourselves. What did watching these characters and their situations allow you to see in yourself and/or in the relationships you sustain?

Basic Theme and Points of Interaction with Christian Faith

- Based upon discussion so far how would you summarize what this film is about? (How do the opening and closing scenes contribute to this understanding?)
- Is there any 'gospel' in this film? (If so, what 'good news' is present? And how does this speak to the 'bad news' that is present?)
- Although unintended by the film's author, nonetheless, I see echoes of what the Church/the Christian life should be in the actions and interests of Tom and Gerri. Can you guess at what and where I see such?
- If my take away is a depiction of the

Church and/or the Christian life ought look like and involve, what do you take away with you from your having viewed this film? (What encouragements? What challenges? What lessons?)

Did you know?

- Mike Leigh collaborated with his actors for five months to create their characters and the world of their characters. The actors then improvise extensively during rehearsals, and the result of those improvisations become the basis of the final script.
- This film was shot in just twelve weeks. But to simulate the four seasons of a year, cinematographer, Dick Pope, used four different film stocks, and a great deal of attention was paid to props so that the passing of time would appear believable. ■

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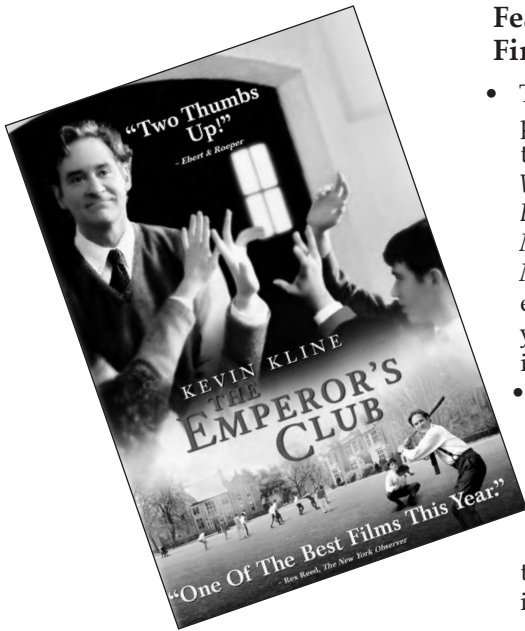


Mark Ryan, together with his wife Terri, served with L'Abri Fellowship for many years (first at Southborough, Massachusetts, then on Bowen Island, British Columbia). He now serves the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.



The Emperor's Club

by Mark Ryan



Features and First Impressions

- The 'inspirational-teacher' genre has proven attractive to Hollywood... think *Goodbye Mr. Chips* (1939), *To Sir With Love* (1967), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), *Dead Poet's Society* (1989), *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Freedom Writers* (2007), etc. As a way into this film, what, to your mind, accounts for the popularity of this well-worn genre?
- As you think about this film in relation to other similar films, what stands out as being similar and what stands out as being different? (For example, how is William Hundert different than other noble teachers we are accustomed to seeing in the movies?)

Key Characters and Story Resolution

- Who are the main characters in the story? What do we know about them (from the point of view of the film)? How are they introduced to us, and how do we leave them?
- What collective and more personal struggles were depicted in this film with regard to the students of St. Benedict's? How effectively are the consequences of choices made in one season of life portrayed as impacting a later season of life?
- Are the teachers of St. Benedict's morally flawed? If so, how are they flawed, and what is different (if anything) about their handling of such struggles?
- In the case of Hundert, what motivated him to raise Sedgewick Bell's grade? (And did anything different

motivate him to accept Bell's rematch twenty-five years later?)

- How did the action of the story resolve? Based upon the final act of confrontation, was justice done? Was there a lesson learned? And if so, who learned it?
- James Berardinelli (*San Francisco Chronicle*) writes: "*The Emperor's Club* doesn't have a lot of heft. It's a relatively lightweight story carried more by the well-defined characters than by plot developments. In the end, we get a sense that it has all been worthwhile, not only for Mr. Hundert, but for those of us sitting in the audience." As you reflect upon the film, were you satisfied by its ending? Is there "heft" (moral or otherwise) to this story? (Please explain why or why not).

Basic Theme and Points of Interaction with Christian Faith

- In light of discussion, how would you summarize what this film is and is not about?
- What, according to Hundert and presumably his colleagues at St. Benedict's, is school or education really about? Do all agree? Do you agree?
- What challenges education's goal? Is it simply that not all agree? Is there also a structural flaw? (I do not know if it is intentional, but it is certainly ironic that the whole matter of virtue is portrayed in relation to being "Mr. Julius Caesar.")
- Is there any 'gospel' in this film?
- What do you take away with you from having viewed this film?

Did you know?

- Bell's playing catch against the wall of his dorm room is a reference to *The Great Escape*.
- Kevin Kline's character, Hundert, is modeled after Robert Nowe, a classical history teacher at Town School for Boys in San Francisco. Nowe inspired the short story on which this film is based.
- While on location at the Emma Willard School in Troy, New York, Kline stood in as an English teacher for several classes who were studying Shakespeare at the time.
- Kline attended Saint Louis Priory School in Missouri, a private, all-boys Benedictine high school similar to the school in the film. He drew inspiration for his performance from his experiences there, and his priory ring can also be seen in the film.
- Ethan Canin, author of *The Palace Thief* (upon which the movie is based) appears as one of the board members around the table during Hundert's meeting with the school's board of directors. He is seated on the headmaster's right during the meeting. ■

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Film Credits: *Another Year*
 Writer and Director: Mike Leigh
 Producer: Georgina Lowe

Starring:
 Jim Broadbent (Tom)
 Ruth Sheen (Gerri)
 Leslie Manville (Mary)
 Oliver Maltman (Joe)
 Peter Wight (Ken)
 Karina Fernandez

UK, 2010, 129 minutes
 Rated PG-13

Film Credits: *The Emperor's Club*
 Director: Michael Hoffman
 Producers: Mark Abraham, Andy Karsch,
 Michael O'Neil
 Screenplay: Neil Tolkin, based on *The Palace Thief* by Ethan Canin

Starring:
 Kevin Kline (William Hundert)
 Emile Hirsch (Sedgewick Bell)
 Embeth Davidtz (Elizabeth)
 Rob Morrow (James Ellerby)

USA, 2002, 109 minutes
 Rated PG-13