

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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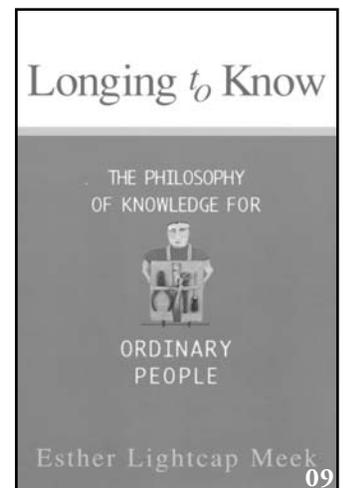
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Editor's Note



To the web.

The latest figures telling us how many people are using Ransom's website are not entirely believable to me. On the other hand, I've felt this way from the beginning. I was certain we needed to launch the site and

believed we had some material in our archives that might prove helpful for people to have access to, including some who may not have known about us through our speaking or *Critique* or *Notes from Toad Hall*. I also realize that the statistics are soft—not everyone who visits the site may be impressed with it, and some may visit it frequently, registering frequent “hits” without being a new visitor.

Still, the numbers surprise me. For example, in January 2004 the total number of users visiting Ransom's website was 14,902. That averaged out to approximately 480 each day. And they downloaded or printed almost 1,300 MB of our material in the process.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, since I had no idea what to expect, but it does surprise me—and pleases me as well. Marsena Konkle's creativity in designing the site is a big reason for its attractiveness and usefulness.

Up to now, we've used Ransom's site as an archive: a place to post material that first appeared in the pages of *Critique* or *Notes from Toad Hall*. With only a few exceptions, virtually everything you find when you log on existed first on paper. (The main exception has been movie discussion guides.) Now that is about to change. In the future when you log on, you can expect to find more material there which didn't appear in our publications first.

Besides an ever increasing number of movie discussion guides, two other types of new materi-

al will be showing up on the site. Some are longer versions of what appeared in *Critique*. Because of the range of issues we want to address, we've needed to ask our writers to stay within careful word counts. Often though, there is much more that could be said on the topic, so from now on some articles in *Critique* will actually be excerpts of longer versions available on Ransom's website. One recent example is the artist interviews that appeared in our Paper & Canvas column—numerous full-color examples of their art work were posted that didn't (couldn't) appear in these pages. And in this issue, Marsena's brief review of the novel *Bel Canto* (see page 5) is part of a longer discussion guide she has prepared for the web. Expect more of this shorter version in print/longer version on the website in the future.

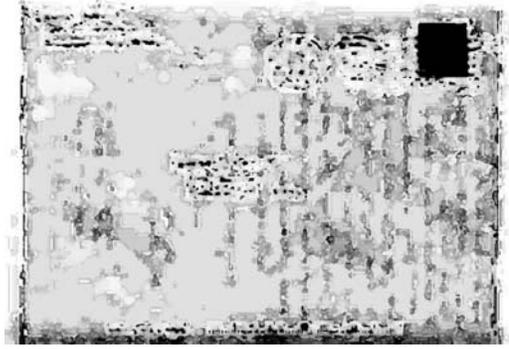
And sometimes the material being posted will bypass print altogether. We'll make some brief note of it in these pages, but not even a shortened version will appear. This will allow us to cover more territory without having to increase our printing and postage costs, which are substantial enough as it is.

If you've visited Ransom's site, you've probably noticed that recently posted material is flagged as “new.” Now there are more reasons to watch for these flags.

We've always seen our publications as an extension of our teaching/speaking ministry, and now Ransom's website seems to be extending Ransom's ministry even further. This next step we are taking seems small, but it also seems like a natural way for Ransom to grow. By God's grace he will use it. ■

—Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: technology and the possibility for fellowships

Send e-mail to:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Marsena Konkle
Critique Managing Editor
23736 S. Lakewood Lane
Lake Zurich, IL 60047

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

My undergraduate was in Computer Science and I went to CTS from '96-'99. I've spent a lot of time thinking about technology and its place in our lives and I wanted to ask if you would clarify a statement you made in one of your Editor's Notes [*Critique* #9 - 2003]: "Technology is not neutral in a fallen world, but enters our lives for blessing and for curse." You went on to describe sinful uses of technology—as a replacement for faith, etc. Do you mean that some forms of technology can be good or evil (not neutral) or are you talking about the *application* of technology in our lives?

I have always understood "things" to be mostly neutral. There are some difficult cases like atomic weapons and pornography, but most things we say are neither good nor bad, but evil men use them for good or bad. As Paul says, "I know and am convinced that nothing is unclean in itself, but to him who thinks a thing is unclean, to him it is unclean."

Perhaps that's what you meant, or perhaps you were speaking about our sinful hearts rather than the "thing in itself." I thought it would be fun to chat with you about it.

Jeffrey Mays
Tulsa, OK

Denis Haack responds:
Thanks for writing; you raise a good question. You are quite correct, and I'm glad for the chance to amend what I wrote. As you noted, my concern was to point out how technology is always applied for blessing or for curse, and its application is never neutral. Instead, what I wrote implied that technology was the problem, per se, which is incorrect. Even the difficult cases you mention do not change this distinction; pornography, for example, is photography (neutral) used to demean women (a curse). What I should have

written is, "The use of technology is never neutral in a fallen world, but enters our lives for blessing and for curse."

I'm currently pursuing a PhD in Educational Technology and have gotten into several very good conversations with faculty members about some of the topics from your Babylon series. In particular, I synthesized some of your ideas on postmodernism and some of mine on Educational Technology and came up with the idea of constructing a completely postmodern, online narrative environment for learning. My profs are very interested, but more than that, it has given me some relationship building and pre-evangelism opportunities.

Thanks for your work with *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. They are making a difference.

Dennis Beck
Gainesville, Florida

I suppose it would be too much to hope that an actual fellowship of persons exist in the Denver area who share these views. Got any ideas? Email: pslm63@wmconnect.com

Catherine
Denver, CO

We respond:
Although we don't know of any groups like this, we think it would be a great idea for our readers to meet each other. Anyone in the Denver area who is interested, please drop Catherine an email.

Satan's Beatitudes

One of the great classics of 20th century Christian writing is *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. It's one of those rare books that appeals so effortlessly to our hearts and imaginations and minds that learning becomes an intense pleasure. For those of you who haven't read it, it consists of a series of letters written by a senior devil named Screwtape to his young nephew, Wormwood, on the finer points in the art of temptation. Witty and insightful, it reveals much about the nature of evil and temptation, of being human and fallen in a broken world.

An email has been circulating, by an anonymous author, that was apparently composed in the spirit of Lewis's book. It is an attempt to rewrite the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:3-12) from the perspective of the devil:

"If Satan were to write his beatitudes, they would probably go something like this:

"1. Blessed are those who are too tired, too busy, too distracted to spend an hour once a week with their fellow Christians—they are my best workers.

"2. Blessed are those Christians who wait to be asked and expect to be thanked—I can use them.

"3. Blessed are the touchy who stop going to church—they are my missionaries.

"4. Blessed are the trouble makers—they shall be called my children.

"5. Blessed are the complainers—I'm all ears to them.

"6. Blessed are those who are bored with the minister's mannerisms and mistakes—for they get nothing out of his sermons.

"7. Blessed is the church member who expects to be invited to his own church—for he is a part of the problem instead of the solution.

"8. Blessed are those who gossip—for they shall cause strife and divisions

that please me.

"9. Blessed are those who are easily offended—for they will soon get angry and quit.

"10. Blessed are those who do not give their offering to carry on God's work—for they are my helpers.

"11. Blessed is he who professes to love God but hates his brother and sister—for he shall be with me forever.

"12. Blessed are you who, when you read this think it is about other people and not yourself—I've got you too!"

This was obviously written and distributed in an effort to make Christians think about and reflect on our attitudes, choices and behavior, so it represents a ready-made exercise in Christian discernment. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first response to this list of "Satan's Beatitudes?" Why did you respond this way?
2. How would you characterize the tone or spirit of the piece? Is the tone/spirit helpful in motivating you to consider the issues the list raises?
3. If you are familiar with *The Screwtape Letters*, how is this list similar to Lewis's book? How is it different?
4. What can you affirm in this list? What would you want to challenge? On what biblical grounds?
5. How does this list compare to Jesus's Beatitudes? How does it differ? What difference do the differences make?
6. This is obviously meant to be a teaching tool by Christians for Christians. Should it be used or distributed? Why or why not? Could it be misunderstood? How? Does the potential good it might have in helping believers assess their choices outweigh any potential misunderstandings that might occur? Why or why not?
7. Identify the various issues or themes raised in the list. What seems to be the primary concern(s) of the author? Is anything missing?
8. Since "Satan's Beatitudes" are being distributed on the internet, it seems likely that it will eventually be read by non-Christians. How does that possibility strike you?

The Spaces Between

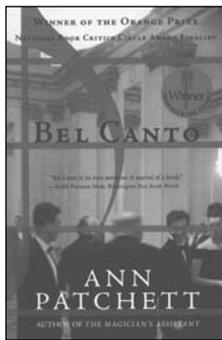
Bel Canto begins with a kiss that is nearly, but not quite concealed by sudden darkness. A group of people from countries as diverse as Japan, Russia, and France have gathered at the home of a South American Vice President for a birthday party. Those from the host country hope the party will forge political and social relationships that will steer them away from poverty and the violence of drugs to a calmer, more stable economy. Others are there only for the music. A famous opera singer is giving a private performance for the occasion and her last note is still hanging in the air and resonating in the hearts of the audience when the lights go out.

When the lights went off the accompanist kissed her. Maybe he had been turning towards her just before it was completely dark, maybe he was lifting his hands. There must have been some movement, a gesture, because every person in the living room would later remember a kiss. They did not see a kiss, that would have been impossible. The darkness that came on them was startling and complete. Not only was everyone there certain of a kiss, they claimed they could identify the type of kiss: it was strong and passionate, and it took her by surprise...

Some of them had loved her for years. They had every recording she had ever made. They kept a notebook and wrote down every place they had seen her, listing the music, the names of the cast, the conductor. There were others there that night who had not heard her name, who would have said, if asked, that opera was a collection of nonsensical cat screechings, that they would much rather pass three hours in a

dentist's chair. These were the ones who wept openly now, the ones who had been so mistaken." (pp. 1-2)

The darkness that descends after the performance doesn't frighten anyone at first. They merely continue applauding, overwhelmed by the music, and assume that the singer continues her kiss. It isn't until she speaks, offering to sing in the dark if someone will bring her a candle, that the spell is broken and everyone knows something has gone awry. The lights go back on as if by magic and terrorists, led by three Generals, who had heard that the President him-



In this place of timelessness, pretense and artifice fall away, revealing to each person what is truly important to them.

self would be there, storm the party.

Where another author might paint such a tense and uncertain scene with flashy colors and exclamation marks, detailing the fear or heightened emotions of each hostage to such an extent that the scene takes on a soap-opera quality and the reality of the situation is lost to the reader, Patchett holds her pen to the paper lightly, trusting that less is more. Her prose is lyrical and pleasing, a symphony of words that upholds her fictional world without getting in the way or announcing itself to the reader.

The police are quick to respond, surrounding the house and preventing the terrorists from retreating, and so without exception, every one of the characters within the confines of the house find themselves in a place of uncertainty where they are stripped of virtually everything except time. In this

place of timelessness, pretense and artifice fall away, revealing to each person what is truly important to them and upon what they have been pinning their hopes and dreams.

The hierarchy between captor and hostage slowly begins to fray and then unravels completely. The days settle into a rhythm of eating, sleeping, listening to the opera star sing, playing cards, staring out the window, and for the terrorists, watching television. Banter is thrown back and forth, and friendships are forged, even between those who don't speak the same language. When the weather permits, soccer matches are organized in the space between the house and the formidable wall that shelters them from the police; the games are cheered on by the Generals and captives alike, all of whom seem relieved to be able to stretch their legs and feel the sun on their skin. The rhythm of life is musical enough that some even wish things could continue as they are forever.

Clearly, this is a fantasy, and even as their hope seems very real and understandable, never far from a reader's mind is the knowledge that such a situation can not end well. It is a testament to Patchett's skill that we will join her characters in hoping for something that simply can't be. As Laura Miller wrote on salon.com, "this is a story of passionate, doomed love; of the glory of art; of the triumph of our shared humanity over the forces that divide us, and a couple of other unbearably cheesy themes, and yet Patchett makes it work, completely." ■

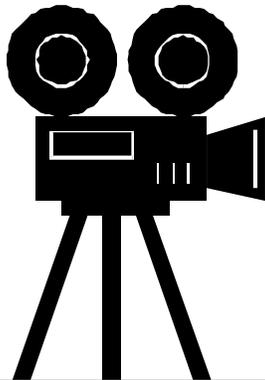
~Marsena Konkle

Go online! A discussion guide—a longer review plus discussion questions—is now available [www.ransomfelowship.org/B_Patchett].

Book reviewed: *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett (NY, NY: Perennial; 2001) 318 pp.

The Darkened Room

The Choices We Make



A review of *On the Waterfront*

by Drew Trotter

Elia Kazan, the recently deceased, Oscar-winning director of *On the Waterfront*, had a problem. His producer, Sam Spiegel, was holding back again. At odds with each other over almost everything throughout the making of the film, this time Spiegel was being too cheap even to rent a taxi cab for the famous confrontation scene between the two brothers in the movie, Charlie “the Gent” Malloy, played by Rod Steiger, and Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando. Everyone knew this was one of the most important, if not the most important scene in the film, and Kazan had wanted everything to be perfect; now, the whole scene was in danger of being scrapped.

Kazan, finally fed up with the stubborn Spiegel, decided to go with a mock “half cab,” complete with dummy steering wheel, and fake shock absorbers pushed by stage hands in order to simulate the motion a real cab would make on the streets of New Jersey. With rear projection for the cab’s back window, and a few lights intermittently shining into the car as if others were passing, everything would be fine.

When the set was ready and the day of the shoot came, everyone showed up to work, knowing they were running on a tight schedule, due at least in part to a clause in Brando’s contract that assured his getting off at 4 p.m. every day to see his psychiatrist. Just one problem: Spiegel had not ordered the rear projection. Differing stories would emerge later about whose fault it was, but the upshot was that everyone was standing around ready, and Kazan was running out of time.

Just as they were about to scrap the day’s work, a stagehand offered that he had ridden in a cab recently, which had a venetian blind in the rear window. Would that work? Kazan yelled, “Somebody get me a venetian blind!” and the rest is history. Kazan, frustrated with Spiegel and already exhausted before the shoot began, chose to let the two actors do the entire scene without any direction; in future interviews, he would consistently reject any credit for its brilliance, claiming that he did nothing but set it up and let the actors improvise. Brando’s solving the problem of how Terry would react to his brother pulling a gun on him by gently pushing it away, and Steiger’s decision to throw his head back and look at the top of the cab in resignation, when he understands that his not being able to kill his brother would probably mean his own death, are just two of the great acting decisions that make this scene one of the greats in movie history.

This story says something important about Elia Kazan and the nature of creativity. Sometimes the best choices are spur-of-the-moment insights one receives, seemingly out of nowhere. But are they really out of “nowhere?” Christians believe that the creativity we have as human beings comes from the giftedness we experience by bearing God’s image. In this sense we are all artists, Rod Steiger and Marlon Brando no more so than you or I, and, secondly, we are artists by the grace of God, not by our own power and right. As Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin put it in *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts*, “However many gifts we possess, we must never forget that they are just that—‘gifts’ given by God and not ours by right. We must also remember that these gifts can be applied to every aspect of human activity. . . . The capacity to imagine, experiment, and make things happen can be applied to the whole of life—education,

Film Credits

Starring:

Marlon Brando
(Terry Malloy)
Karl Malden
(Father Barry)
Lee J. Cobb
(Johnny Friendly)
Rod Steiger
(Charley Malloy)
Pat Henning
(Timothy J. Dugan)
Leif Erickson
(Glover)
John Hamilton
(‘Pop’ Doyle)
Eva Marie Saint
(Edie Doyle)

Director:

Elia Kazan

Screenwriters:

Malcolm Johnson
Budd Schulberg

Producer:

Sam Spiegel

Original Music:

Leonard Bernstein

Cinematographer:

Boris Kaufman

Runtime: 108 minutes

Rated G

horticulture, science, home-making, etc. Artists do not have a monopoly” (p. 44).

Of course none of us are given all gifts, and we are not even equally given the gifts we share. Few, if any, have approached the acting artistry of Brando and Steiger or the directing ability of Kazan. And few can point to a work of art more perfectly crafted than *On the Waterfront*.

The story of an ordinary dock-worker, thrown into the extraordinary circumstance of being the one person on the docks who could make a difference, *On the Waterfront* was a roaring success at the box office when it was released in 1954, and continues to be a powerful example of the early days of American “realism” today. From its groundbreaking, “method acting” performance by Brando to its winter-time location on the waterfront in New Jersey, *Waterfront* is recognized as being definitive for generations to come. It won six Academy Awards including Best Supporting Actress for Eva Marie Saint in her first movie as the Catholic school girl, Edie Doyle. The performances in this movie were so strong that three of the five nominees that year for Best Supporting Actor were from this film: Steiger; Lee J. Cobb who plays the corrupt labor boss, Johnny

Friendly; and Karl Malden, a priest named Father Barry who pushes the dock workers to examine their consciences and think about what they must do.



Waterfront has a moral center that challenges the viewer with the importance of doing what is right, no matter the odds against you or the personal price you must pay.

But technical excellence and awards are not the only reasons *On the Waterfront* should interest the Christian. This movie, perhaps more than any in American movie history, has a moral center that challenges the viewer with the importance of doing what is right, no matter the odds against you or the personal price you must pay.

Terry Malloy is the kid brother of Charlie “the Gent” Malloy, second in command to Johnny Friendly who has a stranglehold of kickbacks and graft on the dock workers of New Jersey. Terry works alongside the other guys but gets the cushy jobs because of his willingness to do favors for Johnny, favors

that extend to taking a dive in the boxing ring, even though boxing was the one thing Terry thought could have made him rise above the crowd. One night he is asked to help set up Johnny Doyle, Edie’s brother, though Terry did not know that Friendly’s henchman were going to kill Johnny. The incident begins a chain of events that leads to Terry’s confrontation with his own conscience, as well as the powers that be on the docks.

Three things make *On the Waterfront* a movie worth exploring for its Christian ideas. First, though its themes seem relatively clear, the film never departs from

telling its story well. An early poster proclaims *Waterfront* to be “The Redemption of Terry Malone” (yes, they did misspell the last name of the lead character!), and this is probably as good a choice for the overall theme of the film as any. But many other concepts about community, true righteousness, faith, and courage are central to an understanding of the film as well, and all of these are handled in a

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What scene, other than the taxi cab scene referred to above, impressed you most about the movie? Why? What choices by the actors or director contributed to the themes illustrated in scene?
2. *On the Waterfront* was a very realistic film for its time, especially in terms of the bloody violence it portrays of fistfights and murders. What do you think of this violence? Was it gratuitous or necessary? Compare it to the much more graphic violence one sees in movies today. Is it more disturbing or less so? Which has more influence for evil on the viewer’s psyche: the personal violence done to a character like Terry whom the viewer really cares about or the mass destruction of sometimes hundreds (in a battle scene, or a gun fight, e.g. in *The Matrix*) of unknowns?
3. Continue the discussion about violence, extending it to the use of force. How do you feel about using force; is it always wrong? Why or why not? What does the Bible have to say about “violence” and “force?”

Questions continued on next page...

The Darkened Room cont.



way that Christians will benefit from discussing.

But its story is always one of realistic characters in real-life contexts (Father Barry is even based on a real priest who worked among the dock-workers). It combines elements of romantic love, job conflict and family intrigue that are true to human experience, and this gives it a timeless feel, making the film as watchable today as it was fifty years ago.

Secondly, Kazan and Schulberg tell their story from the heart, and it shows in their movie-making. The background to this film is much too detailed to enter into deeply here, but the movie was rejected as too controversial and/or boring by every major studio in Hollywood, some of them twice. Even though Kazan was already a famous director, he simply could not find anyone to take a chance on the film, but he and Schulberg kept plugging until they convinced Spiegel to get on board. When they got Brando for the lead, they were good to go, but the point is that the morality inherent in the priest's role and in the exploration of Terry Malloy's conscience was so important to them that it made a work of art that was produced with a moral passion that should be instructive to artists everywhere, especially to Christians.

Thirdly, the church is important, and arguably central, to the moral content of the film. We as Christians need to think hard about ways to present the truth that

Many other concepts about community, true righteousness, faith, and courage are central to an understanding of the film as well.

resides exclusively, or at least predominantly, in the gospel in our art. Most Christian artists do touch on moral verities in their work, but usually they are those known by natural revelation. We need to go beyond the morality that we share in common with others to present the distinctive aspects of Christian truth and morals, if our art is going to change

hearts and minds for the better. William Romanowski has written well in his seminal *Eyes Wide Open* that Christians need to “unfold a biblical vision into a cultural landscape” whose basic features “will help people be engaged with popular art and culture more intentionally *as Christians*” (p. 93, italics his). *On the Waterfront* provides an interesting model in that regard. ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2004 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS CONT.

4. Jeff Young, Kazan's biographer, and Richard Schickel, former movie critic for *Time* magazine and author of many books on the movies, agree on the DVD commentary track that the “Christ in the Shape Up” scene is “the most heavily criticized scene in the movie, and in some ways quite properly criticized,” though Kazan and Budd Schulberg, the author of the screenplay, thought it to be one of the most important in the movie, so much so that they fought Sam Spiegel repeatedly in order to keep it in its entirety. What do you think of the scene? Why do you think Young and Schickel are disparaging of it, calling it “old-fashioned” and “awkward?” Though it could be argued that their criticism of the scene extends only to its form, does that seem the case to you? Or does their animosity say something about the awkwardness of “religious” themes in a movie in our day?
5. How does Karl Malden's character Father Barry compare to priests in other movies you have seen, both of the times (e.g., Bing Crosby in *Bells of St. Mary's*) and of today (e.g., Edward Norton in *Keeping the Faith*)? What does the comparison tell you about the attitudes Americans are willing to tolerate in their entertainment lives? How do you wish the church to be portrayed in the movies?
6. Listen carefully to speech Father Barry delivers in the “Christ in the Shape Up” scene (entitled “A promise fulfilled” on the DVD). What sort of theology does it espouse? How consistent is it with what you believe? What does Father Barry say that only a Christian could say?

Knowing God & Mechanics

The first time I had a chance to talk with Esther Meek, it was over lunch in a pleasant café not far from Covenant Seminary. That meal is sharply etched in my memory, though not because of the food. The conversation stands out most clearly in my memory even though I must confess that I can't remember exactly what was said. What I remember most distinctly is the passion Dr. Meek demonstrated when I asked her about her calling. A calling which embraces a topic that I suspect most people would consider so boring and obscure as to be mind-numbing. Her passion was not only real but infectious, and before long I not only had a reading list but was excited to have learned so much from her.

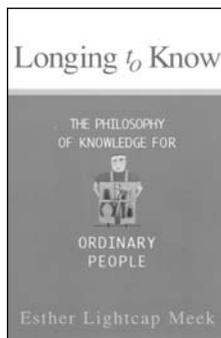
I will tell you the topic she was addressing, but I fear some of you may use that as an excuse to stop reading. Please don't. Esther Meek

is a philosopher, and her specialty is epistemology—the study of human knowledge, of how we learn and know things, distinguish truth from error, and make sense of life.

Another thing stands out to me about our conversation that day. When I asked Dr. Meek about epistemology, her answer, rather than being dry, academic, and sterile, was lively, practical, and rooted deeply in a biblical understanding of life. It was evident that though she knew the literature as a scholar should, she hadn't retreated into an ivory tower but related what she was saying to the ordinary stuff of existence where all of us live out our days. This was not only rigorously Christian thinking, it was the sort of thing that was immediately applicable in the effort to shape a life that is both discerning and faithful in an increasingly pluralistic and post-Christian world.

If you have ears to hear and have taken time to listen, you'll know that our world is full of questions that have to do with knowing.

Many people, for example, question whether absolute truth exists at all, and consider believing in such a thing a mark of intolerance. Then there is the fact that younger Christians are often comfortable with a level of ambiguity about truth that causes their elders great uneasiness. The older, modern generation seeks answers that are certain, while the younger, postmodern generation wonders why they bother, seeking instead for meaning and direction in life. We may have discovered that reasons and arguments for faith that we once found convincing have somehow lost their force. And we all know



Learning to know and trust God is exactly like learning to know and trust a good car mechanic.

young adults who have reached the frightfully wonderful stage where they must either adopt their parents' faith as their own, or reject it. How do we work through such issues? In each instance, though the individual question may be a bit different, each person is face-to-face with what it means to know. Their yearning for truth and spirituality requires the insight of a practical epistemology that is both biblical and accessible to ordinary people. This is precisely what Meek provides us in her new book, *Longing to Know*.

Though Meek accomplishes it so effortlessly you'll hardly know it's happening, reading *Longing to Know* is also an introduction to the thinking of Michael Polanyi. A chemist for most of his adult life, Polanyi was impressed that commonly accepted explanations of how a scientist learns and makes discoveries did not match what actually took place in the laboratory. Polanyi began reflecting on knowledge and human learning, and beginning in the 1940s, wrote books on the topic. They

received little attention at the time because they represented a radical departure from the accepted philosophical assumptions of his day. Though Polanyi died prior to the advent of postmodernism, Meek believes that his approach represents a powerful response to the questions about truth, faith, and knowing that we all face today.

Longing to Know includes discussion questions with every chapter to help us process and apply what we are learning. Meek insists in the Foreword that unlike most books on philosophy, it is not necessary to understand every word of each chapter before going on to the next chapter. Having read the

book, I can attest that this rather dubious sounding proposition is in fact true. What she presents is a way of thinking—and living—about knowing that builds from beginning to end, so that the

more we read the more sense it all makes. Each chapter is brief enough that we aren't overwhelmed by what we are learning.

Here's another radical idea she presents in *Longing to Know*: learning to know and trust God is exactly like learning to know and trust a good car mechanic. It is an example which is both disarmingly simple and bracingly profound. It demonstrates that thinking Christianly about epistemology can help us live more faithfully and speak more clearly about the truth.

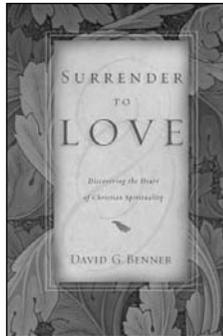
This is a practical, well-written book. If I could think of people who could afford to not read it, I'd list them, but I honestly can't think of any. It would even be good for non-Christians who are seriously considering Christianity. ■

~Denis Haack

Book reviewed: *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* by Esther Lightcap Meek (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2003) 197 pp. + notes.

Imagine God Thinking

If you're like me, you struggle with surrendering to God's control. I pray for God's guidance and direction and then turn around to find myself totally in control of every minute of my calendar. I am competent, educated, accomplished—one could even see evidence of success in my life. I can tell myself that I am pleasing God by doing what I please. Yet, I long for a deeper walk with God. I know that I am sinful and want what I want. My dreams and ambitions, even if they are all about serving God and His kingdom, are still about me and how I want to use my gifts, craft my career, my life. I ask, Lord, am I not just using the gifts you have given me? But it seems like God wants all that too. My fear is that if I



Even our obedience can be egocentric, mere behavioral compliance, as we live with resolve and determination.

don't surrender it, He will take it all away.

I am self-protective. This area where I operate, and my control over my calendar are my comfort zone. In the power of what I can accomplish I feel mastery. In the prestige of what others think of me and my accomplish-

ments, I find my self-esteem. In my possessions, be they professional credentials or a new car, I feel my success. Sure, I know what really matters: not in works, I am not what I do, I live by grace; not in the esteem of others, I am a child of

God; success is in being faithful, not in what I accumulate or accomplish. But doesn't willful control of my time, my choices, my work, give a lie to all this? I want to surrender to God. I long to be closer to Him, to hear His voice, and to be confident of His presence and pleasure, His guidance and blessing of my daily motions. How is that possible?

Perhaps I just need to be more obedient, more disciplined with my quiet time. I need to spend more time everyday in the Word. I could schedule that in. Maybe if I just try harder, I can get closer to God. I can exert my will here! But isn't that the problem again? Finally, I turn to others who seem to have struggled with the same willfulness problem.

One kindred soul is David Benner. In his new book, *Surrender to Love*, Benner relates his journey to know, as he says, "that I am deeply and unconditionally

Briefly Noted: Listening to U2



by Denis Haack

Prophets and poets have always had several things in common. Both speak in metaphors. Both help us see life and reality with startling clarity. And both call us to commitment, to truth, to gladly assume the responsibility of knowledge, even at cost. Those who listen to the music of U2 with ears to hear, realize they are hearing one of the prophetic poetic voices of our day. U2 does not merely entertain, but addresses the questions that we must face as we find our way in this fallen world. In *Get Up Off Your Knees*, 24 thinkers from a variety of Christian traditions share sermons and meditations in which they reflect on life in light of the insightful music of U2. Two of the contributions in this book, "To See What You See: On Liturgy & Learning & Life" and "A Wedding Sermon for Nathan & Sandie" are by Steven Garber, a Ransom Board member. *Get Up Off Your Knees* provides insight into U2 and its music, helps us clarify the meaning of Christian faithfulness, and demonstrates how to weave the creative insights of poets into our reflections on the ordinary things of life. ■

Book reviewed: *Get Up Off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog* edited by Raewynne J. Whiteley and Beth Maynard (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications; 2003) 212 pp.

About You

loved and yet continue to strive to earn love...how much I resist the very love that holds the promise of freeing me from my striving and fears" (P. 12). Benner says that we want to keep one foot firmly planted in the kingdom of self while awkwardly attempting to plant the other in the Kingdom of God. We desperately want to enter into more intimacy with God, but the vulnerability, the surrender required is terrifying.

Jesus confronts me with His words in Mark 8: "If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Had I been standing in front of Jesus the day he spoke those words, would I have walked away in discouragement? Like the rich young ruler. I, in my wealth of education, gifts, good family, and financial security, love my life.

Perhaps I am too easily satisfied. I heard the things God has given me and will not open my arms for more. These are my treasures, "my precious," as Gollum calls the ring in Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* as he was corrupted by its power. But then, I can defend myself by citing my obedience—I have tried to live faithfully this Christian life. Benner warns that even our obedience can be ego-centric, mere behavioral compliance, as we live with resolve and determination. "We want a spirituality of success and ascent, not a spirituality of failure and descent. We want a spirituality of improvement, not a spirituality of transformation. But the way of the cross is the way of descent, abandon and death" (p. 91).

Maybe you aren't in this place in the journey where I find myself. There are different stops along the way in spiritual formation. But, perhaps in the midst of some minor trial or frustration, or even something more life shattering, the questions will arise: "Do I really believe God loves me?"

"Imagine God thinking about you. What do you assume He feels when you come to mind?" Benner asks us (p. 15). "St. Ignatius of Loyola notes that sin is unwillingness to trust that what God wants is our deepest happiness. Until I am absolutely convinced of this I will do everything I can to keep my hands on the controls of my life, because I think I know better than God what I need for my fulfillment" (pp. 66-67).

You see it is a problem of the heart, not of the will, or ability, or obedience. I think I know best what I need. Yet, I am called to let go of trying to steal through power, prestige

The spiritual journey is still about relationship and not achievement.

or possessions what God most wants to give me, that which I long for the most, intimacy with Him. I can't get it by clever maneuvers. I must face all my attempts at getting noticed, trying to please God or be loveable, and just surrender. "How terrifying it is to face my naked and needy self" (p. 78).

Yet, Benner urges me to "sit at Jesus feet, gazing into his face and listening to his assurances of love for me" (p. 79). I need to soak in Jesus' love for me, not simply read about it or just believe it. I must experience it first hand. I need to spend time with God, sitting in prayer and His presence. Benner suggests *lectio divina*, letting the Holy Spirit open the Word of God to me and me to God. "Transformation demands that we meet God in the vulnerability of our sin and shame rather than retreating to trying to get on with our self-improvement projects" (p. 83). Only God's perfect love can cast out fear and loose my controlling grip on my hoarded treasures and my self-defensiveness about my shortcomings, sin and strivings to

please. Undefended, vulnerable, I can receive perfect love from a God who became vulnerable for me as incarnate human life. In this surrender is Christ-likeness, the fruits of the Spirit and the way to love my neighbor. Yes, I have been obedient, I have been of service, I have used my gifts for God's Kingdom, but Benner's book reminds me that the spiritual journey is still about relationship and not achievement. ■

~Jennifer Disney

Jennifer H. Disney is a therapist, spiritual director and writer who lives in Minnesota. Copyright © 2004 Jennifer H. Disney

Book reviewed:

Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality by David G. Benner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2003) 108 pp + notes.

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Longing to Know

The relationship of

Some people these days talk a lot about stories, when you might be expecting them to talk about truth.

At a Borders gathering earlier this year in St. Louis, Denis Haack stressed the critical significance of stories in our lives and in any culture. Quoting Robert Jensen, he concurred that

“stories link past, present and future, in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going...

Our stories teach us that there is a place for us, that we fit. They suggest to us that our lives can have a plot.

Stories turn mere chronology, one thing after another, into the purposeful action of plot, and thereby into meaning... Stories are the best way humans beings have for accounting for our experience.”

(First Things 10/93)

“The stories of a people, or generation, or culture tend both to reflect and to mold the ideas, hopes, dreams, and values of those who listen to and identify with them,” added Denis. “It is story which also shapes our values and perception of reality.”

Denis went on to suggest that “the stories of our day are found by and large in the cinema, and that means that if we want to understand our times and our friends and our selves, we need to listen to the movies.”

Stories vs. Truth?

Do you find it surprising that he and others make such radical claims concerning stories? How can something that is “just a story” be so important, life and perception shaping, for individuals and

cultures? What is a story, if not something humans make up—as opposed to, say, truth? Or reality? What hath fabrication to do with knowledge?

Plenty, I venture to suggest. What Denis is saying about movies and story, I believe, actually applies to all human efforts to know. Devising stories involves assigning significance to events to make sense of them. I believe that every act of knowing involves us in such significance assigning. All knowing is the responsible, risky, human, active struggle to shape a

All knowing is the responsible, risky, human, active struggle to shape a pattern by assigning significance to its pieces.

pattern by assigning significance to its pieces, whether what we are knowing is a book bag or a disease, atoms at cold temperatures, or persons. A profound pattern unlocks the world for us, and we submit to the reality it reveals.

Stories are patterns issuing from responsible human appraisal and unlock the world. Thus they resemble all acts of knowing. Stories are patterns in time—temporal patterns. So devising stories, and this includes film-making, is fundamentally an act of knowing by which we access the world.

Our lives are a tapestry of acts of knowing. You can't turn around without being involved in one, at least one, maybe more. So it is going to make you better at knowing, and more a person of integrity, if you give some thought to what you are doing when you know. Furthermore,

much indeed is at stake in our ideas about knowing—truth, reality, God, not to mention who we are and what we do.

Default Mode #1: Statements and Proof

But I offer my approach¹ to understanding knowing as a third alternative to far more common ways of conceiving it. How do we typically view the “epistemic enterprise?” Our “default mode” of thinking about knowledge is to picture knowledge as so many statements, and their proof. Statements and proof, statements and rational proof. “A cold front is moving through.” “How do you know?” “Well, it's been windy all morning, and now the wind has shifted to the north.” “Sir Ernest Shackleton was the key to the rescue of all the crew of the *Endurance*.” “How do you know?” “I just was reading what his crew wrote in their journals about him, and that's what they say.”

Obviously, there is nothing amiss with saying that statements and proof have to do with knowledge. We have only gotten ourselves in trouble (in the Western tradition of thought) by saying that it is *all* that there is to knowledge. If you say that all that there is to knowledge is fully articulated statements that are thoroughly justified by other statements, some things don't get explained, some really important factors get overlooked, and if you are really rigid about it, you actually inhibit your success in knowing. What is worse, key components of your skill at knowing simply atrophy through disuse, and you feel disconnected from your world, yourself, and others, including God.

Here is an obvious problem with saying that statements and proof is all

...and Movies

stories and truth.

there is to knowledge. If knowledge is only that which has a full justification, and is fully articulated, how do we get it in the first place? How do you come to know? I am only repeating what Socrates' disciple, Meno, asked his master in Plato's dialogue named after him. Wherever you end up, you certainly don't start with explicit statements rationally justified. That's the whole point of exploration of any sort. But exploration, successful exploration, occurs all the time. There must be more to what we do in our knowing than statements. In fact, in the process of exploration, we usually can't articulate related statements and proof until after the discovery. Which ought to make us wonder what is going on prior to it.

And that raises the question, why should we consider "knowledge" and "knowing" to refer only to the statements only possible after our success, and withhold that designation from the exciting, risky, sometimes heroic, irresistible, very human longing to piece things together to get there, and to continue to affirm it once we do? Philosophers, and our default mode, have often relegated the getting-there part to *non-knowledge*. We may think it's mystical, even miraculous. We are told it is irrational. It's what artists do, and religious people, but it isn't knowledge. If you want to talk about knowledge, talk about statements and proof.

Default Mode #2: Private Truth

Nowadays, we have developed a second default mode. Okay, knowledge is statements and proof, but it doesn't exist. All we have is private truth. It has become so patently evident to us that people's perspectives, their situatedness in history, place, and culture, shape their reality. And if this is the way things are, you can't have knowledge that is statements

and proof. So you can't have knowledge. And while we're at it, reality is only what we make it. So make up what you want. Also, in a misguided attempt to exalt the virtue of tolerance, many of us think that we have to say that what is true for me can be and often is different from what is true for you.

Actually, default mode #2 is caught in the same dynamic as default mode #1. If knowledge is exclusively statements and proof, the radical disconnectedness of knowledge from knower and known will lead to the demise of knowledge. Knowledge cut off from knower and known eventually proves to be no knowledge at all. Default

If knowledge is only that which has a full justification, and is fully articulated, how do we get it in the first place?

mode #2, in reaction, has at least attempted to reconnect with knower, but has done so by reducing knowledge completely to the knower: it's all about me, as we say. But in our heart of hearts, this does not satisfy.

In describing these default modes, I am being simplistic; our actual practice of knowing never conforms purely to either default mode. I believe that humans can actually be deluded about how they go about knowing, and still succeed in knowing, because they rely on the very dimensions of the act that they deny. Our epistemology, as humans in the warp and woof of living, is usually better than what we say and think we are doing.

But do you see that to the extent that we hammer our default modes, to that extent our ability to recognize and cultivate any other dimensions of knowledge that might exist can't help but atrophy? These ignored and

often atrophied dimensions include responsible choice, patience and humility as we woo the yet to be known, covenantal self-binding, intentionality with regard to our bodily, felt, lived, sense of the real, and intelligent orienting of ourselves in light of authoritative guides of all sorts.

Longing to Know, Connecting the Dots

The act of knowing, I say, is the active human struggle to rely on clues to focus on a pattern, which we then recognize and submit to as accessing the world. A short way of saying it is to say that knowing is making sense of experience, "connecting the dots," as we say. Isn't that what people are always trying to do? "Why are there cookie crumbs on the counter?" "Why is my roommate acting like that?" "What the heck does my professor mean when he shouts 'particularity!' at the top of his lungs?"

When are we not doing this? When we are deathly ill, or just dead.

How do we go about knowing? We enter a situation that initially makes no sense when we look at the pieces. Because nothing makes sense, we can't even be sure what counts as "a piece." We struggle to make sense of it, to detect a pattern. The process isn't at all linear. It's not like we can line up our premises and derive a conclusion, because we can't say what the premises are until after we find the conclusion. For all that, we struggle toward the solution, and sometimes we even have a sense of getting closer to it. We see that some people get to solutions faster than we do in areas in which they are skilled and experienced. That's because like all skills, some people have a special gift, and all of us improve with practice.

Reading the World

But then there comes a moment when light dawns, a light bulb moment. We have in our struggle actively reshaped the pieces into a pattern, and the pattern seems to take over. The pattern more than connects the dots we thought we were working from. It's liable to explode them with something breaking in that's three-dimensional, that transforms them and us to boot. We get the sense that we have unlocked a door. We can get this sense that we are no longer the one asking the questions. We get this sense that there's horizons and possibilities that we can only imagine.

Can you give an example of such an experience in your life? Can you think of some that you have seen or read about? The Bible also yields telling examples. One of my favorites is the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 23). See if you can track the unfolding of knowledge for them along the lines of my description.

Restoring Statements to Their Natural Habitat

Contrast this description of knowing to the two default modes: in human efforts to know, the statements we do articulate, claim and justify are just the tip of an iceberg. They are the skin that congeals on the top of a cup of cooling cocoa—they lie at the intersection between fathoms below and fathoms above.

Statements crest a responsible human struggle, an exercising of skilled personal appraisal. Statements require a profound reintegration of the pieces, and draw their life from much that is tacit on which we rely to assert them. We will be better knowers as we graciously and humbly

acknowledge and cultivate the subsidiary roots of our claims. We ignore them to our peril.

In the other direction, moving outward, statements are the tip of yet another iceberg, namely, the world. While we aspire to represent reality in them, we must not make claims stand or fall by a rigidly explicit ideal. It isn't certainty or bust. For sometimes our words are more

Because knowing involves shaping patterns, we actually need others—coaches, teachers, guides—to teach us to assign proper significance to the pieces, even to pieces within our own body or thought!

like keys that unlock doors, or catalysts that engage creative response. Words evoke as much as they describe. They point, and sometimes they unleash.

It's not that knowledge isn't statements and proof, or that statements and proof don't consolidate our gains. It's that limiting knowledge to statements and proof is about as helpful as cutting off the branch you are standing on. Nor is it that we determine reality. Shaping patterns isn't fabrication, unless it's a bad pattern. Shaping patterns unlocks the real, the way any good act of knowing does. When I say these things, I take them to describe knowing in science as much as they do knowing in art, in business as much as in religion.

Yes, statements and their truth are key ingredients in knowing. But they survive only as we allow them their integral connection to us and to the world. We need to restore them to their natural habitat for them to thrive.

How Do We Shape a Pattern?

Knowing is the active and responsible human struggle to interpret clues to shape a pattern that then we submit to as accessing the real. Humans shape the pattern. A good pattern unlocks reality. How do we shape a pattern? We do it by assigning significance to the pieces.

Take a simple example. We see a white crescent in the evening sky. It is the moon. What is it that we are seeing? Are we seeing all of a crescent, or part of an orb? Part of an orb, we all agree. The pattern we make hinges on whether we say that what we don't see is absent, or whether it is merely hidden. We assign significance to that gap. And doing it properly unlocks the world to us: we've even put people on the moon.

For us to "see" a pattern, we have to have assigned significance to the pieces. This goes for our simplest and most basic perceptions, just as it does for the theory of relativity. "Noticing" is our very common word for assigning significance to the smallest thing. And seeing the thing can only happen when I assign the significance aright. Noticing requires us to rely on more than we are able to put into words. It is laced with tacit, lived, feel, a kind of navigating and orienting that is a bit like a bat flying through a cave by dint of bouncing radar off the rocks.

Because knowing involves shaping patterns, we actually need others—coaches, teachers, guides—to teach us to assign proper significance to the pieces, even to pieces within our own body or thought! How else does anybody learn to read X-rays? How else would anybody learn to read, period? We need to be taught to see what is there. Have you ever noticed how much the Olympic ski jump commenta-

tors manage to say and say excitedly about what we are all watching? I find it hilarious! How is it that they see all that? Author Annie Dillard speaks wisely: “The lovers can see, and the knowledgeable.”

Movies, Stories, are Patterns, Too

Movies often depict acts of coming to know. My favorite is *The Hunt for Red October*. If you are familiar with it, you can name the pieces that Jack Ryan and others are trying to make sense of. You can name the moment when Ryan grasps a pattern that reinterprets the pieces and makes profounder sense than what everybody else is thinking: Soviet submarine commander Ramius, in launching the Red October, isn't starting World War III; he is trying to defect. You can note the passionate commitment to this pattern that drives Ryan on to ever greater risk and danger, compelled forward by his sketchily based conviction about Ramius. You can savor the moment when he meets Ramius face to face. You can share his terror when he finds that he is no longer the one asking the questions or giving the orders: his pattern has compelled his submission to its reality. Talk about patterns unlocking and engaging the real!

Movies themselves are patterns, as are all stories. Identifying a snowy owl or a Tiffany lamp engages us in shaping a spatial pattern. By contrast, a story is a temporal pattern, a pattern we shape in time. (So is a musical composition, by the way.) A story is essentially a person orchestrating pieces into a pattern by assigning significance to those pieces, is it not? And some stories are more profound, unlock reality better, than others. They can resonate to our experience, they can help us understand ourselves better, or the world better, they can even shape the course of history—my friend's father saw *Mrs. Miniver* in the theater and walked straight to the recruiting office during World War II.

To make a movie requires assigning significance in such a way that shapes a beginning, a problem, a climax, a resolution. It involves bodying forth what is significant about life and reality. Better movies and better stories resonate more profoundly with the real; they assign significance more truthfully. They have a message that grows out of the significance they have assigned to the pieces.

And while we are talking about noticing, notice how the cinematographer prompts his/her audience to notice the right things, and in right relationship to the overall pat-

Movies often depict acts of coming to know.

tern. The cinematographer is a guide, too. And for those of you who read Denis Haack's reviews, or sit alongside him and view a film together, notice how Denis helps you notice the right things in the film. Yet another guide on whom we rely to help us to see the pattern that is there.

Denis says, pay attention to movies: they tell the stories of our culture and of our lives. We need to see that, far from diverting us from the pursuit of truth, he calls us to the main stream of it.

A Call to Story Telling, a Call to Truth

One final comment, of the many things we could go on to discuss. You shape stories too, and view your life in terms of them. Think of how you relate to your friend what happened at the band competition last weekend, or at the office this morning. Think of how as you move into adulthood you have to reassess what happened between you and your family growing up. Think how you try to cope when adversity strikes. We are compulsive pattern seekers, significance assigners.

As image bearers entrusted by God with preserving and developing his world, this is our glory and His.

I hope you find it helpful to see that shaping such stories is the stuff of knowing, and profoundly human. It calls for personal appraisal, personal responsibility, and a good measure of risk. You can do it well or you can do it poorly, according to how profoundly your pattern engages the real. Embrace your calling, and may the wind be at your back. ■

~Esther Meek

Esther Lightcap Meek, PhD, is adjunct professor of philosophy at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and author of Longing to Know, published by Brazos Press. Log onto www.longingtoknow.com for more information, or to contact Dr. Meek. Copyright © 2004 Esther L. Meek.

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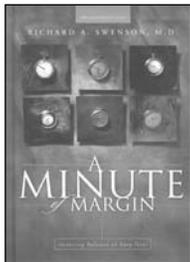
See a review of her book, *Longing to Know*, in this issue of *Critique*, page 9.

Endnote:

1. I have adopted and adapted the epistemology of Michael Polanyi as presented throughout his writings, such as in *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, 1958).

Briefly Noted: Saturated with Busyness

by Denis Haack



Richard Swenson is a medical doctor who left his practice in order to research, write, and lecture on stress, overload, and margin. “When on the unsaturated side of our limits, we can be open and expansive,” Swenson says. “We can say Yes to new opportunities, activities, and obligations. But on the saturated side of our limits, the rules of the game totally change. We cannot say Yes to something until we say No to something equally time consuming or energy draining.” In *A Minute of Margin* he pens 180 brief daily reflections to help us consider how best to live as beings who were created to serve God as finite creatures. As people with limits, and so who need to recognize and honor our God-given limits. As persons made to live in time, in a weekly cycle of work and rest, building in appropriate margin so we are not overloaded, taking on what is not truly ours and short-changing our calling. ■

Note: Log onto our website (www.ransomfellowship.org/R_Swenson) to read an excerpt of the book.

Book reviewed: *A Minute of Margin: Restoring Balance to Busy Lives* by Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2003) 365 pp + notes + index.

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