

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2019 Issue 2



**RANDOM REFLECTIONS
ON LYING**

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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2019:2 CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Ashes and Repentance **1**

2

DIALOGUE

POETRY

A Good Hike
Belly Gunner **3**

by Sam Hamer

READING THE WORLD

Graceful Social Justice:
CreatureKind and the
Ethics of Food **4**

by David John Seel

READING THE WORD

Random Reflections
on Lying **6**

11

RESOURCES

The Reason for No God

A review of *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* by Stephen Hawking

Welcoming Muslims

Thoughts on *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*
by Matthew Kaemingk

The Pace of
Kingdom Living

A look at *In Praise of Wasting Time*
by Alan Lightman

BOOK BRIEFS

Leadership in Turbulent Times
by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts:
Bearing Witness to the Triune God
by Jeremy Begbie

15

DARKENED ROOM

Playing with Time,
Reality, and Death

A review of the Netflix series *Russian Doll*

Ashes and Repentance



The association of ashes (or dust) with repentance has a long history. For example, after Job encounters God, his response is to “repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). “O daughter of my people,” the prophet Jeremiah pleaded as he warned the Israelites of their sin, “put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes” (6:26).

This biblical imagery gave rise to the practice of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent when God’s people remember their sin, fast, lament, and seek to make the spiritual discipline of repentance a habit of the heart. “Pervasive, all-of-life-repentance,” Tim Keller says, “is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus.” At the imposition of ashes in my church, the words are intoned, “Remember that you are dust and that to dust you will return.” It’s a poignant reminder of the words God spoke to our first parents at their fall into sin (Genesis 3:19).

This year—on Ash Wednesday, 2019—a few minutes before midnight my mother died, passing from this life into the next. Mom was 95, increasingly feeble, sliding ever deeper into dementia, and ready to go, so there is a real sense in which her death came as a relief. Still, being by her bedside over several days as she died makes the idea behind Ash

Wednesday into a far starker reality than I would wish on anyone.

As I was in her room at the memory care center, waiting for the end, hoping the morphine would ease her agitation and discomfort and allow her to sleep, the story of Moses and the burning bush kept intruding on my consciousness. It was a text on which I was scheduled to preach in a few days. It’s about being rescued from slavery, being redeemed from the suffering that comes from being oppressed and unappreciated as a human being, of being treated not as a person of dignity and importance but as insignificant. One of my most vivid memories of Mom was her telling me how she never felt appreciated, either as a child or an adult. My father was an abusive, controlling man, and Mom often asked me why he always treated her as if she didn’t matter. We told her often that she was important to us and loved, and tried to demonstrate it in the way we cared for her. In her last few days we kept repeating it too, although we weren’t certain she could hear us.

In a way that was simple and authentic, Mom believed that in repentance, in Christ she was granted forgiveness and life. I loved her but, like all of us, she was not perfect. She too fell short of God’s and her own standards. Several years ago, she told me she realized she had enabled my father in his abuse, and with tears, repented. “I should have done something,” she told me, “but I was so very afraid.”

Repentance is not an easy thing, but hard and costly. It is a fearful thing to face our sin, our failure, and turn from them, especially if we aren’t talking about respectable faults but about the deeper patterns of brokenness that keep us enslaved. It shames me to realize that,

like my father, I tend to be a controlling person. It’s not something I desire but rather a tendency that’s second nature, and that simply appears because, well, it’s the way I am. And so I repent, and repent again, and pray the Spirit of God would discipline me to develop new habits of the heart.

A day or two before Mom died, several of us were with her at her bedside. She was asleep, sedated to ease her discomfort. Our friend Anita Gorder took Mom’s face in her hands and said gently, “Marjorie, I love you.” Mom opened her eyes, looked at Anita and said, “I love you too.” Those were the last words my mother said before she died.

And though this is pure speculation, I suspect they were also the first words my mother said when she met her Savior on the other side. ■

Source: https://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf

DIALOGUE

To the editor:

Dear Denis:

God bless you for all of 2019. Here is a Christian Haiku for you:

*Meditation for
Self-help and comfort. Jesus
For Grace and new life.*

Much love in Jesus,
Ellis Potter
Switzerland

To the editor:

I was recently introduced to your publication by a friend in Iowa. I wish I'd known about you so much sooner, and you *must* keep going!

I *so* look forward to it—a treasure every time.

All the best
Tana Riebe

San Diego, California

To the editor:

Dear Friends in Christ,

Don't be deceived. We are not ranchers nor wranglers. We haven't owned a horse since 1978 when we sold off seven leaving the rural Minnesota River Road Ranch at my spouse's insistence. She did not wish to live in the country because she was pregnant with her fifth child at the age of 40.

Someday I'll send you some of my "over the edge and into the swamp poetry." If you understand or comprehend it you're demented geniuses like me.

Thank you for your literature. I don't always read all of it but always read some of it. My loving spouse, Yvonne, enjoys *Letters from the House Between*. I began a poem about it some time ago but never completed it. Inspiration is a strange thing. Sometimes it deserts you at the most

inopportune times, something like my spelling when I'm too lazy to fetch a dictionary.

God bless you all. If you don't hear from me again, consider yourselves blessed.

Dick Tilleman
Amarillo, Texas

To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie,

A brief note to say I love you both and am so grateful for the work you do. Not the best way to put it: *your life's work* has made a difference in my life, and continues to do so.

I hope you are well. Shelton and I keep trying to figure out a way to get to Minnesota somehow, sometime. We've talked about wanting to visit you on your home turf. Not to consume your time and energy, but to sit down for coffee, maybe, and thank you in person.

Again, thank you for sharing your lives and serving God so beautifully.

Love,
Karen Woods
Boise, Idaho
P.S. Congratulations on 50 years

To the editor:

I sometimes wonder if you have many people on your mailing list that you've never met. The Offners "introduced" me to you years ago.

In a city where the average age of believers is probably in the late 20s or early 30s, I love Margie's sharing of life at this stage. (I'll be Medicare eligible soon.) And as the daughter of a TV writer (non-Christian), I've always been interested in the media's messages. And books. At an early age we were allowed to stay up an extra 30 minutes if we were reading! We were

also quizzed on any vocabulary in the books we were reading.

Anyway, just a (1) hello and (2) thank you for your precious ministry. You have influenced my reading, my watching, my listening—and my thinking over and over again.

Anna Lee Stratton
Washington, D.C.

Denis Haack responds:

I am always humbled when notes arrive in the mail or in my inbox or with a donation to Ransom. Life is busy, making demands on us all, and writing takes time and energy and focus, and all those things are in short supply in our age of distraction. So, to Ellis, Tana, Dick, Karen, and Anna Lee I say, Thank you very much.

Each issue of Critique is sent off with the identical doubt and prayer. The doubt is whether anyone will find what I've written this time to be helpful, interesting, or stimulating. And the prayer is that by God's grace someone might. ■

RESOURCE

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*Resource: Hearts and Minds bookstore,
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A Good Hike

We hike with him a rough and unmarked trail,
A park for all ordained as common ground,
Our father, boots laced, narrow brim pulled low,
Pursuing this craggy, awkward approach,
A slanted pass where rocks release, divide,
Tons tilting, tumbling, rolling reckless down—
All are struck from the same soft stone, each one
A new-veined version of the deep earth's ore.
At length, a doubting glance, but then at last
A bend, a verge, a pounding breath, we see
A sweep of sunlit sky that stretches wide
To distant vales with bright converging streams.
Then down this more forgiving slope we course
To river's edge to soak our swollen feet.

Belly Gunner

My father's father flew beneath the mass
And sweating steel of allied bomber wings
Defending stranger friends both now and past
Hunched with faith 'neath a heavy hull heaving
And fragile shield of frigid glass below
When cruel crack of cannon-spitting fear
Hammered hope as sick skies coughed flak and foe.
But from that battle time has tossed him here.
No screaming shells expose the night, and I
Have never heard a dying man repent
With whispered words. My father sometimes tries
To tell the tale his father won't recount.
This man who naps at noon on Sundays once
For heaven waged a hellish war and won. ■

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Sam Hamer is a practicing attorney in Minnesota. He earned degrees in physics from Wheaton College and in law from Harvard Law School. His occasional poetry considers themes of faith, doubt, and family. Sam lives with his wife, Naomi, and three boys near Minneapolis.

Graceful Social Justice: CreatureKind and the Ethics of

by David John Seel

Environmentalists come in different flavors. There are dirt environmentalists like Rachel Carson and Wendell Berry. There are ice environmentalists like Al Gore focusing on climate change. Here ice caps and polar bears become part of the narrative. And then there are chicken environmentalists. These tend to meddle with dinner and my Perdue Oven-Ready Roaster. This is the kind of environmentalism that gets personal even more than driving an electric car. It's about daily small choices that reflect our overall sense of compassion as well as our sense of justice. It's practical and personal environmentalism. Few Christians think of food as an ethical dilemma worthy of personal lifestyle change. It is far easier to debate the Green New Deal than it is to evaluate our weekly grocery list. Chicken environmentalism demands positive grace-filled consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising is slow, painful, incremental work. It is rarely about grabbing headlines or tweeting sound bites. It is about making visible the invisible and challenging the taken-for-granted. It is also about putting forward a positive aspirational agenda that does not work from the premise of shame and guilt.

This is the work of Evangelicals for Social Action's CreatureKind¹ initiative, which is supported by Farm Forward² and Better Food Foundation.³ This initiative is a window into how ESA approaches its overall efforts in social justice.⁴

Foundational to this approach is a reliance on the application of a holistic gospel. Rather than narrowing the gospel to personal salvation, ESA's approach incorporates a concern for repairing the ruin of all creation. A redemptive vision thus includes

affirming our responsibility to husband and care for all animals and the wider environment in which they live. The ethics of love that is assumed in this care means not inflicting pain on sentient animals. To love our neighbor is not species specific. It means that animals cannot be used as callous means, but must be respected and loved as ends. This view significantly challenges the instrumentalist view of agro-business and its expansion in "factory farming." It is only when one's motivations are infused with a spiritual purpose that one can successfully engage in what is inevitably a long-term systemic conflict. One does not have to take a vegan position—that all meat eating is ethically wrong—to agree that the means and methods of factory farming are beyond the pale of a Christian's responsibility to nature and animals.

The early abolitionists were also those who fought for the prevention of cruelty to animals. To this day, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals uses as its seal the image of an angel intervening on behalf of a downed carthorse who is being beaten with a rod.⁵ It is only a gospel that links the creation mandate to the great commission that can connect the dots that the cross has implications for all creatures.

CreatureKind also seeks to address the problem of invisibility. It seeks to challenge the "out of sight, out of mind" complacency that tolerates systemic injustice. It is generally true that the greatest social injustices are hidden from the public. Fetuses, prisoners, immigrants, homeless, and minorities are easily "othered" when they are not visible to the wider public. In the food industry, there is even a conspiracy of

the othered, as many of the workers in slaughterhouses are undocumented immigrants. We live in an ethically dubious world where we purchase chicken (Tyson) and bacon (Smithfield) in grocery stores with little consciousness or awareness of the systemic cruelty that precedes this sanitized beautifully packaged food. We do not see the blood or hear the screams of animals being cruelly slaughtered for our convenience and empathetic neglect. The line workers in these farm factories slaughterhouses do not have this luxury, and many routinely suffer the trauma of PTSD from the prolonged exposure to animal cruelty.⁶ There are reasons food corporations do not allow cameras in these factory farms slaughterhouses, because invisibility is their greatest immunity from public outrage. It is a repeated refrain in the gospel accounts of Jesus' encounters with others in need, "he looks." Seeing the other is the first step in social justice. CreatureKind is on a mission to reveal the reality of factory farming and its systematic abuse of animals.

Another distinctive characteristic of CreatureKind and Evangelicals for Social Action is its willingness to see reality as various shades of grey. Rather than taking self-righteous black-and-white positions that demonize those who do not agree, it accepts that people are on a continuum of consciousness-raising and is willing to accept them right where they are. Omnivores are welcome partners in this conversation. This humble acceptance of where people are in their awareness of the ethics of food turns out to be far more persuasive to others. Such gentle acceptance, incremental consciousness-raising, and helping people see the other—in this case chickens, pigs, cows, and fish—is

of Food

unique among the social justice activist community. Rather than taking a posture of judgmental outrage or the self-righteous do-gooder, CreatureKind and ESA move within the social justice community with gentleness that can only be a reflection of Jesus.

Lastly, CreatureKind is willing to accept the practical agenda of incremental small choices. Rather than insisting on sweeping change, CreatureKind calls the Christian community to embrace the nudge as an approach to social change.⁷ A nudge is any aspect of the architecture of choices people make that alters their behavior in predictable ways without forbidding any options or changing their economic incentives. Nudges are not mandates. Having Christian college cafeterias offer vegan options or highlighting certified higher-welfare animal products is a nudge. Banning all junk food or meat is not. This means that ESA's approach to social justice is realistic about human nature in a broken world. It raises consciousness without attempting to foster a defensive reaction. This is certainly a slower approach, but it is in the end more effective in fostering cultural change.

There is within the social justice movement the tendency to be open handed when it comes to spirituality and close-

as soon as it comes to politics. Coercion reigns. Guilt and shame are dominant tools of discourse. Demonizing those who disagree is common insider political rhetoric. In contrast, CreatureKind and ESA seek to approach these matters with consistent resolve, but with a grace-filled acceptance of the other that is willing to meet them at the point of their spiritual social justice pilgrimage.

It has been said by others that the Lord's work must be done in the Lord's way. CreatureKind and ESA start with the gospel and then seek to make the way of grace a consistent method. The goal is to be like Jesus in the midst of our societal oppression. Some may misunderstand their motives, but real change is their goal. Eschewing big pronouncements of sweeping demands, CreatureKind is willing to change our ethical sensitivities one meal at a time.

There are lessons many can learn from their example and tone. One might want to start with eating with a social conscience one day per week, reading Sarah King's *Vegangelical: How Caring for Animals Can Help Shape Your Faith* (Zondervan, 2016), hosting a six-week small group course at one's church,⁸ and acquainting oneself with these ethical food organizations. Environmental activism comes in many flavors.

It may be best to start at the refrigerator door.

Links for further information:

1. www.becreaturekind.org
2. www.farmforward.com
3. www.betterfoodfoundation.org
4. www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org
5. www.asPCA.org/about-us/history-of-the-asPCA
6. www.mercyforanimals.org/slaughterhouse-workers-have-ptsd-from-killing
7. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/16a1/7942644877de3dfcccb3c46abcca4bdb5ad.pdf>
8. www.becreaturekind.org/sixweek-church-course ■



David John Seel Jr., PhD (University of Maryland), is a cultural-renewal entrepreneur and social-impact consultant with expertise in the dynamics of cultural change. His latest book is *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church* (2018). He lives with his wife on a historic farm in Pennsylvania and blogs at www.nconversations.com.



fisted when it comes to politics. Too often there is a fundamentalist absolutism within the social justice movement



RANDOM REFLECTIONS ON LYING

I'd like to move next February," my mother told me. She looked me in the eye intently and repeated herself. "I'm going to move next February. A friend and I have been looking at places when we go out for walks, and I've found a house I like. It has a big kitchen which is good so I can do more cooking."

I had this conversation with Mom about seven months ago. It was on one of her more lucid days. She's dead now, but at the time she lived in the secure memory care unit of a lovely retirement home about five minutes from where Margie and I live. She could only get around with a walker and then only for short distances: from her room to the dining area or, with my help, to the commons area. She simply didn't have the strength to get past the front door with her walker. Going outside required me to push her in the wheelchair I had purchased. There was a little kitchenette in her room to make it feel more like home, but the stove was not plugged in. And the facility provided all her meals—health regulations insisted I couldn't provide homemade treats for anyone other than my mother.

I asked her about the house she'd found and she happily told me about it. And then, because I love her, I told her lies: That I was delighted she'd be moving into her own house, that February is a fine month for moving in Minnesota, and that it'd be great that she could be in the kitchen more since I'd missed her cooking.

We talked about her new house for a while, and then she leaned forward and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't tell anyone I told you this, because it's supposed to be secret," she said. "All the residents are required to bring refreshments to activities, so I do. My

friend and I walk to the grocery store for supplies. And my treats are the most popular, you know. Most just bring store bought stuff, but mine are always homemade, made from scratch." That's the way people are, I said, and she should know how proud I was of her. "And then they come by my room and say they want to be my friend, but all they want is more treats, so I send them away." And so you should, I replied. Real friends want more than refreshments, even if they are homemade. Most people weren't raised right. Mom agreed. She asked if I'd make the arrangements for her to move and I assured her I would. "Don't forget, now," she said sternly. I won't, I said. I promised.

It was interesting lying regularly and convincingly to the woman who punished me as a boy for not telling the truth.

In dementia care, everybody lies. Although some nursing homes have strict rules about being truthful, a recent survey found that close to a hundred per cent of care staff admitted to lying to patients, as did seventy per cent of doctors. In most places... there is no firm policy one way or another, but the rule of thumb among the staff is that compassionate deception is often the wisest course. "I believe that deep down, they know that it is better to lie," Barry B. Zeltzer, an elder-care administrator, wrote in the American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease & Other Dementias. "Once the caregiver masters the art of being a good liar and understands that the act of being dishonest is an ethical way of being, he or she can control the patient's behaviors in a way that promotes security and peace of mind." Family members and care staff

lie all the time, and can't imagine getting through the day without doing so, but, at the same time, lying makes many of them uncomfortable. To ease this "deception guilt," lying in dementia care has been given euphemistic names, such as "therapeutic fibbing," or "brief reassurances," or "stepping into their reality."

Six months after our conversation about moving, Mom's dementia had deepened in remarkable ways. When I visited her and asked a simple question, she got confused trying to answer and was embarrassed. I told her not to worry and started telling a story of what Margie and I did that week. How I longed for lucid days that required me to lie. To agree to things I knew couldn't be true, to ask questions about things that never happened, to be happy about things that were nothing more, sadly, than delusions thrown up by her failing memory. To try to enter in love the reality she lived in, even though it was warped and misshapen by the disease that slowly took her mind and memory and life.

I've occasionally been asked how I feel about lying to my mother, and the question always amuses me. I hated the dementia that afflicted her, of course, but the lying never bothered me. From a Christian perspective, lying is not necessarily forbidden in a fallen world.

What is forbidden is stated in the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). The Living Bible, a paraphrase rather than an actual translation, renders it "You must not lie," but though that may be what is popularly understood as what God commands, it is not true to the



**A CHARGE OF LYING AGAINST
SOMEONE WHOM YOU HAVE
ALWAYS FOUND TRUTHFUL
IS A VERY SERIOUS THING; A
VERY SERIOUS THING INDEED.**

— C. S. LEWIS

original language. The commandment is concerned with speaking so as to hurt our neighbor. "The context is that of legal testimony," theologian John Frame says. "The sin of false witness is that of distorting the facts in such a way as to harm one's neighbor."

This is not, of course, to suggest that lying is insignificant, or that it is never a sin against God and our neighbor. The prophet Hosea produces a list of sins he condemns in the people of God, and lying is included (Hosea 4:1-2). As the people of God, we want to be truth-tellers because we follow the one that self-identified as the truth. When we lie, we prove ourselves to be less than trustworthy, a reputation that can undercut our ability to stand for the truth. It's

easy to lie out of cowardice, but that is never admirable; or because we want to protect someone, but that is a calculation that must be made with fear and trembling.

The scriptures record a surprising number of stories in which lies are told, "without

incurring any condemnation," Frame notes, "and sometimes even being commended."

Exodus 1:15-21—the Israelite midwives in Egypt.

Joshua 2:4-6; 6:17, 25; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25—Rahab's deception. Note that apart from what Rahab told her countrymen, even hiding the spies

amounted to a deception.

Joshua 8:3-8—the ambush at Ai. As John Murray recognizes, God himself authorized this deception.

Judges 4:18-21; 5:24-27—Jael and Sisera.

1 Samuel 16: 1-5—Samuel misleads Saul as to the reason for his mission.

1 Samuel 19:12-17—Michal deceives her father's troops.

1 Samuel 20:6—David's counsel to Jonathan.

1 Samuel 21: 13—David feigns madness.

1 Samuel 27:10—David lies to Achish.

2 Samuel 5:22-25—another military deceit.

2 Samuel 15:34—Hushai counseled to lie to Absalom.

2 Samuel 17:19-20—women deceive Absalom's men.

1 Kings 22:19-23—God sends a lying spirit against Ahab.

2 Kings 6: 14-20—Elisha misleads the Syrian troops.

Jeremiah 38:24-28—Jeremiah lies to the princes.

2 Thessalonians 2:11—God sends powerful delusion so that his enemies will believe a lie.

These biblical texts are worth some careful study and reflection. Some are surprising, some are offensive, and all are instructive if we want to truly understand the nuances of a deeply Christian understanding of truthfulness and love of neighbor.

The basic issue is that, in a fallen world, both the truth and a lie can be used as a weapon to harm someone. Telling someone they are overweight may be the truth but, unless we have permission to speak in such terms, it is also deeply unkind and hurtful. And we know how easy it is to

hurt someone by telling a lie—a painful non-truth can even be hurled against someone by remaining silent.

“What, then, is a lie?” Frame asks. “I would say a lie is a word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt.” The lies I have told my mother—told and retold many times—are meant as just the opposite, as an expression of love and care. Trying to correct her mistaken memory brings confusion and embarrassment, and I can see the pain in her eyes when she realizes she is no longer able to think and remember as she once did.

Some of this is widely understood. When a tennis pro deceives her opponent by feigning a shot to the left and instead places one in the right side of the court, no one accuses her of being untruthful and untrustworthy. And this is so even though the lie hurts the opponent’s chance of winning. On a far more serious note, no one thinks the villagers in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon were wrong when they lied to the Nazis about the Jews they were sheltering. And, I suspect, few readers will condemn me for promising my mother that I would help her move from the memory care unit into a house next February.

But these are easy cases, and sometimes the situations we find ourselves in are far less clear. Reality is messy, the world is fallen, our hearts are deceptive, and we see only in part.

People usually want the rules to be clear and simple, a series of bullet points they can consult to keep in the right. The ninth commandment is clear enough, though applying it with humility and righteousness requires great wisdom. And wisdom is found only by growth, by waiting on God, on having his word so deep in our bones that we see as he sees.

There are subtle ways the truth can be misused to people’s hurt. I grew up in a Christian family and church, and in neither were honest questions welcomed. And I had questions, lots of them. I did not raise them in a spirit of rebellion, but because I wanted to know why I should believe what I was told was the truth.

Could we be certain Jesus actually was raised from the dead?

How could we know the Bible was God’s word?

Isn’t it circular reasoning to believe God exists because the Bible teaches it because it is God’s word?

My questions—and there were many more—were seen, especially in such numbers, as a symptom of a deficient spiritual life. Time and again the identical question was asked of me: did I have sin in my life that I was not confessing as sin to God? Unconfessed sin was seen as a great danger, a poison that rots the soul and keeps one heart from freely embracing the grace of God in Christ. I must have unconfessed sin, I was told. That was the only reason anyone could think of as to why I would have so many questions.

And so I would look within, and wouldn’t you know it? I found some. Unconfessed sin, I mean.

But my questions remained, and soon I was caught in a bondage that began to turn my questions into doubt and unbelief.

I realize now the question I was asked was an ungodly trap. I am a

sinner and, although I desire holiness and grace, there will always be sin lurking in some crevasse of my heart and soul and imagination that I have not specifically confessed. That’s merely one definition of being a sinner.

Honest questions need no justification, and they deserve honest answers.

End of story.

Sinners will always have unconfessed sin in their lives. To meet that truth with the grace of the gospel is to allow the promises of God in Christ to bring healing and freedom. To turn that truth into a question that traps sensitive

souls in a cycle of self-recrimination and doubt is to pervert the truth into a weapon that not only hurts, but destroys.

**TRUTH WITHOUT LOVE
IS BRUTALITY, AND
LOVE WITHOUT TRUTH IS
HYPOCRISY.**

— **WARREN WIERSBE**

My lovely wife lied to me—intentionally lied to me—last year.

While we were in Maine celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary, I lost my turquoise ring. I had purchased it in the seventies in New Mexico from a Navajo jeweler. I loved that ring because it reminded me of all that I loved about the American Southwest. The blend of three rich cultures, Hispanic, Native American, and White; the amazing expanse of the high desert; the mountains jutting down out of Colorado; the surprising river bottoms within deep canyons lined with cottonwoods and

aspen; the clear sunlight, blue skies, and earth tones beloved by artists; and the ubiquitous turquoise that adorns jewelry and sundry other crafts.

I lost the ring in New Hampshire. We were in Portsmouth, walking along the wharf. Towering high over everything was a massive cruise ship that had disgorged its

passengers who, judging from the snatches of conversation we heard, seemed to be from central Europe and Scandinavia. We enjoyed the sights, stopped into several shops, bought coffee, and walked some more. It was October, and quite cold, with a steady wind blowing in off the

water. I used my iPhone to take pictures, taking off the glove of my right hand to work the camera. Apparently one of those times my ring slipped off my cold fingers and was lost.

I noticed the loss later when we arrived back at our car, and by then it was too late. It upset me. I had worn it for over forty years. It was only a ring, I realize, a piece of jewelry, but it was meaningful, a repository of memories for me that are essential to the story of my life. At first we wondered if I had dropped it in our rental car since we were chilled to the bone when we got back to it, but a search turned up empty.

So, now fast-forward a couple of months to a morning in November when I discovered my wedding band

was missing from the pocket of my pants which had been placed on my nightstand in our bedroom. It is also inlaid with turquoise and is even more meaningful to me than the ring I had lost in New Hampshire. Now it was missing, too. I double-checked the pocket, and then all my pockets, but no

ring. I checked the pockets of my bathrobe, with the same result. I looked on the floor, in our bed, under the nightstand. It was gone.

I complained bitterly to Margie about my loss, and said some entirely reasonable things about the unfairness of life, my growing decrepitude, and how we should just sell our house

and move into a retirement center. After breakfast she disappeared into the bedroom and a moment later walked out with my wedding band. "It was under your nightstand," she said. "In plain sight if you had bothered to look."

That comment hurt since it confirmed my complaint about my decrepitude, but I was so delighted to have my wedding band back I didn't pursue the topic.

The next month, at Christmas she and Anita gave me a new, lovely turquoise ring to replace the one lost in New Hampshire. Margie had ordered it from a shop in New Mexico, so even that connection had been maintained. Turns out she had taken my wedding band from my pocket that night to

size it to order the new ring and had forgotten to replace it until I said it was lost. She had taken the ring with her into the bedroom and then told me that hurtful lie about it being in plain sight if I had bothered to look more carefully. Wearing it doesn't cure my decrepitude, of course, but I'm very glad to have it, and to have the memories—including the new ones—that accompany it.

It was such a lovely lie she told, a heart-felt expression of affection and good humor.

And that, I would say, is the truth.

Sources:

"The Memory House: Should the illusions of dementia be corrected or accepted?" by Larissa MacFarquhar in The New Yorker (October 8, 2018) p. 47.

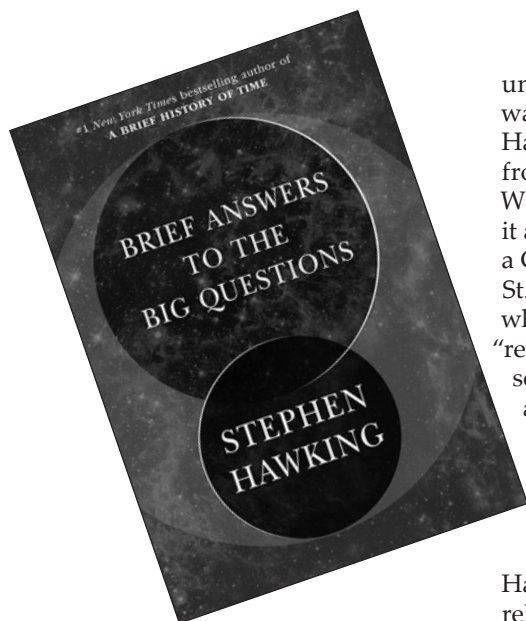
"The Ninth Commandment: Truthfulness," chapter 43 in The Doctrine of the Christian Life by John M. Frame (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2008) pages 830–843; www.brainyquote.com.

"THE TRUTH." DUMBLEDORE SIGHED. "IT IS A BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE THING, AND SHOULD THEREFORE BE TREATED WITH GREAT CAUTION."

— J.K. ROWLING



The Reason for No God



My first thought upon picking up Stephen Hawking's 2018 book, *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, is that it is the Naturalist's equivalent of Tim Keller's *The Reason for God* (2008). In winsome, thoughtful terms a layman can understand, the famed scientist and mathematician provides his answers to ten questions:

1. *Is there a God?*
2. *How did it all begin?*
3. *Is there other intelligent life in the universe?*
4. *Can we predict the future?*
5. *What is inside a black hole?*
6. *Is time travel possible?*
7. *Will we survive on Earth?*
8. *Should we colonise space?*
9. *Will artificial intelligence outsmart us?*
10. *How do we shape the future?*

Stephen Hawking (1942–2018) requires no introduction. His life story is well known, his discoveries and scientific theorizing well publicized and his wide appeal as a public intellectual

undiminished. "People have always wanted answers to the big questions," Hawking says. "Where did we come from? How did the universe begin? What is the meaning and design behind it all? Is there anyone out there?" As a Christian I certainly agree. It's what St. Augustine was referring to, I think, when he spoke in his *Confessions* of our "restless hearts." We can suppress the search, of course, or be so distracted as to ignore the questions for a while, but they remain and occasionally—at points of crisis and uncertainty, for example—they literally demand our attention.

"The creation accounts of the past," Hawking continues, "now seem less relevant and credible." I disagree, though popular (per)versions of them have rightly revealed themselves to be neither credible or plausible. "They have been replaced by a variety of what can only be called superstitions, ranging from New Age to Star Trek. But real science can be far stranger than science fiction, and much more satisfying." Again, I agree. Unsurprisingly, Hawking's answers to the big questions are based on the conclusions and assumptions of modern science, which for many today is seen as the only possible source of ultimate knowledge for life and reality.

Brief Answers to the Big Questions begs to be read and discussed. Please do so—and be certain to include friends who will find Hawking's Naturalism to be credible.

As you read and discuss this book, there are some questions that will be worth some serious reflection. *Why this particular list of questions?* Many religious believers would probably identify a slightly different set of The Big Questions. The specific questions

we pose are related to where we stand when we ask them, and to the sort of answers we expect to find. *What is attractive in how Hawking answers the questions?* Hawking's prose is markedly different from the aggressive secular fundamentalism of Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens. He comes across as reasonable and authentic, and the difference matters. *What unacknowledged assumptions and beliefs does Hawking accept without disclosing the nature of his faith?* We all, Christian and Naturalist alike begin by faith. I accept by faith, for example, that God exists; Hawking accepts by faith the accurate working of our senses on an external reality that truly exists. In the end we are all believers. *In what ways do the Christian answers to the Big Questions intersect—agreeing and disagreeing—with Hawking's ideas?* Our non-Christian neighbors and colleagues may not be as eloquent in talking about their view of things as Hawking, but many will agree with him. It is our calling to relate the biblical understanding of life and reality in love, and in terms our friends can understand, even if they choose to disbelieve it.

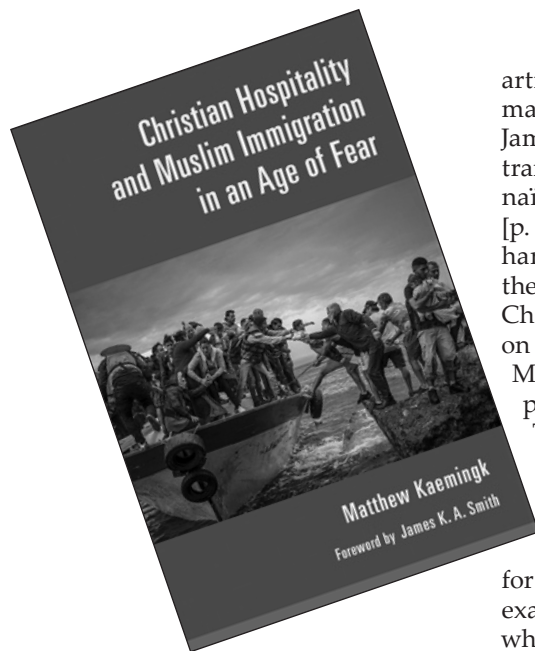
Use Hawking's book as an exercise in discernment and apologetics. This is the worldview that animates the mind, heart and imagination of an increasing number of our neighbors and friends. We need to be able to provide good and sufficient reasons for what we believe and why.

I recommend *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* to you. ■

Book recommended: *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* by Stephen Hawking (New York, NY: Bantam Books; 2018) 211 pages + index

RESOURCE: *CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY AND MUSLIM IMMIGRATION IN AN AGE OF FEAR*

Welcoming Muslims



Everyone knows that immigration is a divisive topic today. In America, Europe and beyond massive numbers of people are on the move and when such migrations unfold the lives of the migrants and their new neighbors are upended. In the U.S. it's well known that the laws governing this issue are in need of being updated but our national political leadership seems far more concerned with getting reelected than tackling hard decisions.

Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear is an essential book for Christians to read. It addresses a topic that is in our national conversation, prompting intense debate and strong emotion. Our society is so politicized that most of the time when Christians talk about Muslim immigration what we hear is a conservative or progressive take on the topic dressed up with a few Bible texts to lend a faint religious veneer to the position. "The failure of Christian theology to

articulate a complex, nuanced affirmation of plurality and difference," James K. A. Smith notes, "too often translates into heretical nationalism or naïve, progressivist assimilationism" [p. x]. Few believers have done the hard, necessary work of digging into the Scriptures to develop a distinctly Christian and biblical perspective on the topic. This is precisely what Matthew Kaemingk, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theology Seminary, does in *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*. His book is must reading for Christians not merely for the conclusions he draws but for his approach to the topic. This is an example of the sort of public theology in which we need to engage in our increasingly secular and post-Christian age.

Within Western Christianity there are two primary traditions of public theology. One is Roman Catholic; it traces its lineage from Augustine through Aquinas to today. The other is Protestant, or Reformed, and traces its lineage from Augustine to Calvin to Abraham Kuyper to today. The two traditions tend to come to remarkably similar conclusions on most issues, though being Reformed myself, I prefer the Kuyperian with its emphasis on clear biblical foundations. Kaemingk stands in this rich tradition of thought.

After carefully working through how Christians should think about Muslim immigration, Kaemingk identifies a series of practical steps we can take to be increasingly faithful. He also points out that we are not the first to face this issue. Europe is far ahead of us, and Kaemingk uses the experience in the Netherlands as a case study because it was there that a vigorous and biblical perspective on the topic was developed

and applied. He argues, correctly, that learning to be faithful in welcoming our Muslim neighbor we will not only find our faith refreshed but that we will also deepen our understanding and practice of democracy.

The grace that evangelicals have received in their hearts can—and must—be lived out in every aspect of their public lives alongside their Muslim neighbors. As evangelicals interact with Islam at work and school, in politics and business, through the media and the marketplace, the hospitality they have received from Christ must be given to their Muslim neighbors.

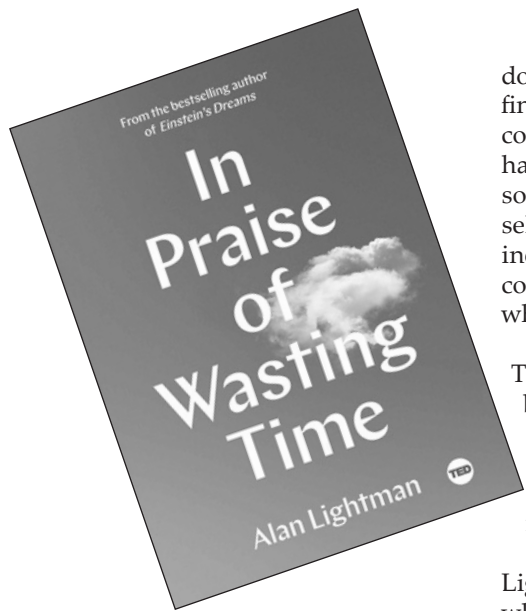
Rather than looking at their Muslim neighbors through the lenses of the world (security concerns, cultural clashes and controversies, and so on), American evangelicals must view their Muslim neighbors first and foremost through their primary lens—Jesus Christ. Christ's sovereignty, humility, nakedness, hospitality, sacrifice, and healing must be the ultimate framework through which American evangelicals not only see but also engage their Muslim neighbor. [p. 297–298]

The reason that the question of immigration is so heated is that it touches on the deepest issues of what we believe as a nation and as individuals. What is at stake here is not merely the question of what policies we should oppose and support on a national level, but the gospel itself and the future of our American experiment in freedom.

Book recommended: *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* by Matthew Kaemingk (William B. Eerdmans; 2018) 305 pages + bibliography + index.

RESOURCE: *IN PRAISE OF WASTING TIME*

The Pace of Kingdom Living



Alan Lightman, novelist and physicist at MIT, thinks we need to slow down and reflect on how our lives have changed. He doesn't doubt the value of progress, but argues we've been slow to consider the costs.

Indeed, an enormous transformation has occurred in the world from the 1950s and '60s of my youth to today. A transformation so vast that it has altered all that we say and do and think, yet often in ways so subtle and ubiquitous that we are hardly aware of them. Among other things, the world today is faster, more scheduled, more fragmented, less patient, louder, more wired, more public. [p. 4]

Lightman identifies three costs that the ever-increasing levels of distraction and busyness have extracted. First, we have no leisure for recreation—meaning to re-create, to take the unhurried time needed to freely nurture unrestricted imagination and creativity. Second, he says, medical research shows our busyness has “endangered the needed replenishment of mind that comes from

doing nothing in particular” [p. 8]. And finally, Lightman says, he senses what could be called a loss of soul. “But I have lost more. I believe I have lost something of my inner self. By inner self I mean that part of me that imagines, that dreams, that explores, that is constantly questioning who I am and what is important to me” [p. 9].

In Praise of Wasting Time began as a TED Talk, and is the sort of book that begs to be read and discussed. It is a brief, small format book, passionate and thoughtful, touching on issues that get to the heart of what it means to be human.

As you might guess from his title, Lightman is convinced that much of what has been condemned as “wasting time” is essential if we are to flourish as persons. Unhurried reflection, time to be deliciously bored to allow half-formed ideas to percolate, the chance to slow down and simply observe nature and art, to read not just what we need to read but things that feed our imaginations and hearts, opportunities to wonder at what is and what could be, to meditate, to pray and wait, and then wait some more—all this and more is not wasting time but perhaps the best uses of time we can muster.

We are losing our ability to know who we are and what is important to us. We are creating a global machine in which each of us is a mindless and reflexive cog, relentlessly driven by the speed, noise, and artificial urgency of the wired world. What can we do? Somehow, we need to create a new ‘habit of mind,’ as individuals and as a society. We need a mental attitude that values and protects stillness, privacy, solitude, slowness, personal reflection; that honors the inner self; that allows each of us to wander

about without schedule within our own minds. [p. 85]

When he sets out to identify what's gone wrong, Lightman identifies some popular Christian practices and ideas along with technological and economic progress as problematic. As a Christian, sadly, I think he has a point, and believe this is an opportunity for Christians to return to a more biblical perspective on time, work and rest. We should do so not just for the sake of our souls and the glory of God—though that should be sufficient—but as a witness to a world being swept along in fast paced lives going nowhere.

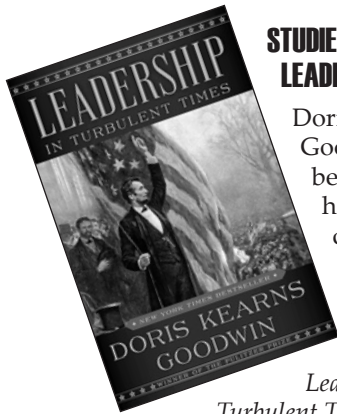
We were created to live in time and God said it was good. Our problem is that we refuse to order our lives within biblical categories, accepting our finiteness as a gift and trusting God enough to set aside our work because we trust he will provide. Our difficulty is made worse when technology, a frenzied media, social networks and the marketplace squeeze us into accepting busyness, efficiency and productivity as final measures of life. Faithfulness, in other words, includes wasting time to God's glory.

I recommend *In Praise of Wasting Time* to you.

Book recommended: *In Praise of Wasting Time* by Alan Lightman (New York, NY: TED Books, Simon & Schuster; 2018) 90 pages (small format) + notes

BOOK BRIEFS

Goodwin and Begbie



STUDIES IN LEADERSHIP

Doris Kearns Goodwin is the best sort of historian: a careful scholar who teaches by telling compelling stories. In

Leadership in

Turbulent Times,

Goodwin profiles four Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Each was in the White House at a crucial point in American

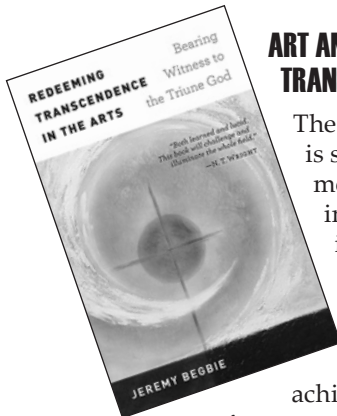
history and each exercised decisive leadership at a time the nation needed it. For each of the four Goodwin identifies the ambition that shaped their rise to power, a crisis that temporarily shattered their dreams that they had to overcome, and the leadership they exercised as President.

Goodwin addresses classic questions about leadership: “Are leaders born or made? Where does ambition come from? How does adversity affect the growth of leadership? Do the times make the leader or does the leader shape the times? How can a leader infuse a sense of purpose and meaning into people’s lives? What is the difference between power, title, and leadership? Is

leadership possible without a purpose larger than personal ambition?” [p. xii]

It should not be controversial to suggest that the opening decades of the 21st century represent, in America and globally, within the church and without, a period of significant leadership crisis. Goodwin’s *Leadership in Turbulent Times* is not all a discerning believer needs to think the issue through, but it is a helpful and delightful addition to the conversation.

Book recommended: *Leadership in Turbulent Times* by Doris Kearns Goodwin (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2018) 368 pages + bibliography + notes + index



ART AND TRANSCENDENCE

The West today is secularized, meaning that increasingly it is believed that human purpose and flourishing can be achieved without reference to the divine.

Yet often in the arts, people—even robustly secular people—report an experience of transcendence, a sense that something lies “beyond” the here and now.

In *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts*, Jeremy Begbie explores this very human and cultural phenomenon. He clarifies what people mean when they speak of transcendence in the arts and explores how this has been defined as an experience of sublimity—“to be overwhelmed,

awestruck by something that exceeds our perceptual and cognitive grasp” [p. 43]. He then defines transcendence in biblical perspective and argues that the sense of transcendence in the arts is deepened when it is conceived not in the ambiguous terms of sublimity, but in reference to the biblical God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the end, what I have been arguing amounts to a plea and an invitation. The plea is that when we make claims about the arts affording an awareness of divine transcendence—or meet such claims made by others—we should be prepared to explore, and where appropriate, make explicit and assess, the theology those claims presuppose. Every judgment we make about divine transcendence, even the outright denial of it, presupposes beliefs about a deity (however inchoate) and the kind of relation that deity has (or does not have) with the finite world. I hope we have done enough to show that the belief that there is a kind of general,

all-purpose transcendence, a metaphysical mold that can be unproblematically filled in with whatever particular brand of religious conviction we prefer, is profoundly misguided...

But along with a plea there has been an invitation: to enter far more deeply into the peculiarities of what we have been calling a “scriptural imagination,” and more deeply than many of us working at the theology and arts interface today have managed to travel so far. Sadly, we have often settled for what amounts to a bland metaphysics borrowed from the philosophical memory of a waning culture. [p. 184–185]

This is a serious work of aesthetics, one that rewards careful reading and reflection.

Book recommended: *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* by Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; 2018) 186 pages + bibliography + index.





Credits for *Russian Doll*

Directed by: Leslye Headland (4 episodes),
Jamie Babbit (3 episodes), Natasha Lyonne
(1 episode)

Created by: Leslye Headland, Natasha Lyonne,
and Amy Poehler

Music by: Joe Wong

Cinematography by: Chris Teague

Starring:

Natasha Lyonne (Nadia Vulvokov)
Charlie Barnett (Alan Zaveri)
Greta Lee (Maxine)
Elizabeth Ashley (Ruth Brenner)
Rebecca Henderson (Lizzy)
Jeremy Bobb (Mike Kershaw)
Ritesh Rajan (Farran)

USA, Netflix; Season 1 (2019): eight 30-minute
episodes.

Rating: probably R (for language, situations,
sexuality, nudity)

Playing with Time, Reality, and Death



Russian Doll is not a movie. It's a Netflix (2019) series of eight half hour programs that I binge watched because I found it utterly fascinating and could not stop. (The producers sold it as a three-season series so perhaps more programs are in the pipeline—I certainly hope so.)

Russian Doll, Robert Lloyd wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* (1/31/2019), "is a beautiful puzzle piece, a circular, multiplane, existential mystery-comedy set in the villages of Lower Manhattan. Peopled with memorable characters large and small, it's a show that having watched once—not hard to do straight through and hard not to do straight again—to admire its machinery and joinery and find the clues you might have missed, but also because it feels just as good the second time around."

The series is intelligent; well acted, directed and written; fast-paced; philosophically rich; and funny. It is also flippantly profane, deeply cynical, morally relative, and very

entertaining. Welcome to the world of advanced modernity.

Russian Doll should also set aside any lingering misogynist doubts that woman are unable to produce high quality film. The series was created by Natasha Lyonne, Amy Poehler, and Leslye Headland, and the writers and directors of each episode are women. The music track is brilliant. Lyonne plays the primary character, Nadia Vulvokov, a software engineer who finds herself stuck in her 36th birthday party. She's caught in a loop of time where she dies and comes back to the identical spot in her birthday party to relive the day, until she dies again, and returns. But then subtle changes begin to occur and she meets a man who is caught in a similar loop, until his loop links with hers—and the plot thickens. The comparison to *Groundhog Day* (1993) has been noted, but that was merely an entertaining movie while *Russian Doll* digs into the big questions of life and reality.

Not since the first season of *True Detective* (2014) have I seen a television series that is so intentionally philosophical. I am not reading this into the series—I am referring to what the dialogue explores: The meaning of death, whether we are intrinsically good or bad as persons, the purpose of life, how we know what we know, the necessity of community and love, and the reality of time.

In the *New York Times* (March 3, 2019), Alisha Harris suggests *Russian Doll* is essentially about "moral evolution," the need to become good as persons. She points out that Nadia must face the fact that she hasn't always been good and, in small ways, finds she needs to be more caring to the people she encounters. Moral goodness is intrinsic to the story

line, but as a theme embedded in deeper metaphysical questions, not as a lesson in self-improvement.

In one sense, *Russian Doll* is essentially about time. It tells the story of a woman attending her 36th birthday party who dies in a tragic accident, only to suddenly find herself reliving the day. She is caught in a loop of time that keeps repeating itself—and yet shows signs of progression and change.

As a Christian, I can understand the interest in time—we all live in it, we are painfully aware we are winding down towards an end of it, and somehow we implicitly sense that the answers to our ultimate questions can only be found beyond time's reach. Remember how God revealed himself to Moses so many millennia ago. God appeared to him in a burning bush as Moses was following a flock of sheep and told him that he should return to Egypt and lead God's people out of slavery into a land of promise.

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (Exodus 3:13-15)

Many Christians do not realize the significance of this text. The fact that God identifies himself as *I AM* changes everything.

In so naming himself, God reveals

himself to be outside of time, its originator who is not subject to its demands. He stands, as it were, in an infinite present, so that what we experience as past, present, and future simply is, to him. This is why his promise of justice in the future is not limited to merely stopping injustice at some point in time and punishing evildoers. How could it? We do not know what this will look like, for we are creatures in time, but it is what C. S. Lewis referred to as “heaven working backwards” so that righteousness will be fully vindicated and redemption made complete.

Storytellers and mythmakers have always imagined transcending time. It is, even when expressed in humanist terms, ultimately a yearning for God.

Russian Doll takes our present cultural moment into a loop of time, with death and return, death and return, until it becomes clear that individualism is insufficient if human beings are to flourish as persons. Along the way, the ideas and values of our secularized world are depicted and explored by a woman who finds mystical connections between people and hints of a deeper mystery in reality difficult to refuse.

Russian Doll begs to be discussed. “draws viewers in,” Hank Stuever wrote in *The Washington Post* (2/3/2019), “with questions large and small about death, depression, and the redemptive power of friendship.” The series raises questions, important questions, identifies the predominant values and convictions of our post-Christian culture, and provides no definitive final answers. In this, too, it is postmodern, comfortable with ambiguity and multiple conflicting possibilities, uncomfortable with traditional solutions to the perennial issue of finding oneself facing the reality of death. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the series? Why do you think you reacted that way? What does this say about you?
2. Consider the series in detail as a work of cinematic art. In what ways were the techniques of television (casting, direction, lighting, script, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the series’ message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. How was music used in *Russian Doll*? How did it add to the effectiveness of the story?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? How do you know? What difference does it make?
5. Within the dialogue several possible explanations are given for how to understand the time loop of death and return in which Nadia is caught. What are they and what is their significance?
6. What is made attractive in *Russian Doll*? To whom is it made attractive? How is it made attractive?
7. Would you be comfortable attending the birthday party depicted in *Russian Doll*? Why or why not? Should you be comfortable attending such a party? Jesus attended gatherings in his day that included some pretty sketchy characters that lived pretty sketchy lives—do these biblical texts shed any light on the answer to this question?

