

critique

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2015 Issue 6

OF THINGS UNSEEN



CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE: *Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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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.

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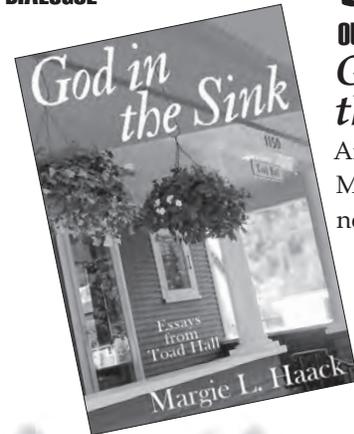
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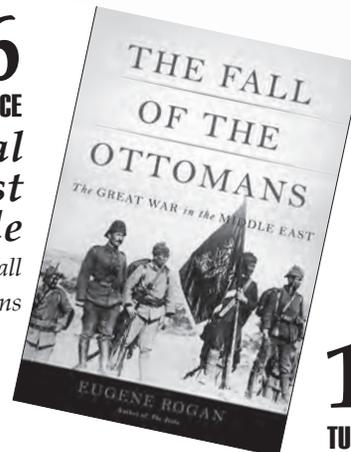
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Fish Sauce and Mayonnaise



An issue of *Food and Wine* included a recipe for Thai fish sauce. I read it because I like Thai food, at least the food that is advertised as Thai here in the upper Midwest, which I suppose may not be like the food served in Bangkok, which I've never visited, but still, it's good. The article explained that fish sauce lends an essential yet subtle depth of salty pungent flavor to Thai dishes, a characteristic we identify as quintessential Thai. That sounds right to me, but then I couldn't have come up with it on my own.

In any case, the recipe is a very simple process, though I think it's doubtful many people will begin making it at home. Here it is, in three easy steps:

"1. Catch, rinse and drain black anchovies.

"2. Layer with sea salt in barrels or clay pots.

"3. Weigh down the fish with rocks and let ferment in the sun. Drain off the resulting fish sauce one year later."

I am not often rendered speechless, but that did it for me. I mean, please tell me who, in a land as blisteringly hot and humid as Thailand, came up with the idea of keeping fish in the sun for a

year—a year!—and then imagined the runoff could possibly be considered edible, and then actually risked their health—if not their life—by trying it. Don't get me wrong: I'm delighted they tried it, but really.

Or consider making mayonnaise. This is something people do make at home—we do it and love the homemade version. However, the crucial step involves slowly, so slowly pouring a tiny stream of oil into raw egg yoke while whisking steadily until eventually, after a long period of whisking, the mixture changes from a mess of oily egg yoke into mayonnaise. The question that comes to mind is the same as with the fish sauce: who would have thought to do it?

Now, if mayonnaise was developed when electric blenders were available it would be easier to understand, but the first mention of mayonnaise is dated to the beginning of the nineteenth century. That meant whoever developed it had to stand and whisk furiously and keep whisking until the change occurs. Who would have done that, and why?

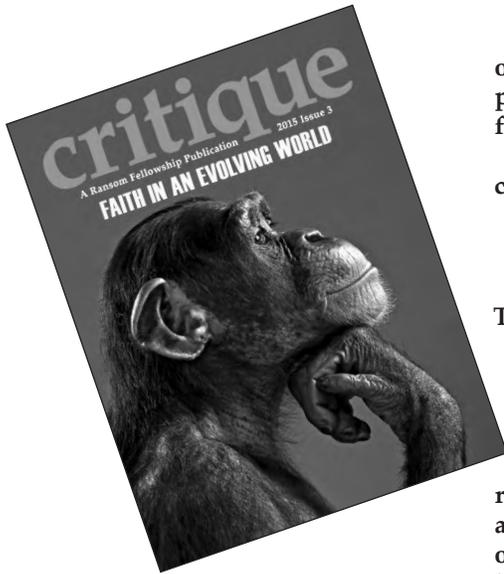
I know: perhaps if I were a cook these things wouldn't amaze me. But I'm not, so they do.

The solution, I suppose, is in my last sentence, that things like this would occur only to a culinary artist, professional or amateur, someone who is not merely skilled in cooking but whose creative insight into food permits them to produce something that is beyond all they know. Like a writer whose story includes interwoven themes beyond what they had planned in their initial outline. Or a painter whose canvas shows not only the imagined image but serves to evoke memories in viewers beyond the artist's imagining.

Human creativity, even in ordinary

things, is more mysterious than we imagine. It does not appear only in extraordinary circumstances to extraordinary people. Sometimes it is hidden in ordinary people doing ordinary things, like leaving fish out in the sun for a year or someone refusing to stop whisking oily egg yolks. Sometimes what happens is beyond all we could possibly know or expect. ■

Source: "How to Make Fish Sauce" in Food and Wine (August 2012) p. 22.



To the editor:

Denis, I have so much appreciated *Critique* 2015:3. It was on the coffee table here at Cardus and I thumbed through it on Monday while having lunch. I read through the review of *The Zero Theorem* which was really good, then bounced to Sufjan Stevens, and *The Goldfinch* review. All were very worthwhile and I've added the three to my roughly sketched map of itinerant explorations.

We take a certain pride here at Cardus in being curators for others (yes, it comes with a certain amount of unsavory hubris) but in fact we benefit greatly from the world of curation in which we find ourselves where things like *Critique* pass through our hands and shape who and what we are.

I've passed on the Sufjan Stevens work to my three oldest, among them my 16 year-old son who writes a great deal of music as well, sans vocals (www.dylanfriesen.com). I find as a dad that I'm always foraging for good things to share with them in their growing lives (two oldest in university,

one high school, one jr. high) and I'll pass along the hard copy of *Critique* for them as something worthwhile.

Thank you for sharing your art and craft with us.

Milton Friesen
Cardus program director
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

To the editor:

Denis, Christian friends of mine sent me a subscription to *Critique* a while ago, because I was impressed by an article they shared with me.

I've received it ever since, and I read it with relish nearly as soon as it arrives. You are doing excellent work of providing a rational and respectful bridge between secularism and your faith, and this month's edition was no exception—specifically treating the issue of speaking to secularists.

Though I am not a church-going Christian, neither am I a secularist. Perhaps "universalist" would be a description of my beliefs—I accept the value in all religions and look for their universal truths that transcend divisive belief systems. As such, I find your publication refreshing in its manifest respect for those who don't believe exactly as you do. Your common sense approach to guiding others to the same kind of tolerance and equilibrium—while maintaining your commitment to proselytize your beliefs—It's a very rare combination in our world today, and I appreciate it.

One error often made, in even the most tolerant Christian, is a certain subtle disrespect for the non-Christian person...as if they are somehow "lacking." It's perhaps not meant as such, but it comes across that way. Your publication—by contrast—practices what Christ taught: "Love God above all

things and your neighbor as yourself." He didn't say to love your neighbor who is a Christian, or who believes as you do. In recorded examples he extended his compassion to pagans, secularists, tax collectors, prostitutes and other "sinners" of his time—even forgiving his executioners, in a powerful example of what he "really meant." He convinced by his living example of respect and love.

Your writings and those of most other contributors you include, are remarkable examples of this kind of respectful compassion. I think you should consider renaming your publication *The Bridge!*

Thank you for it. Every single issue has brought me rewarding and valuable insights.

C.L.
Duluth, Minnesota

Denis Haack responds:

Milton: Thanks so much for taking the time to write. I admire the work of Cardus and think of us as sharing a similar vision of God's kingdom. Thank you for your encouraging words, and may you, and your family and work, know grace this week.

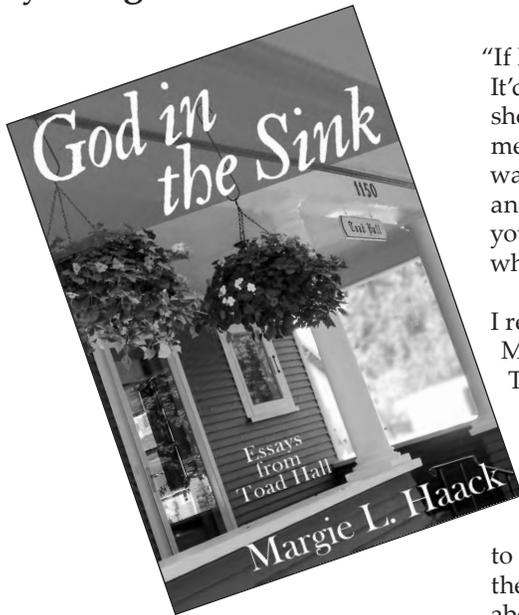
C.L.: Your letter means a great deal to me, because what you have identified is a value that is important to Ransom Fellowship, and something I have prayed would be characteristic of all we do, including *Critique*. The lack of civility in society and of respectful compassion—to use your good phrase—among Christians is both discouraging and, I believe, contrary to what should characterize the followers of Christ. Your words encourage me, as my spiritual mentor liked to express it, to keep on keeping on. Thank you. ■

OUT OF HER MIND

An excerpt from

God in the Sink

by Margie Haack



Last summer in the space of a few weeks, I received more invitations to speak than I had in the previous two years altogether. I was beginning to wonder if God was sending me a message. Like, you're an okay person even if you're a little discouraged and haven't cleaned the vegetable drawer in the refrigerator for six months. It's true that most of the invitations were not destinations, unless you've heard of Onalaska, WI or Hinckley, MN. I just wasn't up to adding a speaking itinerary to my already anxious, overwrought life. So I turned them all down except for this one, which I accepted quite by accident, though God may think otherwise.

I was having a weak moment just as I listened to the message my friend, Lisa, left on the answering machine about the possibility of speaking at her church when the mail arrived with one of my favorite clothing catalogs—which I usually throw away. But this time, I said to my husband, as I leafed through,

"If I find an outfit I like, I'll say yes."

It'd been three years since I'd actually shopped for anything special. I won't mention which catalog because if I say it was K-Mart you might think I'm cheap and sleazy. But if I say Neiman Marcus, you'll wonder how I could afford them, which I can't.

I was stunned to find something I really liked. I even lapsed into Minnesotan, yelling, "Oh, fer cue-it!" Then I laughed, and looking at the ceiling, I announced, "I was only joking about accepting." Then I felt so wicked, I only hoped God had a sense of humor, so to be on the safe side, I decided I had to say yes to this invitation. You immediately see the problem: this wasn't because I cared about people or wanted to be used of God to encourage others.

The irony deepened when I learned the theme for the evening was "Extreme Makeover, Inside Edition," and how we are often tempted to live as if the most important thing is how we look on the outside. I should have just bailed. But I had already ordered that great-looking dress. Somehow, in my talk I managed to segue from the introductory confession into the idea that the central reality of our lives needs to be Jesus and that anything else we place there, even if it's a good thing, will eventually break our hearts. Which lately has been at the core of what I continue to learn about the Christian life.

Wherever Denis or I speak, we are usually invited to put out free samples of Ransom's publications and a sign-up sheet for our mailing list, which I did. At the end of the evening most of my samples were left, and of the 200 guests, only two people signed up for our mailing list. By human measures this event was a minus for our ministry. But,

of course, you can never be certain what things God will do with the material he has to work with.

One good thing: I'm still here, and not so dull-witted that I can't appreciate the irony of my existence. It isn't divine oversight, as if God failed to notice what I was doing or saying. No, he sees me very well, and it is strictly a matter of God's loving kindness that I haven't been snuffed out. ■

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From *God in the Sink: Essays from Toad Hall* by Margie L. Haack (Oro Valley, AZ: Doulos Resources; 2014) pages 109-111, originally published in *Notes from Toad Hall* (Christmas, 2005).

Holiday Special!

God in the Sink

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Also available:

The Exact Place: A Memoir
\$17.95 (includes shipping)

POETRY

SALT AND SUNFLOWER SEEDS

a mouse sits on the edge
of the steel grate below the ceiling.
his beady eyes bulge
as he nibbles on a stale sunflower seed.
his translucent ear twitches,
the one with a pie-shaped piece
missing at its tip,
as the floating legal documents
settle to the ground.

the woman pounded her fist
on the oak desk—papers and a bowl
of sunflower seeds strewn on the
ground.

the man refused to take her pen.

his whiskers vibrate
as he chews on the seed.

the man's suit coat still
draped over the high-backed chair—
he didn't bother to grab it as he
scrambled out the door,
his briefcase choking on stacks of
papers
decorated with gold lettering.

the mouse licks the remnants of salt
from his pointed nose and bony paws.
he leaves his perch and disappears
into the void,
leaving the empty shell
to collect dust and abandoned dreams.

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SPARROW

her bedroom, her nest
a place of safety now turned
into a silenced gun chamber.
a baby sparrow
thrown onto a bed
of her plucked down feathers,
pink skin exposed.
he pins her body, and continues
to tongue her sparse feathers
until they disintegrate
from his acidic slavering.
she squirms beneath him,
feathers floating around her head.
he bites her lip until it bleeds,
driving his fist into the wall.
sweat, tears, and saliva pool
on her trembling breastbone.
disgust and frustration contort his face
as he glares at his prey.
with reluctance,
he releases her wrists,
slamming the door behind him.
shivers soothe her
as the sparrow struggles
to clothe her naked body
with plucked, soggy down.

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Mariah Gordon is an undergraduate in communication studies and creative writing at St. Cloud State University. An aspiring writer who loves to write

poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, her poems have been published in Upper Mississippi Harvest and Spirit Wind Poetry Gallery. She loves the ocean, long summer days, horseback riding, and spending lots of time with the ones she loves.





CRUCIFIXION (1)

Whips curling, slack,
sharp flash of sun on glass
slashing with a crack.

Copyright © 2015 Scott Schuleit

CRUCIFIXION (2)

Sun slides down the spike
before the hammer clinks, clinks,
eclipses the light.

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CRUCIFIXION (3)

Stabbed with a spear thrust,
releasing water, blood, mixed,
sparkling over dust.

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

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

Virtues by an Atheist

Alain de Botton, philosopher and author of *The Architecture of Happiness* (which I recommend), has launched a project through The School of Life (theschooloflife.com), focusing on virtue, as a result of interest generated by his *Religion for Atheists* (which I also recommend). The response to the book gave de Botton “a growing sense that being virtuous has become ‘a strange and depressing notion,’ while wickedness and evil bask in a ‘peculiar kind of glamour.’ De Botton’s ultimate aim for the project is that it ignites a vital conversation around moral character to increase public interest in becoming more virtuous and connected as a society.”

De Botton is often considered one of the New Atheists, along with Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, but he stands out from them in several important ways. He does not write or lecture in ways designed to provoke but to stimulate thoughtful discussion and reflection. While the others can be accurately described as atheistic fundamentalists, thumping for their own take on reality, de Botton seems more concerned to connect with his audience and help ordinary people grow so as to live better lives. Through The School of Life, he works to forge an intimate connection between philosophy and daily life, bringing the discipline out of the dusty halls of academe into the give and take of life in our world of advanced modernity.

As a Christian I agree with his assessment that virtue and evil have, in the popular mind and media at least, achieved an unfortunate reversal so that the entirely wrong one has become perversely attractive. I wish the Christian community was leading this effort, but I suspect any attempt

on our part to do so would be met by jeers. Part of the reason is that we have lost the respect of our culture and the culture warring of Christian conservatives has helped generate hostility to the gospel. As well, so many of the pundits, mega-church leaders, and politicians who self-identify as evangelicals have shown themselves to be so hypocritical, arrogant, and shallow that no one truly expects us capable of leading a serious national conversation on virtue. So, I pray that de Botton’s plans flourish and that the young secularists that are attracted to him and The School of Life not only reflect deeply on virtue but hopefully also reflect on whether secularism provides sufficient answers to the deepest questions of human life, death, and existence.

In my review of *Religion for Atheists* (available on www.ransomfellowship.org), I raised serious doubts as to whether secularism is capable as a world and life view to provide a sufficient or compelling foundation for virtuous society. Certainly no society in history has done so and, though there are probably plenty of good-hearted secularists who might be attracted to the idea, more will be needed if this effort is to achieve real change in our world. Still, I wish de Botton well. Seeking to generate a thoughtful conversation about virtue is a worthy goal.

It is such a worthy goal that I would like to do my small part in stimulating that conversation. Here are “Alain de Botton’s Ten Virtues for the Modern Age”:

1. Resilience. *Keeping going even when things are looking dark; accepting that reversals are normal; remembering that human nature is, in the end, tough. Not frightening others with your fears.*

2. Empathy. *The capacity to connect imaginatively with the sufferings and unique experiences of another person. The courage to become someone else and look back at yourself with honesty.*

3. Patience. *We lose our temper because we believe that things should be perfect. We’ve grown so good in some areas (putting men on the moon etc.), we’re ever less able to deal with things that still insist on going wrong; like traffic, government, other people.... We should grow calmer and more forgiving by getting more realistic about how things actually tend to go.*

4. Sacrifice. *We’re hardwired to seek our own advantage but also have a miraculous ability, very occasionally, to forego our own satisfactions in the name of someone or something else. We won’t ever manage to raise a family, love someone else, or save the planet if we don’t keep up with the art of sacrifice.*

5. Politeness. *Politeness has a bad name. We often assume it’s about being ‘fake’ (which is meant to be bad) as opposed to ‘really ourselves’ (which is meant to be good). However, given what we’re really like deep down, we should spare others too much exposure to our deeper selves. We need to learn manners, which aren’t evil—they are the necessary internal rules of civilisation. Politeness is very linked to tolerance, the capacity to live alongside people whom one will never agree with, but at the same time, can’t avoid.*

6. Humour. *Seeing the funny sides of situations and of oneself doesn’t sound very serious, but it is integral to wisdom, because it’s a sign that one is able to put a benevolent finger on the gap between what we want to happen and what life can actually provide; what we dream of*

being and what we actually are, what we hope other people will be like and what they are actually like. Like anger, humour springs from disappointment, but it's disappointment optimally channeled. It's one of the best things we can do with our sadness.

7. Self-awareness. To know oneself is to try not to blame others for one's troubles and moods; to have a sense of what's going on inside oneself, and what actually belongs to the world.

8. Forgiveness. Forgiveness means a long memory of all the times when we wouldn't have got through life without someone cutting us some slack. It's recognising that living with others isn't possible without excusing errors.

9. Hope. The way the world is now is only a pale shadow of what it could one day be. We're still only at the beginning of history. As you get older, despair becomes far easier, almost reflex (whereas in adolescence, it was still cool and adventurous). Pessimism isn't necessarily deep, nor optimism shallow.

10. Confidence. The greatest projects and schemes die for no grander reasons than that we don't dare. Confidence isn't arrogance, it's based on a constant awareness of how short life is and how little we ultimately lose from risking everything.

Visit The School of Life website for more information. Then find natural ways to generate discussion on his list of virtues, perhaps over lunch in your workplace, or over dessert with neighbors, or with a few friends who would be willing to reflect on virtue and its significance in our lives and society. And in order to help you as you start a conversation about these things, here some questions that discerning Christians might find helpful.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What, if anything is surprising about de Botton's list of ten virtues? Why is it surprising to you?
2. What, if anything, would you add or subtract to de Botton's list? Why?
3. What reasons would you give for proposing an ongoing conversation among friends, colleagues and neighbors about virtue?
4. Who is the most attractively virtuous person you ever knew personally? What made them so? How did they become virtuous?
5. In what way does the consumerism of our society militate against virtue? Where can this be seen most easily? In what way do social media militate against virtue, or the busy pace of life, or the ubiquitous presence and pressure of technology? What other aspects of our world of advanced modernity do you think militates against virtue?
6. In what ways do you actively and intentionally seek to grow in virtue, especially in those that are most foreign or unnatural to you?
7. For Christians, an important list of virtuous characteristics is found in what St Paul called the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), in other words, how God's Spirit would manifest his presence in a believer's life when indwelling that person: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Revised Standard Version). Eugene Peterson translated this text this way in *The Message*: "But what happens when we live God's way?

He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely." Compare and contrast this list of the Spirit's fruit with de Botton's list of ten virtues.

8. In classic Christian thought, the virtues are divided into two groups. The four cardinal (or pivotal) virtues are those that are necessary for all human civilization: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The three theological virtues are those specifically named in apostolic teaching as essential for the follower of Christ: faith, hope, and charity (love). Do some simple research and define each of the seven. (Note that some of the words have changed meaning over time so that we use them differently from originally intended.) Compare and contrast with de Botton's list.
7. Which of these virtues—in all of the lists—comes most naturally and easily to you? With which do you have the most difficulty? ■

Source: www.theschooloflife.com/london/business/case-studies/virtues-project



READING THE WORD

OF THINGS UNSEEN

ONE DAY, IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, I

walked into the bookstore instead of just past it, as was my habit. As a lover of books I always frequented independent bookstores—and still do—and have found that just browsing can generate a flood of questions and ideas that stimulates learning and deeper insight into life and reality. Walking among shelves and piles of books makes me glad to be alive. The two I visited most often in those days included a store near the university that also sold textbooks and a huge used bookstore that was in such a state of delicious chaos as to be especially inviting to readers like me addicted to browsing. Time stood still for me there. Good independent bookstores, so rare now, are like portals, each book spine an invitation to enter a new world of imagination, story, and ideas. Many turn out to be spurious and disappointing, of course, but hidden in the stacks are always some that open into unexpected discoveries like happening upon a secret cabin in a secluded wood where truth and beauty manifest themselves with surprising clarity. I expected the same here as I climbed the steps to the door.

This was a small, niche bookstore, one of a number that could be found around the University of New Mexico in those days. I don't remember its name, but it was known to be a source for esoteric, mystical, and occult titles and rumored to be a place where you could score psychedelics. It was on a quiet side street, an old single story adobe house fitted with shelves and tables and filled with clouds of incense. Posters of Jimi Hendrix and Timothy Leary, a variety of Eastern gurus, and local concerts adorned the walls. None of that was unusual and could be seen in

more mainstream stores and on kiosks on campus. What was unusual, however, could not be seen but was as real to me—perhaps more real—than all I was seeing on the shelves and tables and walls. For as I stepped through the door into the store, a distinct heaviness—it's the only way I know to describe it—descended on me as if something weighty had been draped across my shoulders. Not my shoulders, really, but on me, within me, on my soul somehow, a heaviness that felt as real as if I was being forced to carry an inner burden. It did not exist in the world of sight but though unseen was very real nevertheless.

"Well," someone may say at this point, "this was your experience. So, it wasn't really real, it just felt real to you." What they mean, of course, is that my experience doesn't make it real or true. Experience isn't fully trustworthy, so it's good to have a healthy dose of skepticism when people report unusual experiences. True enough. But I'm not asking you to believe it. I believe it, though, and believe it was real: I felt a weight that day, an unseen, inner heaviness, and it lifted only when I walked back out through that door into the street a little while later.

The weight I felt in that store had a distinctly personal feel, as if it were not just a burden but that a burdensome personality or power was present. It felt dark and forbidding yet strangely seductive, as if what beckoned was promising that this, whatever it was, was no trivial matter in the ordinary flow of things. Here, somehow, an outer, hidden cusp of reality could be experienced with all the danger and promise such a moment would embrace. It fit the books that were offered for sale, books purporting to explore a world of dark arts and ancient, secret rituals that

tapped into powers that normally lay beyond the edge of science and polite society. Some were drug based, where psychedelics, mushrooms, or the recipes of native priests could be used to open one's consciousness into realms of reality that only a privileged few would experience. Within that store a spiritual realm, complete with both angelic and demonic beings and powers beyond imagining, was not just proposed but was assumed to exist, if only we had eyes that dared to see.

So, what was the weight, the inner heaviness I felt that day in that little bookstore? I do not know. Could it have been a reaction to the billowing incense that filled the store? Unlikely. In those days if you wanted to stay away from incense you had to wear a respirator, or remain outside most of the establishments and houses near the university. Incense was ubiquitous. But still, that could be part of the explanation since there is no way to rule it out. Could it have been the hyperactive imagination of a Christian entering a store that catered to those interested in magic, mind-altering drugs, and witchcraft? Perhaps, though I doubt this, by itself, is a sufficient explanation. I had read the books of Carlos Castaneda—all the rage at the time—about his induction into ancient Mexican shamanism, had browsed similar titles in other stores, had long conversations with self-described druids and witches, and tried psychedelics, so this was not a world that was completely foreign to me. Students and street people were interested in such things, so avoiding such topics was impossible if you wanted to have serious conversations with people. It was a world in which Margie and I lived day by day for several years. So it was hardly the only time or place

where I was in such surroundings, and did not sense that day that in entering the store I was entering some especially dangerous or forbidden place. But perhaps my imagination was involved that day, even though I remember being surprised when the heaviness descended.

Even granted these possibilities—and others that could be listed—I do not believe they give an exhaustive explanation for what I sensed that day. I do not discount them but would argue there is no reason to believe that experiences must have only one possible cause.

Did every patron sense the inner heaviness? Don't know, don't care, and have no reason to wonder. Would every Christian sense the weight? Same answer. All I know is that I did, and my experience was undeniable. Would I tell all Christians to stay away out of that bookstore? No, because there is not one square inch of created reality over which Christ proclaims, "This is mine"—and that bookstore is included under his sovereignty. I do not place any significance on my experience except for what it taught me, and that was as undeniable as the experience itself. My embrace of Christian faith was primarily in (and continues to be) the realm of ideas, culture, and worldview, and my visit to that bookstore impressed on me forcibly that what is at stake is not merely abstract and rational but personal and relational. St. Paul is not merely waxing poetic when he tells Christ's disciples that we must be prepared for real spiritual struggle. "For," he says, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

This is an accurate depiction of reality. But don't believe it because I had an experience of heaviness in that bookstore. Believe it because it is the apostolic teaching, and would be true if my experience hadn't occurred at all. Is it possible that, as I entered that bookstore, I was allowed for a few minutes to sense in a special way the reality of things unseen? Since I cannot demonstrate that from scripture, I remain agnostic about the answer to this question. It is true that, as I walked into the store, I was aware that I was entering territory claimed by an "adversary" who, as St. Peter puts it, "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The experience reminded me that what scripture teaches us is true about things unseen, and that seems to me to be a sufficient explanation for what happened.

What we choose to center our life, affections, and hope on really matters in this broken world. What we yield allegiance to, even if we are barely aware of the transaction, is always a choice between kingdoms, between life and death. And our brokenness is so deep that we can twist meaning into its opposite, as the ancient Hebrew seer knew:

*Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)*

Job spoke of people who have turned away from the light. "For deep darkness is morning to all of them," he says, "for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness" (Job 24:17). If that seems strange, consider the *Twilight* phenomenon where the danger of damnation

holds a strange attraction. Is it possible that spiritual realities can occasionally weigh upon our souls? Perhaps.

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils," C. S. Lewis said in *The Screwtape Letters*. "One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight." Lewis is correct, though I would add that the two errors are found in evangelical Christian circles in less extreme versions. It is possible for believers to be de facto materialists or magicians. The one lives as though spiritual warfare never actually impinges upon them while the other frolics in a world in which dark forces are behind every instance of sinfulness. Both deny aspects of the gospel and are content to live in a world of their own imagining.

What singer/songwriter Fernando Ortega expresses in "Our Great God" (2002) is an accurate reflection of the historic orthodox Christian position:

*Lord we are weak and frail
Helpless in the storm
Surround us with your angels
Hold us in your arms
Our cold and ruthless enemy
His pleasure is our harm
Rise up O Lord and he will flee
Before our sov'reign God*

This I believe. It is as real as the laptop on which I am writing. Beings exist and are active in the same reality in which we inhabit but in a mode or realm that is ordinarily—for us, at least right now—unseen.

WHAT GOT ME STARTED THINKING ABOUT

things unseen was reading Bruce Cockburn's memoir, *Rumors of Glory*. Margie and I have long loved the Canadian singer/songwriter's music, and have seen him in concert several times, sometimes solo and sometimes with a band. Sensitive to human suffering, the horror of oppression and conflict, and the grace of beauty in the brokenness, his lyrics evoke some of the deepest yearnings of the human heart.

In *Rumors of Glory*, Cockburn mentions that early in his spiritual pilgrimage he read the novels of Charles Williams, a series of superb stories (that I highly recommend) referred to as "supernatural thrillers" by T. S. Eliot. "When a fan gave me a copy of *War in Heaven*," Cockburn says, "I discovered a Christian author whose background in the occult paralleled my own." I have never read a biography of Williams and do not know if that is an accurate description. I have read his novels, however, and know he need not have a "background in the occult" to write his novels, merely a keen belief in the nature of evil and an understanding that the spiritual warfare described in scripture intersects ordinary people in ordinary settings in ways that few modern people, Christian or non-Christian, imagine. Williams has an uncanny ability as a storyteller to peel back the outer layers of reality in order to provide a glimpse of a deeper reality that lies just below the surface of things. He makes unseen things visible so that we never can see reality the same way again. In his novels, the occult ceases to be the arcane rituals and dark beliefs of a few people on the edge of society, to be revealed as the principalities and powers at work behind the scene in

daily life. Small choices are shown to be decisive steps towards damnation, insignificant individuals are revealed in their quiet submission to be decisive in an ongoing war of darkness against the light, and ordinary things become hints of greater things yet unseen.

Cockburn's experiences with dark spiritual powers, he says, helped prepare him for his encounter with Christ. One fascinating experience he relates occurred while he was a student at Berklee College of Music in Boston. It involved a young woman who introduced herself as Red Devil and told him she was a witch. She had been involved with another student at the college, a drummer, but was ending that relationship in favor of Cockburn, a situation about which the drummer was quite angry. "If we happened to find ourselves in the same room," Cockburn says, "he would scowl at me, baring his teeth."

My pattern at the time was to make a nightly pilgrimage to the gas station around the corner and coax a Coca-Cola from the vending machine. For weeks I hadn't been able to sleep without downing a bottle of Coke. One week, though, something unexpected came to call. As my eyes closed I felt a tidal wave of fear wash over me, a whirl of nameless dread, like a drunk's vertigo. I opened my eyes. The feeling vanished. The moment I closed them again, it was back. I felt myself gripping the edges of my mattress. Eyes open, I lay staring at the springs of the bunk above. The room was darkened to the shade of urban night. Dim light filtered in around the blinds. Calm. The air cool. Eventually fatigue triumphed over both fear and light, and I fell into the black pit of sleep.

This continued for six nights in a

row. The seventh morning, as with the others, I felt fine except for the nagging depression that went with being eighteen. Breakfast...I'd begun to like oatmeal, which used to make me vomit, even the smell, when I was little. Now it was the most palatable offering the Berklee cafeteria could come up with. There followed an arranging class, a guitar lesson learning scale fingerings and flat-picking technique, and later in the day some more theory and an English class, one of the two or three "academic" courses that were added to the school's curriculum to allow it to confer degrees. I was one of a very few students who appreciated those non-musical classes. I didn't especially appreciate having to play with a plectrum, but it was explained to me at the first lesson that no one on the faculty knew how to play finger style, so I would have to go with the pick.

In the early evening, back in my second-floor dorm room, the pay phone in the hall downstairs began to ring. It was for me. I knew that after one or two rings, as I always did when the caller was Red Devil. Whoever answered the phone called out my name. "It's for you." He was surprised to see me already coming down the stairs. "I know. Thanks." Her voice was cheerful. We hadn't spoken for a few days. When I told her about my nightly terror episodes, she took it far more seriously than expected. "That son of a bitch!" she said. "Who?" "Bobby. I'm coming right over."

It was late spring and the evenings were long. Red Devil arrived and led me to the Boston Public Garden.

"What are we doing?" "Gathering some things to make magic with." Her eyes scanned the grass, coming to rest on a



short three-pronged twig. This she picked up. Next it was three white feathers, downy curls from under some bird's wing. With a Swiss Army knife, she cut small slots in the ends of the twig. Into each slot went a white feather. "C'mon," she said, heading for the subway. We travelled to a street I didn't know. She peered around, taking in scene and situation. Apparently all was clear, as we crossed to where a row of well-kept townhouses lined the block. At a grey painted door she handed me the device she had constructed. "Put it in the mailbox." I did. She grabbed my hand and we jogged back to the train, then back to Back Bay.

Curious. What did we just do? "It's like voodoo," she said. "Bobby's been sending you that fear. Now you're sending it back. Let's see how he likes it!"

I'd read about things like this. Fascinating to see it up close. I had no expectations. I liked that she wanted to help. I wasn't totally sure I believed that Bobby was responsible for what I'd been feeling. But lo! The fear was gone that very night and never came back. A couple of weeks later I was strolling down Newbury Street on a sunny afternoon and here came the drummer, striding straight at me, heading toward Massachusetts Avenue. He gave me a slight jolt of panic, but about thirty yards out he spotted me, stopped, then quickly scuttled across the street, fear pulsing over his face.

Red Devil...she had some stuff going. My sense that there was more to life than the physical was strengthened knowing her. (71-72)

I haven't bothered to collate the dates, but this would have occurred around the same period of time as my visit to the bookstore. Certainly this section of

his memoir brought back vivid memories of the scene on the streets and at the university that I experienced in the sixties and early seventies.

I cannot vouch for Cockburn's experience with Red Devil, of course, but have no trouble accepting it at face value. It's clear he believes it, and that it changed him. I do know it is a grace to be made open to spiritual reality, and I have no doubt that somehow, somewhere in this weird experience is an opening to comprehend the reality of the unseen that he needed in his spiritual pilgrimage that eventually brought him to Christ.

People who know their Bibles may think at this point of the "witch" from Endor who conjured up the spirit of the prophet Samuel for King Saul (1 Samuel 28). We think of a witch as someone who trades their soul with Satan for dark powers of magic, but that is not what is in view here. Divination was widespread in the ancient world, involving dream interpretation, and examining signs that if properly interpreted by ancient traditions would provide insight into the future. She is not called a witch in scripture, and is more properly a necromancer, someone who uses rituals and incantations to interact with the spirits of the dead. The story has long been controversial among biblical commentators but I see no reason to simply accept it at face value. We are not given an explanation of the event, and so need none.

Were the powers and rituals claimed by Red Devil real? I don't know. I do know that the God of scripture claims sovereign authority over his creation even as we find ourselves in the middle of a great struggle between good and evil, light and darkness.

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ; and this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

(1 Timothy 6:12-16)

That is more than enough for me, and it is here that I stake my claim. He is my Lord, the tomb remains empty, so I need not fear.

ON THE LAST DAY OF MAY 2014 WE MOVED 77.9 miles from Toad Hall in Rochester to The House Between in Savage, Minnesota. Margie realized we needed to move before I did. I loved Toad Hall and had long assumed I would live out my life there. It was the first place where I felt rooted, and the charm of a Sears Roebuck house built in 1916 was delightful. We had lived there for 33 years, and it was home. It was also a place that had become for many people a safe place for unhurried conversation, stimulating reflection, quiet reading, and leisurely meals. It was not something to be given up lightly.

Slowly our closest friends had moved away, with job or family changes, and though we had blessed each of them as they made their decision, in the end we felt that something precious had had been lost. Rochester was changing,

much of it spurred on by growth in the Mayo Clinic, and the quiet street on which Toad Hall stood became a busy thoroughfare funneling cars in and out of the city center. We had decided that we needed to devote more time to writing rather than speaking, and Toad Hall was not a place conducive to Margie fulfilling that calling. There were other reasons as well, and in the end we came to believe that our time in Rochester had come to an end.

So we put Toad Hall up for sale, using the process as an intentional opportunity for God to change our plans. Instead, the house sold quickly, and we began the tedious process of looking for a place to buy in the Twin Cities. We searched online, attended open houses, had our agent show us houses for weeks, and found nothing in which we were even slightly interested. Then one day after viewing three houses, we drove up to this one in Savage. Margie took one look at the outside and said she didn't even want to look at it. But the agent had patiently come to show it to us, so we went inside. We parted ways just inside the front door, and wandered through the rooms alone. We met in what is now our dining room, and just a glance at each other's face told us this was it.

"We want it," we both said to our agent. "Make an offer." So we did, and our offer was refused. Though the house had been empty and on the market for a year, someone else made an offer the same day and his was accepted. So we went back to searching and feeling increasingly discouraged at the houses available in our price range. Then I had a dream.

I don't dream often. I had frequent nightmares as a boy, and those I remember with a sense of dread. I

would be at the foot of a hill, usually the one in the park across the street from our house. I would hear something behind me and looking back would see huge logs racing down the hill at me. I would turn to run and be rooted in place, unable to move. I could hear the logs bearing down on me and could see them over my shoulder but was forever frozen in place. Then I would wake, terrified. I think now that the dream is best understood as a reflection of the marginalization and abandonment that was the measure of my childhood. The disdain I was showed at home, where the shame that came from being repeatedly told I was a disappointment made me feel caught, with no way out. My dreams, I suspect, were an expression of my inner emotional and spiritual turmoil. One day my mother told me I wouldn't dream if I slept on my side rather my back, so I trained myself to sleep that way, and the nightmares stopped. After that it seemed I stopped dreaming altogether.

So, when I awoke after this dream, it was a striking experience for me. I told Margie about it, and in the telling made certain it would not fade from memory. We were, in my dream, in the house in Savage. It was ours and we belonged there. I told Margie, "That's our house. I don't know what that means, or if it means anything, but it's our house." And we went on looking at more houses, with more discouragement at what we were seeing.

Several weeks passed and it became clear that we would soon need to make a decision since the buyers wanted to take possession of Toad Hall. One day we were in the Twin Cities to look at more places and had stopped at the Minnesota Arboretum because it is a place of restful beauty. My iPhone rang

and it was our agent. "The purchase of that house in Savage just fell through, so it's going back on the market tomorrow. Should I resubmit your offer?" Yes—and now it's ours, just as in my dream. We named it The House Between.

So, how should I understand that dream? Some Christians would append the words, "The Lord told me..." to my story, but I find that presumptuous if not blasphemous. We know that for certain only of the scriptures and should be content with that. The Old Testament prophets were held to a rigorous standard: those who spoke falsely in the Lord's name were worthy of death (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). If we know God at all we will know a proper fear in attributing to God anything except what we know he has in fact revealed.

Could it be that my dream about the house in Savage was a product of my frustration and disappointment over searching so long and so fruitlessly for a house? Absolutely. I would be surprised if that wasn't involved. The search for a house was, as my grandchildren would say, a serious soul-suck. But my dream felt like more than merely a subconscious expression of my frustration. To remember a dream at all was remarkable for me, and this one seemed like a quiet word of assurance. We didn't stop looking—the dream was only a whisper, and could have been merely assurance that we were not abandoned as we searched—but it was deeply reassuring.

We know God uses dreams because that fact is found in the scriptures. The patriarch Abraham lived for a while in Gerar and, because he was afraid the king would assassinate him to take his wife into his harem, Abraham said Sarah was his sister. "Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God

came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife" (Genesis 20:2-3). Being of sound mind, he restored Sarah to Abraham.

Joseph was an Old Testament dreamer, but that didn't go well even though his dreams accurately foretold what would transpire. "Joseph had a dream," the Pentateuch records, "and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more" (Genesis 37:5). Daniel interpreted the dreams of the king of Babylonia and had some of his own. "In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, and told the sum of the matter." (Daniel 7:1) And twice Joseph, Mary's husband, received direction from God in dreams, first when Mary was pregnant with Jesus, and later after the visit of the magi (Matthew 1:20-24; 2:13-15). According to scripture, dreams can have divine significance, and come to both believers and unbelievers.

And more recently, reports suggest that increasing numbers of Muslims in the Middle East are coming to faith in Christ after receiving dreams, many of the Virgin Mary, who is highly honored in Islam, or of Christ saying, "Follow me." To the extent this is true, there is reason to be grateful.

Still, there is every reason to approach all this with hesitant humility—even if we think we have a prophetic gift, none of us are a Daniel—or even close to it. As a prophet, a seer of God, Daniel had a ministry in Babylon that showed him to be set apart by God in a special way for a special purpose. "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to

the king the mystery which the king has asked," Daniel said in one instance of dream interpretation, "but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days" (Daniel 2:27-28).

Commenting on the dream of the Babylonian king in Daniel 2, Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) concludes that Christians should be careful not to place much importance in the meaning of dreams.

Seeing, then, that dreams may arise from such a variety of causes, one ought to be very reluctant to put one's faith in them, since it is hard to tell from what source they come.... If the mind is not on its guard against these it will be entangled in countless vanities by the master of deceit, who is clever enough to foretell many things that are true in order finally to capture the soul by but one falsehood. This happened recently to one of our people who believed strongly in dreams. In one of them he was promised a long life. After collecting a large sum of money to last him for many years, he died suddenly, leaving all of his wealth behind untouched, without having so much as a single good work to take with him.

A wise warning, I think.

So, what about my dream about the house in Savage—can it be explained by considering it a vivid expression of my frustration meeting my desire? Undoubtedly. But I also believe it was more. Again, I'm not asking you to believe it, but the sense of deep reassurance that we were not alone in our search was exactly what I needed at that moment in time. And if I told you that I believed God had not abandoned us I would not have given my dream

as proof—it is not that. I would have turned to the scriptures for proof. My dream was a whisper from a loving Father and proved nothing but assured me of everything I needed. And that is enough.

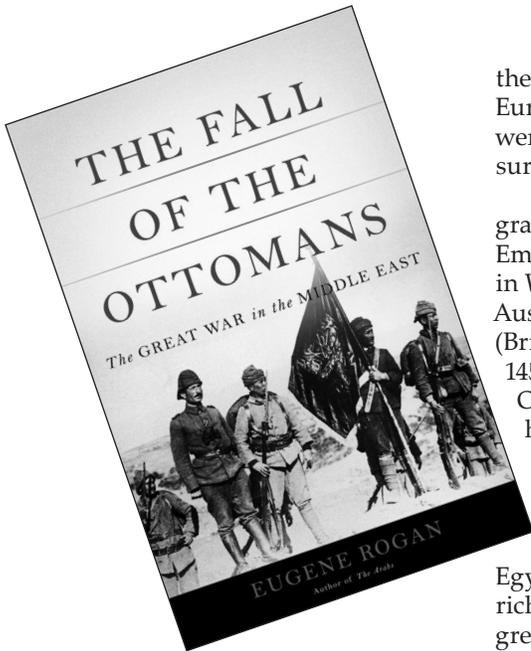
SO WHY AM I WRITING ABOUT THIS?

Because my passion to encourage the people of God to be discerning must include things unseen or we are missing an essential aspect of reality in this broken world. Because our telling of the sweeping narrative of redemption in Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration revealed in scripture is incomplete if the story is limited to only what is seen. So, in the end, I'm writing this in order to pose three simple but important questions I hope you will consider carefully:

1. Do you believe in things unseen? Why?
2. What difference does it make in your life?
3. And how can you talk about it in our pluralistic and religiously confused world in a way that might persuade people to reflect on the truth of reality and scripture? ■

Sources: The Screwtape Letters by C. S. Lewis, revised edition (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company; 1961, 1982) page 3; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (XIII): Ezekiel, Daniel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2008) page 167. Rumors of Glory: A Memoir by Bruce D. Cockburn and Greg King (New York, NY; 2014) page 70-72, 162.

When National Self-interest Begets Trouble



The First World War has always seemed like a distant reality to me—a horrible conflict that engulfed other people living in other places a long time ago. The history I learned told of awful trench warfare, and wholesale slaughter of troops trying to gain a few yards of territory. By the time it ended something like 16 million people had died. What I did not realize is how World War I shaped the Middle East in ways that continue to send out ripples of mistrust, unrest, and violence that explode in today's headlines. WWI is not a distant reality after all.

A book—*The Fall of the Ottomans* by Eugene Rogan—has changed my understanding of the Great War and its sorry aftermath. Rogan is a University of Oxford historian and the author of *The Arabs* (which I also recommend). In *The Fall of the Ottomans* he tells the story of WWI from the perspective not of Europe but of the Middle East. In that part of the world, rather than

the grinding trench warfare of the European front, the battles that raged were often fluid and dynamic, and surprisingly tenacious.

It is difficult for Westerners to grasp the significance of the Ottoman Empire today. It was a major player in WWI, an ally of Germany and Austria/Hungary against the Allies (Britain, France and Russia). Between 1453 and the end of WWI in 1918, the Ottomans ruled an empire that at its height stretched from present day Hungary and Bulgaria across into Russia, all of Turkey through the Caucasus, down through Palestine and Syria, through Arabia and Egypt and across North Africa. It was rich and powerful enough to rival the great European kingdoms and empires and was ruled by a sultan/caliph who was considered the rightful ruler of the Muslim world. It is a heritage the Islamic world remembers with pride and its dismemberment by the Allies has remained not merely a great loss in the hearts and imaginations of Middle Eastern Muslims but a painful humiliation.

Westerners today assume that diplomats and politicians will pursue policies that serve their national self-interest. So, during the course of WWI, the Allies secretly negotiated treaties with one another that would allow them as victors to carve up the Ottoman Empire in ways that would best serve their imperial interests. “Had the European powers,” Rogan writes, “been concerned with establishing a stable Middle East, one can’t help but think they would have gone about drafting the boundaries [of nations] in a very different way.” Instead, he says, they made “outlandish agreements, which were only conceivable in wartime.” (p. 404)

As WWI escalated in the years following 1914, the Allies feared that the call to jihad by the Ottoman Sultan would cause Muslims to rebel in their colonies, forming a fifth column at home. That never materialized but the distrust it engendered poisoned relations that have never fully healed and the fear led to battle plans that in hindsight proved to be unwise. “Much of the Allied war effort in the Middle East,” Rogan says, “was driven by what proved to be an unwarranted fear of jihad.” (p. 404) This failure to comprehend their enemy lengthened a very costly and bloody conflict.

Foreign policy that is shaped by a doctrine of national self-interest can have unintended consequences. Just because WWI seems like a distant reality to me, it is not to everyone. For, as Rogan concludes, “in the Middle East more than in any other part of the world, the legacies of the Great War continue to be felt down to the present day.” (p. 406)

Reading *The Fall of the Ottomans* has helped me better understand my world. ■

Book recommended: *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* by Eugene Rogan (New York, NY: Basic Books; 2015) 406 pages + notes + bibliography + index

The Lament of a Burdened Heart



Though moving is no fun, developing new friendships is. So I asked a young woman I am getting to know to recommend an album that she likes and listens to often. The band is Get Scared, she replied, and the album is *Built for Blame, Laced with Shame* (2012). So I bought a copy, downloaded it, and couldn't locate the songs on my laptop—it had to do with age, she said.

Get Scared is a heavy metal Goth band, with dense, driving drums, thrashing guitars, insistent beats, and massive sound, music that is best heard very loud. This is not, however, merely angry music, though certainly rage is expressed against those who use blame and shame to wound, dismiss, and control.

*Picture perfect down the drain again
and again
I'm really tired of these
Stupid little people knocking you to
the ground...
This is what it takes to breathe
This is what it takes to fake a smile
and say
That everything's okay
As long as I take blame
["Built for Blame"]*

Rather than an indulgent scream of rage, *Built for Blame, Laced with Shame* is a lament, the heart cry of someone seeking a way out of being the one who is always seen as not only in the wrong, but wrong, period.

*Devils come out at night.
In the form of people that I love
They said I'm not enough. ["Start to
Fall"]*

Within each human heart an elaborate fabric is constantly being woven, complete with threads of deep emotion, for blessing and for curse. The fabric is inescapable, lending color and texture to how we think and do and feel and imagine. Some threads, like blame and shame, can easily dominate and then begin to feed on themselves until trust becomes impossible and hope withers and finally dies. They can take on a life of their own.

I grew up in a home where shame was used to control and to punish. Failures were never forgotten and often rehearsed to emphasize how I was a disappointment to those who loved me. So, to learn that Christ was on record not being ashamed to say he is my brother (Hebrews 2:11) was and is very difficult to believe. That he would tell others that, and even publicly "sing my praise" (2:12) is still something I have not even begun to process. I suspect that until he replaces my shame with his glory—which is the Christian hope—the full impact of it all will continue to elude me (Colossians 1:27).

Built for Blame, Laced with Shame captures the awful reality of being not merely lost in the cosmos, but of being lost within one's own skin and soul as well. "Look, oh, look around—you're lost," they sing "but never found, no." ["Cynical Skin"] When such threads are

woven into the fabric of our heart we feel caught, bound by dark realities that will not let go.

*Fake apologies (Fake apologies)
Can I just call it quits,
I can't take all of this
Fighting all of me (Fighting all of me)
I want a second chance,
But I'm so broken ["Problematic"]*

For those with ears to hear, there is creativity in the music of *Built for Blame, Laced with Shame*. A carefully crafted beauty, appropriate to the music's genre, that hints of something better.

*Well, I know you lay in bed,
Contemplating your own death.
Well, just look at what you've done.
Don't you dare forget the sun, love!
["Don't You Dare Forget the Sun"]*

As the music of a heart it is very worth a listen. ■

Music reviewed: *Built for Blame, Laced with Shame* (2012) by Get Scared.

Enjoy a few Get Scared pics on this issue's back cover.



we're getting up again
This is what it
to fake a smile again



DON'T YOU
DARE FORGET
THE SUN, LOVE

