

critique

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**DIALOGUE, POETRY,
RESOURCES, MUSIC, FILM,
AND**

A LIFE-GIVING, TRANSFORMATIVE

ORDINARY



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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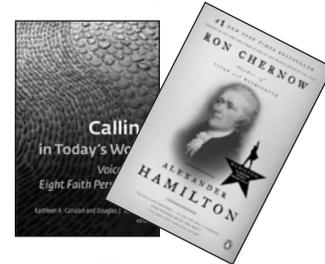
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Nourishing our Souls



“Beautiful things are a *delight* to the senses, a *pleasure* to the mind, and a *refreshment* for the spirit,” artist Makoto Fujimura writes in *Culture Care* (p. 32). The italics are his, by the way, and he is right to emphasize them. “When feeding our souls, we dare not substitute surface attraction—that which is effortlessly appreciated and soon exhausted of virtue—for true beauty.”

We commonly think of a triad in which we should grow and mature: truth, goodness, and beauty. I know plenty of Christians who regularly set aside time to grow in truth, to mature in their thinking, reading challenging books, and being part of a small group that does serious Bible study together. I also know plenty of Christians who consider carefully what it means to grow in goodness and righteousness, taking repentance seriously, praying that virtue would take root in their hearts and lives, and adopting spiritual disciplines in a heart felt desire to love what is good and to do it.

But are there Christians who have a thoughtful plan for growing towards maturity in beauty? Who intentionally set aside time to relish the delight, pleasure, and refreshment that can be

found in beautiful things? Who intentionally seek to sharpen their ability to see beauty in a broken world?

The usual excuse is that there isn’t enough time to add growth in aesthetics to growth in truth and goodness, but that is obviously a smokescreen. After all, we always make time for the things we consider essential. Don’t we instead believe we can achieve spiritual maturity without developing a deeper appreciation of beauty or a more profound comprehension of art? Although we’d never put it this boldly, we actually believe that a Christian can consistently refuse to give beauty the time it requires, can hold undeveloped views of creativity and culture, can insist that “what I like” is a sufficient standard for art—and here’s the kicker—we actually believe that such a philistine can still be regarded as a mature and maturing follower of Christ.

“The Mighty One, God the Lord, / speaks and summons the earth / from the rising of the sun to its setting. / Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, / God shines forth” (Psalms 50:1–2). To miss beauty, then, is to miss God who dwells among his people. Just as we worship God awed by his truth and goodness, so too we worship him for his glory: “how great is his goodness,” the prophet Zechariah exults, “and how great his beauty! (9:17).

We are limited by our culture’s Enlightenment roots, shaped by pagan Greek thinking where truth, goodness, and beauty are made into categories of thought, impersonal, abstract, and strictly rational. A far richer, truer vision of reality is found in the Hebrew wisdom tradition in which Jesus lived and taught. Here truth, goodness, and beauty are not to be dissected but lived, together one mysterious glory of the

infinite personal God who has revealed himself in creation, scripture, and Christ, before whom we stand in faith, obedience, and silence. In this view, beauty is not a category of thought but a reflection of the Creator in all things called into existence by God’s word, is personal because it is a reflection of the personal infinite God, is never abstract but always lived, and is never strictly rational because it goes far beyond all reasoning into a mystery of divine glory that is rational but beyond human knowing. In the Greek view beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but in the Hebrew it is the resplendent glory of God Most High.

Beauty is a signal of transcendence, a sign that something beyond the here and now exists and can be embraced. It is one reason why the scriptures insist that unless we learn to be still, we cannot know God. Beauty is unhurried, delicate, and allusive, so quiet contemplation is necessary to plumb its depths.

“Blessed are they,” Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) said, “who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.” We do God no favor in being so busy or so distracted or so captured by Enlightenment philosophy that we look at glory but see nothing. ■



To the editor:
Denis,

I just wanted to say ‘thanks’ for recommending [*Critique* 2015:4] James Smith’s book—*How (Not) to be Secular*—on reading Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. I’m a little over half way through and have been encouraged to read Taylor’s massive volume when I am through with Smith’s treatment. This is a step of faith for me, truly, because when I set out to read Smith, I had in mind that it would suffice on its own. While it is immensely helpful, I cannot help but think that I need to take the next step.

Furthermore, the most recent article in *Critique* [2016:3] by John Seel on the same subject has served to further aid in my understanding as a pastor of why it is that unbelievers feel the freedom to not believe. Even here, in this once Dutch bastion of Cedar Grove, Wisconsin, a place that once boasted

in its church attendance, there are many new families moving in from the surrounding areas that feel no need to believe in the transcendent, let alone attend church! The article is an encouragement, because I had always set out to make friendships here, not for the purpose of evangelism, but for the purpose of friendship and shared experiences, be it music, movies, or the NCAA Basketball Tournament (a personal favorite time of the year for me!). Moreover, these men know who I am, what I do, and have at times asked me some pretty probing questions. To share a cheap beer (not ironically, by the way) with a man who is genuinely seeking is the fruit of five years of friendship. He attended our church three times over the past three years, not because I asked but because of mutual respect and, I suspect, some haunting in his own life. It is for these reasons that long-term pastorates make the most sense to me. For the health and gospel understanding of the congregation and the slow

and regular friendships with men who do not believe, but I think really want to. Thanks again for all you do to point out these must-read resources and books.

God’s grace upon grace to you and Margie,
Justin Sembler, pastor
First Evangelical Presbyterian
Cedar Grove, Wisconsin

To the editor:
Denis,

Thanks so much for your article, “Seeing Beyond the Traces” [*Critique* 2016:2]. I am always fearful as a physician of encounters in the hospital with those skeptical of signals of transcendence and reading what you had to say was very helpful.

Hope your summer is proving to be relaxing and enjoyable.

Aloha,
Bill Fong
Honolulu, Hawaii

Denis Haack responds:

Justin and Bill—I am always grateful when friends take the time to send a note, whether to ask a question or to mount a challenge or, as you have, to express appreciation for something I have published in *Critique*. Writing is an interesting experience. Unlike with public speaking or in a discussion group where there is instant feedback, when I send out a new issue of *Critique* it simply disappears into the mail. From the beginning we have prayed God would use it to help his people in some small way to think and live Christianly in our broken world. Notes like yours help us know that God has been pleased to answer that prayer. Thanks so much for writing. ■

Hints

by Scott Schuleit

There were those moments as a child,
when epic dreams
beyond the borders of sight—
the margins of the world—were revealed,
offering an elusive glimpse,
a vague vision, like that time
considering hickory smoke
threading from a dark, winter wood,
rising, dissolving
into the infinity
of a blue-gray evening.
Or, after the fresh of fallen snow,
all alone in the starry silence
of early morning,
finding myself wandering
amidst the silvery-blue shadows
of smooth, softly glittering hills.
Once, it had emerged
upon entrance into a room
flickering with orange firelight
and spiced with cider, laughter,
the wonder of each interval
a sliver of light
through a crack in the door,
flaring for a timeless instant,
unveiling a glimpse
into the dark of distance—
a whisper of splendor and mystery—
those moments as so many hints
into the spaciousness
of the everlasting. ■



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Scott Schuleit received an MA in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. He is an adjunct instructor at South Florida Bible College.

His non-fiction has appeared in several print and non-print publications, including: Tabletalk, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Monergism.com, The Gospel Coalition, and Modern Reformation. His poems have appeared in The Penwood Review, Christianity and Literature, Critique, Crux Literary Journal, and Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal. He enjoys the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his wife, Christina.

What Do Students Need?

by Preston Jones

What do my students need from me? Obviously, they need knowledge. If our civilization is to live, then each generation will need to know, for example, why Plato was important, even if some things he said were crazy and opened doors to tyranny. Each generation will need to know why Shakespeare is great. Each generation will need to know why the Sermon on the Mount has been so influential. Students should know what Thomas Jefferson meant when he said that people have a God-given right to pursue “happiness,” which has little to do with fun and amusement and a lot to do with hard work, perseverance, and a virtuous life.

Like all people, students tend to take the good things for granted. But many such things—the kind of stuff, for instance, that makes mission trips possible—didn’t come about by accident. Electricity, rapid transportation, modern surgery, water purification systems, e-mail and telephones all came into being in a certain civilization that prized certain ideas, among them the belief that when people are creative and busy doing things that make life better, they are reflecting the interests and image of a creative God.

And I think that students should be encouraged to see that inventiveness is most likely in contexts of trust. The New Testament’s moral teaching in favor of kindness, decency, integrity, truthfulness, and perseverance in good works really is a guide to better lives and better societies. I want to challenge my students to see that when such virtues are not treasured, protected, and promoted, then societies erode and with that erosion go opportunities to help people in other parts of the world. I happen to be writing these words in a hotel room in a Central American city

riven by insecurity, distrust, and crime. Life doesn’t have to be this way

I want my students to know, or at least to have a chance to consider, such ideas. But I know that words go only so far. The casual cynicism that pervades American culture exists for a reason. Mr. Huxtable, the ideal pop culture dad, turns out (so myriad allegations claim) to be a predator.

So my students need words, but they need words contextualized in a life that attempts to live up to certain ideals.

I ask myself: what do students need from me? One thing they need is a model of perseverance in good work, in work that, if allowed to run its course, can benefit individuals and society. In the classroom, this means the diligent pursuit of good thinking. It means that students should be able to see that classes are well-prepared, that the teacher isn’t using gimmicks to pass time. The teacher tries to model diligence, thoroughness, and charitable efficiency. The teacher values all contributions but doesn’t allow clichés, catchphrases, and buzzwords to stand in for thought.

And students need models of thoughtfulness, resistance to the Googlification of life. How much less interesting the Gospels would be if Jesus had given straightforward answers to everything—no roundabout responses, parables, or rhetorical questions. Thoughtfulness isn’t intellectual game-playing or the nuancing of everything into oblivion—an approach that led Paul to critique teachers who are “ever learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Like love, thoughtfulness is patient and kind but not forever open-ended. Its goal is knowledge, deep and wide.

Students need idealism informed

by realism. How many teachers started out wanting to change the world only to find themselves years later on autopilot or worse? I ask my students how many ever had classes with teachers who obviously didn’t care. Most hands go up.

The longer one lives and the more one confronts life’s frustrations and problems, the harder idealism is. Indeed, this essay represents part of my own work against the ever-looming temptation to slip into autopilot, to stop caring because caring is harder than not caring. But I’m attracted to the conviction Paul expressed near the end of his life: he knew that he had run well his life course (2 Timothy 4:7). I doubt that such certainty will be mine, but I want to get as close as possible. So while I try to see the world as it is, and as I recognize that the kind of short-term thinking that lost Eden is repeated every day, I nevertheless want to push back—to use words about pushing back and, more importantly, actually to do so, with as much grace as possible, in daily life.

One way to push back against a cultural trend of ever easy, is to try to model perseverance in good and useful work. A way to push back against the habit of instant answers provided by search engines and political talkers is to try to model thoughtfulness. A way to push back against ill-founded idealism that crinkles into cynicism is to hold to true ideals while also facing the world as it is.

Paul spoke with certainty: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Notice the verbs: *fighting*, *racing*, *keeping*. Working for truly good things in the world that God has given us to manage for as long as we’re here. ■

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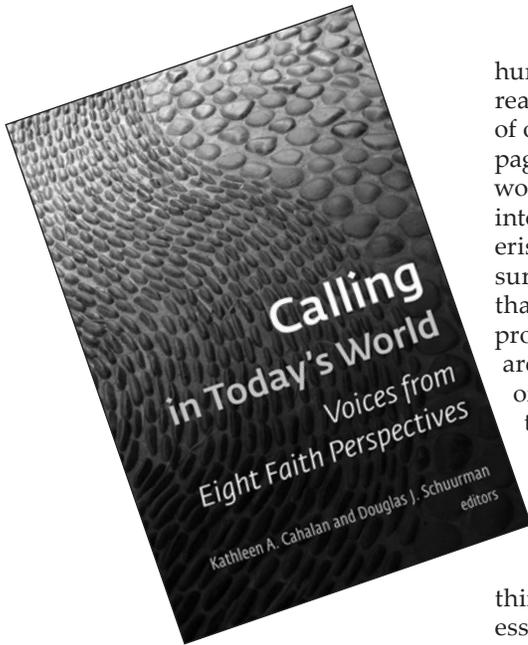
Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University in Arkansas. He travels regularly to Guatemala to teach and learn from Christians there. Lately he has been involved in leading discussions at factories on the personal and economic importance of all useful work.

perseverance
thoughtfulness
realism

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your initial response to Jones' essay? What do you find attractive? What do you find challenging?
2. Jones identifies a number of dangers present in the world of advanced modernity in which we live. List them and define each carefully. What good thing does each threaten? To what extent do you find them encroaching on your own faithfulness in your vocation? Which danger is most dangerous for you? Why do you think that is?
3. Have you had teachers that modeled the sort of life, thinking, and integrity in their vocation that Jones describes? What impact did they have on you?
4. What ideals have you held that have slowly been leached away by the hard reality of life in a broken world? What have you lost in the process? What practical things might allow us to keep our ideals while facing the realism of life as it is? What plans should you make?
5. The sort of faithfulness Jones outlines here is hard. Is that mistaken? Jesus' statement, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30) does not contradict that, but promises that the yoke/burden we are called to fits who we are, our gifts, and, regardless of the difficulty, is part of what flourishing means for us. Discuss.
6. In *The Call* (1998), Os Guinness says that "calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service." To what extent does this describe you and your vocation?
7. Using this essay as a template, produce a version for your own life and vocation. Consider doing it with a group of friends—they need not be in the same line of work—so that you can pray for and support one another in the process.

Non-Christians Reflect on Calling



“‘Vocation’ and ‘calling,’ the editors of *Calling in Today’s World* note correctly, “are Christian concepts. They do not appear in other religions” (p. xi). However, since we live in a pluralistic world, Kathleen Cahalan and Douglas Schuurman invite representatives of non-Christian religions to reflect on these Christian concepts from the perspective of their faith commitment. So, besides a chapter on the Catholic (Cahalan) and Protestant (Schuurman) Christian perspective, there are chapters written from a Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist, and secular perspective.

What is fascinating about *Calling in Today’s World* is that it invites non-Christians to reflect not on an aspect of Christian belief that is a scandal to non-Christians—e.g., the Trinity, the incarnation, the cross, the exclusivity of Christ’s claims—but on a teaching that non-Christians can admit is both practical and admirable. Our view of

human work is crucial if for no other reason than it takes such a large slice of our time and energy. The ancient pagans believed that the gods disliked work and so brought the human race into existence to do it. Modern consumerism is little better, seeing work as mere survival and workers as nothing more than a resource to be used to increase profit. The Christian belief that our lives are significant in the cosmic scheme of things, that our work is pleasing to God, and that he calls us to it is a teaching that brings healing and hope into a world where injustice, toil, and economic uncertainty are the order of the day.

I’ve long believed that the Christian thinking on calling and vocation is essential to Christian faithfulness. It is impossible to speak seriously about human flourishing without it. I had not thought enough, however, about it in terms of apologetics—in terms of commending Christian faith to non-Christians—but *Calling in Today’s World* demonstrates this doctrine’s apologetic power. Though it needs to be done without hubris or triumphalism, a quiet consistent witness to one’s calling and vocation before God is a powerful way to share how the biblical worldview is deeply satisfying to human beings in a broken world.

The editors “invite” the reader of *Calling in Today’s World* “to appreciate what other traditions have to offer and to support each other’s sense of calling” (p. xiii). Fine and good—my non-Christian neighbors should be supported in the work of their hands and minds and imaginations, and I am eager to do so. But it also seems reasonable to listen to each faith tradition carefully as they reflect on this topic in order to ask some serious questions. How does

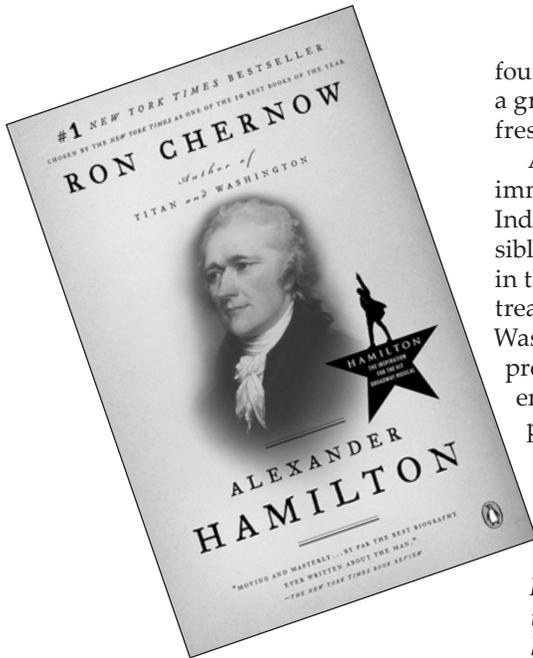
one’s deepest beliefs explain how our work matters? Surely any faith tradition that cannot account for work’s true significance needs to be thoughtfully and graciously challenged. The biblical worldview provides a perspective that should be considered. It is one more reason why the claims of Christ in the gospel are worthy of belief.

One weakness—and it is a serious fault—in *Calling in Today’s World* is that it is tone deaf to the rich contributions to the topics of calling and vocation provided by evangelical Christian thinkers. Significant works like *The Call* by Os Guinness (1998) and *Visions of Vocation* by Steven Garber (2014) go unmentioned, even in footnotes and lists for further reading, and the book is poorer for the oversight. Guinness and Garber not only make important contributions to the Christian understanding of calling and vocation, they write for a lay audience in a way that is life giving for ordinary believers seeking to be faithful in their work.

Even with that caveat, however, I recommend *Calling in Today’s World*. Living in a pluralistic world requires us to get inside the perspective of non-Christian faiths, and the book helps us do precisely that. Think of it as a book length exercise in Christian discernment. ■

Book recommended: *Calling in Today’s World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives* edited by Kathleen A. Cahalan and Douglas J. Schuurman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing; 2016) 223 pages + further resources on vocation + index.

The Immigrant Who Shaped America



I decided to read *Alexander Hamilton* when I heard it was an excellent biography, that author Ron Chernow combined the careful research of a scholar with an ability to write history in prose that made readers feel they had been transported back in time. That was enough to put the book on my to-be-read list. When I learned the book had inspired Lin-Manuel Miranda to write his award winning and immensely popular Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, Chernow's biography was promoted to my to-be-read-now list. There are several reasons I would commend it to you.

First, the rumors about Chernow's excellence as an author are not exaggerated. This is a well-written, meticulously researched piece of history that tells a story worth reading just for the delight of it. Much of Hamilton's life is simply improbable, but it actually happened.

Second, reading *Alexander Hamilton* was a wonderful way to learn about the

founders—and I learned a lot, including a great deal that requires me to think in fresh ways about the American Story.

Alexander Hamilton, a penniless immigrant from the British West Indies, rose to become the indispensable aide to George Washington in the Revolutionary War and then treasury secretary in his cabinet when Washington served as the nation's first president. Gifted with indefatigable energy, intelligence, impeccable political sense, and superb management skills, Hamilton essentially crafted the American political and economic system that still operates today.

In all probability, Alexander Hamilton is the foremost political figure in American history who never attained the presidency, yet he probably had a much deeper and more lasting impact than many who did. Hamilton was the supreme double threat among the founding fathers, at once thinker and doer, sparkling theoretician and masterful executive. He and James Madison were the prime movers behind the summoning of the Constitutional Convention and the chief authors of that classic gloss on the national charter, The Federalist, which Hamilton supervised. As the first treasury secretary and principal architect of the new government, Hamilton took constitutional principles and infused them with expansive life, turning abstractions into institutional realities. He had a pragmatic mind that minted comprehensive programs. In contriving the smoothly running machinery of a modern nation-state—including a budget system, a funded debt, a tax system, a central bank, a customs service, and a coast guard—and justifying them in some of America's most influential state papers, he set a

high-water mark for administrative competence that has never been equaled. If Jefferson provided the essential poetry of American political discourse, Hamilton established the prose of American statecraft. No other founder articulated such a clear and prescient vision of America's future political, military, and economic strength or crafted such ingenious mechanisms to bind the nation together. (p. 4)

The story Chernow tells in *Alexander Hamilton* surprised me by sounding like it was ripped from today's headlines. It is a story of inspired nation building and wretched wickedness, a story to make one proud to be an American yet aware of so much for which we need to repent. Sadly, it shows that even at America's founding we had a financial system sullied with rapacious greed and risky economic speculation, leaders of moral laxity, vicious rhetoric in political campaigns, violence and warfare, and duplicitous politicians who demonized opponents.

Alexander Hamilton was a gifted and fallen human being who did far more in his short life (he died in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr when he was 49) than most people could even imagine. He was one of those rare individuals whose gifts surpasses the average person and who seems to appear in history at precisely the right moment and in precisely the right place to best make use of them.

If you want to understand the American Story, you need to know the story of this amazing founding father. I recommend *Alexander Hamilton* to you. ■

Book recommended: *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow (New York, NY: Penguin Books; 2004) 731 pages + acknowledgments + bibliography + index

READING THE WORLD

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ORBITAL

WARY.

Unless we are blind to reality—from disbelief or busyness, distraction, or addiction—if we stop and look, and then look some more, we will see that the ordinary is charged with hints of glory. And catching sight of glory always gives birth to a sense of wonder.

On most days this month a wild turkey walks warily out of the woods behind our home and makes his way across a bit of lawn to the spot directly under the bird feeders that hang off our deck. It is a male turkey, a tom as they are called (I looked it up), though earlier this summer a hen came by with four lovely chicks (called poults). We only saw her a couple of times, and last week a hen also appeared but she had

only two chicks. Birds are messy eaters, so there is always plenty of feed on the ground for the turkey to find. The chickadees, woodpeckers, and finches that flock to the feeders toss rejected seeds into the air and the beat of their wings throw clouds of feed around as they land, take off, and squabble. It seems a neat arrangement.

The tom is not, to my eyes at least, a very handsome creature. It's featherless

neck and head shows skin that's blue, mottled, lumpy, and it hangs off in flaps over and under its beak. The small naked head on such a huge body seems disproportionate. The mating display in the spring, when toms strut and show off their tails like peacocks, is remarkable, but their feathers, though with a lovely iridescence, are not colorful—probably good for blending into the shadows and bushes in the woods. Still,

compared to the little birds feeding above them—yellow goldfinches, orange orioles, blue jays, and red cardinals—the tom stands out only in size.

All of this, ordinary though it may be, fills me with wonder. I wonder how a wild bird so large can adapt to life next to an urban setting, coming up out of woods to scavenge food right next to our house. I wonder why creation is so richly diverse, with such beauty and fine detail, so that it forms a ecological tapestry so complex that all our learning about it only reveals how little we actually know. And I wonder how so many can see what I see and yet believe it exists in an impersonal universe in which meaning and purpose are nothing more than constructs arising from the random firing of synapses in human brains. I wonder whether human beings can retain their humanity if they truly believe that all wonder is finally meaningless. My wonder over a tom turkey pecking at seed scattered on the ground at the edge of my yard may not seem like much in the cosmic scheme of things, but I resist the notion that my wonder is ultimately insignificant; for if it is, the wonder of wonder shrinks away into a dark sea of meaninglessness.

We cannot escape the deep yearning for meaning because meaning is essential, it seems to me, to our personhood, to our humanity, and in our experience of life. It echoes with poignancy in the protests, filled with lament, against the killing of unarmed blacks in urban settings. It is at the heart of the search for justice in the face of judicial inequality. Meaningfulness is evident in the faces of refugees fleeing the violence and destruction of any of the wars raging across the face of God's good world. It can be heard in the sweet

questions of children and the doubts of young adults as both wonder about so many things in a world chock full of wonders beyond our imagining. The yearning for meaning is heard even in the stories of people whose view of things seems to discount meaning as really possible. We may not have words sufficient to express our yearning for meaning, but the human soul becomes restless when the cold conviction of being insignificant overtakes our consciousness.

A

s part of a plenary lecture at the 2016 Rochester L'Abri Conference, Andrew Fellows identified what he called five key questions of the heart. Together they provide some shape to the yearning for meaning we share, and

when we discover some partial fulfillment—it's always partial in this broken world—some partial fulfillment for our yearning a sense of wonder bubbles up in relief and gratitude. Each of the five questions of the heart, he said, was part of a project, a project of significance each person is embarked on over the course of their life.

Why? This is the *personal meaning project*, the deep and unrelenting desire each person feels for a measure of personal significance. We find ourselves embedded in a life that is rich in detail, crowded with creatures and persons and events in a cosmos of amazing complexity. If we have no sense of why we exist, or discover that perhaps there

actually is no reason for existence then it can be hard to want to continue to exist at all. At the very least something simply won't seem right.

What for? The *purpose project*, the quest to make sense of our life and our work, and how we use up ourselves in the tasks that fill our days. All labor is tainted with toil, and no one is immune from boredom and the fear that what we do is simply striving after wind, a small cog in a massive effort going nowhere and signifying nothing. This is why expressions of gratitude can mean so much while having all we do be ignored or dismissed can feel like being smothered in the dust of death.

Who am I? The *hero project*, not that we each imagine we are some heroic figure astride history but the tiny hope that, in the final analysis, I stand out somehow in the endless crowd. This is why superhero stories and mythic tales of rescue and redemption are so appealing. I suspect this deep yearning of the heart is why young men and women are drawn to warfare, virtual and real, the one environment in which we each can give our all for another or for some cause.

How should we then live? This is the *good life project*—the quest to find some measure of fulfillment for a life well lived. I may not be able to change the world or even be able to change much in the lives in my closest friends, but still I yearn to feel a sense of satisfaction at the end of the day and, more importantly, at the end of my life. This yearning gives birth to a restlessness that dogs us, a willingness to make changes, to dig deeper. It's why so many of us are constantly scanning the horizon looking for a better job, a better relationship, and a better place.

How can I be saved? In the face of death, no one is content, and so we look for rescue or a way out. The *salvation project* is not religious for many. It is seen in the quest for youthfulness, fitness, and longevity that so many obsess over, and in the myriad forms of distraction and addiction that numb so many. The first is active, the second passive, a fact the devotees of the first trumpet to celebrate their superiority, but in the end both are equally pathetic.

What maladapted creatures we are if all these yearnings are for naught. How we answer each question is of importance because, though many answers can be given, not all fit with what it means to be a person. Every answer does not necessarily mesh with reality, and so we are used to making allowances. This is not merely or even primarily a strictly cognitive exercise. True, it is important to think about the answers, but in practice we tend to live into the answers rather than reasoning them out in an abstract way and then shifting gears to put our ideas into practice.

As I listened to Andrew's lecture I thought his list a good one, something that provided clarity in understanding the human condition, clarity in understanding my own heart. And a few other questions come to mind as well.

Am I loved? The *relationship project* in which we need so desperately to know there is someone who loves us, accepts us, and will not leave. It is why heartbreak is so painful and why, even in situations where it is sadly the best and necessary option, divorce is always wrenching and sends ripples of disappointment and hurt across generations. To feel unloved and unlovable is to sever the chords of friendship

and community and to threaten an unrelieved loneliness. The desire to be loved is at the root of our yearning for meaning, and, as all the best stories assure us, when we fall in love, the wonder of it all can take our breath away. In the creation narrative, God proclaimed all things good except for one thing, that the man was alone. Not until woman was present was art made (Genesis 2:23), and in describing what it means to be made in God's image, the Creator spoke of them not individually but in relationship. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). The need to be loved and to love is a yearning we cannot escape, and it can be argued that this quest is at the root of all the deepest human desires and needs.

Where is home? The opening stories in scripture capture so much of the essence of what it means to be human. It is significant that, when our first parents determined to live not by God's word but by their own ideas, the first result was the loss of home (Genesis 3:23-24). Choosing to go one's own way meant that the place that had been prepared for them was lost to them, and the wandering we all know began. The *place to rest project* had been launched. When the first murder occurred, there was further separation, and Cain lamented his lot. "My punishment is greater than I can bear," he cried (4:13), and all those without home have shared that grief ever since. Singer songwriter Karen Choi knows the yearning well:

*I want somebody who will know my
name*

*Know where I'm going know the places I
have been*

'Cuz I been up and down

*I am looking for something to own
For a place to belong for a house I can
call my own
'Cuz I've been up and down*

Even nomads bring home with them as they travel. Those that suggest that homelessness is merely or primarily a financial issue have not reflected on the problem in sufficient depth.

Can justice be achieved? We listen to the news, look at the pictures and videos coming from war zones and terrorist attacks, and wish that justice could occur in the real world. It's why so many movies tell stories of heroism, even though in many it is vengeance rather than justice that is sought and achieved. "Let righteousness cover the earth," Bob Marley and the Wailers sang, "Like the water cover the sea," giving voice to the *justice project*. The lyrics reflect expressions used by the ancient Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk, and so have a long history in the hopes of mankind. This yearning for justice seems to be instinctive, innate in people, showing up even in small children who feel slighted by playmates and parents.

What is that? The *creature project*, where we wonder as creatures what our fellow creatures are and how they fit into things. This afternoon I stepped out on our deck to record a reading on our rain gauge. I am a volunteer for the Minnesota State Climatology Office. It isn't much of a task, since I've always tried to keep track of rainfall. Living this far north means weather is a ubiquitous topic of conversation, because we get extremes that are memorable. So, since I checked rainfall amounts anyway, I figured I should do it in a way that helps climatologists in their research. I signed up, received

an official rain gauge, and record the amount of precipitation every day on a chart that I send in at the end of each month. We had a series of thunderstorms roll through last night—rainfall: 3.71 inches.

As I walked across the deck to the gauge, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. The tom turkey stepped away to the edge of the woods and stood watching me. So I watched him, and for a few minutes we eyeballed each other until he slipped away in the bushes. My spiritual mentor, Francis Schaeffer, used to say that when we stand with our fellow creatures before the creator there are two things we must remember. On the one hand, we are different from the rest of the creatures because we bear God's likeness. On the other, we are no different from the rest of the creatures because, like them, we are creatures. That tom's life is dependent upon God just as mine is, and one important difference between us is that the tom is content to be the turkey he was created to be, while I and all my kind have refused to accept God's word concerning how we are to be and to live.

Cranes know when it's time to move south for winter.

And robins, warblers, and bluebirds know when it's time to come back again.

But my people? My people know nothing, not the first thing of God and his rule. (Jeremiah 8:7)

Under the influence of modernity, many believed all these great yearnings could be fully met in this life. Even today politicians speak as if justice can be achieved as long as their particular agenda for change is instituted and funded. Christians testify to having met God in such a way that these questions

cease to be questions for them, and the impression is given that, if the answers are not fully settled for you, you aren't as spiritual as they are. Yet, because we see only in part, no one can ever claim to have all the answers fully settled. Broken people in a broken world will always yearn for answers because, even if we are convinced that God's kingdom will come, we still live before its final consummation. Even if we have developed a cognitive answer that satisfies us (as we should), we are still on a pilgrimage working out that answer in life. Things are not yet fully complete.

A

s a Christian, I find the answers to these human yearnings—the worldview provided in scripture as an unfolding story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—to be so satisfying that I want to share them with others. The fact that things are not yet fully complete means there can be no hubris, no triumphalism in my sharing. I too am a fellow pilgrim. The fact that Christianity provides answers that are intellectually rigorous, historically plausible, and practically nourishing means that discussing them is not a duty but a joy. The conversation helps me think through my own position, helps identify areas in which I need more reflection and deeper understanding, defines questions to which I have no sufficient answer, and prompts me to find ways to express my faith in terms that non-Christians can understand and appreciate. In the process I hear

alternative answers given by various religious traditions and ideologies, and can honestly assess them, where I would agree and where I find I need to disagree, and why. Such conversations are life giving, demonstrating by listening that we care for people, and by asking questions that we take their ideas seriously.

None of this requires me to be a philosopher or theologian. It requires understanding and a willingness to learn, but that is part of ordinary Christian discipleship. I need not try to be an expert in world religions, but be willing to ask questions and listen to the religious convictions of my friends and neighbors. I need not read great tomes by philosophers, but be willing to read the things that my friends and neighbors find helpful. This is the ordinary in my life and it is to that I am called.

I want to be faithful as a Christian in this world, now, in this time of yearning. I am not part of the powerful, influential cultural elite whose decisions can alter the flow of history or affect the shape of the culture. I am an ordinary person who knows ordinary people, and who sometimes feels the ordinary is so ordinary as to be insignificant.

That is a mistake: thinking the ordinary is insignificant. It is anything but insignificant. It is where the extraordinary occurs.

The story of scripture is the story of ordinary bread becoming the broken body of our Lord, ordinary wine becoming his blood shed for us, and ordinary water through which we pass to take our place as a member of Christ's body. In the ordinary elements of the sacraments, an extraordinary thing occurs, a mystery that can only be described as an exercise of divine grace in the gospel. These rites of the church,

essential to Christian faith, capture the Christian perspective on life in a broken finite world. As God's people live faithfully in the ordinary of our days God does extraordinary things.

My ordinary is not your ordinary, and certainly is not the ordinary of a professional philosopher or professor of comparative religion, but it is where God has called me to be faithful. So, I can be content to steep myself in the truth of God's word and find creative ways to talk about and live out that truth in daily life.

It can be hard to be content with being faithful in the ordinary. We dream about being a hero, and want to part of something that is big. It's not a new desire. One evening early in his public ministry, St. Mark recorded that Jesus ministered grace to hurting people late into the night (Mark 1). They found healing, freedom from oppression, and met the truth. It must have been impressive—"the whole city was gathered together at the door," he says (1:33). The next morning Jesus was gone, having gotten up before dawn to go out alone to pray, so the disciples set off to find him. Now, I want to be careful here because St. Mark gives little detail and it is easy to read into scripture what is not actually there. But notice what occurs when the disciples find Jesus. "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (1:37-38). An entire city is stirred up about Jesus, they all gather early in the morning to experience more of him, and Jesus is off in a lonely place praying, and then, upon hearing that a crowd is waiting for him, says let's go somewhere else. Our Lord's calling defined his ordinary, and that meant leaving a receptive crowd behind. I

don't want to read into scripture, but I can't help wondering if the disciples found all this rather baffling.

As I am faithful in ordinary things, pursuing my calling, and you do the same, we can trust that God can use the faithfulness of his people to change lives, change cultures, and change the world. We may not see how he is at work—he has not promised that we will always be able to see what he is doing—but we can trust him to love his world and us and our neighbor.

The great themes expressed in these yearnings are the themes that appear in the best stories. We can see them, if we have eyes to see, in the best novels and children's books, in poetry, in music, and in films. In fact, it is usually through story that most of us wrestle with these things rather than in some abstract, academic philosophical or theological setting. They are also heard in the stories that people tell of their lives and that come up in conversations when people feel safe enough to reveal something of their dreams and fears.

This is why some of the simplest gifts are so profoundly human, and why people starved of them feel so lost. Gifts like unhurried conversation—not unlimited conversation, mind you, but unhurried. Conversations where cell phones are ignored and where attention is paid and proved by asking questions and by careful listening.

Sociologists have discovered that we all need the third place. The first place is home, and the second is the workplace—both needed and enjoyed and in which family and work occurs, both central to human existence. The third place, however, is a safe spot where relationships are nurtured and community is developed and deepened. It is

a place outside the home and place of work where friends meet to talk, to care for one another, to argue and debate, to laugh, and to explore the deeper things of life. In some societies, the third place might be a sidewalk café, a pub, a coffee shop, or a park—wherever friends can be together to really talk. American society, built around the automobile, busy urban centers, and distant suburbs by and large is devoid of the third place, though some hopeful signs of its recovery is occurring as millennials transform urban spaces into more humane living centers. Finding ways to provide a third place for our friends and neighbors can be a simple yet radical gift in a society of too-busy living.

Hospitality needs only warm welcome and a safe place for conversation to be a life-giving gift. A simple unhurried meal of soup and bread shared on a card table in a cramped apartment can make friends feel cared for and noticed. Afterwards a short story can be read aloud, or a movie watched, or a new album played, and the discussion can be allowed to flow naturally, with no agenda except listening, asking questions, and listening some more.

T

he turkey—I have been thinking of it, foolishly, as my turkey—is back scratching for seed under the feeders on my deck. The earth is the Lord's, and that tom is under his gracious and watchful care. Jesus was warmly expressive in describing how

his Father cares for his creation. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” he asked. “And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matthew 10:29). Sparrows then, as now, are not an exotic species but a common, prolific bird found everywhere and, from a human perspective, worth very little. St. Luke records Jesus’ statement a little differently. “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God” (Luke 12:6). What we should notice is not that then, like now, they are eaten, but the care extended to them by God. He remembers each one, and forgets them not. If this is not a divine blessing of the ordinary, I cannot imagine what would be.

The ancient biblical writers, free of the mechanistic reductionism that so encumbers our thinking today, saw birds properly within an enchanted universe. We get to listen in as the Creator addresses Job so many millennia ago:

*Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads his wings toward
the south?*

*Is it at your command that the eagle
mounts up and makes his nest
on high?*

*On the rock he dwells and makes his
home in the fastness of the
rocky crag.*

*Thence he spies out the prey; his eyes
behold it afar off. (Job 39:26-29)*

In adapting to life on the edge of an urban center, my tom is not cast adrift but has instincts honed by keen eyesight, an omnivorous diet, the ability to hide in the shadows, and the very wisdom of the Almighty. Here, if we have eyes to see, the ordinary becomes quite extraordinary, and something

so routine it often goes unnoticed is charged with mystery.

A

As we listen and talk, we can use the simple process of discernment to shape the conversation. What’s being said or communicated? What is made attractive and appealing? With what do you agree? What would you challenge?

Why? And what difference does it make in life?

Christians can and should meet together prayerfully to work through some answers to the great yearnings and questions. We need one another’s help in thinking things through, and others can help us see when our answers are too glib or weak. One necessary part of this exercise should be to explore how to frame our Christian answers creatively, in ways our non-Christian friends might be able to understand and appreciate. Jesus used stories and metaphors, answered questions with questions, left things hanging—whereas today most Christians speak as if they are perpetually in a Sunday school class. No wonder so many unchurched people are unimpressed by us.

We live in the in-between time, after the establishment of God’s kingdom but before its consummation. God’s revelation of himself in creation, scripture, and Christ provides answers for the deepest yearnings of our hearts, and yet we still yearn for the answer to appear in its fullness. It is a very good time to

be alive, because it is the time my Lord has ordained for me. My sworn enemies, the flesh, the world, and the devil are always discreet but unrelenting in finding ways to subtly make me discontented with being faithful in the ordinary. Of keeping me too busy or too stressed to have time to nurture wonder in the extraordinary things the Creator has built into the ordinary things he has made. Of slowly increasing religious activities until I have no meaningful relationships with non-Christians. Of convincing me I am not creative or intelligent enough to speak and live out the Christian answers in appealing ways before a watching world. Of making me think that faithfulness in the ordinary is too small to count in the coming kingdom.

The only real issue before me is whether I will be content—as my tom turkey is—to live as my Lord intends in his call to me. Once again, Karen Choi gets it right:

*Sometimes I feel a pull, is it only me?
I wonder how to live life well, I wonder
how to fully see*

*As the earth waits for her glory, as
human hearts wait to be free
I will wait for you, oh Lord, oh Lord out
on that road to Tennessee*

*Call my name won't you give me
something good
something good to do*

*May my days unfold like an old back road
ever lovely ever true ■*

Sources: Excerpt from “The Clearing” by Lêdo Ivo, a poem published in *Image* (Summer 2016 #89) p. 29. Karen Choi in song “Older” and “Road to Tennessee” on *Through Our Veins* (2016). Bob Marley in song “Revolution” on *Natty Dread* (1974)

Yearning for a Home Beyond Time



This summer I had the chance to hear Karen Choi play at the Aster Café in Minneapolis. The musicians that backed her also appear on her latest album, *Through Our Veins*, and it was a lively, lovely set. Choi's clear, expressive voice and the emotional pull of her alt-country sound grounds her music while her lyrics invite us to see past the details of the here and now into the greater reality in which we live and move and have our being. Never sentimental, this is music that embraces beauty while yearning for that which all beauty portends.

*I'm getting back to the basic
I'm getting back down to what's real
Spent all these years trying to get it
just right
Now I'm spinning my wheels still
I want to love without limits
Want my heart to grow too big for its cage
Life is as short as a song
And as fragile as a bright blue
robin's egg...*

*I watch the trees hear the melody
Of the music of this beautiful sphere
I think that they want to break free
and dance
But they can't, they're too rooted in fears
See life's gonna throw you some punches*

*But only for those who love free
The open heart is most subject to wound
But only the open heart sees
[From "Through Our Veins"]*

Her debut album, *Paper Birch* (2012) was a meditation on space, an exploration of how geography, distance and pilgrimage shapes us. She brought us with her and in the process helped us see our own path with greater clarity and affection. Now she turns to time, aware how this relentless dimension of reality is a measure of our finiteness as creatures waiting for eternity.

*By now we know how the promised
spring comes on slowly every year
We wait under the last winter's snow,
try to shake off heavy fears
Now I don't know if this old heart can
take another frost
I'm a daffodil, my hope must bloom
despite the risk of lost...*

*I long for eternal sun,
Warm on my shoulders, dry my eyes
I long for eternal sun,
Make all this sadness come undone
Come undone*

[From "Nineteen"]

Here getting older is not a reality to be denied or fought but rather a chance to rest in the hope that maturity is reassuring as we come to know that love capable of grace is on offer. The pilgrimage continues, and time's passing is noted with the calm assurance that traveling together is so much better than finding oneself alone.

*We both are starting to appear a
little older
I'm trying to see every gray turned hair
as a crown of glory
Turn the pages of our life, tell the story of
our days
We've said our vows a thousand times in*

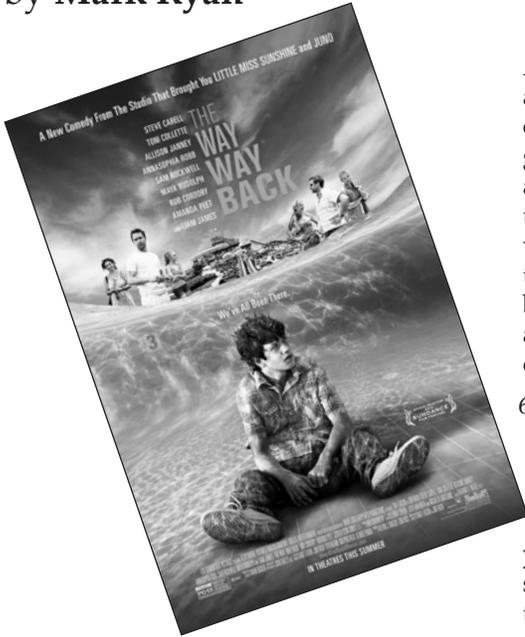
*a thousand different ways
Take me high take me low, take me
anywhere you go
I just wanna go with you, I just wanna
go with you
When you're struggling to survive,
honey, you better let me drive
I just wanna ride with you, I just wanna
ride with you
[From "Anywhere You Go"]*

Through Our Veins has no time for regret over time wasted, since here the reality of time is part of whom we are, not an enemy to be resisted. Time is passing, but it also makes home and love a more precious gift giving birth to the hope that an even greater home lies ahead. The flood of the century, gray hairs spotted in a mirror, an infant needing to be fed, photos that remind us of what is past, the promise of a robin's egg, the morning's rooster crow all become signals of mystery, of transcendence in a life that is so rich that its beauty, even in a broken, hard world, can make us pause and be overcome with gratitude and wonder. ■

Album recommended: *Through Our Veins* (2016) by Karen Choi.

The Way, Way Back

by Mark Ryan



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was your first impression? What dialogue and visual settings stood out to you? (Why? What feelings did these moments evoke in you?)
2. To what genre might you assign this film? What other films did it bring to mind?
3. Who are the main characters in the story? What do we know about them? In addition, what relationship dynamics most stand out to you?
4. Much of the film centers around two settings—Trent’s ocean-side home and the local pool park, Water Wizz. What is similar about these settings and how are they different for Duncan? (Do you recall significant settings from your youth? In what ways did such settings contribute to your gaining a sense of self?)
5. One reviewer confessed upon simply hearing about this movie: “Really?

Another movie about a shy, gawky, angsty teen boy who triumphantly overcomes his lack of a hot blonde girlfriend.” After viewing this film and thinking about its main characters and their relationship dynamics, what do you identify as the movie’s theme? (What suggestions are offered by the opening and closing scenes and the film’s title? How would you characterize the central story?)

6. Thinking biblically...
 - a). To what degree does this film help us think about family in the twenty-first century? (Is the scenario of “child/adult reversal” familiar to you? Is the reality of “coming of age,” so often depicted in film, something the Christian faith can speak to in a helpful way? While the evangelical church is known for its general embrace of “family values,” to what degree is it addressing the issues of broken homes, dysfunctional relationships, and the resultant confusion of where one belongs?
 - b). Erik Yates (Zeek Films) writes: “Ultimately, this film has a powerful message of community and what a family truly is. Everyone is looking for a place to belong, where they can be themselves, with no masks or conditions. We all want to be accepted, warts and all. Family, ideally, is supposed to be that place. This film, however, shows...that family is often not a place of acceptance.... This film does not seek to provide an answer for this dilemma as much as acknowledge its ever present reality in our lives.” In light of twenty-first century dynamics—and the human longing for acceptance—how might the church better serve those wrestling with isolation and struggling

to mature? Are there things to be learned from the pool park staff? If so, what might they be, and what might these things require of local congregations and Christian families?

7. Overall: Did you enjoy this film? What will you take away from having viewed it? (What are its strengths and weaknesses?)

TRIVIA

- The writer/director team of Nat Faxon and Jim Rash play ‘Roddy’ and ‘Lewis,’ who work at the Water Wizz.
- Rash says the script’s main inspiration was a conversation he had with his own stepfather when he was 14, now reflected in the opening scene.
- Steve Carell initially turned the movie down because of a scheduled family vacation. But the Massachusetts film location was only a short drive from where his family was headed, enabling him to accept the role.
- In the original script, the character of Caitlyn was a young teenager with no significant screen time. In later drafts, the she was made older and given more interaction with Owen. When Maya Rudolph was cast, she and Rockwell were told that their characters would have to create a meaningful relationship. ■

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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.





Film Credits: *The Way, Way Back*

Writers/Directors: Nat Faxon, Jim Rash

Producers: Tom Rice, Kevin Walsh

Director of Photography: John Bailey

Editor: Tatiana Riegel

Music: Rob Simonsen

Starring:

Steve Carell (Trent)

Toni Collette (Pam)

Rob Corddry (Kip)

Liam James (Duncan)

Alison Janey (Betty)

Amanda Peet (Joan)

AnnaSophia Robb (Susanna)

Sam Rockwell (Owen)

Maya Rudolph (Caitlin)

Budget: \$5 million

Box Office: \$23.2 million

USA, 2013, 103 minutes

Rated PG-13