

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2019 Issue 5

**SATIRE, EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE,
AND A FUNERAL SERMON**



CRITIQUE



2019 Issue 5 © Ransom Fellowship

EDITOR

Denis Haack

ART DIRECTOR

Karen Coulter Perkins

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Donald Guthrie

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

Denis and Margie Haack
Co-founders, Ransom Fellowship, Minnesota

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President for Marketing and Communications
CCO, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Henry Tazelaar

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

Paul Woodard

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

CONTACT CRITIQUE:

www.RansomFellowship.org
5245 132nd Court, Savage, MN 55378
ransomfellowship@gmail.com

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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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

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

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

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

2019:5 CONTENTS

1

EDITOR'S NOTE

2

DIALOGUE

Let's Hit the
Pause Button

3

OUT OF THEIR MINDS

An Excerpt from
The Second Mountain

by David Brooks

4

DISCERNING LIFE

Responding to Satire

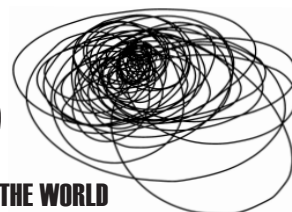
with thoughts influenced by *Good Omens* and C. S. Lewis

6

READING THE WORLD

The Millennial
Existential Experience

by David John Seel



8

READING THE WORD

"He will exult over you..."

a funeral sermon for Denis' mother

13

BOOK BRIEFS

Strangers in their Own
Land

by Arlie Russell Hochschild

The Mosquito

by Timothy C. Winegard

The Guarded Gate

by Daniel Okrent

Between Two
Millstones

by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



15

DARKENED ROOM

The Power of Gospel

a celebration of Aretha Franklin in
Sydney Pollack's *Amazing Grace*



Let's Hit the *Pause* Button



One of the things I find myself constantly thinking about is how discerning, faithful Christians can bring a measure of grace into our fallen world. This is, after all, our calling, and something we must take seriously if we intend to follow our Lord Christ into the world. It may not change the world—that's the responsibility of my King, not me—but if it is in keeping with the values of God's kingdom then it is worth doing, for his glory. And who knows how he'll use it?

An idea came to mind as I read, "Wait a Minute" in *The Atlantic* (August 2019) by Jonathan Rauch. The author suggests that the pressure to respond quickly to emails and texts produces responses that are not necessarily shaped by careful reflection and thought, but by the need to say something quickly. "Slowness," the author notes, "is a social technology in its own right, one that protects humans from themselves." Social media, on the other hand not only rewards instant responses, it essentially requires them.

I realize that sometimes emails and texts do not need reflection and a careful, thoughtful response. Just this morning I exchanged a series of messages with dear friends that work with me on the art gallery at our church.

Some of the emails were to make certain we all remembered correctly what had already been discussed and agreed. And then there were emails with family members about dates and times of arrivals for visits together. We were simply exchanging facts. My responses needed accuracy, but not reflection and unhurried thought. I could read the email, hit *Reply All*, type a quick sentence or two, and hit *Send*.

Humans have not one but two cognitive systems. In his book Thinking, Fast and Slow, the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls them System 1 and System 2. System 1 is intuitive, automatic, and impulsive. It makes snap judgments about dangers such as predators or opportunities such as food, and it delivers them to our awareness without conscious thought. It is also often wrong. It is biased and emotional. It overreacts and underreacts. System 2, by contrast, is slower and involves wearying cognitive labor. It gathers facts, consults evidence, weighs arguments, and makes reasoned judgments. It protects us from the errors and impulsivity of System 1.

It's doubtful to me that social media companies will change their systems so that people must pause and reflect before posting a message. For one thing I suspect most users would not like the change and many would resist it. Outrage diminishes when we slow down, pause, wait, and reconsider.

"Rethinking instantaneity," Rauch says, "would help us put our better selves forward, perhaps often enough to make social media more sociable." It's hardly a new insight. Consider, for example, these ancient Hebrew proverbs: "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked

pours out evil things." (15:28). "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him." (29:20). And Christians move past mere advice to apostolic command that we be "slow to speak" (James 1:19).

Instead of waiting for social media platforms to install Pause buttons we should consider installing our own.

Perhaps instead of apologizing for a delayed response to some email, we should mention that we wanted to take time to reflect before responding. Perhaps we might include a note at the bottom of each email saying that except in occasional factual exchanges we do not respond quickly as a matter of principle. Perhaps we might cancel our Twitter account.

It's interesting to me that Margie and I recently have met young adults who intentionally choose to communicate via snail mail. They have computers and email accounts but prefer to write. One recently was given personalized stationary for his birthday and happily wrote me a delightful, thoughtful two-page letter on it.

Over the years quick responses have come back to haunt me. Ill chosen words have provoked misunderstandings, wounded friends, ended relationships, passed on outrage, and encouraged cynicism. Such is the fruit of instantaneity.

I should have installed a *Pause* button years ago. ■

Source: "Wait a Minute" by Jonathan Rauch in *The Atlantic* (August 2019) pp. 18-19

DIALOGUE



To the editor:
Denis and Margie:

At a pivotal time such as this it is critical that Ransom keep going! It is a voice of kingdom sanity in a world of politicized evangelical insanity. Keep the faith, even through the retirement years. Since when is retirement really biblical with a calling such as yours!

With great appreciation,
John Seel
Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania

Denis Haack replies:

John, good friend, thank you for the encouraging words. We've started mentioning RETIREMENT because we want to alert donors and friends of Ransom that some changes are coming. It's the wrong word, though, for the very reason you mention. We don't believe in retiring and won't.

WHAT IT DOESN'T MEAN: I intend to keep writing and speaking and meeting with folks to talk about things that matter. I am shopping one manuscript (on learning to listen) with publishers now and hope to have the one on living as exiles in a pluralistic world published next year. I plan to keep posting blogs and articles to our website and distribute them to those who have signed up to receive emails from us. Margie is completing her second memoir—this one, following The Exact Place, is tentatively titled No Place. It tells the story of our spiritual wandering, seeking to make sense of our

faith and life together. I can imagine her continuing to post on her blog and drawing together essays from all the years she's been writing and speaking for other books as well.

WHAT IT DOES MEAN: What we are considering doing is shuttering Ransom as a nonprofit. It's been 35+ years now and I'm weary, not of the work we do and want to continue, but of the reporting, processing donations, filing governmental forms, record keeping, mailing lists, and all the other administrative tasks that go on behind the scenes to keep a nonprofit afloat and legal. We've obviously not been big enough to have departments to handle all that for us. As well, printing and mailing Critique and Letters is a huge expense, so the digital world seems wise in terms of stewardship.

Retirement? No. Change? Yes.

If you know a better word let me know.

To the editor:
Dear Denis,

You are the first to receive a letter on my new stationary. It was a gift from my Dad and a printer friend in Iowa who printed it on an old-fashioned letterpress. I am hoping it will get me to write more letters (and then receive more), which is a joy to me. But of course, as James K. A. Smith writes in Critique 2019:3, I best not get carried away in a Luddite's "quest for purity." I took note of the part, "We don't need better media, or to romanticize old media. We need to change what we want." Very convicting! "Bore us so that God can bore into our souls and we can find ourselves again."

Hannah and I also loved your thoughts in "Musing on the Physical." It instantly made me plan a night walk with the boys to a high point on the farm to star-gaze.

I loved the quote from Malcolm Guite! The idea of a tree and all

creation being a poem that Christ is interpreting for us is fascinating. And you bring it back to the gospel so well after quoting 1 Peter 2:24 (which happens to be the only memory verse the boys have learned.)

As you say in your Editor's Note ["The Growth of Nones"], it is so important that we are working for justice for our neighbors. In my little world, it gives me renewed strength to give people food that won't harm them and not put toxic things into God's good land. (And to push Christians on this justice issue.)

Most convicting, reading this fine issue of Critique, was thinking how we as a family can better be in touch with the Lord through his creation and word—how we need to fight against the forces of busyness and distraction and cultivate a sense of wonder and gratitude.

Thank you, Denis, for pushing us by bringing us ideas.

Blessings to you and Margie.

Your friend,
Daniel (Miller)

Easy Yoke Farm
Zumbro Falls, Minnesota

Denis Haack replied via snail mail on his stationary.

OUT OF THEIR MINDS

An Excerpt from *The Second Mountain*

by David Brooks

"Bless you, prison," the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*. "Bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul."

In the course of his imprisonment, Solzhenitsyn looked at the guard who treated him most cruelly. He realized that if fate had made him a prison guard instead of a prisoner, perhaps he would have been cruel, too. He came to realize that the line between good and evil passes not between tribes or nations but straight through every human heart. Prison, and the tyranny it represented, gave Solzhenitsyn a sense of participation in a larger story: "It makes me happier, more secure, to think that I do not have to plan and manage everything for myself, that I am only a sword made sharp to smite the unclean forces, an enchanted sword to cleave and disperse them. Grant, O Lord, that I may not break as I strike! Let me not fall from Thy hand!"

Many people look at these spiritual experiences with blinking disbelief: What on earth are you talking about? Many people have never had such experiences and so understandably have trouble believing in these supposedly hidden dimensions of existence you can't actually provide any evidence of. And, frankly, there are good reasons to mistrust these experiences. Maybe they are just the product of some cocktail of brain chemicals, some hallucination, an altered state caused by weariness or stress. In that case they are certainly not something to base your life around.

Believers, on the other hand, look at atheists with the same blinking disbelief. As Christian Wiman writes in *My*

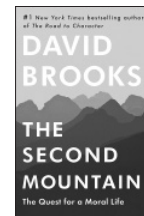
Bright Abyss,

Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond your self, some wordless mystery straining through words to reach you? Never? Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward. Religion is what you do with these moments of over-mastery in your life.

The universe is alive and connected, these moments tell us. There are dimensions of existence you never could have imagined before. Quantum particles inexplicably flip together, even though they are separated by vast differences of time and space. Somehow the world is alive and communicating with itself. There is some interconnecting animating force, and we are awash in that force, which we with our paltry vocabulary call love.

The odd thing about these moments is that, as Wiman continues, "it is not only as if we were suddenly perceiving something in reality we had not perceived before, but as if we ourselves were being perceived." ■

Copyright © David Brooks 2019



Excerpt: from *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* by David Brooks (New York, NY: Random House; 2019) p. 208-210

David Brooks is an op-ed columnist for The New York Times, a regular commentator on PBS NewsHour, and a prolific author.

RESOURCE

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

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



Responding to Satire

I came to appreciate Neil Gaiman as a storyteller and fantasy author by reading his 2001 novel *American Gods*. In it he depicts American society not as a marketplace with competing political and economic forces but as a spiritual battle waged between gods, old and new. He broadens our perspective past the petty detritus of daily life to see the normally hidden powers and principalities that animate them.

"The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to."

"What do they sacrifice?" asked Shadow.

"Their time, mostly," said Lucy.

"Sometimes each other."

Gaiman is correct: we are worshipping beings, and even those who profess to believe in no religion still believe something, still foster a vision of the good life, and still consecrate something as the center of their existence. We live surrounded by competing idols and rival kingdoms.

So, when I heard Gaiman was developing *Good Omens* (2019) as a television series, I wanted to watch it. The series is based on a novel of the same title published in 1990, co-authored by Gaiman and the late fantasy author Terry Pratchett (1948–2015). An Amazon/BBC production of six episodes directed by Douglas Mackinnon, it's about the end of the world.

Good Omens is a comedy—a comedy about a tragedy, the final tragedy. The story goes something like this: At creation an angel (with the flaming sword) and a demon (the tempter / snake) have been assigned to work on earth. Now, in 2018, however, suddenly the announcement reaches them (from above and below, respectively) that the time for the end has arrived. They find

this upsetting—they've grown to rather like their comfortable lives on earth. So they agree to work together (sort of) to keep Armageddon from occurring. Trouble is, they've lost track of the Anti-Christ—the boy was mistakenly adopted at birth by the wrong parents—and so things are in a bit of a mess and they find themselves up against a rather strict time limit. The story unfolds from there.

In reality, *Good Omens* is a satire on Christian beliefs. Episode 1, for example, opens with God speaking, voiced by the veteran actor, Frances McDormand:

Current theories on the creation of the Universe state that, if it were created at all and didn't just start, as it were, unofficially, it came into being about fourteen billion years ago. The earth is generally supposed to be about four and a half billion years old.

These dates are incorrect.

Medieval scholars put the date of the Creation at 3760 BC. Others put Creation as far back as 5508 BC.

Also incorrect.

Archbishop James Usher claimed that the Heaven and the Earth was created on Sunday the 21st of October, 4004 BC, at 9:00 a.m. This too was incorrect. By almost a quarter of an hour. It was created at 9:13 in the morning, which was correct. The whole business with the fossilized dinosaur skeleton was a joke the paleontologists haven't seen yet.

This proves two things: firstly, that God does not play dice with the universe. I play an ineffable game of my own devising. For everyone else it's like playing poker in a pitch-dark room, for infinite stakes, with a dealer who won't tell you the rules, and who smiles all the time.

Secondly, the Earth's a Libra.

I have not read the book, so these comments are limited to the TV series, but I started losing interest around the fourth episode. I thought the pacing faltered, and that some parts of the story strained plausibility—even granting the story line and world imagined by the authors. On the other hand I appreciated Gaiman's and Pratchett's skill in writing satire. They have a dry wit; this is comedy, and in many places the humor works, not just to make me laugh, but to surprise me into seeing something in a new light. After all, I had never before wondered what it might be like for an angel to team up with a demon to avert the apocalypse.

The question I'd like to address here is how Christians should respond to productions like *Good Omens*.

I suspect the series will offend and anger many believers. The doctrines embodied in the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration are very precious to me. They not only shape my life and thinking, they provide the best expression of reality and our humanity of any story yet told in human history. Still, in a pluralistic and increasingly post-Christian world we must not be surprised when unbelievers satirize our beliefs. At least they consider my beliefs significant enough to spoof. The scriptures insist I must live at peace with my neighbors, even those who scoff at and make fun of my faith.

What grieved me about *Good Omens* is not the satire but that much that is satirized is not historically orthodox biblical doctrine. Instead, they spoof a host of popularly held but badly mistaken versions of Christian belief. It grieves me that such nonsense is attributed to the faith and, even more, that many theologically and biblically illiterate believers actually buy into them.

The demon, Crowley, for example, is courageous and formidable, a creature people tremble to meet. The angel, Aziraphale, is cuddly and soft, reserved and affable. This is simply the opposite of biblical teaching. Heaven is depicted a place far removed from earth—not a renewed earth—devoid of art and music, good food, and all other good cultural gifts of God. The brief views of it in the series are not of a place I would like to visit, to say nothing of being there for eternity. It is little wonder that the angel Aziraphale prefers life on earth. And the apocalypse is not imagined as a time of judgment when justice finally will be rendered for all the brokenness and suffering inflicted throughout human history. It is not a final victory for righteousness and grace when all that is broken is undone and made better than it was in the first place. Rather, it is depicted merely as a final, brutal battle between good and evil, between the forces of heaven and hell. This is a vision of the end that has missed the significance of Christ's resurrection and supposes the struggle between good and evil has yet to be decided. There is more, but these examples can suffice. This is *not* what I believe.

I suppose *Good Omens* could be taken as a reason to encourage authors like Gaiman and Pratchett to do more research into what Christianity actually teaches. I prefer to take it as a sign that Christians are not doing a very good job communicating what we actually confess as true. It might even be a good exercise for believers to watch the series to identify all the mistaken beliefs and then to discuss how to communicate the real biblical doctrines in a way our non-Christian neighbors might be able to understand and appreciate. That might not stop them from satirizing our

beliefs, of course, but I'd rather they had to wrestle with the real version.

Part of the reason *Good Omens* works as comedy is that the version of the faith it is satirizing is worthy of it. It's easy to make fun of a heaven that everyone will find boring and sterile. More difficult would be to satirize a new earth and new heaven that fulfills not merely the best hopes of justice and humanity and righteousness, but far exceeds our wildest hopes by having the resurrected God-Man, in whom is life eternal, design it specifically for us as persons made in the very image and likeness of God. C. S. Lewis defines it as, "The whole Nature or system of conditions in which redeemed human spirits, still remaining human, can enjoy participation [in the Divine Life beyond all worlds] fully and forever." It's easy

for me to see how that might be disbelieved; it's harder to imagine it being satirized effectively.

Sadly, many non-Christians have not rejected biblically orthodox Christianity but merely a bowdlerized imitation of the faith. I have been praying that *Good Omens* will not add to their number. Beyond prayer, there is little or nothing I can do to keep that from happening. I can, however, be willing to explain what the faith really claims and to live in such a way that the reality of Christ and the beauty of his kingdom make the idols and rival kingdoms of our age to withdraw into the shadows where they belong. ■

Source: *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* by C. S. Lewis (New York, NY: Macmillan; 1947) p. 163



The Millennial Existential Exp

by David John Seel

He stood out in a room of forty balding pastors. Most were old and graying with the settled paunch of a largely inactive lifestyle. He was young, covered in long pink hair, with “Black Lives Matter” emblazoned on his T-shirt. Sitting on the front row, it was clear that he was the only millennial in attendance to hear me speak about the importance of listening to millennials. So I decided to listen to him. Despite being a gay Unitarian Universalist minister, he was my God-given resident crap detector, a gift of authenticity. I had no idea how he would react to my presentation.

So I turned to him as I began publicly and asked him to hold me accountable. “I’m going to outline seven characteristics of millennials. Did I get them right? Or did I miss an obvious one? At the conclusion of this presentation, I’m going to come back to you and ask.” He eagerly agreed, looking for a constructive outlet for his rightful skepticism over a grandfather Boomer talking to pastors about his much-beleaguered generation.

And so I outlined the seven characteristics that are highlighted in my book *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church*:

1. Secular
2. Open
3. Cross-pressured
4. Experiential
5. Relational
6. Authentic
7. Haunted

It was evident that he was following closely and was in general approval. If way off base, he probably would have raised his hand in immediate protest. He didn’t suffer fools.

As promised, I turned to him and asked him in front of the entire

audience. He said, “You were spot on, except that you missed one because you don’t live life as a millennial. The missing characteristic is Anxiety.” I immediately knew he was correct.

Once you look for this characteristic the research starts to jump off the page. One blogger wrote,

This year during Youth Sunday, a sixteen-year old girl stood in the pulpit. She was barely visible, given her small stature. From my view in the choir loft, I could see her knees trembling. Getting her up there was a challenge, but now she stood before our congregation and shared about her struggles with mental health issues. I watched the faces of the people in the pews; many nodded their heads in agreement, others looked surprised at her openness. “Anxiety is a relevant and personal battle many of us face,” she said passionately. “We need to start talking about it in the church.”

The Berkeley Institute for the Future of Young Americans at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, released a study, “The Anxious Generation: Causes and Consequences of Anxiety Disorder Among Young Americans.”

As the first generation raised on the Internet and social media, as a generation that came of age in the wake of one of the worst recessions in modern history, and as a generation still grappling with increased economic uncertainty and worsening financial prospects, millennials are experiencing anxiety like no other generation.

This is the existential lens through which new Copernicans experience life. One survey conducted on behalf of *Quartz* in 2018 found that millennial (and some Gen Z) employees between

18 to 34 year old experience work-disrupting anxiety and depression at almost double the rate of older workers. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders among today’s adolescents in the U.S. effecting approximately a third at one point in their lives.

Scrawled on the grease board, Toby Lingle in Williston, North Dakota, wrote, “I’m sorry. I can’t take the anxiety and depression any more,” before killing himself with his newly acquired Sig P226 Legion, so reports an article, “All-American Despair,” in *Rolling Stone* magazine. The Centers for Disease Control recorded 47,173 suicides in 2017, and there were an estimated 1.4 million total attempts. Suicides in America are dominated by white men who account for 70% of all cases. And the states with the highest numbers are generally red, Trump-supporting states: Montana, Alaska, and Wyoming all double the national rate of suicides. This January the *Chicago Sun-Times* headline read, “Deaths from Drugs, Alcohol, Suicide Hit Millennials Hardest.” Far more than their Boomer parents, the CDC found that millennials are the most likely demographic to die from alcohol, drug abuse, and suicide, the three “deaths of despair.”

John Auerbach, CEO of the Trust for America’s Health, cites “burdensome levels of educational debt,” the cost of housing and the challenge of building careers during the “great recession” in a gig economy, and the opioid crisis. Couple this with the survey results just released from a YouGov poll this week that found that 20 percent of millennials claimed that they don’t have a single friend. This millennial anxiety is tinged with a palpable sense of loneliness.

Anxiety and loneliness is a lethal combination that is now impacting a

erience

growing number of families. This week the Kennedy's laid to rest 22-year-old Saoirse Kennedy Hill. It's best to hold the "snowflake" comments. Boomer parents have not walked one day in the anxious shoes of their millennial children. There are no easy answers. But this much is clear: **we'd better start talking about it in church. Empathy begins with listening.** I owe much to my pink-haired, tattooed gay Unitarian crap detector. He was right. I gave him a hug as we departed. ■

Copyright © 2019 David John Seel

This essay first appeared as a post on Seel's blog, New Copernican Conversations (www.ncconversations.com). It is reprinted here with his kind permission.

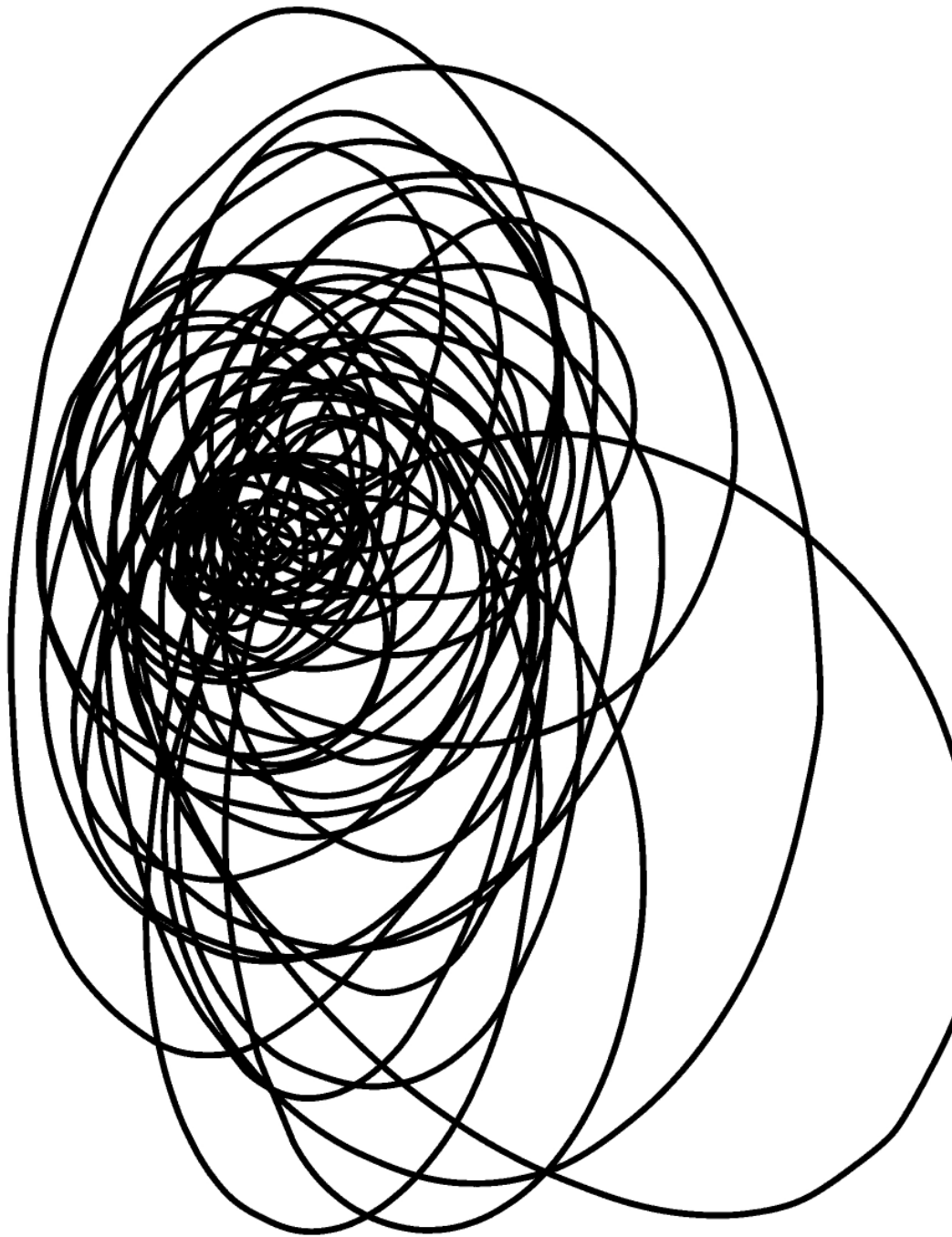


David John Seel Jr.
(University of Maryland) is a cultural-renewal entrepreneur and social-impact consultant with expertise in the dynamics of cultural change. He lives with his wife on a historic farm in Pennsylvania and blogs at www.ncconversations.com.

For further reading:

New Copernican Conversations (www.ncconversations.com)

The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church by David John Seel Jr. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018) 205 pages + notes



“He will exult over you with lo

a funeral sermon for my mother Marjorie Haack, by **Denis Haack**

A reading from the Old Testament Isaiah 61:1–3

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those
who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn
in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of
mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a
faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of
righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may
be glorified.*

A reading from the Old Testament Zephaniah 3:14–17

*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments
against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in
your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands
grow weak.
“The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;*

*he will rejoice over you
with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with
loud singing.”*

A reading from the New Testament John 11:21–27

*Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had
been here, my brother would not have
died. But even now I know that whatever
you ask from God, God will give you.”
Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise
again.” Martha said to him, “I know that
he will rise again in the resurrection on
the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am
the resurrection and the life. Whoever
believes in me, though he die, yet shall he
live, and everyone who lives and believes
in me shall never die. Do you believe
this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I
believe that you are the Christ, the Son of
God, who is coming into the world.”*

Not long after my father died, my mother began saying she wanted to come to this church, Church of the Cross. “I want to go to your church,” she told me, and said this is where she wanted her funeral to be held. My church isn’t like the Brethren Assemblies, I told her, but she said with some obvious irritation that she knew that. One time when she brought up Church of the Cross again I said, “Mom: have your changed your theology?” She leaned forward, looked me straight in the eye, and pointed a finger at me menacingly. And then she said something I remember hearing many times growing up as boy. “Now, don’t you get smart with me, young man!” she said and then laughed at herself and us.

These conversations occurred during her lucid time, long before the disease of her dementia robbed her of memory and the ability to converse. I didn’t take her request as a change in theology but as a desire to be family. Over so many decades Mom had been separated from Ruth and me, with long miles between the United States and the Philippines. She yearned to be in and with family, but first geography and then brokenness had kept her from it. So it is in that spirit, of the love of family, that we honor her request by holding her funeral here today.

Over the past two years Margie and I have spent time with Mom each week, at first bringing her to our home and then when her declining health prohibited that, spending time with her at the memory care center where she lived at Valley Ridge. We took her by wheelchair to *Cinco de Mayo* last year in St. Paul, a lively street festival of everything Mexican. There were stalls serving wonderful food—Mom wanted a hotdog, no green chili,

oud singing.”



thank you—there was a loud parade with Mariachi bands, floats, politicians in convertibles, and traditional costumes. The highlight was when we gathered around a boxing ring—wrestling ring, really—to watch the masked *Lucha Libre* wrestlers in action. The first two were announced to great fanfare and they strutted around to the delight of the crowd, the good guy cheered and the bad guy booed heartily. They threw each other around the ring and acted like they were being slowly killed, until finally the good guy got the bad guy on the mat for the count of three and was declared the winner. Mom watched attentively, occasionally wincing when one of the wrestlers did something particularly nasty, and as we left she motioned from her wheelchair that she wanted to say something to me. I leaned over and she said in a somewhat offended voice, “Denis—I really think some of that was fake!”

We are born, we eat, and learn, and die,” says novelist Michael O’Brien in his story, *Island of the World*. “We leave a tracery of messages in the lives of others, a little shifting of the soil, a stone moved from here to there, a word uttered, a song, a poem left behind. I was here, each of these declare. I was here.”

As I spent time with Mom over the past two years I intentionally sought out the “tracery of messages” that she was leaving behind. Even as her memory faded she could remember events and people from her childhood, and a question from me would produce a smile and some stories. Of her father and his love for his garden and for flowers. Of

her five sisters and their squabbles, and of how her sisters never, ever did their fair share of the household chores. Of all the times she would pack a picnic lunch and walk to Buttonwood Park in New Bedford when Ruth and I were small, to spend an afternoon playing outside. Of the board games she and I would play and the mysteries we listened to on the radio. So many things that seem so small and insignificant in the cosmic scheme of things, but that in reality shaped me into the person I am today.

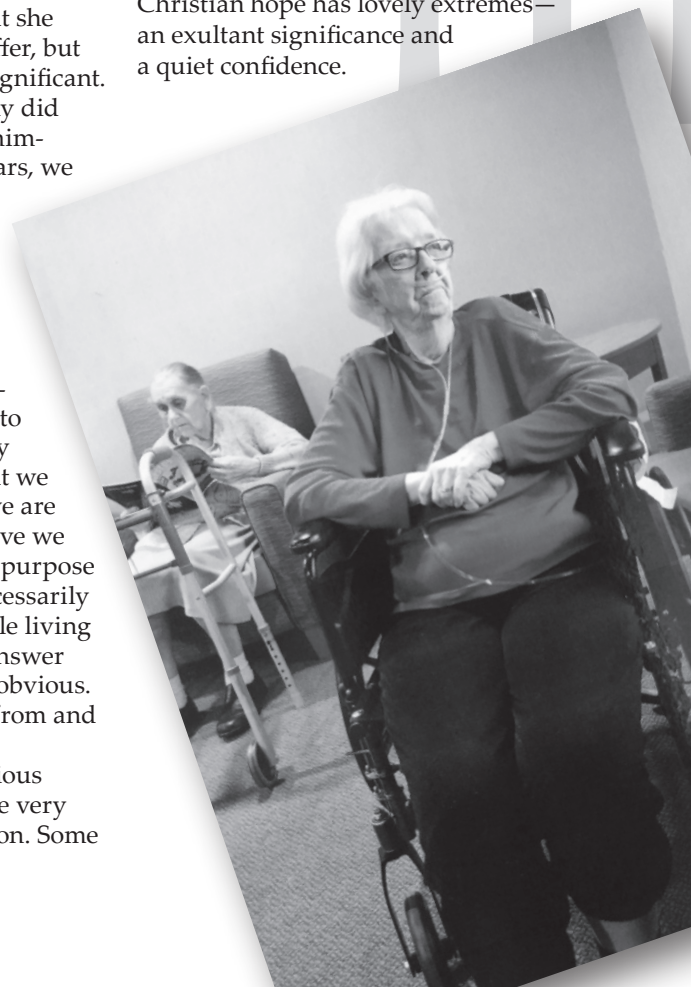
There is one other thing I heard from my mother repeatedly over the last decade, and she never spoke of it without crying. She said she never felt appreciated, or made to feel that she had anything of real value to offer, but was made to feel small and insignificant. “Why?” she would ask me. “Why did they always make me feel so unimportant?” Over the past two years, we often told her she was important to us, and we repeated that to her even in her final few days when we were not certain she could hear us.

These tracery of messages were specific to my mother, but they form echoes of what we each must face. If we are a confident person we can believe we have significance and a greater purpose or meaning but that doesn’t necessarily make it so. We are broken people living in a broken world, and so the answer is not necessarily immediately obvious. Where does significance come from and how can we be sure?

In our pluralistic world, various of our neighbors would propose very different answers to this question. Some

have adopted the very reductive view that human significance is an illusion, but courage requires us to forge ahead believing it to exist anyway. Others assert that we make our own meaning through our accomplishments, but those of us who have tried so hard over so many years and still come up short find that to be the counsel of despair.

In the midst of these alternatives, the Christian faith provides a very different answer. Our scriptural texts capture the essence of that hope, and I’d like to highlight two aspects. In Christ, these texts tell us, we have an exultant significance and a quiet confidence—the Christian hope has lovely extremes—an exultant significance and a quiet confidence.



If these ancient texts are true, Mom has now experienced what it means to have and to enjoy exultant significance. Look at verse 17 in the Zephaniah text: "The Lord your God is in your midst," the ancient Hebrew prophet says. "A mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

The God of Scripture has always chosen to dwell among his people, not simply watch them from some Mt. Olympus in a far off heaven. He is not aloof or distant, and does not only know us in theory or just in general terms. He knows us personally and really, and his promise to be our God and we his people is a radical proposition. And then in Christ he entered human history and our humanity itself by becoming man while remaining God.

Mom's life was important even if most of those around her failed to see it and failed to assure her of it. It was important because she was made in God's image, and so she could be faithful in the small, ordinary things in her life to his glory. In the final analysis, all we need is an audience of one, if that One rejoices over you with loud singing and in so doing causes all of creation to exult. "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you," Zephaniah says, and so Mom sees no longer through a glass darkly but clearly, and she knows of her significance because she has heard the Almighty actually sing of it.

This image described by the Hebrew prophet is part of a larger vision of the future that we

call the Christian hope. It provides an utterly transforming perspective on life and death, and on life after death. "The resurrection of Christ," Timothy Keller says, "means everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost."

Marjorie Haack is now with a circle of women whose "tracery of messages" echo with great glory in the pages of Holy Scripture. The circle includes Ruth and Rahab, Sarah, Priscilla, Mary the mother of our Lord, the prophetess Huldah, and Anna who recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah when he was still an infant. Each was memorable in her own way, used of God in ways lost in the fog of history but remembered by the one that called them and whose memory is in the end the only one that counts.

One in that circle whose story is worth remembering is Mary Magdalene. In the first century both the Jews and the Romans agreed that women were untrustworthy witnesses, and neither permitted a woman to testify in court. Jesus treated all such misogyny with contempt, however, and treated women with a respect that caused many to become his disciples. Then Jesus was crucified, and buried, and in the event that changed all of history forever, rose from the dead. His resurrection meant that he, the God-man, had not just entered human existence but had actually gone through death and come out on the other side. Suddenly death was no longer the final enemy but had lost its sting, and no longer needed to be the final word in the story of our lives. And who did God arrange to be the first witness to this greatest of all events? Who was providentially provided to arrive at an empty tomb, speak to

angelic messengers sent from the throne of the Almighty and go tell the truth to Jesus' discouraged and disheartened male followers? Mary Magdalene, a woman, the first believer in the resurrection of our Lord, and the primary witness to its truth.

I wonder if Mary realized the significance of what happened that day 2000 years ago. She had gone to the garden with spices to anoint Jesus' dead body, something Jews did after someone had died. It was all very normal, very ordinary, not at all very significant at that moment, just something you did. And then so much unfolded. Peter heard her report and thought it sounded incredible, like "an idle tale," the Scriptures record (Luke 24:11) and ran off to check the tomb for himself. It was Mary Magdalene that is the first witness to the premier event in all of human history, and the ordinary events of that day were transformed into something far bigger than any of us can possibly imagine.

My mother Marjorie is now in that circle of witnesses, and I suspect they have begun reviewing the "tracery of messages" in Mom's life so she can see them not as others debased them while she was alive but reveal them to be providential events ordained by her Lord for his glory and the service of others—like me. Our lives are like a tapestry, and often all we get to see is the underside, full of knots and loose ends, indistinct patterns and confusing designs. Mom only saw that side of her life but now has been shown the other side of the tapestry—a new view that is accompanied by glad rejoicing, a singing that emanates from the very throne of God.



Messiah, the one promised from the very beginning. And then St. Luke tells us in his gospel, chapter 4, that Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth, took the scroll of Isaiah, read this text aloud, and said an astounding thing. "Today," he asserted, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).

This is either a silly, narcissistic boast or the most important declaration in human history. We know for a fact that it is not empty words because, when Jesus promises comfort for all who mourn, we know he knew what grief was like. When his dear friend Lazarus died, Jesus visited his tomb and there, we are told, he wept. This was not theater but real because Jesus knew, even more than the rest of us, how death was not meant to be, but was an intruder, a perversion of what God had made and said was very good. He could cry even though he then raised Lazarus back to life because death is always a tragedy, and grief at the pain and horror of death is always appropriate.

And so we are comforted today, even in the presence of this coffin, because the one who is the very source of life has come to bring us comfort. He is "the resurrection and the life," our gospel text tells us, and in that we can have the quiet confidence that, though death is real, it is not the final word in her story.

And so, just as we await the return of the King and the resurrection, so Mom waits as well. Right now her body and soul are separated, and that is not how human beings were created to be. And right now we live in the shadows in a broken world where grief over loss is

our reality, and so we need comfort as we mourn.

The Christian hope, embodied in Christ Jesus, provides an exultant significance in life and death and a quiet confidence as we face the future. "Whoever believes in me, though they die," Christ said to Martha, "yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

And that is precisely the question we are finally left with as we stand together today in the presence of this coffin.

Let us pray:

Father, you created our hearts for unbroken fellowship. Yet the constraints of time and place, and the stuttering rhythms of life and death in a fallen world dictate that all fellowships will at times be broken or incomplete. And so we find ourselves bearing the sorrow of our separation from Marjorie Haack, my mother.

We acknowledge, O Lord that it is a right and a good thing to miss deeply those whom we love but with whom we cannot be physically present. Grant us, therefore, courage to love well even in this time of absence. Grant us courage to shrink neither from the aches nor from the joys that love brings; for each, willingly received, will accomplish the good works you have appointed them to do. Therefore we praise you even for our sadness, knowing that the sorrows we steward in this life will in time be redeemed.

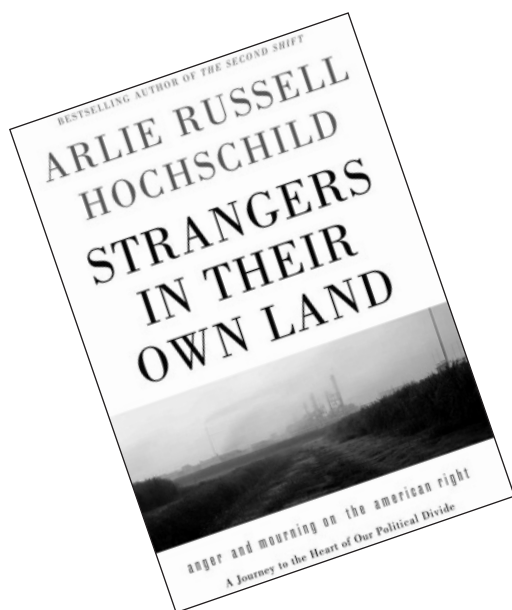
We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is life itself as we await his return, at which point death will be no more, world without end, Amen. ■

Source: Final prayer was adapted from Every Moment Holy (2017)

And along with an exultant significance, the Christian hope also provides God's people with a quiet confidence. Listen again to some of the comforting words written so many centuries ago by the prophet Isaiah. Hear them with your imagination and let them sink into your soul: Verse 1: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives... Verse 2: to comfort all who mourn... Verse 3: to give them a beautiful headress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit."

The Jews understood this to be a messianic text, meaning they realized it would be fulfilled, accomplished by the

Hochschild, Winegard, Okrent, and Solzhenitsyn



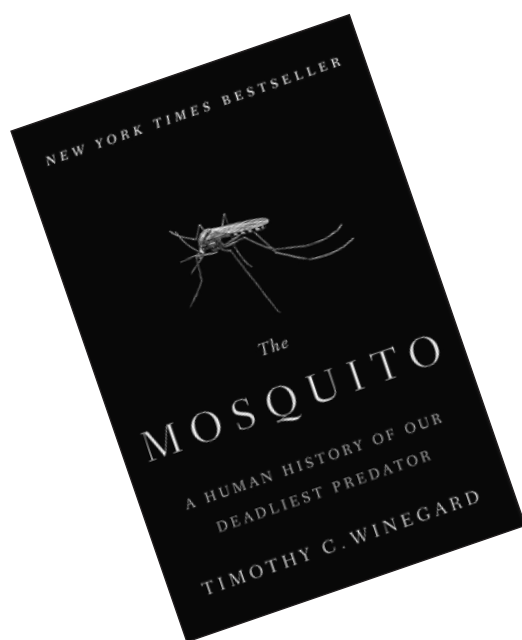
Listening Across the Political Split

A progressive sociologist, concerned about the growing tribal divisions in American society and politics, travels to the Louisiana bayou to listen to people who hold positions radically different from herself and her closest friends. “I had some understanding of the liberal left camp,” Hochschild says, “but what was happening on the right?” *Strangers in Their Own Land* is the report of the people she met, the questions she asked, and the things she discovered both as a researcher and as a person.

Strangers in Their Own Land helps us see more clearly the stark emotional and rhetorical chasm that separates the conservative right and the liberal

left. Each side tells a story, a story that captures their differing fears and dreams, their conflicting values and convictions. The book also demonstrates how to listen across the divide, to discover that our neighbors who disagree share our humanity, and surprisingly, many of our concerns. ■

Book reviewed: *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right: A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide* by Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York, NY: The New Press; 2016) 242 pages + appendices + notes + bibliography + index



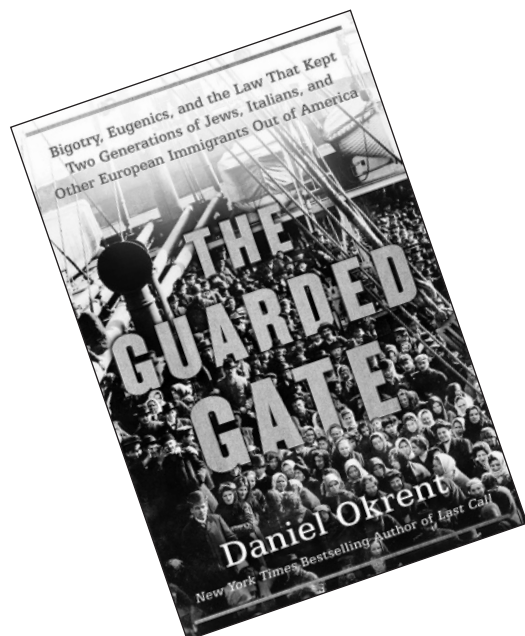
The Perilous Pesky Bug

The mosquito has preyed on the human race from the beginning, and the toll has been immense. “The mosquito has killed more people,” Timothy Winegard reports, “than any other cause of death in human history” [p. 2]. Yet, as annoying as we find the mosquito’s bite, it is the diseases she carries that are deadly. Yellow fever, dengue, West Nile, Zika, and malaria are only five of the over 15 diseases this insect carries and distributes—and the mosquito is found virtually in every corner of the earth. Death and chronic debilitating illness continue to this day.

The Mosquito is marred by too much

detail and speculation, and a tendency towards flowery prose that I found distracting. Still, when the mosquito is included in the story of human history, it changes our perspective. Alexander the Great, for example, was not stopped in his empire building by foreign armies—he likely died from malaria caught as his army slogged through marshy terrain. ■

Book reviewed: *The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator* by Timothy C. Winegard (New York, NY: Dutton; 2019) 442 pages + bibliography + notes + index



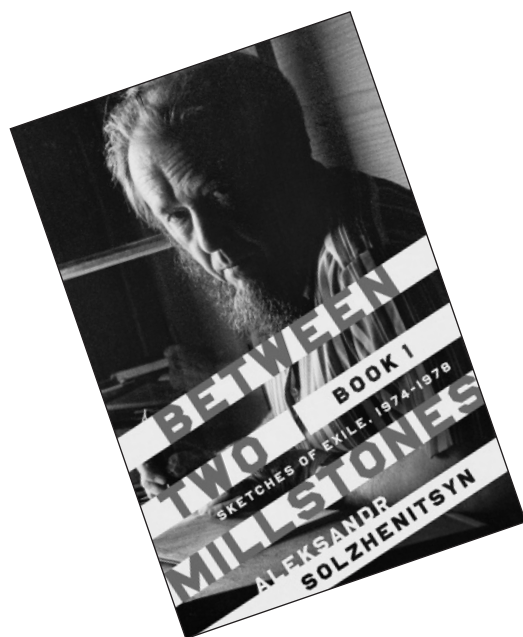
Restricting Immigration

The effort to limit immigration has a long history in America. Beginning in the late 19th century the reasons given were based on eugenics, a pseudo-scientific notion that some races were biologically inferior to the “race” of white northern Europeans. Jews and Roman Catholics, along with all those from southern Europe, Asia and Russia were deemed undesirable. Political leaders worked relentlessly until Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 closing what anti-immigration activists called “the unguarded gate” at the American border.

“Enough! Enough! We want no more / Of ye immigrant from foreign shore / Already is our land o’er run / With toiler,

beggar, thief and scum” [p. 68]. The details of Okrent’s story are different from today’s immigration debate, but the xenophobia, fear, disregard for truth, and rank bigotry remain the same. It is to our shame that “the official Nazi *Handbook for Law and Legislation* would specifically cite American immigration law as a model for Germany” [p. 361]. ■

Book reviewed: *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, eugenics, and the law that kept two generations of Jews, Italians, and other European immigrants out of America* by Daniel Okrent (New York, NY: Scribner; 2019) 394 pages + notes + bibliography + image credits + index



Misunderstanding One’s Own Time

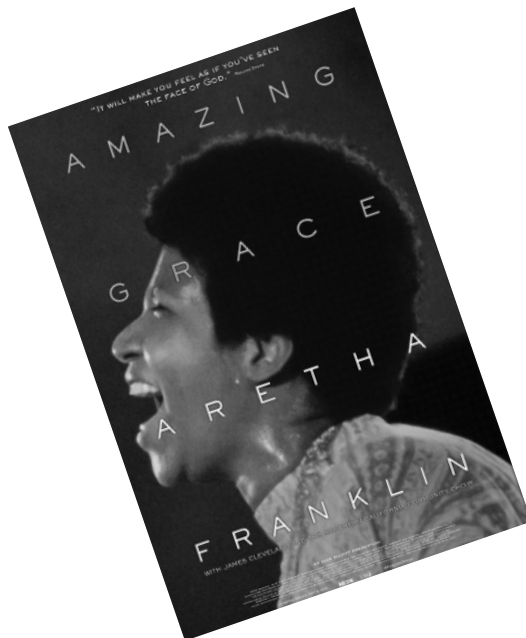
During a time of political turmoil in ancient Israel the tribe of Issachar contained “men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). It is a rare gift, though almost everyone claims to have it. I thought of that as I read *Between Two Millstones*, the memoir of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn covering his initial period of exile in the West. One of most important and intelligent literary figures of the twentieth century, he bore witness to the brutal oppression instituted by Communist rule.

An Orthodox believer and disciplined writer, Solzhenitsyn was unprepared for life in the West where he experienced freedom and a society

he failed to understand. Failing to listen, he was increasingly marginalized and misunderstood. His often bitter memoir nevertheless contains a perspective on America that is worth considering. If you haven’t read him, begin with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Cancer Ward*. His memoir reminds us that knowing the truth without knowing the times makes one ineffective. ■

Book reviewed: *Between Two Millstones: Sketches of Exile, 1974-1978* (Book 1) by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; 2018) 344 pages + appendices + indices.

The Power of Gospel



The gospel music tradition has its roots in the seventeenth century with Christian hymns and spirituals sung in black churches, often in call and response and accompanied with clapping. Born of suffering, shaped by scripture, and animated with hope it expresses the gospel of Christ with an authenticity and power seldom matched in the history of sacred music. Although not the only legacy the black church in America has bequeathed to the global body of Christ, it is surely one of the richest.

That music contains a unique ability to move us is hardly a surprise. It's chords strike chords within us that touch deep passions, for blessing or curse, shaping our perception of life and reality and giving rise to a full range of human emotions. It does so because music resides at the interface between the visible and invisible realms of reality and, when truly experienced, can provide brief, fleeting, and precious

moments of transcendence. This doesn't just apply to gospel or sacred music, of course, but to music, per se. The composer and the performer may even deny the possibility of the transcendent or divine but their denial doesn't change the nature of reality.

The popular but reductive view of reality held by so many would seek to discover when and how music was introduced into human history. The Christian view is that music preceded the appearance of human beings; that music is intrinsic to the very nature of creation itself. "Where were you," the Almighty asked Job, and by extension asks us, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" And so we identify the correct moment he is referring to, he adds, "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." (Job 38:4, 7). You remember—the time when the music burst out and joy was complete.

When the King returns to consummate his kingdom, the Christian hope tells us that all of creation will once again be freed to express itself in that primal music.

*For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before
you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap
their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)*

And then to ratchet up the mystery even more, all these images pale into insignificance compared to the vision recorded by the prophet Zephaniah:

*The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with
gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;*

*he will exult over you with loud
singing (3:17)*

Here the Creator takes over for the creation, and there will be music that transcends all our wildest imaginings. God sings to and for his people, and only redemption will keep us from dying from sheer unutterable delight.

One of the finest gospel singers in American history was Aretha Franklin (1942–2018). She grew up singing in church; her father, the Rev. C. L. Franklin, was a prominent Baptist minister and civil rights leader. In January 1972, Aretha Franklin gave a gospel concert over two nights at the New Bethel Baptist Church (Watts, Los Angeles) with the Southern California Community Choir under the direction of Alexander Hamilton. Led by James Cleveland (known as the "Crown Prince of Gospel"), the concert was recorded by Sydney Pollack a filmmaker inexperienced in making documentaries. Because of a technical error on his part, the 20 hours of video could not be synced with the audio recording of the concert. Finally, advances in recording and editing technology allowed the film to be completed in 2018. The audio recording was released the year of the concert as a double album and became a hit, winning the Grammy Award for Best Soul Gospel Performance for Aretha Franklin the following year.

The first notice of the film I read was in *Rolling Stone*. "It's the closest thing to witnessing a miracle," Peter Travers wrote, "just some cameras, a crowd, and a voice touched by God.... The result is a concert film to rank with the best." I made a note to see the film. "It's enough to make you get religion," says Bilge Ebiri in *Vulture*. "Aretha Franklin's concert documentary *Amazing*

Grace is transcendent." I suspect my understanding of "miracle" and "transcendent" as a believer might be a bit different from the meaning implied by these reviewers, but they are onto something that can't be missed. The music in this film touches on the deeper things that matter most, and once touched is both transformative and life giving.

Don't just watch *Amazing Grace*. Buy the DVD and watch it more than once. ■

Sources:

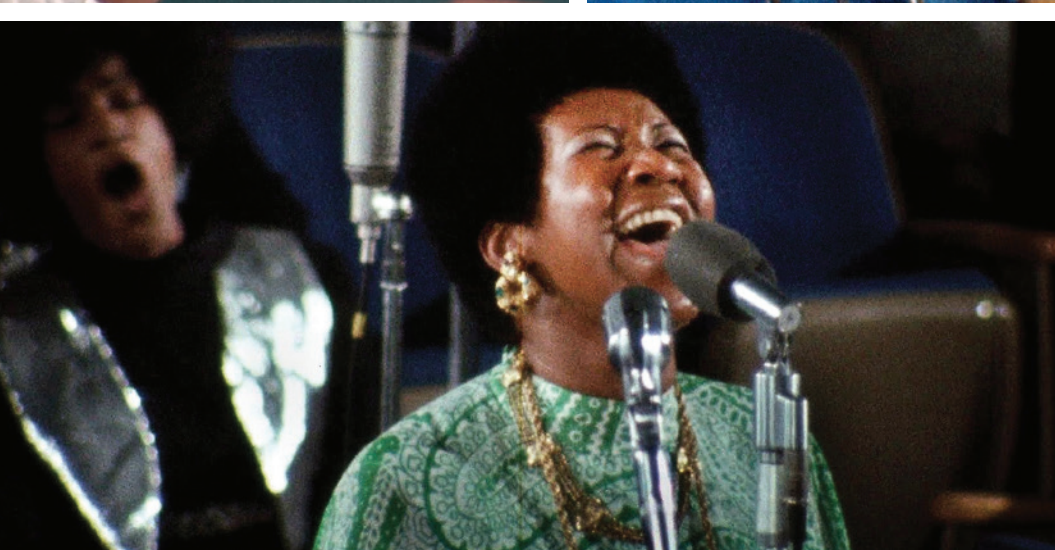
Peter Travers in Rolling Stone online (www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/amazing-grace-movie-review-aretha-franklin-815944)

Bilge Ebiri in Vulture online (www.vulture.com/2018/11/aretha-franklins-concert-doc-amazing-grace-review.html)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. Did you cry as you watched the film? Yes or No—what does this suggest about you? Throughout the film the people in the choir and audience are overcome by the power of Aretha Franklin's singing. People nod and cry out, and dance and clap. One woman is so moved she rushes towards the stage and must be restrained. At one point Rev. Cleveland sits down in a pew off to the side of the stage and weeps.
3. In what ways were the techniques of film making (direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? Most documentaries attempt to be neat and tidy, editing out most glimpses of the crew recording the event. In *Amazing Grace* this is not done, and we often see background material not essential to the music. Did you find this interesting and helpful, or distracting? Why?
4. What is attractive here? How is it made attractive?
5. Might *Amazing Grace* be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? How could this point of contact be misused or even abused?
6. What might Christians who worship in more staid and formal churches take from *Amazing Grace*? What might Christians who worship in churches that use contemporary music shaped by popular culture take from it?





Movie credits: *Amazing Grace*

Directed by: Alan Elliott and Sydney Pollack

Produced by: Joey Carey, Alexandra Johnes,
Spike Lee, and others

Film Editing by: Jeff Buchanan

Starring:

Aretha Franklin (herself)

James Cleveland (himself)

Southern California Community Choir
(themselves)

Alexander Hamilton (himself)

C. L. Franklin (himself)

Mick Jagger (himself, audience)

U.S.A., 2018; Warner Bros., 40 Acres and A

Mule Filmworks; Al's Records and Tapes

Rated G