

# critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2018 Issue 4

## **Flannery O'Connor: The Patron Saint of Ex-English-Major Organic Vegetable Farmers**



# 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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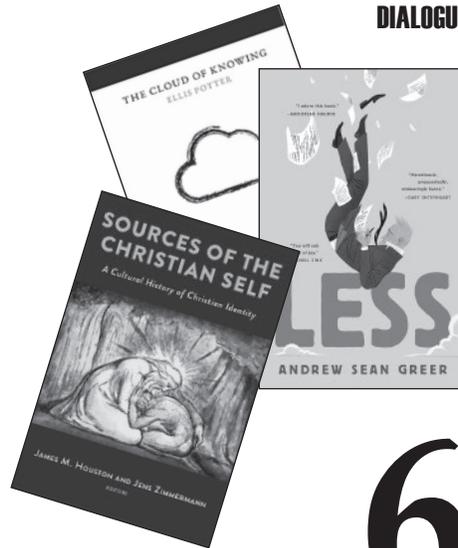
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# A Prayer for Discernment



Good friends of ours, Greg and Mary Jane Grooms, recently introduced us to a poem, a prayer I have been pondering.

The Grooms were L'Abri Workers back in the 1980s when we met them, and lived a few blocks from us. For the past 25 years they have lived and worked at Hill House, a Christian study center at the University of Texas in Austin. The prayer they referenced is by Carmen Imes, professor of Old Testament at Prairie College in Alberta, Canada.

It is titled "A Scholar's Prayer," but includes lines all of us need to pray. If you are a scholar, you need to pray it. If you are a dropout who hated school so passionately you couldn't wait to leave it behind, these lines are for you. They are for every Christian who yearns before their Lord to be discerning instead of reactionary in our uncertain times.

*Quicken my mind  
that I may discern what is right  
and understand more fully the  
complexities of the subject  
that is before me today.*

Day by day and minute by minute we are inundated with news and opinion, spin and fact. There is simply too much to absorb, to say nothing about carefully processing much of it. If we are not to be snared by half-truths

and lies we will need to be careful. It is a good thing to ignore much of the cacophony around us. I don't really need to know much of what is out there to be faithful. If I know less and know it with greater depth, I am more deeply into the truth.

*let me never mistake eloquence  
for accuracy  
Or monotony for irrelevance.*

Media seeks to capture our attention with a host of manipulative tools. Lies repeated often enough begin to sound true. Forceful presentations sweep us into conclusions without careful reflection on how we got there. The speed by which things come at us causes us to lower our guard. And being a successful television or talk show personality is not synonymous with being wise.

*Let me love the truth  
more than I love what I have thought or  
said or written.  
Grant me the courage to confront  
falsehood, even in myself,  
to defend an unpopular position,  
or to surrender a cherished opinion  
found wanting.*

The pressure to go with the flow is like a rip tide always pulling us under the waves. Asking probing questions and withholding judgment is unpopular, and fools see it as weakness when it actually is an essential part of wisdom. Christians adopt ideologies—conservative or progressive—not seeing them as the idolatries they are, and decorate them with a thin veneer of proof texts to make them acceptable. It is hard to say, "I don't know." It is harder to say, "I may be wrong." And it is hardest of all to say, "I was wrong." But all three should be said when needed. Conformity is valued more highly than to be a seeker

of truth, and humility is interpreted as an unwillingness to accept the obvious. This is the way of fools.

Asking probing questions is a skill that is not innate in most of us and so must be learned. As we seek to learn and practice it, expect pushback. It always amuses—and annoys—me when a question I honestly pose is interpreted as revealing my position on something. If I want to tell you my position, I'll state it; I am asking a question to learn, to explore, to see where your ideas come from and where they take us. People instantly become defensive at the slightest hint that their opinion is not accepted as true and final. This too is the way of fools.

*Give me sober judgment,  
sound reasoning,  
and clarity of expression.*

And I would append St. James' prudent instruction at this point. "Know this, my beloved," he tells us in James 1:19, "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." Essential if I am to be discerning instead of reactionary. And something I need to pray for, and then pray for again.

And so, Amen ■

**Source:** "A Scholar's Prayer" online (<https://thewell.intervarsity.org/spiritual-formation/scholar-s-prayer>)



To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie,

Thank you so much for all of your publications over the years. Each one has been a day-brightener when it arrives. God bless you!

Sincerely + with love,  
Lorraine Stevenson  
Bloomington, Minnesota

To the editor:

Dear Denis,

The first essay in *Critique* 2018:1 ["When Attention is Paid"] had me chuckling. I've been reading *The World Beyond Your Head* (2014) by Matthew Crawford (also interviewed on Mars Hill Audio) that deals with issues of *attention*. I'm trying to put this together with Craig Barnes teaching me, "Spirituality is nothing more than paying attention."

It seems the more I study, the more I see the issue in my daily walk.

Live Boldly and Love God,  
Richard Carpenter  
Spokane, Washington

To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie,

Please know how very much John and I appreciate your hard work and dedication in producing and publishing such fine work—*Critique* and *Letters from the House Between*. We are always encouraged by the thoughtful treatment of each subject you choose to cover.

Love,  
Louise Berg  
Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin

To the editor:

Denis and Margie,

Please don't retire! Your work is too important and has been making a difference in my life for the past 25 years!

Thank you!

Keep pressing on,  
Kristin Davis  
Boerne, Texas

From the editor:

*Margie and I are always so grateful to hear from readers, to know that you've read what we've written and thought about it. It's hard to find the space for reflection, what with screens and activities and commutes and wearisome days when a tire goes flat just when you are trying to get caught up but now will be late on top of missing the final appointment that really needed to be done. It is here, in this mess of details that we carve out attempts at faithfulness, wondering if it matters and knowing that we must believe it does even though there seems to be no obvious proof of significance. At such moments, a few words of encouragement help to stave off the doubts, and so we appreciate your words to us.*

*Our word to you in return is equally simple, an assurance that God is answering the prayer his people stand and say in unison and in numerous tongues as the sun rises each first day of the week and shines in successive time zones across the spinning globe. His kingdom is coming, his will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We are sure of it, for prophets and apostles have both promised. And since our faithfulness is kingdom work and since finding time for reflection is waiting, being still so we can know him... we can be content. ■*

# The Clouds of Scripture and Reality



Ellis Potter suggests we can best understand reality by seeing it in terms of two great divisions.

The first division is between the Uncreated and the Created. The Uncreated is God and God alone, who has personality, meaning, relationship and love. All else is in the realm of the Created including all that is finite, made and sustained by God.

The Created realm is also divided into two parts, the Natural and the Supernatural. The Natural includes matter and energy and everything like rocks and moons and plants that can be measured and examined by science and mathematics. The Supernatural includes angels and demons and spiritual powers that are just as real as everything in the Natural realm but that can't be measured and examined by science and mathematics.

Now if you imagine these realms of Reality visually there will be some sort of interface between them where

they divide. And human beings usually are interested in finding some way to penetrate past the boundary to catch a glimpse into the other realm or engage it in some way. Mystics of every religious tradition claim to have found entrance into the Supernatural realm, often using techniques like fasting and meditation to achieve it. And interestingly that seems to be part of St. Peter's experience when he had his life-changing vision from God (Acts 10:10-11).

What is the interface between the Natural and the Supernatural realms? And how can it be accessed, and by whom, and when?

In the early seventies when Margie and I lived in New Mexico in a Christian commune many of the people drawn to His House were also drawn to psychedelic drugs. Some people took LSD, peyote, or psilocybin (magic mushrooms) as a form of escape in a world so broken that finding escape is attractive. But most of the young adults we came to know well used psychedelics because they believed that reality was not limited to the Natural world. They were convinced that the part of reality beyond the Natural, a Supernatural, spiritual realm really existed. And they believed a way into this realm was available in the use of psychedelic drugs. Folk religions and traditional shamans had long known this, they said, and stories circulated of trips that opened into the beauty of light unspeakable.

Most of our Christian friends, especially evangelicals were dismissive, if not disdainful of such stories. If contact was made with anything, they said, it was demonic. The Supernatural realm, they claimed could only be accessed by Christians through prayer or Bible reading.

As we listened to the stories of those

who used psychedelics and watched their lives, we came to believe our evangelical friends were mistaken. My own experiment with LSD suggested that more was going on than the reductionist explanation that only believers had access to the Supernatural and that all else was the machinations of evil spirits.

Psychedelic drug use is not as prevalent as it was in 1971 when we lived in His House. But interest in the Supernatural remains high, even in our secular age. If you doubt that you haven't been watching many movies.

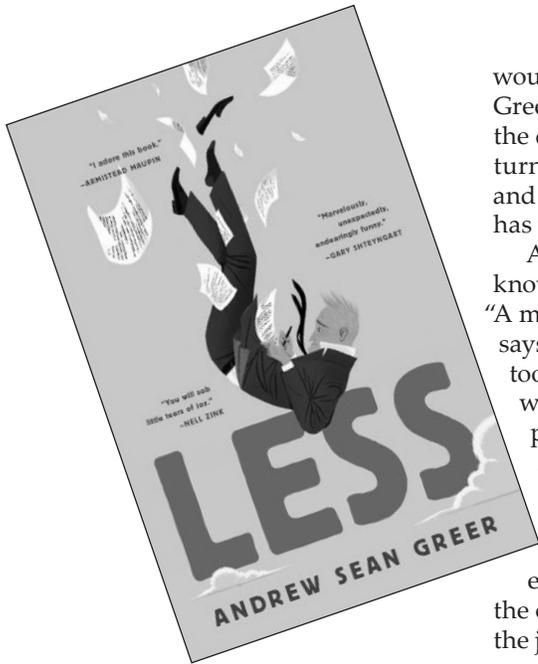
So, if we are to be discerning Christians, some questions need some serious reflection. What is the interface between the Natural and the Supernatural realms? How can it be accessed, and by whom, and when? And most important for those who name Christ as Lord, what do the Scriptures reveal about it?

Ellis Potter answers these questions in *The Cloud of Knowing* (2018). Originally a lecture given at L'Abri Fellowship, this small format book (4x6 inches) includes his lecture on the topic, really a Bible study, and answers to 35 questions people have asked when he's spoken on the topic. Oh, yes, there are also illustrations and a poem.

I recommend *The Cloud of Knowing*. It might help you see reality and Scripture with greater clarity. (Hint: the interface is not prayer, or the Holy Spirit, or the Church, or Scripture.) ■

**Book recommended:** *The Cloud of Knowing* by Ellis Potter (Destinee; 2018) 108 pages.

# A Mediocre Life Searching for Love



I decided to read the novel, *Less* by Andrew Greer because it won a Pulitzer this year. “A generous book,” the Pulitzer Board said, “musical in its prose and expansive in its structure and range, about growing older and the essential nature of love.” I was also attracted to it because reviewers said it was funny. Christopher Buckley who has written some fine comedies himself (*Thank You for Smoking*, 1994) commented in *The New York Times*:

*Convulsed in laughter a few pages into Andrew Sean Greer’s fifth novel, Less, I wondered with regret why I wasn’t familiar with this author. My bad. His admirers have included John Updike, Michael Chabon, Dave Eggers and John Irving. Less is the funniest, smartest and most humane novel I’ve read since Tom Rachman’s 2010 debut, The Imperfectionists.*

*Less* is funny, though I was never convulsed, but the primary word I

would use to describe it is poignant. Greer uses wit to bring into sharp focus the disappointment of a man about to turn 50 who has never achieved success and who has never lacked for lovers but has never known love.

Arthur Less is a writer who has known writers of genius but is not one. “A minor author,” the novel’s narrator says, “an author too old to be fresh and too young to be rediscovered, one who never sits next to anyone on a plane who has heard of his books.” After his lover of nine years leaves him to get married and invites him to the wedding, Less needs a way to skip the ceremony, to escape the humiliation of knowing the other wedding guests see him as the jilted loser. So he decides the only way out is to leave the country. He accepts a series of invitations to literary events—very minor literary events—that will take him to New York, Mexico, Italy, Germany, France, Morocco, and India. Some of the funniest moments come when translations fail, directions get confused, and accommodations are not what he expected.

In India Less discovers that instead of the writer’s retreat he intended to book he has instead reserved a cabin at a Christian camp.

*“Here are the black ants; they are your neighbors. Nearby there is Elizabeth, the yellow rat snake, who is the parson’s special friend, although he says he is happy to kill her if you want him to. But then there will be rats. Do not be afraid of the mongoose. Do not encourage the stray dogs—they are not our pets. Do not open the windows, because small bats will want to visit you, and possibly monkeys. And if you walk at night, stomp on the ground to scare off other animals.”*

*Less asks what other animals could there possibly be?*

*Rupali answers, quite solemnly: “Let us never know.”*

“Greer mercilessly skewers the insecurity of authors,” reviewer Patrick Gale writes in *The Guardian*, “as well as the vanity of the literary industry’s self-absorption in the face of its irrelevance to most people’s lives.” You don’t need to be a writer or gay, however, to identify with Less, for the poignancy that characterizes his life is a deeply human problem. How do we find meaning when our work is ordinary in a world where we meet people doing extraordinary things? How can we be satisfied being a minor player when even the major players are soon forgotten? And in a world of fragmented relationships can we find a love that will not leave with the morning light?

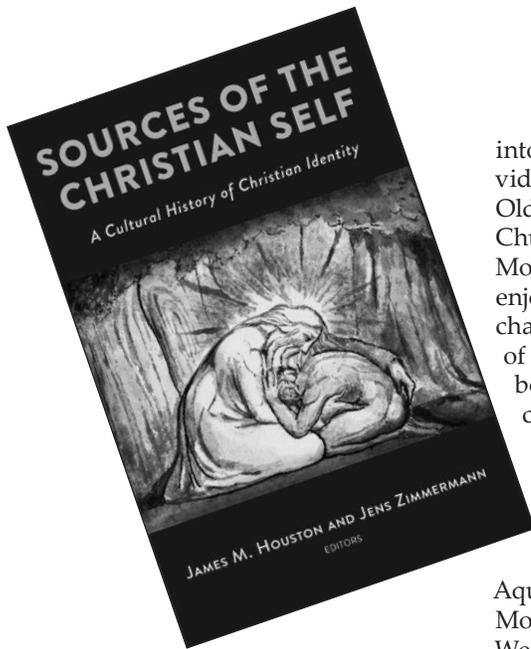
*Less* is a novel that reflects our twenty-first century world—its values and lifestyles, its fears and hopes. In other words, the same essential questions that humankind has always asked are raised in *Less*. Christians will need creativity if we are to tell the biblical story in a way that its answers to those questions can be appreciated.

So, read *Less* and chuckle and grieve and pray and reflect—all four, it seems to me, are a proper Christian response. ■

**Sources:** *The Guardian online* ([theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/01/less-andrew-sean-greer-review](http://theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/01/less-andrew-sean-greer-review))

**Book reviewed:** *Less: A Novel* by Andrew Sean Greer (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company; 2017) 261 pages.

# A History of Christian Faithfulness



The calling of God to his people to be faithful never changes, but the specific shape of faithfulness changes because God's people live in different settings that raise unique challenges. It should therefore be possible—and instructive—to identify exemplary believers throughout history to learn how they applied the call to faithfulness to their particular moment in history. This is exactly what 42 scholars do in *Sources of the Christian Self*, a new book edited by James Houston (Regent College) and Jens Zimmermann (Trinity Western University).

*What did it mean to identify oneself as a Christian in different times and places? This is the question posed by this book. The basic calling of a Christian is to identify with "the name" wholly and simply, in a way that one's confession of Christ becomes the most essential fact of one's life. But this calling upon every generation of believers takes place under cultural conditions and, indeed, under*

*changing cultural conditions.* [p. xvi]

*Sources of the Christian Self* is divided into seven sections, with essays on individuals (or groups) from each period: Old Testament, New Testament, Early Church, Middle Ages, Age of Reform, Modern World, and 20th Century. I enjoyed being able to read through the chapters in order to catch something of the flow of history, or to open the book at random and find a discreet chapter on some person (or group) that can be read on its own. And the 42 whose stories are told is fascinatingly diverse including: Abraham and Jeremiah, James and Jude, Ambrose and Timothy of Baghdad, Aquinas and Julian of Norwich, Thomas More and Teresa of Avila, Charles Wesley and Christina Rossetti, C. S. Lewis and Flannery O'Connor. It is wonderful to meet old friends and also to make new ones—like Timothy of Baghdad, Thomas Becon, and a variety of African Christians. Every person who is covered has clay feet, flawed yet eager to know and live out "what it means to be a Christian and therefore a fully human being" [p. xxv].

Perhaps the best way to introduce *Sources of the Christian Self* is to provide a quote, this one from the chapter on Jacques Ellul:

*The Christian, Ellul contended, echoing Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17 is to be "in" this world but not "of" it. By implication, he stressed that Christians needed to make a concerted effort to understand their social and cultural circumstances for the sake of trying to discern where, within these circumstances, the possibilities of genuinely redemptive individual and social action actually lie. "We must seek the deepest possible sociological understanding of*

*the world we live in," Ellul contended in The Presence of the Kingdom (1967), "in order to find out, as precisely as may be, where we are and what we are doing, and also what lines of action are open to us." Insofar as such lines of action are concerned, Ellul believed that Christians are called to be present—which is to say, to bear witness to the possibilities of grace and freedom—at precisely those points of maximum tension between a sinful world at enmity with God—a world that is, in effect, bent on suicide—and God's redemptive purposes for the world. "Our concern," he stressed, "should be to place ourselves at the very point where this suicidal desire is most active, in the actual form it adopts, and to see how God's will of preservation can act in this given situation."* [p. 649]

Please do not imagine that Ellul's challenge applies only to scholars and leaders on the cutting edge of society. The "points of maximum tension [in] a sinful world at enmity with God" are as suicidal and as real in ordinary lives and events as they are in the more rarified worlds of academia, commerce, art and politics.

*Sources of the Christian Self* is serious, not light reading. The intended audience is intelligent Christians willing to take the time to grow theologically by reflecting on historical studies on Christian identity over time in a changing and broken world. ■

**Book recommended:** *Sources of the Christian Self: A Cultural History of Christian Identity* edited by James M. Houston and Jens Zimmermann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2018) 682 pages + indices.

# Challenges to Christian Ideas

The facts are relatively simple. Many of our neighbors in our pluralistic world are non-Christians, and so have adopted world and life views that at some points at least contrast with Christian beliefs. Many have not just moved away from the Christian faith but for one or more reasons reject it as unattractive, implausible and even dangerous. So, it should not surprise us to find challenges—some major, some minor—to our faith raised by thinkers convinced that the traditional Christian view of things is mistaken.

Even if we aren't surprised, a challenge remains for us, namely responding creatively and thoughtfully to the challenges aimed at debunking some aspect of Christian belief. And that can be difficult. For one thing few churches intentionally prepare their people for such conversations. Some are so convinced that their beliefs are so obviously true that they feel no discussion should ever be needed. Others depend on the talking points generated by pundits, without realizing that thoughtful apologetics are antithetical to punditry.

It is awkward to remain silent when challenges are raised, uncertain of what to say that might seem plausible and intelligent. Certainly we should admit, "I don't know," if we don't know, or "I'll have to think about that," if thinking is necessary. Still, it is best to be prepared. One way to become better apologists is to identify challenges and work through the issues thoughtfully and creatively with Christian friends. The process of discernment sharpens our ability to think well, and uncovers ways to express old truths in fresh ways. Our goal can be to always be growing towards being able to say something that does justice to the truth, providing

reasons for it that may not fully convince our non-Christian neighbors but that provides at least a glimpse of the power, beauty and coherence of the Christian worldview. Tim Keller says it well:

*Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts—not only their own but their friends' and neighbors'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt.*

I'm including here two challenges to Christian belief, and am allowing the non-Christians who raise them to speak for themselves. Get some believing friends together and work through them. It's a chance to develop skill in discernment.

## **Challenge #1 Two becoming one**

"I don't understand the outdated notion of 'two becoming one.' If you think you're only half a person, please figure your shit out before getting in a relationship. Likewise, if you're in love with a half formed person, get out fast. When you've worked as hard as I have to form your identity, the last thing you want is to blur where you end and someone else begins. Remember who you are, and stay true to that."

## **Challenge #2 Poverty you will always have**

"According to the New Testament, shortly before the crucifixion a woman anointed Christ with precious oil worth 300 denarii. Jesus' disciples scolded the woman for wasting such a huge sum of money instead of giving it to the poor, but Jesus defended her, saying that 'The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me' (Mark 4:7). Today, fewer and fewer people, including fewer and fewer Christians, agree with Jesus on this matter. Poverty is increasingly seen as a technical problem amenable to intervention. It's common wisdom that policies based on the latest findings in agronomy, economics, medicine, and sociology can eliminate poverty.

"And indeed, many parts of the world have already been freed from the worst forms of deprivation. Throughout history, societies have suffered from two kinds of poverty: social poverty which withholds from some people the opportunities available to others; and biological poverty, which puts the very lives of individuals at risk due to lack of food and shelter. Perhaps social poverty can never be eradicated, but in many countries around the world biological poverty is a thing of the past.

"Until recently, most people hovered very close to the biological poverty line, below which a person lacks enough calories to sustain life for long. Even small miscalculations or misfortunes could easily push people below that line, into starvation. Natural disasters and man-made calamities often plunged entire populations over the abyss, causing the death of millions. Today most of the world's people have a safety net stretched below them. Individuals are protected from personal misfortune by insurance, state-sponsored social

security and a plethora of local and international NGOs. When calamity strikes an entire region, worldwide relief efforts are usually successful in preventing the worst. People still suffer from numerous degradations, humiliations and poverty-related illnesses, but in most countries nobody is starving to death. In fact, in many societies more people are in danger of dying from obesity than from starvation.” ■

**Sources:** *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller (NY, New York; 2008) p. xvii. Challenge #1 is from “Love is Messy, and I’m Good With That” by Amanda de Cadenet in *Glamour* (October 2017) p. 128. Challenge #2 is from *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2015) p. 265–266.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Since we should expect challenges to the faith in a pluralistic world why are so many believers surprised (and some even offended) when they do?
2. A good way to engage non-truth or partial truth is to ask questions. To the extent that something is untrue it is to that extent out of touch with the nature of reality. By asking a series of probing questions a mistaken idea can eventually be exposed as dubious or incoherent. What clarifying questions might be important to begin with in these cases? What probing questions might be asked?
3. What attitude should the Christian demonstrate in such conversations in order to bring glory to the Lord Christ? What biblical texts might be good to review and pray through in this regard? What is more essential—showing love or defending truth—in conversations with other people? How do you know?
4. The process of discernment is a series of questions we apply to the issue at hand, in this case challenges to the faith. The series of questions include:
 

*What’s being said?* (As objectively as possible identify what is being communicated so that our challenger will feel we have heard them clearly, completely and accurately.)

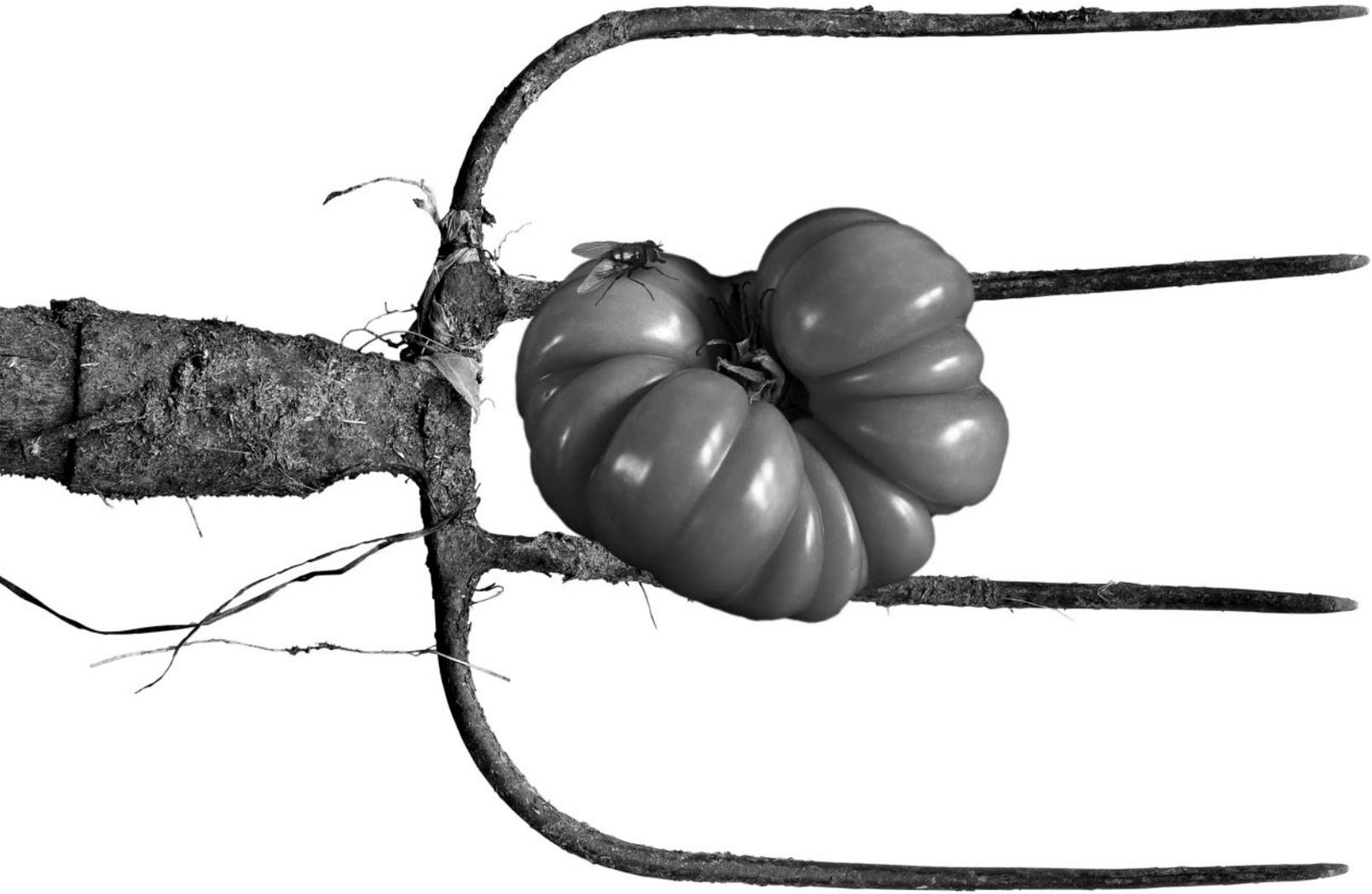
*Where do we agree? Why?*

*What would we question or disagree with? How can we best question it?* (The point is not merely to register disagreement and our reasons, but to speak in a way that hopefully will not simply end the conversation.)

*How can we creatively and intelligently express Christian truth* in terms that non-Christians in our pluralistic world might be at least a little intrigued? (Reasons for faith that seem ironclad in a Sunday school class can seem weak in the marketplace—why is that, and how can we avoid it?)
5. What texts of scripture might be good to review that addresses the content of each challenge?
6. When is a challenge to the faith so insignificant as to not warrant a careful response? Is it possible the identical challenge might become significant in different circumstances?
7. Jesus not only responded at times with questions, he also responded by telling stories. What stories might be worth telling in a conversation about these specific challenges?
8. Challenges to the faith are a signal that the faith is being taken seriously—if it weren’t, there would be no reason to challenge it. How should this affect our initial or gut response to one more challenge? Why does it suggest that irritation or annoyance on the part of the believer is especially counterproductive?

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**READING THE WORLD**



# Flannery O'Connor: The Patron Saint of Ex-English-Major Organic Vegetable Farmers

by Daniel W. Miller

Seven years ago my wife Hannah and I started an organic vegetable farm in southeastern Minnesota. Like our homesteading ancestors we employed a lot of hard labor and sweat equity to establish our family and farm on what was a bare 30 acres of land. Until we finished building a house last year, we were living on the farm in a 400 square-foot dwelling with three small children and feeling like a slightly more modern version of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Things are now starting to slow down a bit for us. The intense start-up phase of our farm seems to be passing and we find ourselves with some time to look back and reflect on these whirlwind years. When it got well below zero this winter, I wanted to do some writing on our experience but couldn't think where to start. Then I got an email from a friend:

"As I see you and Hannah, I don't

believe you are farmers who happen to love Flannery O'Connor in your spare time: that farming is one thing and her writing is something apart for evenings when you can't be in your fields. You exhibit a wonderful unity, and though I'm not certain how much you have thought about it, I am certain it is worth thinking about. And writing about."

At first I thought our friends' assessment of O'Connor's significance on our farm was reaching a bit, but then I realized it's not farfetched. Of all the people that steered us away from the city and into the backwoods of the Deep North, I don't think anyone played a bigger role than a Catholic fiction writer from the Deep South.

## A LATE ENCOUNTER WITH FLANNERY

I was a 21-year-old college student when I first read something by O'Connor. My friend Sam and

I had signed up for a seminar at the University of Minnesota on the mysterious "Southern Gothic" writer from Georgia. We had been told that O'Connor was gaining prominence in the literary world and we needed to check her out.

We met at our favorite grungy campus coffee shop called the Purple Onion. With our copies of O'Connor's *Library of America Complete Works*, Sam and I settled into a nasty, sticky booth in the smoking section. We had agreed to read the first assigned story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and talk about our first impressions. I remember being pretty skeptical of O'Connor. Her portrait on the cover of the book looked—to my proud, 21-year-old eyes—like an elderly church-lady of 60 or so. Lighting up our roll-your-own cigarettes, we buried our heads in the story.

When I finished and looked up, Sam

was waiting for me and said with a big smirky grin, "How did that old grandma write *that!*"

O'Connor was considered a minor American writer when she died of lupus in 1964 at age 39. Nowadays it would be hard to find an introductory English literature course where you don't need to read, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Every year, there seems to be more and more writers in publications like *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* lauding O'Connor's work and telling how it inspired them. With her ever-growing fame, interpretations of her stories have grown as well, and many critics want to claim her as their own.

Luckily, O'Connor wrote a lot about the meaning of her stories. Her collection of essays, *Mystery and Manners*, and her correspondence, *The Habit of Being*, are remarkable for their beauty, depth, and honesty. They also give us a very clear picture of what O'Connor was consciously doing with her craft.

### THE VISION OF A BACKWOODS PROPHET

O'Connor called herself a "hermit novelist" and said, "My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil." As you read her letters, essays, and the several biographies on her life, you see that from a young age she had a very strong sense of vocation—not only as a fiction writer, but also as a Christian apologist and modern day prophet. Her friend Sally Fitzgerald said that O'Connor came onto the twentieth century literary scene, "like having Jeremiah suddenly appear."

O'Connor, however, didn't want to be called a "Christian writer." She thought (from the influence of Jacques Maritain) that a writer's work should stand on its own as art. But she also never shied away from saying that she

wrote from the perspective of someone who happened to believe that the world and all of history has an *axis mundi* and that this central axis is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

"*Wise Blood*," she wrote of her first novel, "was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them (the protagonist) Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to do so. Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen."

O'Connor's prophetic inclinations were fueled by the belief she shared with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche that the world operates as if God were dead. She thought this nihilism has progressed to the point that it is now—both in and out of the church—"the gas we breathe." As a consequence, this lack of faith in the supernatural has dulled the senses to the point that we refuse to see what can't be proved by science or reason.

To counteract this, O'Connor wanted to impart to her audience a kind of vision that could see beyond the merely material world into the realm where God's hand is alive and active. To see the divine under-workings in the world, O'Connor said it was necessary to take

the time to really look at things—even if it meant gawking. She wrote, "...there's a certain grain of stupidity that (one) can hardly do without and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting the point at once. The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it."

What O'Connor saw looking hard at the world was often not pretty. In her stories as God's invisible grace collides with very resistant hearts, the visible confrontations are often shocking and violent. She famously defended her use of shock by saying that extreme measures were necessary to reach an audience that refuses to see anything supernatural and operates as if God is dead. "To the hard of hearing you shout," she said. "and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."

In "A Good Man," O'Connor's writes about a self-absorbed grandmother from Georgia who happens upon an escaped killer who calls himself The Misfit. As the grandmother begs for her life, she has a moment of grace-filled empathy for him and lovingly reaches out to touch him. As soon as she does, The Misfit recoils and shoots her in the chest. "She would've been a good woman," he drawls, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

### THE NEED FOR ROOTS

When I finished my seminar/class on Flannery O'Connor, I thought for sure that I was supposed to be a fiction writer. To this day, it's hard for me to imagine anyone not wanting to be a writer after reading *Mystery and Manners*. It became obvious pretty quickly, however, that I was not a fiction writer. I just didn't have the imaginary gift. So I wouldn't be one of her protégés.

But her writing had a powerful affect on me and it started to change my career path.

I was growing more and more disillusioned with the city. I had grown up in Minneapolis and, after moving away for a while, returned to the city for college. The energy and excitement of the city exhilarated me and I dreamed of living the literary life in New York or Boston. Slowly however, partly from reading O'Connor's knocks on city life, the country became more appealing. The appeal intensified after I reconnected with some family friends who were organic vegetable farmers. I started having the feeling of being cramped and trapped in the city. The urge was coming over me to find more elbowroom, open spaces, and a closer connection to the land.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota, I moved to the small town in southeastern Minnesota where I was born and where my family has ancestral roots. I started working for those family friends on their organic vegetable farms. At one of the farms I met my wife Hannah. Not long after we met, 30 acres of prime farmland came up for sale right next to Hannah's sister's farm. This land, which we eventually bought, also happened to be just a few miles from where my great-great grandfather had homesteaded 150 years ago.

O'Connor was fascinated by the French writer Simone Weil, whom she called one of two twentieth century women in whom she was most interested. Weil wrote a book called *The Need for Roots* and argued that the modern world was becoming more disjointed and less humane as it grew more industrialized and urban. This idea comes up a lot in O'Connor's fiction and essays. As people left the country for the city

they became less connected to the land and a particular place. O'Connor feared that urbanization would make it harder for rural communities to maintain their distinctiveness and individuality.

"I think as (the region) gets to be more and more city and less country," Flannery wrote, "as ... everything... is reduced to the same flat level—we'll be writing about men in gray flannel suits. That's about all there'll be to write about, I think, as we lose our individuality."

Another reason the country became so appealing to me was that it felt so neglected. Everybody I knew wanted to be in the city where all the cool people were. Why would anyone want to move out in the middle of nowhere with the rednecks and hillbillies? But with O'Connor, I found someone making the opposite case. Why would you want to be in the city with the hordes of men in gray flannel suits? Or now, the hipster hordes in skinny jeans and 90s apparel?

When we were dating, Hannah and I talked about things that small-scale farming could bring us that the city couldn't. The thing that was most appealing was the possibility of making a living as a family and working together on a daily basis. We hoped too, that raising a family on the farm in the country would be a natural way for us to be counter-cultural—in the sense of being in the culture but not of the culture.

We also wanted to be part of building culture, to be part of a small enough community so as to have a real

stake, and real responsibility, in that process. We wanted to put down our roots in a particular place, potentially for generations. We wanted

to be part of a community

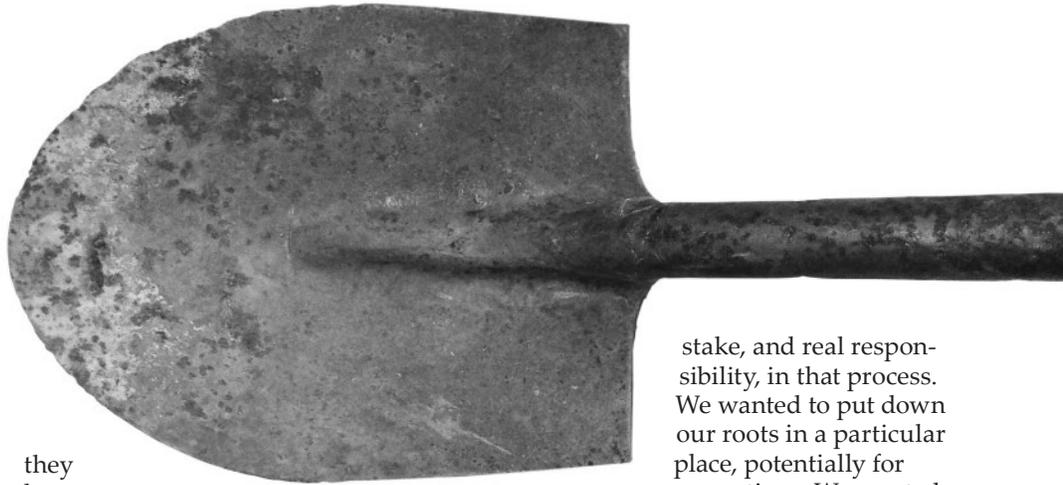
where there wasn't as much pressure to conform to the wider culture, a place with a sense of distinctiveness within a region.

#### COMING BACK TO CHRISTIAN REALISM

We've been in the country over seven years now and things haven't gone exactly according to our vision. Our farm is thriving, but it has been heavy lifting to break into the community. We still haven't even met many of our immediate neighbors and we know through rumors that, to many, we are just temporary "hippie farmers." We chose to attend a local church and, while we have grown to love the people there and they us, it took years for them to believe that we were really here to stay. It is very odd in our rural area if you are joining a church that you were not born into or in which there is no family connection.

Family life on the farm has brought us many of the blessings we thought it would, but it has also fallen short of our unrealistic expectations. We struggle to balance the never-ending farm work with spending real quality time with our kids. With all the work looming just outside the door, it's way too easy to let it steal precious time from family and God.

We've realized that we will very likely never feel like natives in our area. The roots we put down here are the extremely slow growing kind, like those of a burr oak tree. The hope is that while they are slow growing they are



hard-fought and will eventually be the deep and lasting kind.

As our farm mentor, O'Connor delights in not letting us dwell in warm fuzzy feelings. "There is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism," she writes. "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." From O'Connor we've found that the action of God's invisible grace hunting down unsuspecting victims is not reserved for the backwoods characters in her stories. This relentless and purifying Grace comes after us again and again.

As Hannah and I move into the post start-up stage of our farm, we hope our community roots begin to flourish as well as our vegetables have. By growing good food—and more good relationships—we want to do our small part to swing the pendulum back away from the city to the country.

I realize it is really hard work, going against the grain, to realize a vision of a life like ours in the country. But with O'Connor I'm worried about the fallout if city life continues to dominate. It's concerning that without rural places that cultivate deep, distinctive social roots it will be difficult for healthy individuality to flourish. O'Connor also worried that without regional roots our literature would suffer. She argued that having people deeply belonging to their region creates an environment capable of making great art. "The best American fiction has always been regional," she wrote, "it has passed to and stayed longest wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of likeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light."

I don't know if the next great American fiction will be written around

here, but I think O'Connor helps us see how our place, our life in the country, connects with our Christian faith. "The possibility of reading a small history in a universal light," is necessary for faith that the one immortal, omnipotent God was born into "a small history"—into a specific time and place and region. We have a need for roots because the Incarnate God had a need for roots. And this Story of all stories forms the basis not only for good fiction, but is the guide for how we are all called to live, work and create in the light of God's salvation plan.

There is nothing pure or intrinsically better about the country than the city. Deep roots can be established in the city too. The book of Revelation tells us that God has a perfect version of both the city and the country in store for us at the end of the age. We live in the *in between* of God's kingdom already bursting forth into the world and the *not yet* of its final consummation. In the meantime, I hope that the rural, regional distinctiveness makes a bit of a comeback. To have both the city and the country learning things from each other will surely bring a better vision of how divine Grace nourishes God's plan for his people in the world.

I don't know a better modern guide for this kind of vision than Flannery O'Connor. With her singular and prophetic voice she can help us see our world in a way that recognizes God's redemptive power in action. For O'Connor this is no vague spiritual abstraction.

It goes back to the very

concrete act of staring and gawking that she encouraged. If we look long enough at the things around us we start to see how our "small history" is part of God's cosmic plan. This kind of concrete, down to earth action, like staring, is what we yokels in the country are supposed to be good at. Because for someone to be able to see successfully, O'Connor writes, it will "be a descent into his region. It will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision." ■

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**Daniel W. Miller**, with his wife Hannah, run Easy Yoke Farm, an organic vegetable operation near Zumbro Falls, MN. Daniel's writing has appeared previously in

Minnesota Daily, Hospitality, and Green Blade. The Millers have three young children: Paul, Anders, and Ruth.



# Music of None Spirituality



Music accompanies life because life—and creation itself—generates music, and cannot stop. At the moment of creation, God told Job so long ago, “the morning stars sang together” (38:7). How could they not? It thus fits that C. S. Lewis, in *The Magician’s Nephew* depicts Aslan the Lion singing all things into existence.

*The Lion was pacing to and fro about that empty land and singing his new song. It was softer and more lilting than the song by which he had called up the stars and the sun; a gentle, rippling music. And as he walked and sang the valley grew green with grass (p. 112).*

And when the rightful King returns, the Hebrew psalmist predicts, the creation itself will burst out in music so that “the hills sing for joy together before the Lord” (98:8-9).

The music that wells up out of the heart reflects deep realities, even if a person’s heart has been made shallow by the brokenness of the world and by the idols it has adopted. Getting to know someone is impossible if we never take the time and care to listen thoughtfully to the music they love. It’s not a matter of liking it, but getting it, not a matter of making it my own but of loving you

enough to hear it fully so that I can receive it and you.

This came to mind as I listened to the fifth studio album by Jon Hopkins, *Singularity*. Hopkins began his musical career as keyboardist for Imogen Heap, and is probably best known for his creative work with Brian Eno and Coldplay. Early on his imagination was captured by the endless possibilities of electronic music, and the nine mesmerizing tracks on *Singularity* reveal something of his vision, and I suspect, his heart. Using meditative techniques and times away in the desert to nurture body and soul, Hopkins produces music that is beholden to no religious tradition but that sonically captures passing glimpses of transcendence.

This is the reason for the title of this review, “Music of None Spirituality.” I hope it is not presumptuous. What I mean is this. Musicians of every time and place and religious tradition compose music that captures our most precious experiences. Experiences of loss and restoration, suffering and healing, love and wonder. It is not news that the fastest growing category of belief in America involves those who choose “None” when asked to state their religious preference. And it is also not news that many Nones insist that, though they are not religious, they are spiritual. I do not mean to suggest that Nones will like *Singularity*, or that Hopkins’ music will somehow resonate with their experience of spirituality. I can’t know for certain because I am not a None, but a Christian. Still, *Singularity* requires no adherence to dogma or ritual, but quietly celebrates the wonder of existence in a cosmos where beauty surprises and order takes our breath away.

“Hopkins seems to model his music,”

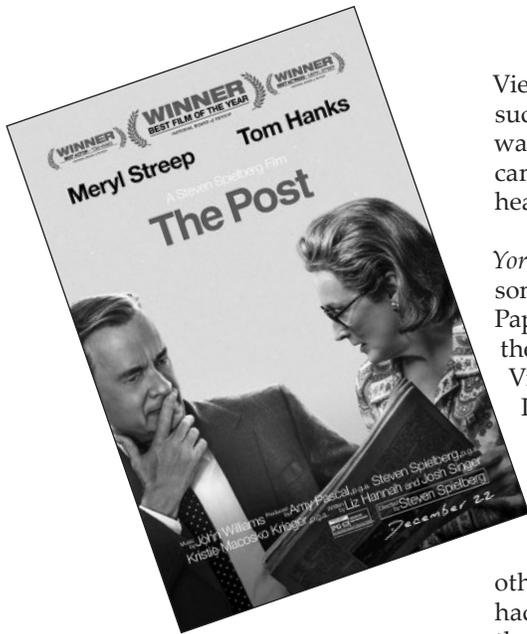
Brian Howe writes in *Pitchfork*, “on the infinite cycles of destruction and rebirth that power the universe—but we, too, are part of the scheme.” Sitting quietly and letting the music engulf me is like being on a trip, uncertain of what is around the next corner but happy to be going there to find out. *Singularity* can’t be understood or fully appreciated unless you are willing to stop and wait as the album plays, and to listen without distraction. It may seem, at first hearing, to be background music, and some use the album to go to sleep, but the layered depths in the tracks is an echo of someone who has been alone in nature and relished the wonder it evoked. “*Singularity* is an hour-long ode to spiritual transcendence,” Kelefa Sanneh says in *The New Yorker*, “that also resembles pleasant background noise—at least, it does at first.” Sanneh’s comment is not a put-down, since the spiritual realm is to our fallen senses, sadly usually in the background.

Bring it into the foreground with Scripture, waiting quietly on God, unhurried prayer, and *Singularity*. ■

**Sources:** Pitchfork online ([pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/jon-hopkins-singularity/](https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/jon-hopkins-singularity/)). “Dancing in Your Head” by Kelefa Sanneh in *The New Yorker* (April 30, 2018, p. 74).

**Album recommended:** *Singularity* by Jon Hopkins (Domino, 2018)

# The Free Press in a Democracy



In 1971 the United States was at war in Viet Nam, and I was eligible for the draft. I had sought status as a conscientious objector but my draft board rejected my application. They had not been good listeners when I met with them, but they were correct. I was a reluctant, not a convinced pacifist, and so didn't deserve the deferment. A man in my church was an ardent evangelist for pacifism and since my responses to his arguments had been quickly demolished I assumed pacifism was the only viable option for a Christian.

It was a confusing time. My reading of Alexander Solzhenitsyn had convinced me of the totalitarian nature of Marxist regimes, but something still didn't seem right about the war waging in Southeast Asia. The U.S. was bogged down in a seemingly endless war against a tiny, third world country in support of a regime that by all accounts was hopelessly corrupt. Why couldn't we be victorious and end the carnage or simply get out? Was South

Viet Nam really worth defending at such great cost? At home America was bitterly divided and street and campus protests against the war made headlines regularly.

Then on the front page of *The New York Times* an article appeared about something they called, The Pentagon Papers. Its real title was "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force." President Richard Nixon and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued the leaking and publication of this secret document was an act of treason.

The report revealed, among other things, that the government had secretly expanded the war into the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia and in other ways had consistently lied to the American people. America had been involved in Viet Nam since the end of World War II (1945) and successive administrations had not told the truth about their true intentions in the ongoing conflict. Nor did they admit that government analysts had concluded the war was unwinnable. Our soldiers were apparently dying for nothing.

The Pentagon Papers were leaked by a psychiatrist, Daniel Ellsberg, who had helped draft the secret study. Arrested and charged for the act, charges against Ellsberg were eventually dropped and in 2011 the entire report was declassified and published. Nixon appealed to the Supreme Court to stop the media from publishing them after the *Times* reported their existence, but the Court sided with the press. *The Washington Post* managed to get a copy of the Papers from Ellsberg, and bravely released it to the public.

Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017)

tells this story, and stays pretty close to the facts in doing so. Some have asserted that the film exaggerates the role of *The Washington Post* in the affair, downplaying the role played by *The New York Times*, and that is possible. But still, the real story here, it seems to me, is the role to be played by the media in a free society, a topic as relevant today as it was in 1971.

A second significant theme in the film involves the role of women in leadership. The episode of the Pentagon Papers occurred when the first female editor of a major newspaper was leading *The Washington Post*. More than a few thought Kay Graham, played brilliantly by Meryl Streep, would not be up to the task but she fooled them all and made history. The movie shows her agonizing over the right thing to do, reviewing the basic principles she believed in, and then doing what she believed was right even though it involved enormous risk.

The search for truth in this broken world is fraught with difficulty. Everyone who claims to speak truthfully has some sort of agenda and perfect objectivity is impossible. We choose which facts are relevant and which are dispensable, we decide which should be emphasized and which of our sources are most dependable. This need not overly concern us because it is only to be expected in a finite, fallen world, but it should prompt us to be discerning consumers of the news. The search for truth is also complicated by propagandists who use well honed techniques to get their particular take on things feel definitive. We need to read the strongest arguments from both the Left and the Right and always ask probing questions as we read.

In a polarized political setting the intersecting roles of government and

press must be nurtured and guarded with great care. Both can make mistakes and must be held accountable. And both are essential to maintain our democratic freedoms.

At a time when the movies seem dominated by action films, it's unclear to me how *The Post* will fare with the viewing public. Will it help prompt a national conversation on topics in desperate need of careful discussion? Will it serve as a reminder that our democratic freedoms are unimaginably fragile and that the American experiment plays out on the knife-edge of authoritarianism? Or will it simply be ignored, a historical drama about events long forgotten and largely irrelevant?

In one sense, of course, it doesn't much matter. *The Post*, after all, is only a movie. But the issues it touches on are enduring for all who seek truth, justice and freedom. ■





## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first impression of *The Post*? Why do you think you responded as you did? Does your response suggest anything about your view of the significance of a free press? Or more specifically of the historical significance of the publication of the Pentagon Papers?
2. What is made attractive in *The Post*? How is it made attractive? To what end?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get *The Post*'s message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. Who do you identify with in the film? Why? With whom are we meant to identify? How do you know?
5. Compare and contrast the two main characters in the film, Kay Graham (played by Meryl Streep), publisher of *The Washington Post*, and Ben Bradlee (played by Tom Hanks), its editor.
6. Trace the character development of Kay Graham as depicted in *The Post*. Does she exhibit the traits of a true leader? Why or why not? "My decision stands," she says at one point in the film, "and I'm going to bed." What does that reveal about leadership?
7. Why is it that in nations ruled by oppressive regimes the suppression or control of the press is always a high priority?
8. How do we decide whether someone like Daniel Ellsberg is a whistleblower or a traitor? To what extent and under what circumstances are we called as God's people to reveal official wickedness, even at personal cost, when we are ordered to keep it secret? To what extent and under what circumstances is the government wrong to keep something secret? Since it not clear that the citizens of America are having this discussion, what plans should we make?
9. There is a long and noble history within Christian thought for civil disobedience in the pursuit of justice against institutional evil. The Pentagon Papers revealed the duplicity of the U.S. government in sending American soldiers to die in a war they knew was unjust. "Wouldn't you go to prison to stop this war?" Daniel Ellsberg asks the *Post* reporter who arrives to get a copy of the papers. "Theoretically, sure," he replies. To what extent are you willing to engage in civil disobedience for the sake of righteousness? Is it a regular topic in the training of young disciples of the Lord Jesus? Against what manifestations of institutional evil would you be willing to be civilly disobedient—racism, misogyny, mistreatment of refugees or minorities, the killing of innocents, government corruption (judicial, legislative or executive), suppression of the press, religious discrimination? Would you add anything to this list?
10. It is in the nature of things that the roles of press and government should include a measure of antagonism. It is the role of the free press to uncover and reveal the truth, even when it is unsavory; it is the role of government to keep secret truths that will harm the interests and security of the nation, even when unfortunate. What are the signs these contrasting yet essential roles are being maintained in a healthy way? Are there signs that they are deteriorating today in America in a way that might threaten democratic freedom? This antagonism need not result in hostility and virtuous people in the press and the government can pursue their roles with integrity and mutual respect. Does it matter if hostility and lack of respect become the order of the day? Why or why not?



#### Credits for *The Post*

##### Starring:

Meryl Streep (Kay Graham)  
Tom Hanks (Ben Bradlee)  
Bob Odenkirk (Ben Bagdikian)  
Tracy Letts (Fritz Beebe)  
Bradley Whitford (Arthur Parsons)  
Bruce Greenwood (Robert McNamara)  
Matthew Rhys (Daniel Ellsberg)  
Carrie Coon (Meg Greenfield)

Director: Steven Spielberg

Writers: Liz Hannah and Josh Singer

Producers: Steven Spielberg, Liz Hannah, Josh Singer and others

Cinematography: Janusz Kaminski

Original Music: John Williams

USA, 2017, 116 minutes

Rated PG-13 (language and brief war violence)