

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2014 Issue 4



Rapturous Visions



[OR NOT]

CRITIQUE



2014 Issue 4 © Ransom Fellowship

EDITOR

Denis Haack

ART DIRECTOR

Karen Coulter Perkins

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Steven Garber

Director, The Washington Institute, Washington, D.C.

Donald Guthrie

Professor of Educational Ministries
Director of PhD Program in Educational Studies
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois

Denis and Margie Haack

Co-founders, Ransom Fellowship, Minnesota

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President for Marketing and Communications
CCO, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Henry Tazelaar

Chair, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology
Professor of Pathology
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Arizona

Paul Woodard

Life Care Retirement Community Chaplain, retired
St. Louis, Missouri

CONTACT CRITIQUE:

www.RansomFellowship.org
15245 132nd Court, Savage, MN 55378
info@ransomfellowship.org

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.

RECEIVE CRITIQUE: Critique is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise.

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Letters from The House Between* (formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*), a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

COPYING POLICY: Feel free to make up to 50 copies of any article that appears in *Critique* for use with a small group. We only ask that you copy the entire article, note the source, and distribute the copies free of charge.

HEARTS & MINDS: Hearts and Minds bookstore donates 10% of your purchase to Ransom Fellowship if you mention us when placing your order: www.heartsandminds-books.com.

2014:4 CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITOR

1 The House Between

2 DIALOGUE

READING THE WORLD

3 Discernment 101b: What's Obvious Might Not Be

REFLECTIONS

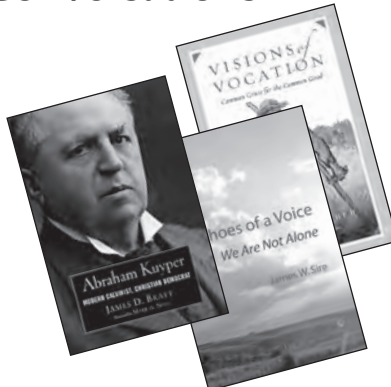
Candles

From Scott Schuleit

6

DISCERNING LIFE

A Toolkit for Conversations



8

READING THE WORD

Rapturous Visions (or not)

A response to Fanny Crosby's hymn, "Blessed Assurance"



RESOURCES

14 Does Work have Meaning in a Broken World?

15 Signals of Immanence and Transcendence

16 A Dutchman Worth Knowing

17

TUNED IN

Woe to the Broken Planet

A review of Wovenhand's album *Refractory Obdurate*



The House Between



After living 33 years in a house in Rochester, Minn., that we named Toad Hall, we moved. There are lots of reasons, but I'll let Margie tell the story in her next few issues of *Letters from the House Between*. Suffice it to say we had the growing conviction that we were being providentially extruded from Rochester. Our closest advisors were equally convinced and, as we made plans to act on that conviction, God seemed to confirm our move, step by step...and here we are in Savage, Minnesota.

(I love the name—Savage—but I'll reflect on that another time.)

If my summary of our move makes it sound like it was a piece of cake, smooth and easy and without stress or incident, that's not the case. Again, I'll let Margie tell the story, but let me assure you that in general my advice is: if you need not move, don't. It's stressful, a lot of work, full of hidden expenses, and a lot of work—yes, I've repeated myself, and

could repeat it a third time without fully expressing how much work it involves. As far as I'm concerned, the next time I move, paramedics will do it.

Two years ago I thought I'd never leave Toad Hall and, when we first decided to move, I mourned the loss. It was the first place in which I felt rooted and that is not a small thing. Yet now the move is over—there are only a few boxes left to be unpacked—and I find myself loving it here. This place seems just right for the next stage of our life and work. It will allow us to be hospitable, welcoming people to meals and unhurried conversations. There are numerous places where people can sit and read or reflect, places away from the busyness of modern life. The house is unassuming in front, designed for inhabitants to focus out the back, where it nestles up against a wooded ravine on the edge of a 45 acre Savage City park called Hidden Valley Park. The room I am sitting in as I write seems more like a tree house than an office. It seems that God providentially kept this place for us, but again, I'll let Margie tell the story. For certain: God has been gracious.

So, now this is home. I am very glad to be here, very much at home.

And yet, it is not home—it is The House Between.

Our home lies between the bustling Twin Cities and a wooded ravine with lovely streams and trails. In time it lies between Toad Hall, where we spent the majority of our working years, and this next and final stage of our work. It is the place we will live as we seek to be faithful in the ordinary things of our calling in the time between what is now and the future return of our King. All of redeemed existence is in this place of tension, between what is and what is

yet to be. The one is lived in light of the other. So this is The House Between.

We need to get a sign posted out front with the name, but we haven't decided what shape that should take. The sign won't primarily be for visitors, but to remind us where we are.

"Be still before the Lord," David wrote so many centuries ago, "wait patiently for him" (Psalms 37:7). I don't know whether that was difficult to do in the agrarian world in which he lived, but it seems almost impossible today. Being still is unproductive and inefficient, and having to wait is a waste of time that generates not just complaints but rants.

We hope that some small echo of what David meant might be found here. It seems like the perfect task for The House Between. ■



To the editor:

We enjoy both *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. We used "Nourishing Gratitude" [*Critique* 2012:6] for discussion in our care group and we talked for over two hours. The only reason we stopped was some of the group needed to be somewhere else.

May God continue to bless you and your ministry.

Roberta Rodriguez
Albuquerque, NM

To the editor:

Critique arrived today and I have devoured it already. Thanks so much.

A Man For All Seasons is a great film [*Critique* 2014:1] and I'm not surprised you got a good discussion out of it. Yes, the Greatham Manor [English L'Abri] is especially refrigerated and is a sort of purgatorial third circle. I'm organizing some double glazed windows in four of the east face large windows and a double glazed base for the lantern in the bake house/lecture room. I hope that will make a good difference. They have installed a boiler and heating radiators but, of course, when I was there in January for a week the system was not working the whole time. GI hot water bottles are many peoples' closest friends there.

It was great to see you in Rochester and have the tiny beginnings of

To the editor:

Hi Denis

Bob and I were recently on a car trip during which we listened to Mars Hill Audio, thanks to you introducing us so many years ago. Anyway, one of the Mars Hill discussions led us to discuss the news flap over the baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple, and then on to a re-discussion of your Babylon series, which has been repeatedly helpful over the years as we wrestle with how to live faithfully and transparently in our multi-culture. Both of us wished we could get it on audio—maybe mp3—with your voice doing the reading, because you have a way of opening up meaning by the way in which you read, so it would certainly be more meaningful if you read it.

Now, obviously, you have a lot on your plate and probably aren't looking about for new projects, but we figured it didn't hurt to bring up the idea so if you were considering doing some of your writing as audio projects you would know that at least two people would find that very, very helpful.

Our daughter, Alta, whom I think you ran into briefly at the recent L'Abri conference, is currently involved in making an audio book out of our co-published book, *Dyslexia Tool Kit*, so I know what a lot of work it entails. She's doing the sound engineering as well as the reading. However, if someone else did the sound engineering

conversations. To be continued I hope.

Greetings to
Margie. God bless
you both.

Love in Christ,
Ellis Potter
Switzerland

and you only went into the studio and read your article, that might be reasonable.

So there it is—more ideas for things to do!

BTW, thanks for making your work available on www.ransomfellowship.org. The site is a huge, wonderful resource.

Yvonna Graham
Boulder, CO

Response by Denis Haack:

Roberta: Thanks for writing. I am always very pleased when readers say they have used some piece in *Critique* to prompt conversation, since that is one of the main reasons we publish it. It is always a delicate balance to state what I believe to be true without giving people an excuse not to think for themselves. This seems especially crucial in a society where depending on experts to provide answers has become so normative that the notion is rarely questioned, and at a time when unhurried conversation is rare for many. I always find myself wishing I could have listened in. May you—and your care group—know glimpses of truth and beauty in the days ahead.

Ellis: I appreciate the kind words, my friend, and the fact you are working to introduce heat into the premises in England. May you know grace and health as you write, travel, and lecture.

Yvonna: They say that some emails should not be read, especially ones that involve more work, but it's too late for that. Actually, I appreciate your idea since it didn't occur to me on my own. I don't commute or spend much time in the car, so listening to anything except music isn't a regular part of my life. I'll consider it carefully, and thank you. ■

Discernment 101b: What's Obvious Might Not Be

Some people act as if pluralism isn't simply a fact of life. Instead, they are offended when movies do not depict the values they approve, or shocked when friends support a candidate or a program they find unacceptable. I know that regional differences make a difference—some areas are more diverse, some are less diverse—but all the conditions of our postmodern world tend towards greater pluralism, not less. And greater pluralism means more difference of opinion not less.

One practical result of cultural, religious and lifestyle pluralism is this: *In a pluralistic world, what seems obvious to me may not be at all obvious to you.* And vice versa, of course. What you find obvious may be so implausible to me as to seem almost silly, to seem almost impossible to take seriously. You think what?

The reason is simple. My assumptions about what is true or untrue, beautiful or ugly, acceptable or unacceptable are rooted in my experience of life and in what I believe. I may assume something because I have considered the evidence and the alternatives and come to a careful conclusion about it. Or I assume something because I happen to understand it or simply because it appeals to me. Or I may assume something because the people around me assume it, or because it seems to work, or because it feels right, or because, well, I don't know, but I'm surprised you don't find it obvious too.

And this suggests a few things that discerning Christians should keep in mind as we seek to live faithfully in an increasingly pluralistic world.

The first is, well, obvious: *Expect it.* Expect to discover that some of what is obvious to you may not be obvious to your friends—and vice versa. The primary reason we should expect it is not because this is what pluralism produces, but because this is what the scriptures teach us to expect in a fallen world. "Fools think their own way is right," an ancient Hebrew saying warns, but that doesn't make it right (Proverbs 12:15). Being surprised or shocked is not merely a waste of emotional energy, it says nothing about the plausibility of our friend's assumptions, and it gives them grounds to doubt our commitment to the view of life and reality revealed in the Bible.

Second: *Treating people with dignity as image-bearers of God means we will take their assumptions seriously.* And before we disagree we need to be certain we understand what's being assumed, and why our friend finds it attractive and believable.

The next suggestion arises from the fact that we too share in the brokenness of the world: *Welcome challenges to our own assumptions.* It's a chance to think things through, and that is a gift. "Fools think their own way is right," the proverb says, "but the wise listen to advice."

Fourth: *A person's assumptions reveal what they are prepared to hear about Jesus—or about anything else, for that matter.* If you've ever been stuck with some idiot who doesn't listen but just pontificates about their perspective, you know how deadly such an encounter can be.

One final thing: *Expect it of fellow believers, too.* Just because I happen to be talking to a Christian is no guarantee that what we find obvious will be identical—or even necessarily similar on a whole host of topics. That's why the New Testament includes so many epistles, apostolic letters written, among other reasons, to correct the mistaken assumptions of fellow Christians.

Now that I am finished writing this I wonder if it's all so obvious that I needn't have bothered. Like when Steve Martin said, "A day without sunshine is like, you know, night." ■

Candles

by Scott Schuleit

Click. A button was pressed on a lighter and a small flame appeared in the dark sanctuary. It was like a seed of light, its flame bright with the energy it contained. The wand of the lighter was dipped towards a man with a handheld candle and, magically, it flourished. He then, in turn, passed his flame to another individual with a handheld candle. These participants then transferred their flames to others and so on until, in time, it made its way to my wife and me in the back, the room blossoming with petals of light. The room was enchanted with hands half-aglow beneath floating white candles topped with raindrops of fire. Light was flowing around the room, rippling, soft and luminous, stirring shadows, drawing forms out of darkness...soon faces were discerned, gently flickering, and glistening eyes revealed, touched with fine points of fire.

There's something about the use of candles during a church service, whether during a Christmas candlelight service or some other occasion. There's just something wondrous about them, especially when glowing in a darkened room. I'm convinced that one of the reasons God created fire involves its ability to enchant, its special capacity to provoke wonder. There's something inexplicable about fire. I mean, what is it? Scientists can give us some information, but there is, at least, some measure of mystery here.

Growing up, my identical twin brother and I were fascinated by fire, probably inordinately so. Once, on a sunny day when we were just boys, we started a dry field on fire. Immediately we were excited by our deed, intoxicated by the power and beauty of it, the honey-yellow flames, curling of smoke and crinkling of its burning bringing delight to our mischievous souls. These

emotions proved fleeting however, giving way to fear as other spots in the field began to catch fire. Soon it was out of control, patches blooming, here and there, before us. Frantically, we tried to stamp them out and, when we failed, ran away. For some reason we turned back and, after battling the flames for some time, managed to stamp them all out. If I recall correctly, this little incident was not communicated to Mom and Dad. I'm still fascinated by fire, and this memory along with the more recent one of the candles kindled during that special Christmas candlelight service remind me of this fact.

I'm sure some important symbols were used surrounding the candles in the service, but I'm afraid either my memory fails me regarding what pattern of symbolism was expressed and its meaning, or I just wasn't paying enough attention to this aspect of the service. Having said that, I offer some symbols associated with the use of candles in the cool, yet warm dark of that room, including the obvious illustration of luminous Christians in a dark, fallen world. Another image involves candle flames as a portrait of the church, for when we come together, unified, we burn stronger and more brightly than when apart, the candle smoke like the incense of our worship rising as a sweet offering before the throne of our Lord. This last image reminds us that a candle isolated from the church, left alone in the world, can easily go out, snuffed by the buffeting of the smothering dark. The single flame of a candle also reminds us of the cross when Christ—the Light of the world—bore the immense burden of our sins on his back, alone, fighting against the fierce powers of darkness.

A candle flame in a dark room also tends to draw our gaze down to its tiny,

radiating flame of light, its presence swallowing up a sense of the vastness of space as if all eternity, the great weight of it stood hushed, gazing, peering down like on that timeless day when the convergence of the temporal and the infinite, time and eternity, deity and physicality was revealed, and a beautiful Baby—the Savior of the world—was born. ■

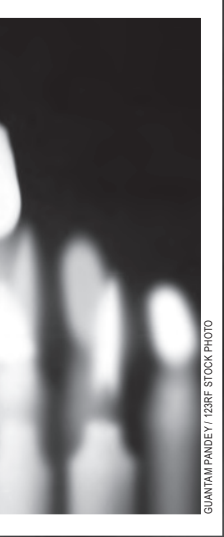
Copy © 2014 Scott Schuleit



Scott Schuleit received the MA in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. He is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian

Reformed Church and an adjunct instructor at South Florida Bible College. He enjoys the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.





QUANTAM PANDEY / 12856 STOCK PHOTO

A Toolkit for Conversations

The School of Life (www.theschooloflife.com), headquartered in London and founded by philosopher and author Alain de Botton, offers in their shop an attractive little packet of cards for sale designed to help us be better conversationalists.

100 Questions: A Toolkit for Conversations

It isn't easy to get into a good conversation. Many of our best ones seem to have happened by chance. Far from it—we believe a great conversation always starts with someone asking a great question.

In this set of beautiful cards, you'll find laid out a hundred of the very best questions around, carefully designed to get a group of people into exceptionally entertaining and meaningful conversations.

100 question cards with box
150 x 115 x 50mm

Topics include:
Personality & Emotions
Sex & Relationships
Family & Friendship
Work & Money
Travel, Culture & Taste
Life & Death

The School of Life website provides some sample questions from the packet:

What are the best features of middle age?

Are you where you wanted to be at this stage in your life?

What makes a person a good travelling companion?

What plausible government action would make you leave the country?

What do you imagine people say when they gossip about you?

Have you ever had a religious experience?

If you had married your first boy/girl-friend, what might your life be like now?

What work were you doing the last time you forgot time altogether?

I haven't ordered the toolkit, but since meaningful and unhurried conversation is a topic of real interest to me, I've been thinking about it ever since I noticed the ad.

As readers of mine will know, I have a great deal of respect for Alain de Botton. A committed atheist, he has refused the aggressive fundamentalism of the New Atheists and has instead sought to make common cause with all who seek the common good in society. Instead of trying to score points, he wants to help human beings flourish, and believes his secularism has the necessary resources to make that possible. As a Christian I have doubts about that, but I wish him well—and pray for him regularly.

Certainly the thinking behind "100 Questions: A Toolkit for Conversations" resonates with me. Meaningful conversation is essential to our humanness, and without trying to track down data to back up this claim, unhurried conversation that touches on the deepest issues of the human heart seems to be lacking. Like so much of what is important in life, conversation is not simply natural—at least it isn't for most of us. Learning to ask questions that are open ended but still authentic, probing but not intrusive, is part of growing in wisdom. Learning to listen and being comfortable with silence isn't easy. Conversation isn't just an event, but a skill to be learned, an ability essential to community that is vital enough to intentionally nourish over a lifetime.

Which suggests some questions worth some reflection and discussion. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How would you rate yourself as a conversationalist? How would you rate yourself as a listener? How would you rate yourself as someone able to ask good questions?
2. Describe an encounter in which someone truly listened to you in an unhurried way. How did the encounter affect you? What did the person do to encourage you to speak freely?
3. Do you remember a question that someone asked you that still sticks in your memory as memorable and helpful?
4. What is the difference between using something like "100 Questions: A Toolkit for Conversations" to help you learn to ask better questions, and turning the whole thing into some sort of technique?
5. To what extent do you feel the need to control the direction of conversations? Where does this need in you originate? What does control, or the addition of an agenda on the part of one of the participants, change a conversation?
6. A true conversation is open ended and free, an interaction between two (or more) people created in God's image. To what extent are you comfortable in this situation? Where does your discomfort originate?
7. In conversations, do you tend to be primarily listening as the other person speaks, or do you tend to be thinking of what you should say next? What difference does it make?
8. If the person with whom we speak is to feel free to open up honestly in the

conversation, she/he must feel safe with us. Of what does such safety consist? How is it communicated? To what extent is such safety rare—and why?

9. Though I've never been able to trace the source, the philosopher Mortimer Adler said, "Love without conversation is impossible." Do you agree? Why or why not? To what extent does this resonate with a biblical perception of life and reality? If this is true, to what extent do we demonstrate love for the non-Christians—and the Christians—around us?
10. What are the greatest hindrances to real conversation? Are there any hindrances that seem to be particularly present among Christians? Why might that be?
11. Begin your own list of "100 Questions." Which questions might you keep from the list posted on the website of The School of Life? Which might you add? Which questions might you toss, or edit? Why?

Source: www.theschooloflife.com/shop/100questions





[OR NOT]

A while back the hymn, “Blessed Assurance” was in the service of morning worship in our church. That hymn is always a problem for me.

In evangelical Protestant circles, “Blessed Assurance” is well known and well loved. In 2013, a nationwide survey was taken in Great Britain in which they asked people to rate their favorite hymns—the BBC reports that “Blessed Assurance” placed #32 in the top 100 favorite hymns that year. Hymnary.org reports that, as of June 2014, “Blessed Assurance” is one of the most widely published hymns, being included in 845 hymnals available in the marketplace. And though this is far from being statistically relevant, my memory suggests that people often request “Blessed Assurance” during church sing-alongs, though I admit that my distaste for the hymn might skew my perception a bit.

On second thought, I don’t dislike it, exactly. I just can’t relate to it.

Actually, that’s not entirely true, either. Like many of Fanny Crosby’s hymns, “Blessed Assurance” is not particularly good poetry. Theodore Cuyler, a Presbyterian minister who knew Crosby mentioned her in his autobiography, *Recollections of a Long Life* (1902). “The venerable and devout blind songstress, Fanny Crosby,” he wrote, “has produced very many hundreds of [hymns]—none of very high poetic merit, but many of them of such rich spiritual savour [sic], and set to such stirring airs, that they are sung by millions around the globe.” I am aware of the danger of being a snob here, so that worship becomes acceptable only when performed by professionals. Christians should not be aesthetes. On the other hand, to suggest that the quality of the poetry in our worship doesn’t matter at all is to slide close to the error of

separating standards of excellence from what we offer to God.

There have been hymn writers who have also been good poets. The one who comes most readily to my mind is William Cowper (1731–1800). The Rev. Kevin Twit, who began and leads Indelible Grace Music (www.igracemusic.com), assesses things this way:

Cowper is one of only two truly great poets who is also a great hymn writer (the other being James Montgomery.) A good hymn (as Montgomery contends) must be immediately understandable and accessible the first time you sing it, without opaque images, but yet repay repeated singings with fresh discoveries of its depth. Perhaps Cowper can do this where other fine poets fail because he believed that poetry should be a kind of heightened normal speech—in fact he led a movement against the florid language of the poets of his day and believed that poetry was the original pre-fall speech of man. Thus when you speak in poetry you are connecting in an intuitive way with our deep humanity.

By the way, I believe there is a place for bad poetry. When my grandchildren write a poem I laud it loudly and read it aloud to friends. There is also a place in the church’s corporate worship for poetry that represents our best even if our best isn’t very good. So, I want to be sensitive to that. Still, good poetry is a very rich gift, an art form that appears repeatedly throughout the scriptures, and poetic expression is able to enhance and deepen language simultaneously. So since there are plenty of hymns to choose from, and since her poetry isn’t very good, I find that a distraction whenever I am asked to sing one of Crosby’s hymns.



Fanny Crosby (1820–1915) was a remarkable person. Though blind from infancy, she was intelligent, gifted, purposeful, active, and deeply devoted to her Christian faith.

Her work habits harked back many years and always began with prayer. Sometimes words came quickly to her in a form that satisfied her; at other times, getting them just right required effort. She liked to think through difficult texts (often “difficult” because a tune demanded an awkward meter) at night when Manhattan was quiet and she could sit undisturbed. Oddly enough she felt most comfortable holding a small notebook in her hand, although she never wrote down her own texts. (Despite her education, her handwriting was barely legible, and on legal documents she signed her name with an X witnessed by friends.) And so she composed text and filed it away in what she termed “the library” of her mind until someone came by to take her dictation. She edited her poems in her mind, too, working on some for several

[OR NOT]

days before she dictated anything. Crosby envisioned her mind as a library, and she trained herself to wander among its shelves and recall stored information at will. When an affable scribe appeared, she was likely to dictate several poems at once, sometimes as many as seven a day. The manuscripts of her dictated poems show that she occasionally edited as she dictated.

Sometimes Crosby would dictate two poems simultaneously, to two transcribers.

She didn't just write hymns, but composed patriotic songs as well. In one song composed during the Civil War, Crosby cheered on the Union soldiers in the fight against the Confederate forces:

*Death to those whose impious hands
Burst our Union's sacred bands,
Vengeance thunders, right demands—
Justice for the brave.*

Crosby also composed a rather impertinent piece addressed to Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States:

*Now, Jeff, when thou art ready,
Lead on thy rebel crew,
We'll give them all a welcome—
With balls and powder too!
We spurn thy constitution!
We spurn thy southern laws!
Our stars and stripes are waving,
And Heav'n will speed our cause.*

Whatever her faith in the Union cause, however, it is clear from her poetry and life that what primarily animated Fanny Crosby was her faith in the gospel. Convinced of its truth and its power to change lives, she devoted herself over a lifetime of activity in the revivals of D. L. Moody, the work of rescue missions and the growing Sunday school movement. She must have been a fascinating person to know.

Still, the main difficulty I have with "Blessed Assurance" is not the quality of the poetry but that I simply can't relate to the lyrics. The first verse begins by celebrating some of the spiritual blessings God grants us in Christ by his grace.

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

Each line is essentially a popular nineteenth century expression of some biblical truth. Fanny Crosby was very good at putting phrases in her lyrics that resonated in the hearts and imaginations of the evangelical Christians who sang her hymns, phrases that were often heard in sermons and read in devotionals and which captured some kernel of biblical truth. Each phrase in this first verse could have a proof text associated with it: Hebrews 10:22, Colossians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 5:5, Galatians 4:7, 1 Corinthians 6:20, John 3:8, Revelation 7:14. "Blessed Assurance" does not prompt thoughtful theological reflection like the lyrics of "A Mighty Fortress" tends to do. Instead, it compiles a series of phrases that are well known by Crosby's intended audience and are designed to prompt a sense of togetherness and celebration.

The chorus is simple, catchy, and perfect for group singing:

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

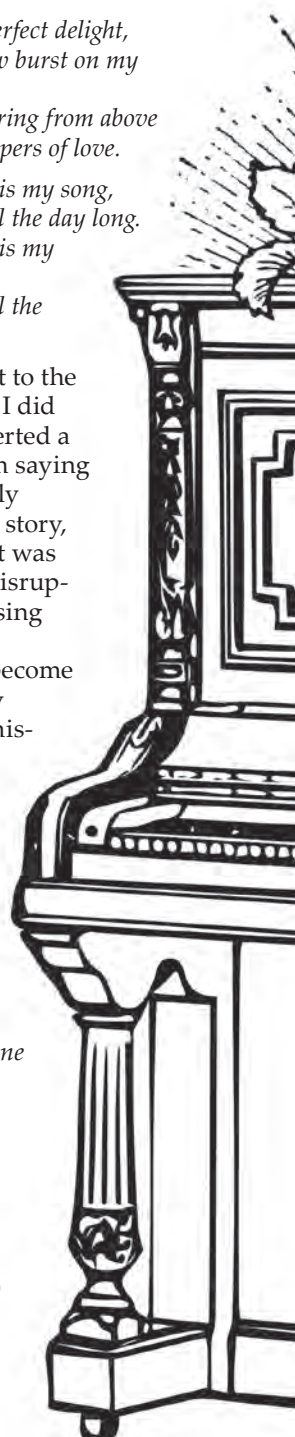
This is another gift that Fanny Crosby demonstrated in her composing, namely the ability to compose hymns that congregations and groups at rallies and revivals simply loved to sing.

My difficulty with "Blessed Assurance" comes in the next verse:

*Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels, descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

In church, when we got to the chorus after this verse, I did what I always do: I inserted a few words to keep from saying something that is simply untrue: "This is *not* my story, I can't sing *this* song." It was under my breath, not disruptive, but I simply can't sing those lines.

It is easy for me to become cynical here. You really experience *perfect* submission? Really, *perfect*? You find that rapturous visions burst on your sight now that you're a Christian, or maybe just sometimes—anytime? You can tell me that *angels* bring you whispered messages from heaven? Can *anyone* claim that this is *really* their experience of the Christian life? Or even *close* to it? Singing this hymn strikes me as a group exercise in proclaiming a lie. (OK, the cynical rant ends here.)



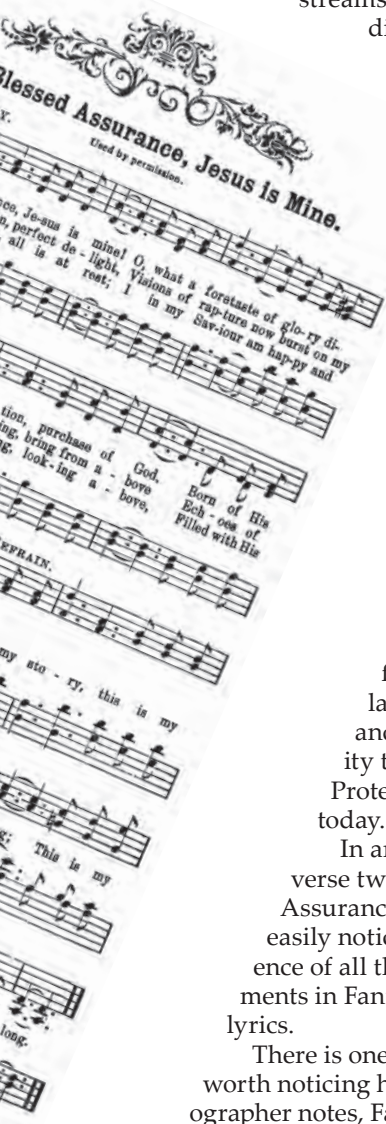


As in so many of her lyrics, Fanny Crosby reflected the popular evangelical Christianity of her day, which is to say a faith that had been shaped to a large extent by the intersection of three recent streams of theology: revivalism,

the holiness movement, and pietism. Revivalism is the mindset that flowed out of the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century in America. Evangelists like Charles Finney came to believe they could lead people to decide for Jesus by urging them to believe what they saw as the essential core of the gospel—you are a sinner, Jesus died for you, if you believe you'll be forgiven. Everything else was secondary. The holiness movement grew out of a concern that many lay Christians were living lax lives, morally. So an emphasis on personal holiness was stressed, leading among other things to John Wesley's (1703–91) teaching that committed Christians could reach a state of perfection. And pietism was a movement that originated among German Lutherans in the mid-eighteenth century that sought to awaken lay believers from nominal belief to a warmly devotional personal relationship with God.

All three streams were used of God, and each grasped an aspect of the gospel. Revivalism sought to make the gospel understandable to non-Christians, the holiness movement recognized that personal holiness is important because our Father is holy, and pietism saw that faith in Christ should be more than cool mental assent. On the other hand, all three tended to concentrate on only one aspect of the faith and so quickly led to distortions of biblical truth. Revivalism reduced the rich story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration to a formula repeated without regard to the person hearing it in an attempt to provoke a decision. The holiness movement could not do away with sin, and soon legalisms proliferated to identify behaviors that were deemed unworthy of a spiritual person. And pietism soon established emotional markers and

daily disciplines that became standard for measuring the presence and depth of true faith. All three streams—and their distortions—continues to



shape the faith of most evangelical Christians, and account for much of the lack of reality and authenticity that plagues Protestantism today.

In any case, reread verse two of “Blessed Assurance” and you’ll easily notice the influence of all three movements in Fanny Crosby’s lyrics.

There is one more thing worth noticing here. As her biographer notes, Fanny Crosby’s contemporaries appreciated and embraced her hymns for what they were.

No one made a serious case for Crosby lyrics as “serious” hymns. Rather, her lyrics were “singable,” “catchy in the best sense of the word,” and their resonance with grassroots realities assured that they would be remembered and sung long after “more ambitious poems” had been forgotten. Her contemporaries did not expect to find her lines in books printed without notes and designed for devotional reading; few, they admitted, “will achieve poetic immortality.” Instead, her words were emphatically for singing, and the simplicity, sentiment, “galloping,” and repetitiveness that critics found offensive were the precise elements that charmed the masses. Since tunesmiths often approached Crosby for text for their new tunes, her options were limited by the wishes of the tune writer as well as by the occasions for which the text and tune were solicited. Her modest and limited education—begun formally when she was already fifteen—lacked the breadth and depth that breathed from the eighteenth-century hymn texts she loved. Literary critics and theologians might bestow careful analyses on the Wesleys or Watts but would find little to occupy them in the hymns of Fanny Crosby. While her lines revealed her beliefs, they made no claim to be (in John Wesley’s famous words) “a little body of practical and experimental divinity.” Rather, they were emblems of faith. In an era of mounting intellectual challenge to traditional Christianity, Crosby’s words mirrored the views of a large percentage of rank-and-file evangelical Protestants who either failed to grasp the implications of modern thought or discounted its relevance to evangelical faith.

This sad blindness to culture and the world we are to love for the sake of the gospel still infects the evangelical world

and its hymnody.

Still, as I’ve already mentioned, my reaction, above, to verse two is very cynical—and that is neither good nor sufficient. I need to be careful here and not make the mistake of assuming my experience of things is normative. So, let me admit that what she expressed in verse two of “Blessed Assurance” apparently was Fanny Crosby’s actual experience—and perhaps it is yours, too. Perhaps you do experience rapturous visions and angelic whispers. I will assume Fanny Crosby did—which means she was waxing poetic here but not lapsing into some sort of romanticism or sentimentalism, but trying to express her experience of faith with a measure of realism. It’s not my experience, but it was hers.

Now, assuming that, the point I would want to make here is that, even if this is an accurate reflection of Crosby’s daily spiritual experience, it too must not be assumed to be normative. Some of us—perhaps many of us—have never experienced anything like it. Some of us have even thought about it and would prefer to never experience anything much like it. And more important, none of it is taught in scripture as being normative for the believer’s experience for life in a fallen world.

Consider, for example, what we know about Daniel’s experience. In 605 BC after a siege, the Israelite capital of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. The Babylonian king ransacked the temple, taking vessels used in worship and carting them back to be placed in the temple of his god. He also ordered his chief eunuch to choose the best and brightest among the young people of the land and to bring them to Babylon to enter his service. Most Christians are so familiar with this story, and the details

[OR NOT]



are reported in scripture with such sparse detail, that it's easy to forget what it must have been like. Since we aren't given details, we must be careful not to assume too much, but the facts we are given suggest it was far from a pleasant experience. A siege, the fall of a city in warfare, being chosen as a slave, being taken to a foreign land across many miles of forced marches—and given the length of Daniel's life, all this must have happened when he was in his early teens. The degree of trauma, horror, and pain must have been stunning. Once in Babylon, the exiles were expected to be absorbed into Babylonian life and culture, given Babylonian names and a Babylonian education. After three years, Daniel was examined and accepted into the king's service. Although it is not mentioned in scripture, we can assume that this means he was made a eunuch, a crude operation in that day that killed a significant number of the males that were castrated. Daniel had visions, which bring us to Crosby's lyrics, but they could hardly be termed rapturous. Once he was "severely distressed for a while...terrified," another time his "spirit was troubled...terrified," another time he was "frightened" and fell on the ground, another time he "was overcome and lay sick for some days," another time his "complexion grew deathly pale," he became speechless and "retained no strength." Although he received angelic messages, all of the experiences are described in terms of fearfulness rather than lightness of heart. Daniel was also the brunt of jealousy among his colleagues in the king's court, and they conspired to bring him down. Even after many years of faithful service, he was known as a foreigner in the Babylonian court. And though the pictures we colored in Sunday school showed smiling,

cuddly lions in the den, the reality was horrific—the famished beasts ripped the bodies of the families of his accusers apart before they hit the floor of the den the next day. Daniel was also a grateful man, acknowledging God's grace and exhibiting a steady faithfulness that could only have been rooted in the truth of God's word as opposed to the myths and gods and goddesses of the pagan world. But does "Blessed Assurance" capture the reality of his experience of faith? If anything, it's a study in opposites.

I'm not writing this in an attempt to get people to stop singing "Blessed Assurance." My friend Kenny Hutson included the hymn on his album, *Foundation and Fortress: A Collection of Instrumental Hymns* (2011). I have *Foundation and Fortress* in a playlist I call "Solace" and find the collection a lovely balm to my soul on days when the darkness seems to press in too closely.

"Love for God," John Stott says, "is not an emotional experience so much as a moral commitment." That is not to say a believer will not at times be filled or even overwhelmed by emotion—we may be. It is beauty in art, creation, and finely crafted prose that evokes deep emotion in me, and is the spiritual experience I cherish most.

So, if the lyrics of "Blessed Assurance" describe your experience, celebrate it; but be careful not to make it seem like it's the experience of all believers—that's the sort of inauthenticity that causes so many believers to be alienated from the church and so many unbelievers to be alienated from the claims of the gospel. And I need to celebrate my very different experience and not make it seem normative, either.

By the way, the hymn that most deeply expresses the reality of my

heart and experience is not "Blessed Assurance" but "None Other Lamb," by Christina Rossetti.

*None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other hope in Heav'n or earth or
sea,
None other hiding place from guilt and
shame,
None beside Thee!*

*My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart's desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.*

*Lord, Thou art Life, though I be dead;
Love's fire Thou art, however cold I be:
Nor Heav'n have I, nor place to lay my
head,
Nor home, but Thee. ■*

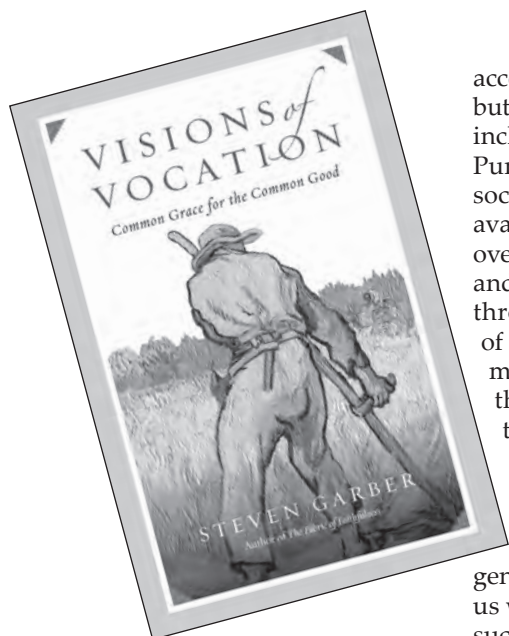
For further reading: "None Other Lamb, None Other Name: In a Broken World, a Quiet Confidence" available on Ransom's website (www.ransomfellowship.org/articleDetail.asp?AID=571&B=Denis%20Haack&TID=4)

Sources:

- www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3DnJQz7zsF1JrB3rZ8yQ86w/the-uks-top-100-hymns; www.hymnary.org/text/blessed_assurance_jesus_is_mine.
- Cuyler and biographical information from *Her Heart Can See: The Life and Hymns of Fanny J. Crosby* by Edith Blumhofer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) p. 200–201, 334.
- Kevin Twit from "History of Hymnody Syllabus," for a class by the Rev. Twit at Covenant Theological Seminary (Spring 2010) p. 43.
- Stott in *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* by J. R. W. Stott, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1964) p. 173.

RESOURCE: *VISIONS OF VOCATION*

Does Work have Meaning in a Broken World?



Day by day, patiently and in unhurried conversations, group discussions and lectures in all sorts of settings, Steven Garber gives himself to people as they wrestle with the perennial questions of human existence. Who are we? What is the world like? What should I do? And does any of it really matter? In *Visions of Vocation* he allows us to listen in as he reflects on the answers that are popular and widely believed, and the answers that are most richly satisfying.

Just so there is no misunderstanding: Steven Garber is my friend, and a member of Ransom's Board of Directors. If that means you need to check out some other reviews besides this one before getting a copy of the book, so be it. But do read the book. It touches us where we live, addressing the issues that express most intimately the deepest yearnings of our souls.

Visions of Vocation is one of those rare books that manage to strike the right balance for readers. It is scholarly yet

accessible—Steve is a serious thinker, but also a storyteller whose interests include *Magnolia* and the Smashing Pumpkins. He quotes philosophers and sociologists while making their thinking available to readers whose eyes glaze over thinking of reading such things, and he develops his ideas not primarily through argument but by telling stories of people whose lives display what it means to want to take ideas and make them real in the ordinary structure of their days. *Visions of Vocation* is rich with reflections on worthy books—by Simon Weil, Walker Percy, Alan Lightman, Chaim Potok, John Le Carré, and more. And Steve has a gentle but firm way of helping those of us who tend to resist much reflection on such things to pause, take notice, and realize both the cost of our resistance and the joy of new discovery.

Steve's thesis involves a simple insight that is remarkably powerful in unlocking what it means to flourish as a human being in our broken world. The insight is that our work, done to God's glory, is not merely acceptable to God, but that in our vocation, pursuing our calling, we serve God, extending his kingdom of grace.

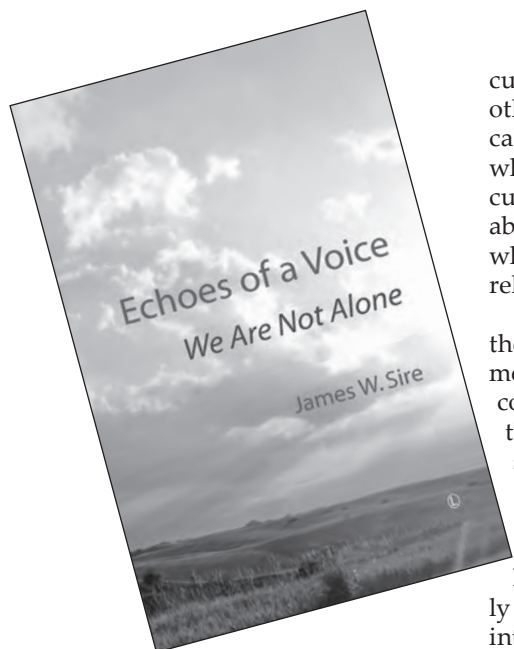
The word vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God. It is never the same word as occupation, just as calling is never the same word as career. Sometimes, by grace, the words and the realities they represent do overlap, even significantly; sometimes, in the incompleteness of

life in a fallen world, there is not much overlap at all.

As the vision statement of The Washington Institute (<http://www.washingtoninst.org>), puts it so well, Steve desires to “recover an understanding of faith that implicates people in every aspect of life, work, and pleasure for the sake of individual and societal flourishing.” *Visions of Vocation* allows us all to become part of that quest. From his vantage point in Washington, D.C., Steve takes us with him to the State Department to meet with leaders of the Tiananmen protest, into the Senate dining room for a discussion with novelist Tom Wolfe, onto the tour bus of Jars of Clay as they commit to care about Africa with Blood:Water Mission, and into conversations with people whose daily life is in politics, business, art, homemaking, and hamburgers, for the common good. The book will not only act as a wise guide as you reflect on the desires of your heart in light of the reality of life in a broken world, it will enrich your imagination and mind, and invite you to further reading and thinking. ■

Recommended: *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* by Steven Garber (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2014) 239 p. + notes).

Signals of Immanence and Transcendence



“Small disconnected facts,” novelist Walker Percy wrote in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, “if you take note of them, have a way of becoming connected.” It is part of the mystery of existence. No matter what we think about reality, the details around us always prove to be signals, pointing to something greater or deeper or beyond themselves, even if only as a quiet whisper, a sly hint, and even if only to some other small detail of existence.

I keep a little stick on the windowsill of my office. Bleached white and rubbed smooth, it is a piece of driftwood, 13.5 inches long and ½ inch in diameter that I found on the shore of Lake Superior. It’s just a stick, but it reminds me of the three weeks Margie and I spent in a cabin on the north shore—the best vacation of my life. It’s a stick, and a signal.

“A signal,” James Sire says in *Echoes of a Voice*, “can be any action, event, thing, image, sound, taste, touch, smell, word, metaphor, or idea that sparks

curiosity beyond its own identity. In other words a signal is anything that calls out to anyone who is struck by what they perceive and wants (becomes curious) to know more about it, more about how it fits into the context in which it occurs, in short, what it is in relation to what it is surrounded by.”

Signals surround us, and some of them are signals of transcendence. For me, such signals of transcendence have come in a variety of forms: goldfinches, the music of Bob Dylan, ravens, and a stick found during a time away when creativity returned after a year of unrelenting spiritual dryness.

In *Echoes of a Voice*, Sire shows us how to think about all this by carefully unpacking the phenomenon and by introducing us to the work of thinkers and poets and prophets and scientists, believers and unbelievers, who notice the signals and try to make sense of them. This is not a superficial work, but a thoughtful and accessible exploration of philosophy, theology, and art. Sire asks us to reflect on our experience of life and reality, in all its glorious ruin, and to face the question we all know we need to answer: What does it mean?

In *Echoes* we have a chance to reflect on the words of Virginia Woolf, Wendell Berry, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Steven Weinberg, among others. They see the signals, hear the echoes, and come to very different conclusions. Along the way Sire helps us to classify the signals around us, clarifies our experience of them, unpacks a Christian perspective on them, and demonstrates that some meanings are more meaningful than others.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, in *The Secular Age*, shows that in our age of disbelief a new type of humanism has been born: what he calls

“exclusive humanism.” He defines it as a worldview, novel in human history that accounts for human significance and meaning without an appeal to the divine. If we have ears to hear, we can hear its claims in the hopes and lives of so many around us. Yet even exclusive humanists stumble upon signals of transcendence, and it is here that a conversation about the gospel might be fruitful.

And even apart from those conversations, *Echoes of a Voice* will help us make sense of the signals that flicker and glimmer around us. The signals that we see and hear and feel, and that we make sense of, for blessing or for curse. And that is a grace. ■

Recommended: *Echoes of a Voice: We are Not Alone* by James W. Sire (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books; 2014) 230 pages + bibliography + index.

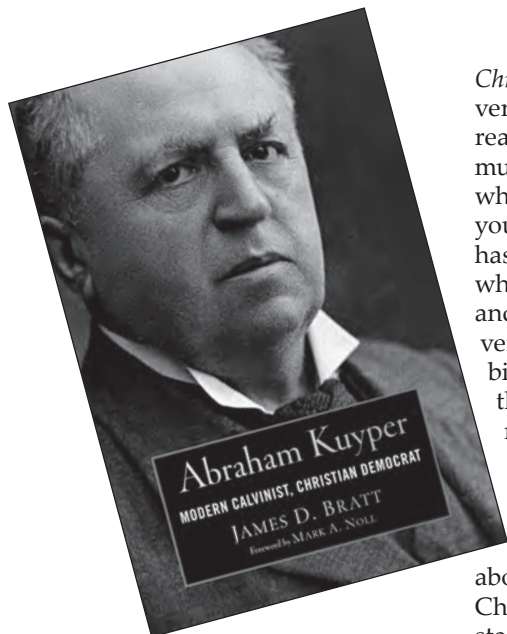
RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

Resource: *Hearts and Minds bookstore*, www.heartsandmindsbooks.com



A Dutchman Worth Knowing



The first I ever heard of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), at least far as I can remember, was in something he said: “There is not one square inch of created reality over which Christ as Lord does not claim, ‘This is mine.’” I learned later that Kuyper didn’t actually say that, exactly. What he actually said was, “Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” (I like the version I heard better.) In any case, having grown up believing that some parts of life (the “spiritual”) are hermetically sealed off from the rest of existence (like art and culture), Kuyper’s statement was revolutionary. Before long Kuyper’s writings and thinking was shaping my view of things, a process that continues to this day.

The book I am recommending here, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist*,

Christian Democrat by James Bratt, is very worth reading but shouldn’t be read by everyone. Please don’t worry much about whether you are someone who should read it. If you should, you’ll know. You’ll be someone who has been deeply influenced by Kuyper, who has read at least some of his books, and who will want to read what may very well prove to be the definitive biography of the man. If you don’t fit this category, skip this book. Instead read *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (note the word “short”—Bratt’s book is not short) by Richard Mouw and Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*. But do learn about Abraham Kuyper—discerning Christians need to recover his understanding of faith, scripture, culture, and politics instead of remaining captive to the various political and economic ideologies of our world that are in reality forms of idolatry.

Bratt clearly loves his subject and seeks to honor him but does not make the mistake of writing a hagiography. “Abraham Kuyper was a great man,” he says, “but not a nice one” (p. xxii). I would argue that we need to learn from Kuyper, but we must not simply imitate him. For one thing, he lived and worked at the beginning of the twentieth century when modernism was dominant while we live at the dawn of a new century when increasing pluralism, exclusive secularism, and an assumption of disbelief shape the intellectual background of our culture. And though Kuyper’s list of accomplishments—minister, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, journalist, professor of theology, member of Parliament, Prime Minister, author—are impressive, his life was marred by controversy and more than one serious physical and emotional

breakdown from being persistently hyper-active.

Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat reminds me that what I cherish most in Kuyper is his unshakable conviction that the Christian worldview, firmly grounded in the revelation of scripture, provides the necessary and sufficient foundation to chart a course for human flourishing in our broken world. His creativity in thinking through the issues of his day, his insistence that his thinking always reflect the reality of Christ’s Lordship over all, and his unwavering commitment to fleshing out the truth in the ordinary things of life are his legacy—and qualities that I hope might perhaps be seen, even if dimly, in me. ■

Source: *Kuyper quote in Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* edited by James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1998) p. 488.

Recommended: *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* by James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2013) 382 pages + bibliography, notes and index.

Woe to the Broken Planet



If David Eugene Edwards was a fictional character instead of a musician, he'd appear in a story by Flannery O'Connor or Cormac McCarthy, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. His is an insistent voice, called not primarily to entertain (though many of us love his music) but to speak truth to a generation that doubts truth is possible.

*Master say on
Good teacher, yes
We have heard it said*

*A certain man, a certain ruler
If there is no law there is no bread
New gods we have chosen
War is to the gate
In it's turning it ...tremble
Woe to Earth
Heaven has dropped its gates*

[“Field of Hedon”]

“It’s primal and powerful music,” Grayson Haver Currin says in a review of *Refractory Obdurate* in *Pitchfork*, “loaded and loud enough to demand that you—Christian or no—at least consider his case.” Well, yes. That is true, but it is also more. It is also a warning, issued with concern so warmly authentic as to be convicting, that the questions Edwards is exploring matter not just now, but world without end.

*Up from His high place
He looks
But there is no man
Casting down imaginations*
[“Obdurate Obscura”]

Producing music first as 16 Horsepower and now as Wovenhand, Edwards’ latest offering is *Refractory Obdurate* (2014). It’s an album designed to prove that heavy, driving rock might just be the perfect genre to express the heart of a people who discover that, as citizens of the kingdom of God they are “sojourners and exiles” in the land where they live out their lives (1 Peter 2:11). Having sworn allegiance to a different, higher king, and worshipping a different, higher God, they hold a worldview that is always out of step with the ideologies that move and mold the minds, hearts, and imaginations of their neighbors. “*Refractory Obdurate* is Edwards’ ‘heavy record,’” Currin notes, “with tumescent electric guitars and unforgiving drums, howled lines and massive codas.” Edwards’ music has always been intense, but this album ratchets up the level of insistence.

The music is brooding not because it is dark, but because Edwards is aware of the darkness at a time when many imagine that gazing into the abyss is a form of courage. He also believes the darkness is not out merely there, but that it runs like a wound through the human heart, including his own.

*A standing fire ever doth intercede
Rip the roof off and lower me down
Forever in my time of need*

[“The Refractory”]

If you are looking for quiet music as a balm for your soul during hard times, this may not be the album you need. If you are looking for music that

demonstrates what it is like to be a believer in an age of disbelief, you’ll find it in *Refractory Obdurate*. It captures the sound not of someone who is lost but who knows himself found yet left a wanderer until his rightful king returns. ■

Source: <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/19193-wovenhand-refractory-obdurate>

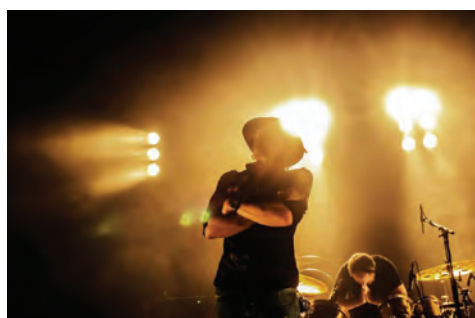
Recommended: *Refractory Obdurate* (2014) by Wovenhand.

© PHILIPPE GASSIES



© EMMANUEL LEDERER-BODIEZ





***Refractory Obdurate* by Wovenhand**

Release date: April 24, 2014

Line-Up: David Eugene Edwards (vocal, guitar, banjo), Chuck French (guitar) Neil Keener (bass), Ordy Garrison (drums)

Produced by: David Eugene Edwards and Wovenhand

Track Listing

01. Corsicana Clip
02. Masonic Youth
03. The Refractory
04. Good Shepherd
05. Salome
06. King David
07. Field of Hedon
08. Obdurate Obscura
09. Hiss
10. El-bow