

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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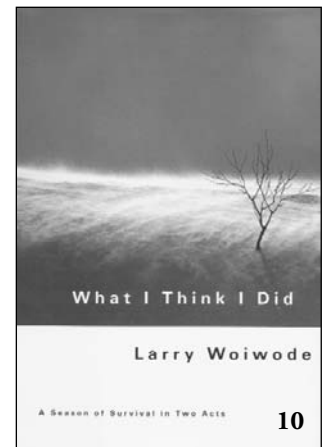
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Editor's Note

When columns go awry.

As I write this, Minnesotans are trying to come to terms with the Viking's 41-0 loss to the New York Giants in the NFC championship football game. The week before the game a local sports writer published a column bearing the headline, "Take it to the bank: Vikings will win." This week his headline read, "Take it to the bank: Crow doesn't taste like chicken." A reader had delivered to the *Post-Bulletin* offices a box addressed to him containing a plate on which rested a plastic crow, garnished with lettuce.

No one sent me a comparable dinner, but more than a few readers objected to The Discerning Life column in the #8-2000 issue entitled, "Pottering about Potter" (pp. 4-5). In that column I reproduced an email I had received warning people away from the Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling. I pointed out that *World* magazine had also been critical of the series, and concluded the column with an invitation for readers to be discerning. Questions for reflection and discussion were included, as usual, for those who wished to act on my invitation. Readers were particularly exercised that I reproduced the email without pointing out that it contained quotations which were taken from a fictional piece in *The Onion*, a national satirical newspaper. I did point that out, actually, though in another article later in the same issue (see pp. 6-9).

The idea behind The Discerning Life is to provide exercises in discernment, case studies from life which require Christians to think Christianly. (Or, as in this issue, to respond to one of the case studies that appeared in a previous issue of *Critique*.) Since that's the purpose of the column, I must confess I was somewhat unmoved by the controversy. Sounds to me like the piece got people thinking and responding, which is, after all, the point. On the other hand, I am sorry I wrote the piece as I did. I should have written it with more of the questions

embedded in the piece itself. I should have pointed out how the email perverted the truth about both the novels and the author, instead of leaving that aspect of the exercise to be discovered by my readers. I have even learned that one family got rid of their copies of the books after reading the email in *Critique*. And for all that, I deeply regret the misunderstanding the column caused.

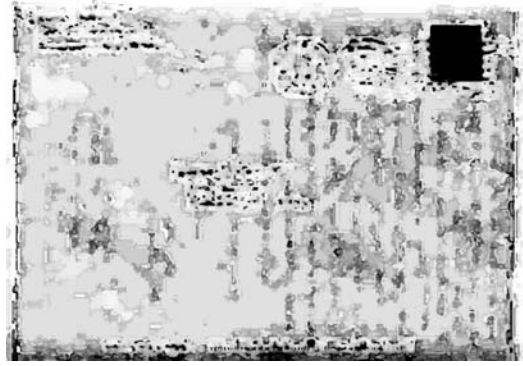
I plan to review the Harry Potter novels in an upcoming issue of *Critique*. Though the books are not fully comparable as literature to such classics as Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, they are well-written children's books, fun to read and very worth reading.

Regarding the email, I believe it should never have been distributed by Christians. And it was apparently distributed widely, judging from the number of times it appeared in my In-box. Christians have long argued that just because modern technology can do something doesn't mean it should be done. That ethical principle doesn't apply only to big issues like cloning human beings, but to things like email as well. It is easy to click on "Forward," but that doesn't mean we should. If what we forward turns out to be untrue, or slanderous, we bear some responsibility. If we distribute a lie—even if we were duped into believing it—shouldn't we now contact those to whom we spread it, in order to undo the wrong we helped to perpetrate?

I apologize for publishing the piece as I did, and will try to learn from this so that future articles in The Discerning Life will prompt readers to think Christianly instead of mistaking the exercise for a settled conclusion. And to those who got rid of the books, please accept my apology for inadvertently misleading you. And please buy another copy—they're too good to be missed. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Dialogue



Comments about Harry Potter and John Seel.

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

Marsena Konkle
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406 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

or e-mail:
marsena@itis.com

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

Ouch. I just received the latest issue of *Critique* [#8 - 2000]. On page 4 is an email supposedly from a young girl named Ashley about Harry Potter, followed by a supposed quote from the author J.K. Rowling.

Both quotes are hoaxes originating from the satirical website *The Onion*. I mean, today's *Onion* features this headline: "Lab Rabbit Strongly Recommends Cover Girl Waterproof Mascara for Sensitive Eyes."

Please clarify this as being a satirical joke and not a fact. This stuff has been passed all over the Christian community as fact; all it has accomplished is to inflame the issue with false rhetoric.

Steve Laube
Phoenix, AZ

Margie Haack replies:

Please note that on page seven of the same issue [#8 - 2000], Denis identified the quote as coming from *The Onion*. He was hoping to help people think critically before actually learning that it was a hoax in the first place. We'd hate to leave people with the idea that we believed the email.

Margie Haack

You caught me! I did not make it to page seven. I usually browse quickly before I sit down and pour over the articles.

I guess I am guilty of the knee-jerk reaction, for that I sincerely apologize. Unfortunately that email about Harry Potter was circulated in our company as fact and I was the only one to stand up and say "No way." Plus earlier today I dealt with another hoax email being circulated regarding politics. As you can imagine, when you want to deal in truth and facts, the perpetuation of error and exaggeration becomes something to crusade against.

Steve Laube

I have read three Harry Potter books to my children. My daughter's second grade teacher started reading it in class but had to stop because of parental disapproval (and yet they showed *Beetlejuice*!). I read it to my children because Harry is loyal, brave, and moral. He hates injustice—even if it is against dumb animals. He is kind to those with no social standing who cannot repay him. He doesn't cheat in class or on the playing field. He loves his mother and father. He risks his life for his friends. He learns that you have to look beyond beauty, intelligence and power.

The books also generate the best discussions: Why is divination bad? What would Jesus want Harry to do? When is it ok not to tell your teacher something? My kids know that they cannot step into a fire and it has not led them to try it at home. The critics act as if we can teach our children by isolating them from all evil instead of walking through a little with them to immunize them.

Lynn Pisaniello
Lowville, NY

Being the mother of three, one on the verge of adolescence, I found John Seel's book, *Parenting Without Perfection*, very realistic and most helpful in developing a framework (along with scripture) to guide me in my privilege of child rearing. Mr. Seel does not give a list of dos and don'ts on parenting but dives much deeper to a biblical framework that takes into account the whole of the child, including their peer group choices. I highly recommend this book to all that seek to raise godly children but also as a tool in our own child-like walks with the heavenly Father. Thank you, Mr. Seel for your insight.

Suzanne Sundrick
Rochester, MN

Responding to Questions

An issue in need of discernment.

In *Critique* #4-2000 I raised an exercise in discernment involving questions about Old Testament law. It revolved around a letter posted on the Internet addressed to radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessinger responding to statements she (apparently) made on her program that homosexuality is contrary to the law of God. The Internet respondent thanks her for reminding everyone that “Leviticus 18:22 clearly states [homosexuality] to be an abomination,” but asks for advice on understanding other texts. “I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus (21:7),” the respondent writes. “In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?” And “A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Leviticus 10:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don’t agree. Can you settle this?” And the writer lists five more questions in a similar vein.

I said there were at least two issues worth considering here. First is the controversy surrounding Dr. Laura. Were her comments wise? Was her tone appropriate? Is talk radio a good forum for such topics? Should Christians support her? Why or why not? And second, how would we respond if similar questions were raised by a non-Christian friend who learned we took the Old Testament’s teaching seriously.

In this column I will sketch out some reflections on the first of the two issues; in a future issue of *Critique*, I’ll tackle the second. It’s possible readers might disagree with what I write here, or have ideas they wish to add to the discussion—and if so, I hope you will take advantage of the conversation available in

Critique’s Dialogue column.

Christian apologetics—especially in the sense of providing answers to the questions and challenges raised by non-Christian friends—is not a matter of having snappy responses to win an argument. It is instead an honest effort within a conversation to provide creative and meaningful reasons for our faith. The goal is not to win a debate, but to persuade, to listen, to raise questions and suggest answers, while inviting challenges and taking them seriously. That being the case, please don’t read what I write here as a stock response to whip out when the topic of Dr. Laura arises.

Rather, read it as my attempt to help us all think and live and speak more Christianly in a society in which talk radio plays such a prominent role in the public square.

What I’d probably say...

I didn’t hear the program, and in fact have only listened to brief excerpts of Dr. Laura’s show on a couple of occasions. As a follower of Jesus though, I find her comments, as you’ve reported them, to be deeply offensive. Talk radio may be popular, but I doubt that strident voices are all that helpful. In a pluralistic culture when the very fabric of civility seems to be unraveling, we need to listen and care for one another, even when we disagree, and I don’t think that happens on talk radio. Relationships are fragmenting, people are increasingly polarized, and that means we need to tone down the rhetoric, not

inflare it. It’s fashionable to say we need to tolerate one another, but actually I don’t think that’s sufficient. Toleration doesn’t go far enough. As a follower of Christ I believe I am called to something more radical, more healing, than simply being tolerant. I am called to work for reconciliation, just as Jesus did. To break down barriers, instead of raising them. So, I don’t listen to talk radio on principle. I’d rather have a conversation over dinner with friends.

Christian apologetics is not a matter of having snappy responses, but an honest effort to provide creative and meaningful reasons for our faith.

How I’ve tried to be discerning...

In trying to think this through and arrive at this response, I’ve used several basic questions to guide my thinking. My desire is not simply to react—to either the non-Christians raising the challenge nor to Dr. Laura and talk radio—but to be discerning. The questions I’m using are simple yet probing, and together they allow me the opportunity to set the issue within a distinctly Christian perspective. The four questions (listed below) are a guide for discernment, whether we are responding to a film, an idea, an issue in the news, or to a challenge to our faith.

Discernment question #1: What’s being said—or, what are the facts? Many Christians are supportive of Dr. Laura, and usually give similar reasons when I ask them why they appreciate her pro-

About Dr. Laura

gram. “She speaks the truth,” they say. “She uses common sense, tells it like it is, lets callers really have it when they need it, and when asked about moral issues, she bases her answers on God’s law in the Old Testament.” I haven’t listened to her enough to know, but let’s assume for the sake of discussion that this is an accurate portrayal of what is broadcast when Dr. Laura is on the air.

Discernment question #2(a): What’s a Christian response—where do we agree? In this post-Christian age, a desire to stand for or proclaim the truth is both noble and necessary. We can hardly expect anyone to take us and our message seriously if our approach to truth is any less rigorous than our Master’s. After all, Christ didn’t merely claim to teach or demonstrate the truth; he claimed something far more radical: he claimed to be the Truth. To this extent, then, we must see Dr. Laura as a co-belligerent, attempting to argue for the truth in a culture which doubts truth is even possible.

Discernment question #2(b): What’s a Christian response—where do we disagree? The Scriptures, however, don’t merely teach us to proclaim the truth. They also teach us that there are times when the truth should not be proclaimed; that just because something is true doesn’t mean it should be said. Jesus taught that there are situations in which it would be wrong to share aspects of the truth—that doing so would be inappropriate for our listeners, and dishonoring to him. This is seldom taken seriously by believers today, but not because Jesus’ teaching is obscure. Rather, it seems that our passion to proclaim the truth to a lost world overwhelms our willingness to obey that truth ourselves.

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs,” Jesus taught in

Matthew 7:6. “If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” Notice that Christ is not criticizing those he refers to as “dogs” or “swine”—they are simply acting in a way that fits their nature. Dump jewels into a hungry boar’s trough, and he won’t be pleased; if he’s hungry enough he might attack, and if he’s big enough he could very well “tear you to pieces.” The metaphor is apt, as any farmer knows. Jesus is not criticizing the unbeliever for refusing what is sacred, he is warning those to whom he has entrusted his truth not to treat it as less than sacred.

Discernment question #3: Why do we believe this? What Jesus is calling for is a form of discernment, the ability to distinguish carefully those who are prepared to appreciate what we have to offer in the gospel, and those who are not yet ready. Or more accurately, how much of the good news our non-

Just because something is true is not sufficient reason for it to be said.

Christian friend is prepared to receive. “A Jew,” Dr. Tasker writes in his commentary on this text, “would not invite a pagan to share his religious feasts, for that would be like throwing meat consecrated for sacrifice to an unclean pariah-dog. Nor would he risk the jibes of his Gentile neighbors by placing before them spiritual ‘food’ which they could not assimilate; for that would be like trying to feed unclean pigs with pearls, the only result being that the pigs, finding the pearls inedible, trample them under foot and turn savagely upon the donor. Similarly, the truths that Christ taught, his pearls of great price,

must not be broadcast indiscriminately to those who would ridicule and despise them, and become increasingly antagonistic.” We are required, then, to treat the gospel as not only true, but precious. Could it be that one reason so few take our message seriously is that we don’t seem to take it seriously enough ourselves?

Discernment question #4: How do we speak about and live out the truth creatively in a pluralistic and fallen world? If they turn on us when we throw pearls to swine, we must not imagine the result to be persecution, for it is not. It is, rather, nothing more than the natural result of treating the truth as less than precious. The opening phrase in the Greek (“Do not give”) is a strong prohibition which means, “Never think of giving.” So, if the question about how we understand God’s law in the Old Testament arises as an honest question raised by an interested friend, they deserve an honest answer. But if the question arises because we have treated the truth as less than sacred, proclaiming it indiscriminately in terms inappropriate to our listeners, they still deserve an honest answer, but when the conversation is finished we must repent for treating the truth more lightly than it deserves.

Just because something is true is not sufficient reason for it to be said. The truth is sacred, precious beyond our imagining, and Christ expects his followers to act accordingly. And though I have heard so little of Dr. Laura that I wish to speak with great care about her program, as a Christian I find it impossible to support what she and others are doing on talk radio. Talk radio may be a forum where the truth can be proclaimed, but it is not a forum where the preciousness of truth can be safeguarded. As a Christian, therefore, I cannot be supportive

of such programs. And I will gladly distance myself from them—even when talking to a person with whom I happen to disagree far more than I do with Dr. Laura on any particular point.

Many of our postmodern friends feel they have considered the claims of Christianity and found them wanting, when all that has happened is that they have heard some tirade by someone claiming to stand for the truth, or been on the receiving end of a regurgitated spiel told without regard for their questions or concerns. They need to hear the truth, certainly, but from someone who loves them enough to invite them home for dinner. Someone who will listen, ask questions, and then listen some more before talking. Someone who

My desire must be to treat my challenger as a person of significance, made in God's image. I ask my questions willing to learn from my non-Christian friend, and willing to admit it when my position, in part or as a whole, is revealed to be contrary to the truth. And I ask them realizing that to the extent their ideas and values are contrary to the truth, that weakness in their world view might, by God's grace, become increasingly clear as I ask them what they believe, and why. And if such weakness becomes evident, I will not gloat because I know the shame of being wrong, and because regardless of how my challenger conceives of our interaction, it is a conversation between friends, not a debate between enemies. So, here are a few of the questions I

Intolerance? Since we live in a pluralistic society, who sets the boundaries for intolerance? If we disagree with someone's beliefs or values, how do we live together in a civil society? How can we express our disagreement without appearing intolerant?

What ideas or beliefs or values or lifestyles do you find so distasteful, or wrong, or dangerous that they are hard to tolerate? Why? ■

~Denis D. Haack

Source:

The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary by R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961) p.80.

They need to hear the truth from someone who loves them enough to invite them home for dinner.

loves the truth so deeply that they refuse to reduce it to sound bites. Someone who is eager to share the truth because it has so captured their heart and mind and imagination that they share it for what it is—something more precious than life itself.

Questions I might ask my friend...

This is, as I have already stressed, a conversation with a non-Christian, not a debate in which we launch withering arguments against an opponent. That being the case, I would want to ask questions of my challenger. I would want to get to know them better, and try to understand what is behind their challenge. Although I am eager to answer questions—including saying, “I don't know” or “I'm not sure” when it's appropriate—I am also eager to listen.

would consider raising.

What did you think of Dr. Laura's statement? How did it make you feel? Why? Did you actually hear her statements about homosexuality?

Have you found Christians to be intolerant? How was their intolerance expressed? Do you find me intolerant?

If you converted to Christianity today, do you think your life would become larger, fuller, richer, more attractive and creative, more involved with people and culture? Or do you think your life would be smaller, narrower, more withdrawn, more reactionary, less winsome, less involved with people and culture? What has convinced you of this? Do you think Jesus was uncreative or reactionary or negative? How do you know?

How do you define tolerance?

Doing What I Want

An excerpt from *God's Guidance: A Slow and Certain Light* by Elisabeth Elliot

We can all think of a few things we are afraid of. One thing I have feared ever since I first asked God to accomplish his whole will in my life is my own desires. But I have come to see them in a little different light than I used to. For a long time, I took the view that whatever I might want to do could not possibly be what God wanted me to do. That seemed unarguable. I am a sinner, my desires are sinful, “there is no health in us,” and that’s that. I went on the Manichean assumption that I am always and necessarily bent on evil, so it ought to be a relatively simple matter to figure out that the will of God was whatever I didn’t want to do. (I heard a man on television say that everything he really wanted was too expensive, too fattening, or illegal.)

A better understanding of Scripture has shown me that even I, chief of miserable offenders that I know myself to be, may now and then actually want what God wants. This is likely to be the case more and more as I practice obedience, but it can also be a very simple and natural thing. “Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.” That frame, spoiled by sin as it is, still has something to do with what God will finally make of me, and if the process of being made into his image has been begun in me by faith, my real wants are becoming more like his.

The psalmist said, “My heart speaketh to me for God.” If that heart has been given to God, why shouldn’t God use it as his speaker? Even the heart of the king, we are told, is

in the hand of the Lord.

“If a pagan asks you to dinner,” wrote that severely disciplined saint, Paul, “and you go, feel free to eat whatever is set before you.” Imagine! “If you want to, if you feel like going, go.” That shocked me at first. An invitation to a pagan feast would be the sort of thing I would not have dreamed of accepting without praying long and earnestly. God might want me to go, all right, but not—

An invitation to a pagan feast would be the sort of thing I would not have dreamed of accepting without praying long and earnestly.

heaven forbid—because it would be fun. He might want me to go for some exalted reason such as to “witness” to those present (which—heaven help me—would not be fun). So I would have had to inquire very carefully in order to separate my own desires from his. Paul took the whole thing very casually. It could happen any day and, like crossing the street, it might be dangerous. But Paul was writing to Christians, and he assumes that if they went, they went with God. It was nothing to pray and fast over.

There were occasions when Paul attempted to do things he wanted to do but was “prevented by the Holy Spirit.” He does not mention special guidance in the decision to do the thing—it was what he wanted to do, so he decided to do it—but he certainly had special guidance to stop, and it came in time, before he strayed off the path of righteousness. It is, we may properly say, *natural* to trust God to do this for us once we have made up our minds to follow, and we need

not be forever halting and backing up, paralyzed by fear of our own desires. ■

—Elisabeth Elliot

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Excerpt from:

God's Guidance: A Slow and Certain Light, Second Edition with Study Guide, by Elisabeth Elliot (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell; 1997) pp. 103-104.

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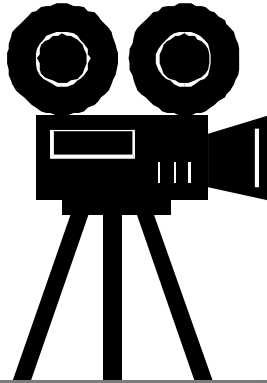
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The Darkened Room

All Paid Up



A review of *Pay It Forward*

by Drew Trotter, Jr.

Film Credits

Starring:

Kevin Spacey
(Eugene Simonet)
Helen Hunt
(Arlene McKinney)
Haley Joel Osment
(Trevor McKinney)
Angie Dickinson
(Grace)
Jon Bon Jovi
(Ricki)

Director:

Mimi Leder

Based on novel by:

Catherine Ryan Hyde

Screenwriter:

Leslie Dixon

Producers:

Paddy Carson
Mary McLaglen
Jonathan Treisman
and others

Music:

Thomas Newman

Cinematography:

Oliver Stapleton

Costumes:

Renee Ehrlich Kalfus

123 minutes

Rated PG-13 for substance abuse/recovery, some sexual situations, language, brief violence.

Pay It Forward should have been a “can’t miss” proposition for any filmgoer on a limited budget who wants to see something that will inspire one to live a better life. The film boasts a cast that includes Kevin Spacey, fresh off his Best Actor performance as Lester Burnham in last year’s *American Beauty*, Helen Hunt, in her first role since winning the Oscar for playing the wonderful Carol Connelly in *As Good As It Gets*, and last year’s Oscar nominee, the brilliant Haley Joel Osment, the best child actor to come along in some time.

Mimi Leder directs the film; she has been successful on the big screen with such films as *Deep Impact* and *The Peacemaker* and has shown her skill in handling much more relationship-oriented material by her long career in television, directing many episodes of *L.A. Law* and *E.R.*

The story is a wonderful tale about a boy who takes his teacher seriously when given an assignment to think of an idea that will change the world. Supporting elements of the film were handled by such brilliant artists as Thomas Newman (Musical Score; *American Beauty*), Leslie Dixon (Scriptwriter; *Mrs. Doubtfire*) David Rosenbloom (Editor; *The Insider*), and Oliver Stapleton (Cinematography; *Cider House Rules*). So it can’t miss, right?

Wrong. *Pay It Forward* is one of the sappiest, emotionally bloated movies to come along in some time. It stretches believability in so many wrong directions that one is tempted to laugh when one is supposed to be weeping, and weep when

one is supposed to be laughing. It shamelessly borrows from other films (the ridiculous camera shot quotation of *Field of Dreams* ought to be grounds for a law suit), and the movie’s plot is irritatingly predictable at its best and downright manipulative at its worst. *Forward* seems only cynically interested in pulling a big box office by tugging at the audience’s heart strings, not by carefully melding plot, character, music and scene to reach head and heart together. Make ‘em weep here; make ‘em laugh there. Who cares if it all makes sense?

What a grand idea, though. Osment plays Trevor McKinney, a troubled boy desperately wishing for a hero, when his hero shows up in the form of a seventh grade social studies teacher, Eugene Simonet (Spacey). Simonet has that blend of inspiration, strength and approachability that makes Trevor believe he can accomplish great things. When Simonet challenges Trevor’s class by giving them an extra-credit assignment to think of an idea that will change the world, Trevor does, and spends the rest of the movie trying to implement it. His idea is “pay it forward” rather than “paying it back” when something nice is done to you. Select three people, do something nice to them that they cannot do themselves and that is extraordinary, and then require only that they do the same thing in return. This chain-letter do-goodism reaches homeless, middle class and rich people alike, and if the movie had just stayed on this track, it might have been successful, despite the basic “everybody is really good deep down inside” lie on which the idea is founded.

But it doesn’t. To show that they are avant-garde, Leder and Dixon decide to play with the time line of the story, coming at the future from both the past and the present à la *Pulp Fiction* and a hundred

clones since then. The device seems out of place and intrusive. The love interest that arises between Simonet and Trevor's mother Arlene (Hunt) would have been a good subplot, if it had not taken so much away from the development of Osment's character. He barely has time to pay it forward himself, he spends so much time trying to make sure Arlene and Eugene get together. The ending of the movie would have been much more acceptable, for instance, if Osment had spent more screen time with the characters he encounters then.

As it is, the final scenes are blatantly emotionally manipulative and devoid of the real pathos they should carry.

There are some good aspects of the film, and for many they will probably redeem the horrific writing. Spacey, Hunt and Osment are all superb, and almost belie the old adage that great acting cannot keep a sinking ship afloat. All three labor under the burden of basically reprising roles for which they are already famous. Spacey's Simonet is not edgy like Lester Burnham in *American Beauty* but he is vulnerable and on a journey of discovery. Hunt is once again the waitress, single mom with the heart of gold, though the character here is much rougher than Carol

Connelly. Osment, as in *The Sixth Sense* knows something that he must convince a weak-willed adult to do, while not having the power to do it himself.

***Pay it Forward* is an example of the hoping-against-hope humanism that prevails in our society. How could anyone really believe that random acts of kindness will change the world? We need a Savior to accomplish that.**



The tension of the relationship with Spacey forms the heart of his character as it did with Bruce Willis in *Sense*. But all three triumph over this obstacle to give us truly interesting, memorable characters, and that is to their credit, and that of Mimi Leder.

The use of Las Vegas, too, as the backdrop could have been far too obvious (think *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Hard Eight*), but the movie wisely stayed away from gambling, not even showing the famous strip in a single shot. Instead we get inexpensive suburbs, the bus station, a school, a plain cocktail lounge. This serves two purposes. It allows the viewer to think "If 'pay it forward' could happen in

Las Vegas, it could happen anywhere," but at the same time encourages the viewer to move the plot into his or her own world of kitchens and junior high class rooms anywhere in America. And in spite of the rampant naiveté of homeless communities where reporters can drive up in Jaguars in the middle of the night without even a sideward glance, the movie does try to show that paying it forward won't always result in goodness and restoration, as a heroin addict finds out when he falls back into addiction or classmates of Trevor persist in their evil ways.

Nevertheless, nothing rescues this contentless, maudlin feel-good movie from being a pathetic example of the hoping-against-hope humanism that prevails in our society. How could anyone read of Israel and Palestine, of Africa, and even of the streets of Las Vegas and really believe that people will respond on their own and regularize their "random acts of kindness" so that the world will be changed? We need a Savior to accomplish that. ■

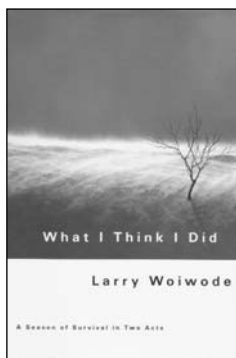
~Drew Trotter

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Despite the movie's failings, consider the classroom assignment. Could it work to change the world? Under what circumstances?
2. Which character in the movie did you most identify with? Why?
3. Which character most clearly "pays it forward?" Why this one over the others?
4. What aspects of the plot detract the most from the movie? How would you have written it differently?
5. What should be the basis of the true Christian emotions of sadness and joy? How do these differ from the sadness or the joy you felt as you watched *Pay It Forward*?

Writing as if it



The world is full of books—as Solomon noted well before the advent of printing presses and amazon.com—and some of those books are books of fiction. While much fiction is worth reading, relatively few novels and short stories are worth reading more than once. Even fewer are so exemplary to be worth reading again and again, each time cherished for the grace of story-telling that’s found between their covers. I usually wait for most books to appear in paperback, but a few authors have become so precious to me that I gladly purchase their work in hardback. Not only do I prefer to read them in hardback, I am delighted to have a greater monetary return accrue to them from my purchase. My list of such authors is relatively short, but one who is near the top is Larry Woiwode. Whenever a new title appears from him, I buy it. Hardback.

I remember the first time I read something by him. The November 22, 1982, issue of *The New Yorker* had just arrived in the mail. As usual I paged through it to read the cartoons, and then turned to the fiction. The short story was called “Firstborn,” by Larry Woiwode. It was searing, and disturbing, and arresting and lovely. So I bought his first novel, *What I’m Going to Do, I Think*, and hadn’t finished before concluding that the short story was no fluke. So I went on to his second novel, a masterful and massive story of four generations and the grace of God, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. Here was an author who wrote as if words and real-

ity, creation and redemption truly mattered. (“Firstborn,” I’m happy to say, is one of thirteen stories collected in Woiwode’s *The Neumiller Stories*. A second collection of nine short stories, is *Silent Passengers*—and I recommend both collections highly.)

It turns out that Larry Woiwode (pronounced WHY-wood-ee) is an evangelical, an elder in an Orthodox Presbyterian Church in North Dakota, but I didn’t know that when I began reading his work. “I write for *The New Yorker* because I hope to pull it in an increasingly Calvinist direction,” Woiwode told *World* magazine. “I measure every sentence against my faith and the way God has revealed himself.”

Evangelical readers may be aware of Woiwode through his articles in *Books & Culture* or *Image*, publications to which he contributes essays on a wide variety of topics. Though I can not praise his fiction too highly, I am not at all persuaded by his assessment of fantasy literature. In *Acts*, an otherwise helpful commentary (of sorts) he wrote for non-Christian students who had never read the Bible, he argues the fiction of Lewis and Tolkien is escapist and shallow. And though it’s true that their fantasy literature is remarkably different from Woiwode’s gritty realism, surely there is room for both types of fiction within the Christian world and life view.

Woiwode’s fiction is serious, literary, robust, and brutally truthful—and may thus surprise the Christian whose experience of fiction has come from the saccharin best-sellers dispensed in religious bookstores. “I know that every Christian

writer must be aware, sentence by sentence,” Woiwode says, “of whether what he or she is depicting is there to purposely cause a brother or sister to stumble. If not, then it could be that the self-appointed gatekeepers of what is proper are the ones causing brothers and sisters to stumble by fencing them from actuality.”

Woiwode’s most recent book is the first in a projected trilogy, a memoir entitled *What I Think I Did: A Season of Survival in Two Acts*. Alternating between past and present, it is, at one and the same time, the story of a young man finding his calling as a writer in New York, and the narrative of a mature writer struggling to get his family through a bitterly cold blizzard in North Dakota when their furnace proves insufficient for the task. It is also

Woiwode’s fiction is serious, literary, robust, and brutally truthful.

the story of a pilgrimage of faith, the sort much needed if pre-evangelism is to occur in our post-Christian culture. It’s full of fascinating vignettes and anecdotes, people and events, all of which came alive to me as I read, even though his story is so utterly different from my own.

Geography is important in Woiwode’s books. *What I Think I Did* unfolds in New York and North Dakota, and the lay of the land acts almost like a character in the narrative. In that regard I was reminded of Kathleen Norris’ *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, another memoir I recommend. “The high plains, the beginning of the desert West,” Norris writes, “often acts as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob’s angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it

Mattered

before it bestows a blessing.” In an age when mobility is so constant that few ever get a sense of belonging to a place, Woiwode’s abiding sense of home and keen observation wherever he is adds refreshing depth to his prose. The following excerpt from his memoir will give you an idea of his style.

I stand in a bookstore in South Dakota, at the end of a scheduled book-signing, next to the only person left other than a cashier, the manager. After two hours of a trickle I want to extricate myself from the manager-fellow’s talkative embarrassment, or at least say I’ve had from hundreds to a half-dozen at book-signings, and this was not as bad as the low end, so not to worry, people hardly read anymore, and—

At that moment a nun walks up. She wears a matching skirt and jacket any woman might, trimmed with darker piping, but a piece of identical material pinned to her gray hair is the giveaway. For me nuns are messengers. I stand alert.

“Sister!” I say, as I was taught in parochial school, seeing that what she grips to her chest are my heavy books. They were bought years ago, from the looks of their dust jackets, and at the sight of them the manager walks off.

“So you’re Larry Woiwode, the author.”

“Well.” Those are my books, I want to say, uneasy with “author,” after years of being a writer, day by day. Now and then I even say that to someone, but wouldn’t think of correcting her. Her pink and dandily lined face has the pugnacious aspect of a survivor.

“I recognize you from your pictures. Otherwise I wouldn’t know you from Adam.”

I sense a jolt of grace or whatever spiritual emptying it is that passes between us (as a husband and wife feel at a surprise sight of each other) and wait for her message.

“I’m Sister Bernadette... I used to baby-sit for your parents.”



*“Oh?”
“I baby-sat you.”
“Goodness!”*

My wife, who has been examining books with the downcast countenance of overload from a bookstore—too many books as mere products—suddenly turns and walks over.

“It would have been when you were two or three because our family moved to South Dakota after that.”

“Yes. We moved into the house where you had lived.”

“Don’t get me going on that. You wrote a story about the house in this book”—she juggles the books in her arms—“and got it all wrong. What I’ve thought about all these years is how I wheeled you around in a stroller. I took care of you and your brother—Danny, isn’t it?—when your parents wanted to go off on their own.”

“Dan, yes. How was I to take care of?” This wonderment develops when your memory is failing.

“Oh, you know—”

She glances at my wife, so I introduce them. “My wife,” I add, so she knows our relationship isn’t salacious.

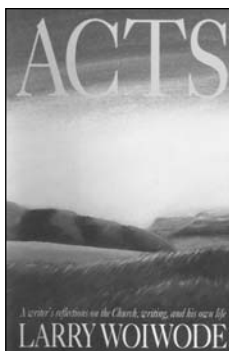
They shake hands.

“Your mother said to me about you, ‘He might throw a tantrum and hold his breath until he turns blue, and if he does that, you just walk away from him. Don’t give in. Leave him in his stroller or wherever he is and walk off till it’s over. That’s what I do. Don’t worry, he’ll eventually take a breath, and then stand back, because, oh, the howl that will come out then!’”

“Is that what I did?”

“Not for me, no.”

She smiles so sweetly I’m not sure she’s telling the



truth. Then she holds out her books for me to sign.

The day I purchased *What I Think I Did* I determined to savor it slowly, reading only a few pages every day in order to extend the pleasure for as long as possible. But I couldn’t. Pulled in by Woiwode’s masterful crafting of words, I devoured it, and as I read the last page found myself looking forward to reading it again.

I recommend *What I Think I Did* to you. Consider it an introduction to a brother in Christ whose gifted writing and finely crafted fiction will help you see reality more clearly. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Sources:

“Get Real” by Chris Stamper and Gene Edward Veith in *World* (July 4, 1998; pp. 17-19) p.18. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* by Kathleen Norris (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin; 1993) p. 1.

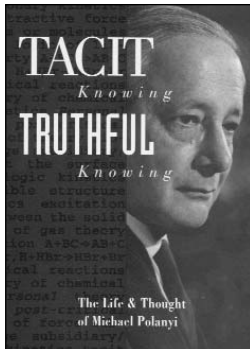
Books mentioned:

What I’m Going to Do, I Think by Larry Woiwode (1969). *Beyond the Bedroom Door: A Family Album* by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1975) 623 pp. *The Neumiller Stories* (short stories) by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1989) 289 pp. *Silent Passengers* by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Atheneum; 1993) 131 pp. *Acts* by Larry Woiwode (Harper Collins; 1993) 236 pp. + notes. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* by Kathleen Norris (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin; 1993).

Book reviewed:

What I Think I Did: A Season of Survival in Two Acts by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Basic Books; 2000) 309 pp.

What Do You Know?



Here's a multiple choice quiz for you. Four questions with only one correct answer for each—and no fair skipping to the end of this review to find the answers.

1. The Christian or biblical understanding of the relationship between faith and reason is best summarized as:
 - a) Reason vs. faith (reason and faith are opposed, reason must be predominant and must test all faith claims).
 - b) Faith vs. reason (faith and reason are opposed, and since rationality leads to naturalism, we simply accept such things as God and meaning by faith).
 - c) Faith above reason (reason and science are mere tools which when properly used provide proof for what is then
 - d) Faith seeking understanding (one believes in order to understand, so that reason is always preceded by faith, and true faith is always pursuing understanding).
2. This entire topic of epistemology (the theory of knowledge, or how we can know anything at all) is:
 - a) extraordinarily boring to normal people, and is best left to intellectuals who have no social life.
 - b) actually both interesting, if it's presented creatively, and very practical—in the sense that it makes a profound difference in how we understand the Bible, how we share our faith, how we pursue our calling, and how we seek to be faithful as Christians in a postmodern culture.
3. The best thing I can do at this point is:
 - a) drop this and read something else.
 - b) order a copy of *Tacit Knowing*

Truthful Knowing: The Life and Thought of Michael Polanyi from Mars Hills Audio.

Well-written and professionally produced, *Tacit Knowing Truthful Knowing* is a creative introduction to a thinker who is not well known among Christians, but who should be. Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) was a scientist who for many years did groundbreaking work in chemistry. As a scientist, however, he was troubled by the description of science that the modern world had adopted. The modernist notion was that the scientist was an objective and disinterested observer, simply following the facts wherever they led, so that reason following the scientific method would reveal the nature of reality and could test every truth claim. Polanyi knew as a working scientist that this idea was false. The best scientists are not disinterested, but passionate. Many discoveries come not by following the facts in a laboratory, but as a burst of insight. And

Lewis and Literature

by Denis D. Haack.

“An underlying conviction of this book,” Dr. Martin says of *Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis*, “is that while many continue to read Lewis for his fictional, apologetical, and theological writings, they underappreciate this fact: Lewis’s mind was nurtured on the study of literature. Those of us in English departments—those who have exchanged the wardrobe door for the university door—have always understood this. Studying literature has for us served as a means of going further up, deeper in.” In *Reading the Classics* twenty scholars share something of the fruit of their study. There are papers on modern literature, science fiction, Spenser, Milton, myth, fantasy, medieval literature, and much more. This is serious reading, but by scholars who appreciate Lewis, know and love literature, and are eager to welcome us to the scholarship and literary world of C. S. Lewis, Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature, Cambridge University. ■

Book reviewed:

Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis edited by Thomas L. Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2000) 392 pp. + index.

before the scientist begins his work, he assumes certain things are true, meaning that faith always precedes reason. So, after a long and fruitful career in chemistry, Polanyi turned his attention to philosophy.

Polanyi was known as someone who could explain complex ideas simply. As a chemist, for example, he would occasionally take the podium after a scientist gave a seminar that few could comprehend and in a few sentences explain what had been presented. *Tacit Knowing Truthful Knowing* does the same, taking what might seem to be a rather esoteric and complex set of ideas and making them not only understandable, but compelling.

The tapes begin with the story of Polanyi's life, involving, among other things, his escape as a Hungarian Jew from Berlin where he was teaching as Hitler came to power. His thinking is summarized and illustrated in ways that make it both plausible and practical. Finally, a number of people from a variety of vocations (including master violin-makers Wendy and Peter Moes, educator Steven Garber, and Nobel prize winning chemist Dudley Herschbach) are interviewed to show how his ideas apply to everyday life.

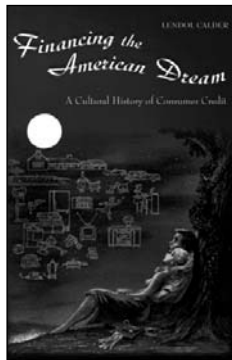
If you are an aerobics instructor, a post-doctoral fellow doing research, a farmer, an elementary school teacher, or on the staff of some ministry, *Tacit Knowing Truthful Knowing* will be helpful. It's for everyone who cares about truth, about knowing that truth, about science, and about how faith and reason relate.

We recommend *Tacit Knowing Truthful Knowing* to you. ■

-Denis D. Haack

by Denis D. Haack.

Credit, Debt and Myth



When Dr. Calder, a historian at Augustana College, began his research, he held two beliefs about the rise of consumer credit—beliefs held by most Christians. First, that prior to the early years of the 20th century, people lived within their means and rarely assumed debt, and second, that consumer credit undercut moral values, encouraging consumers to live hedonistic lives of instant gratification. Though he is skeptical of the consumer culture which has evolved, his research shows these two beliefs are largely myth.

“If my analysis means anything,” he says, “it means that modern consumers run the risk of being both deceived by consumerism and dragged along by consumer credit. To say there have been worse ways of living is not to say this is a good way to live.”

We recommend *Financing the American Dream* to you. Though scholarly, this is not a dry textbook, but the well told story of an essential aspect of our cultural history. We hope Dr. Calder will write a companion volume in which he spells out the implications of his research for the church. We not only need to shed a few myths, we need his help to see what faithfulness looks like in the midst of a consumer culture. ■

Book reviewed:

Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit by Lendol Calder (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1999) 303 pp. + notes + index.

Multiple choice quiz answers: 1(d); 2(b); 3(b).

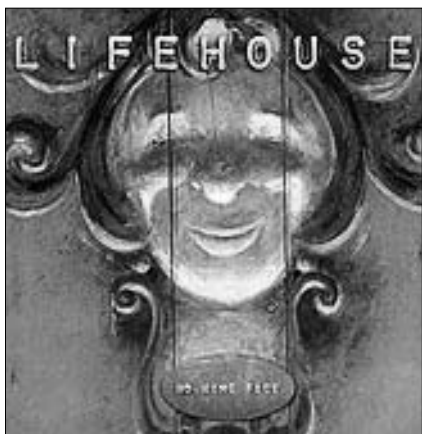
Tape set reviewed:

Tacit Knowing Truthful Knowing: The Life and Thought of Michael Polanyi written and edited by Andrew Witmer, produced by Ken Myers and hosted by Kate Burke and Ken Myers (Mars Hills Audio Report #2).

To order:

Contact Mars Hill Audio by phone (1.800.331.6407), by mail (Mars Hill Audio, P. O. Box 7826, Charlottesville, VA 22906), or visit them on the web (www.marshillaudio.org). And please tell them you heard about it in *Critique*. For those readers receiving this issue by mail, we've enclosed a brochure on the tape series to make ordering even easier.

Songs for the



The seventeenth century apologist Blaise Pascal wisely noted that “There are only three sorts of people: those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy, those in the middle are unhappy and reasonable.” It is of the middle group that the alternative rock band Lifehouse sings.

No Name Face, released last Halloween, is the provocative debut album of the Malibu-based group. Its release date is telling, as the album deals with many of the demons that haunt young adults. “This record deals a lot with self-discovery and breaking out of whatever your parents or your boss or whoever thinks you should be. It’s about trying to find out for yourself who you’re supposed to be; your purpose, your destiny in the world,” states Jason Wade, Lifehouse singer-songwriter-guitarist.

The single “Hanging By A Moment” has received increasing radio airtime climbing the charts to #1 in its first fourteen weeks. One reviewer suggests that the group has the depth and resonance of Pearl Jam coupled with the light hearted rock style of Third Eye Blind. But comparisons do the group no justice. It is Lifehouse’s combination of musical quality, emotional transparency, and substantive content that sets it apart.

*Could you let down your hair and be transparent a while
Just a little while to see if you’re human after all
Honesty is a hard attribute to find
When we all want to seem like we’ve got it all figured out
Let me be the first to say that I don’t have a clue
I don’t have all the answers
Ain’t going to pretend like I do
Just trying to find my way*

The cumulative impact of this record expresses the heart questions of security and significance that frame our longings for love and meaning. Without dogmatic assertions, Lifehouse points its audience to God. Rarely in today’s rock world does one find such honesty and hope combined. Here is authenticity without the typical nihilism. “I don’t tend to write about shallow things. I don’t just want to connect to people and relate to them for its own sake,” Wade explains. “I don’t want them—or me—to be miserable and lonely and feeling there are no answers. I want to say something hopeful, that maybe we can figure out some of this stuff.”

*I’ve tried to find myself in approval
I’ve already been there and done that
It got me nowhere
It brought me nothing
But a good place to hide in no one to confide in now
I guess you’re the only one that nobody changes
I guess you’re the only one who will never change faces
I guess you’re the only one*

A high school sophomore, Anna Kilgore says, “I really appreciate how Jason Wade is struggling with the deep questions. He’s not afraid to admit he doesn’t have all the answers. In ‘Somebody Else’s Song,’ he talks about feeling like somebody else and wondering where the thoughts in your head come from—a very universal struggle but not one that many people want to admit.”

Wade’s early elementary years were spent on the mission field in Hong Kong with charismatic parents involved in a variety of ministries to the Chinese poor. By twelve, he found himself back in Portland, Oregon, with divorced parents. He admits, “My parents had lots of issues. But they wouldn’t allow me to see the problems in their relationship. Our family was always peaceful; there was never any fighting or anything. We looked perfectly happy from the outside. It was like *Pleasantville*. The worst part was that I couldn’t acknowledge anything was wrong, so I couldn’t do anything about it. I felt completely powerless.” He moved with his mother to Seattle and there discov-

Lifehouse’s

No

Name

Face

Journey Home

ered his musical creativity as a way of coping with his emotional pain and spiritual doubts. “I started questioning my spirituality. I started wondering if God was real and if so, could He help me through all these terrible feelings? And if not, then what? That’s what my earliest songs were about—they were me crying out, trying to figure out what I believed.”

*This doubt is screaming in my face in this familiar place, sheltered and concealed
And if this night won't let me rest don't let me second guess what I know to be real
Put away all I know for tonight and maybe I just might learn to let it go
Take my security from me and maybe finally I won't have to know everything
I am falling into grace to the unknown where you are
And faith makes everyone scared
It's the unknown the don't-know that keeps me hanging on to you*

When Wade was fifteen, his mother moved again, this time to Malibu, where she pursued a graduate degree in psychology at Pepperdine University. Few things are more difficult than having one’s parent’s divorce and subsequently moving twice in high school. Wade poured himself into his music. He hooked up with budding bassist Sergio Andrade, whom he met at the Malibu Vineyard church. The two strangers became fast friends. The chemistry of the group is grounded in this now five-year long relationship. By Wade’s seventeenth birthday, Lifehouse had become a local hit. Starting with audiences comprising mainly his church youth group, the band was soon playing for audiences at Pepperdine University and the University of Southern California.

The group is cautious not to be identified as a “Christian” group. The album was produced by Ron Aniello, a member at the Malibu Vineyard church, but mixed by Brendan O’Brian, who has mixed albums for U2, Rage Against the Machine, Stone Temple Pilots, and Pearl Jam. Wade allows for ambiguity to remain in the meaning of his songs. “That’s the great thing about a song—a lyric may mean

something totally different for someone else than it does for me and still be just as valid.” For many the songs connect at the emotional level. “I can relate to the songs Lifehouse sings, they help me figure out my inner self and help me to discover who I really am,” says high school freshman Meredith Hubble.

Wherever the album meets its listeners, its message points in a definite direction. The romantic melodies point beyond human love to that which is Love itself.

*You are the light
That is leading me
To the place where
I find peace again
You are the strength
That keeps me walking
You are the hope
That keeps me trusting
You are the life to my soul
You are my purpose
You are everything*

The search for security and significance is rarely without scars. For once the prodigal had his “pig-sty moment,” he still faced a long walk home. He could have easily penned the lines:

*Desperate for changing
Starving for truth
Closer to where I started chasing after you. ■*

-David John Seel, Jr. and Norell Garrett

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John Seel is the Headmaster of Logos Academy, a Christ-centered, classical, college preparatory school in Dallas, Texas. He is also the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World, published by NavPress.
Norell Garrett is a freshman at Highland Park High School and member of Park Cities Presbyterian Church.*



by
**David
John
Seel,
Jr.
and
Norell
Garrett**

A Poem

Yearning

I want to be one
Who rises with the sun
and delights in the coming of dawn

with praise for the splendor of light
and joy and the end of night
glad at last to see the morning come

to revel in the clarity of sight
and cherish the rays of light
befriended by the illuminating globe

Rejoicing while hidden places are revealed
the cloak of darkness unveiled
and all the shadows are driven away

I long to desire,
for my heart to sincerely require
the warmth of the burning flame

to need at my core
the light beaming more
penetrating the cloak of blackness

would that I yearned
for the brightness that burned
and ran to the light of day

I find that instead
the morning comes with dread
and I cringe when stirred by its rays

oh, but I love the night
and thus begins my fight
to overcome my yearning for the darkness

-Douglas D. Warren

*Rev. Douglas Warren is a church planting pastor in
Portland, Maine where he lives with his wife,
Kristen, and their three children. They pray that
God will continue to establish His church and
redeem their city through the gospel ministry.
www.MainePCA.org*

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1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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