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FORM ~~A~~ ^C PROJECT
COLLEGE SCHOLARS ~~PROPOSAL~~ APPROVAL

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The Soul of my Shoes - April 26, 2004
Project Title and Completion Date (Semester and Year)

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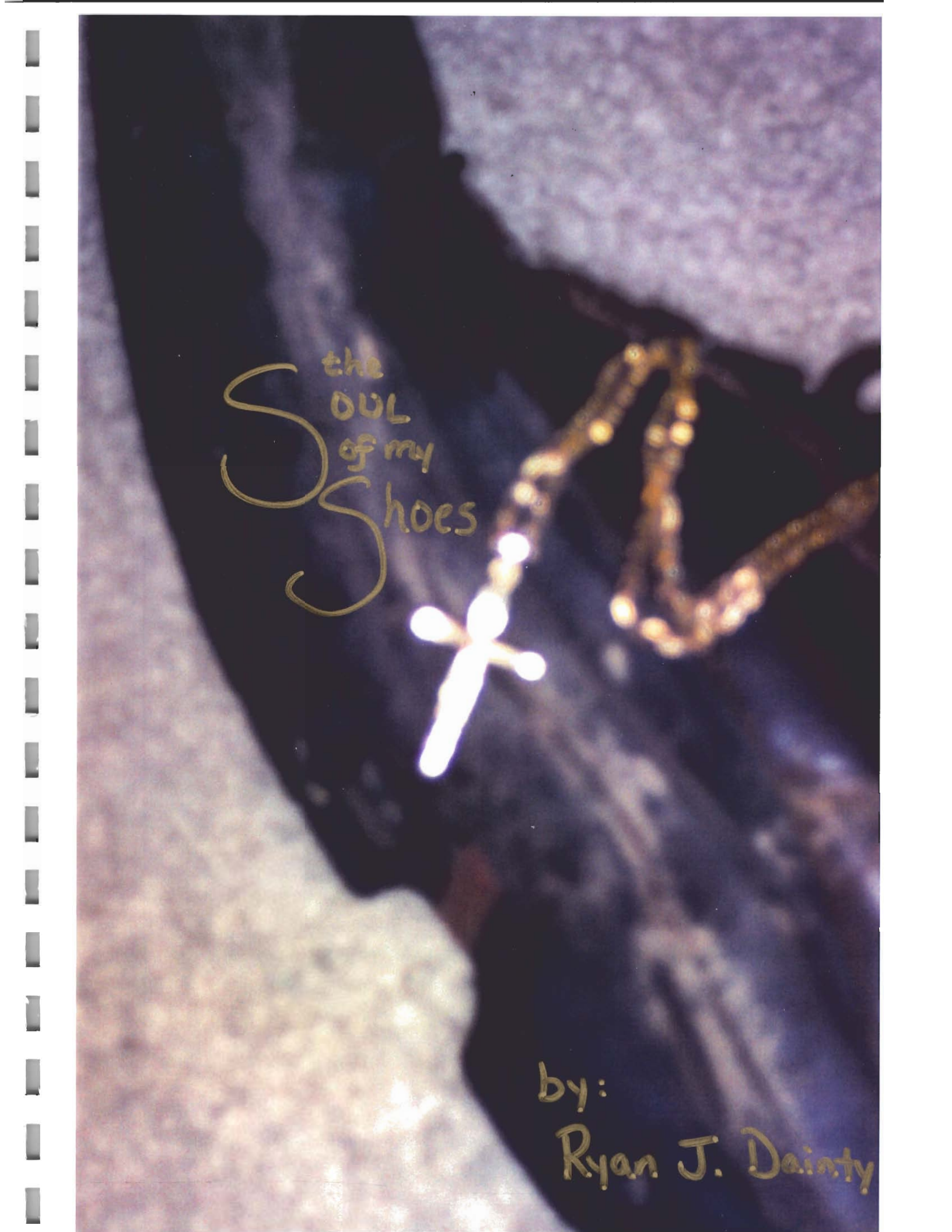
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PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF THE WRITTEN PROPOSAL TO THIS SHEET
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DATE APPROVED: April 19, 2004

The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a piece of fabric or a wall, with a mottled pattern of dark blue, purple, and black. A bright, glowing cross is positioned in the center-right area. To the right of the cross, a string of small, warm-toned lights is visible, forming a loose, curved shape. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

the
SOUL
of my
Shoes

by:
Ryan J. Dainty

Rainy Day Jesus

I know a man with fire, His eyes; perseverance, His beaten brow; truth, His jaw; strength, His tired back; suffering, His shoulders; mercy, His hands; and grace, His feet. I met Him one rainy day; He was walking across puddles, his steps making not even a ripple or a splash in the shallow pools of water. He looked wet and weary, so I offered my umbrella to which He kindly responded, "Oh, no thank you," and continued walking, looking up at the grays of sky and down at the greens, reds, and yellows of autumn leaves thrown about the earth in perfect geometry to the soul. I followed, but a way's back, so as not to be a burden. He had to think I was up to something because often He spun His head around and saw me trailing. One time He stopped, turned to me and called me forward asking, "What are you looking for?" "Master," I said, "where are you staying?" "Come and see"* was His response, "only walk *with* Me, not behind Me." And so We walked in the rain, and splashed about in the puddles.

- Anonymous

the **Soul** of my **Shoes**

by: Ryan J Dainty

*To anyone like me, seeking
To walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the Christ,
Lord forever and ever.*

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“I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me, I must not say no.”*

the **Soul** of my **Shoes**

Prologue

This is my story. That statement alone has a double meaning. Is it my story from an autobiographical standpoint? Or is it simply a story I received, or maybe found, and have adopted as my own? Maybe both are true, but be certain neither is relevant. All that matters is that I have been inspired to tell it. But I caution those of you who are quick to judge. The Gospels were certainly inspired, yet they were also “heavy laden,”* to quote Matthew, with the agenda of the author. Now I am not taking a stand on the validity or truth of the Gospels; that is not the point of this book, but my point should be clear: there is a difference between capital T Truth and little t truth. The Truth is what we all seek, but we all have our own truths that help us get there. All that being said, it is now up to you to decide whether or not any truths you find in here are part and parcel of the Truth. And off we go.

To begin I must confess both my brokenness and my selfishness, for both are true of who I am, but perhaps selfishness is not the right word. Instead, I should say arrogance. I confess my arrogance in writing this book. Only a few years ago I was a teenager, so why should I expect anyone to take me seriously when I write about what it means to walk as a faithful disciple in God’s kingdom? The answer lies in my aforementioned brokenness. I do not have any answers, and neither does this book. Its

philosophies and little anecdotes are most likely cracked, but they have grown out of my experience and help me continue to stand firm in my faith and in my daily struggle with Jesus. And yes, it is a struggle. People seem to always want to call it a walk, but it is not a walk. A walk conjures up images of lush apple orchards and white sandy beaches. Don't get me wrong; a walk is what our relationship with Jesus should be. After all, Jesus promises us rest, an easy yoke, and a light burden when we come unto him.* And that sounds like a walk in the park to me, so maybe when we actually abandon ourselves and fully come unto Christ and abide in Him, we are walking. But if you are at all like me, this is hard, really hard. I tend to get in my own way and find myself going back and forth between walking and struggling. If this is also you, read on. If not, read on anyway. No one can quit after two pages.

The reason for this back and forth between walking and struggling is our impatience. When we struggle, it is because we either stop walking to admire what we are walking through; then it is only a matter of time before we realize our impatience with walking has left us stuck standing while our Savior and Companion walks ahead waiting for us to join Him again. Or sometimes we get so restless from walking that we need to sprint ahead so we can see what is to come. Again, once we acknowledge our impatience we turn around and discover that He is not all that far behind, and all He has been doing is walking. We hang our heads in shame, as our lives are reduced to an ancient fable.* But I picture this reunion: a calm, cool relaxed Jesus with all His strength smiling at us with compassion and pity as we stand doubled over, out of breath, and sweating like crazy. All He does is touch our shoulder gently and push us onward in the right direction. The instant He touches our weakened selves we are restored to fullness of

strength and we resume our walk with Him. We are truly stuck, incapable of movement, apart from our Lord.

If “we live and move and have our being in Christ”* then ideally we never stop walking, but this relationship is more often a struggle than it is a walk. It is a struggle between Him and us for our loyalty, for our lives. It is a struggle with a choice. And in this struggle it is important to remember that we cannot actually choose Jesus, for He has already chosen us. Our choice is whether or not we choose ourselves. To choose ourselves is to deny Jesus His claim to us. As soon as we deny ourselves, and only when we deny ourselves, do we make room for God’s Son.

Making room for God’s Son will be a recurring theme throughout the book, which, you will find, is in three parts. The first two parts consist of meditations that explore the arguments I have begun here, in greater depth. What does it mean to recklessly abandon ourselves to the foot of the Cross? How do we live each day as the incarnation of the Risen Lord? How do we walk? How do we see? How do we, as Oswald Chamber says in My Utmost for His Highest, become totally separated unto the Gospel?* These are questions I will ask, and in the third part, a collection of short stories, I will explore the struggles we endure for the sake of the radical discipleship Christ demands from us. How is Christ present in our world? It is this last question that lies at the center of every soul’s search. Walking, seeing, discovering, embracing, never letting go of the Quiet, the Jesus within.

By the tree

As I sit quietly beneath the maple tree, I am by myself but not alone; I am never alone. The sadness I feel at the fading hum of a motorboat departing reminds me of the joy there is for others as they listen for the crescendo of that same motorboat returning. Laughter echoes from the kitchen forcing my heart to jump and smile. Gravel crushes beneath the heavy feet of a nearby friend and I ponder just how amazing it is that Jesus walked on water. And of course, the stars. It is a perfect night, not a cloud anywhere in the abyss of sky. I write by the natural light given me by my Father. The stars and moon illuminate my soul, and I am exposed; my pen is my only means of communicating this song of myself;* my paper is the nearest friend with the means to listen. And we create. We compose. We sing. We dance. We... Suddenly, I hit a bump and my mind wanders. The music in my heart rests, and I am unable to find the melody. I struggle with writing the chorus. I am humbled by the creative genius of God. He created all we have and have not seen and He never hesitated for a second or stopped and made corrections. He simply created and called it good. I think about all the things I have created and am reminded of the constant revisions and start-overs, or when I have hesitated to put a thought on the page because I fear it might not be good enough. So I resign to being broken, at the same time confessing my thirst and hunger for perfection. Perfection is

such a silly goal now that I think about it. It is an unattainable and fruitless pursuit. Perhaps I should just aim at being better than me, but even that is hard. Nonetheless, it is this torturous tension between brokenness and perfection within my very being that produces these notes in my soul. No sweet melody or perfect harmony, but in its place, the sounds of bad jazz. Still, my faith tells me the song rings painfully sweet in my Savior's ears.

I try and imagine just what my life sounds like, and memories of rainy days echo in my head. I remember the last time I experienced a rainy day. It is almost painful, being bound to my usually comfortable couch by waterfalls that seem to press inward upon me, restricting my natural instinct to simply go out and play. For a moment I am saddened, but it is only for a moment as I begin to see the benefits of a rainy day. I have letters to write, long distance friends to call, a package to send, and a book to read. The delicate patter of raindrops falling like tears from Heaven, splashing on my window, reverberating to my soul seduces me to sleep away the afternoon. I always wake up refreshed, alive.

Finally it hits me. I am in constant need of rain in my life: no, not physical rain, although I absolutely love it, but rather spiritual rain. How often in my life do I go dry and just cannot seem to find my way back to God. As I struggle to find a way back my steps only kick up dust that chokes me and blurs my vision, and I am forced to stop and let the dust settle. At that point I realize the need for God to rain in my life. And so I ask Him. He faithfully answers, always.

“Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”*

We all need God’s Rain, and we all need God to Reign. All we need to do is ask for it, receive it, and use it to bring forth good fruit. Feeling dry? Need a change? Then my advice is pray for rain.

the man with **watercolor shadows**

Washing the Car

The air is cool and newly
bitten by the coming autumn;
the sun scorches the sky
cloudless, warming the pavement
so I don't have to wear shoes.
The hose pours forth icicles melting
over the warm colors of fall leaves
scattered about the ground forming

a new constellation on the earth.

Soap bubbles dance upward like
balloons released in the wind.
I pay careful attention to the
dirty, mud splattered spots,
spending extra time scrubbing the
Jackson Pollock canvas, uncovering
a cleaner, finer art form. I am feverish,
like Michelangelo chiseling away
excess marble, revealing a pre-existent
beauty beneath the soiled, metallic red
surface. *Perfection*, so
I go inside, and feel it start raining.

It *always* rains

Time

Have you ever had a day when you needed more time? I think we all have reluctantly left things unsaid and undone because we have had something else to go say or do, or we fell asleep from the sheer exhaustion of business and just forgot. Schedules, to-do lists, jobs, classes, assignments, deadlines, personal time, family time, fun time—all these make for busy, time-consuming, often tedious days and lives. How often do we get caught up in the business parts of who we are and forget about “what really matters?” This phrase is so clichéd I think people just tend to ignore it and continue down their time-driven paths, making the answer to my question, so often we cannot remember how often we forget what matters.

What does matter then? What gets lost in this world of time?

God.

Now this is tragic but understandable. After all, who has time in their day for anything that demands a timeless point of view?

You have heard all the cliché phrases about time—time is a precious commodity, time is money, time flies when you’re having fun—and all of these are true. There are many more, but my point is that all these phrases fail to capture the meaning of time today. Time means so much more in today’s world. In our world, time is the enemy.

Time keeps us from doing what we want to do, and it keeps us from being who we want to be.

“I just don’t have the time to try and make this relationship work.”

“I can’t run to the store for you because I am meeting her in thirty minutes.”

“I can’t stay because I have to run to the store.”

“Happy 7th anniversary honey!”

“I have too much homework.”

“I need to find a real job.”

“I was asked to work overtime, again.”

“I am on break.”

“She’s been dead 3 years, 8 months, 27 days, 4 hours, 11 minutes, and 16, no wait, 17 seconds.”

“I need a vacation.”

“What time is it?”

“I need a longer vacation.”

“Why did my car have to break down today when I have a million and one things to do?”

“Where does the time go?”

“Time me on this run.”

“I have two weeks to fit into that dress.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I was told to do 30 minutes at least 3 times a week.”

“It’s getting late.”

“It’s too early.”

“I need more sleep.”

“I can’t go on like this,” and I won’t, but you get my point. Time penetrates every facet of our lives. It is a rapidly moving and changing world and to have no concept of time leaves one ignorant and outcast. Only deadbeats, hippies, drunks, and homeless people don’t need time, right? They are eternally dead to the world anyway. If we had no concept of time would we be lost in this world? Homeless? A drunk? Dead?

Imagine you are the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. You are obviously bound by time, keeping a very tight schedule, and demanding punctuality from your closest employees. One day your vice president, who you let do his own thing- after all he is dependable and has helped make this company successful in a short period of time- does not show up until 10 am, missing the morning meeting. You ask him to meet you for lunch to catch up, but he doesn’t show, citing later that he just wasn’t hungry. So you choose to email him the minutes from the meeting and the week’s schedules and agendas, but he never checks his email and either misses altogether or catches only part of the week’s business. He doesn’t come to work at all the first three days of the following week and shows up on Thursday with a shaved head, a suntan, and a Hawaiian shirt, demanding more theme days in the office. This is ridiculous. You finally get to him to sit down and meet with you Friday afternoon to inform him that he is fired. Out of curiosity you ask him what has happened, what made him change so quickly? He laughs and calmly replies, “I lost my watch last week and couldn’t find it.” And then he adds, “and I’ve never been so happy in my entire life.”

We would be foolish in the world's eyes if we just shunned time completely, but I hope you can see that time can cripple us by restricting us to a schedule of what we can and cannot do and when we can and cannot do it. Time is a diet that tells us to eat things never meant for human consumption. Time is a straitjacket and a padded room. Time is a nightmare. Time is a desert in need of rain. Time is the single most influential force in the universe. Time is our governing body, making its own laws. It appoints the hours to Congress, the days to Mayor, and the seconds to the Supreme Court. Time is an addictive drug, a crowded street, interstate traffic, waiting for a cab, soliciting a prostitute, taking a test, riding a wave... Time is a necessary fact of life. To shun time is to say, "kiss my ass" to the world, and quite frankly, most of us lack the gumption to say such a thing.

Now this idea of gumption is incredibly valuable and warrants some discussion here because although most people have probably heard the word, not a soul on earth knows what it means. Robert Pirsig, in his fantastic and necessary book (by necessary I mean people who possess the intelligence to stomach the depth of its philosophical inquiry must read it), Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, refers to gumption as something one is filled with "when one is quiet long enough to see and hear and feel the real universe, not just one's own stale opinions about it".* The Greek word for this idea is the root for our word, enthusiasm, which means to be filled with *theos*, or God. Gumption is the Holy Spirit. We refuse to sit still and be quiet, because time passes away when we do, and we fall behind everyone else. We all rely too much on what this world of time tells us to do. Without gumption, without the Holy Spirit, we do not possess the means to overcome this world of time in which we live.

So what must we do? I say resign. Give in. Marry yourself to time. Put on the shackles of time: a wristwatch. Set the timer on the bomb that is your alarm clock and obey the schedule that someone else has given you to follow. Show up to work on time. Take exactly two weeks paid vacation every year. Never miss a deadline. Only call in sick when you really are sick, and absolutely, under no circumstance, make a promise to anyone that time won't allow you to keep.

If you are at all like me, you do all of this with reluctant reluctance. You do not want to not want to obey time. But if you are again like me, there is that part of you that desires to be free from time, to go live in a place where there is truly no word for time. You long to grasp something other than that which is fleeting and fickle; you desire immortality and permanence. Evan Williams, in his book, No Word for Time: The Way of the Algonquin People, he depicts a culture that has no word for our worldly sense of time. He portrays a worldview where “time is measured in experiences and ‘things take as long as they take’”.* I think Jesus possessed this view of time. He stayed places as long as people needed him to stay. He taught people as long as they needed to be taught. He healed people as often as they needed to be healed. You might say, “but Jesus’ world was different then. They didn’t have clocks or watches or calendars or technology. The world demands more of us today.” I respond by saying the world that demands more of you today is the same world, or kingdom, that Jesus preached against. And anyway, aren’t we supposed to be imitators of Christ? Well, Christ had no sense of time, only sense of purpose, of mission. That is what is lost when we hold to this world of time—purpose. But we don’t let go of time because letting go of time means forfeiting what we

assume is control over our lives. The truth is that if we truly had control over our lives we would see that time indeed controls us, and we would eliminate time.

Of course, this cannot happen. No time means no place and outside of time and place, we don't exist. We are nothing if not what we do, when we do it, and where we do it. To exist means to occupy time and space, and because we know we exist, both time and space are real and exert force on who we were, who we are, and who we will become.

Do you ever wonder how many people were smart enough to be doctors or lawyers, or wise enough to be priests or rabbis, or talented enough to become athletes or musicians, but just did not have the time? Maybe they had to work to help feed their families or raise an unexpected child. Maybe they crashed their car because they were hurrying to be on time for something. The number of these people is probably more than we can imagine, but yet they do not blame time for their woes. They don't curse time for taking away what might have been. They don't demand that time pay them back. They don't rebel against the world. No, they quit like the rest of us. They simply wake up to alarm clocks, put on wristwatches, punch a time card twice a day, and get to bed by midnight because tomorrow will be a busy day, identical to the one just lived. We all cry ourselves to sleep, too tired to call on our loved ones or spend a few moments in prayer, begging to know why time can't just stand still for one moment.

Movement

Movement is the way we experience time. I honestly think that time would stand still if only we would, but we are unwilling to slow down our fast paced lives for fear of falling behind the rest of the world.

At the turn of the twentieth century the cities saw mass migration and over the first half of the century expanded into suburbia and rural America. Today, corporate industry in America has somehow ingrained itself into every building, street, hillside, cornfield, and white picket fence. The cause and effect of this is movement. Can we actually go anywhere and be still. No, but what bothers me even more is that I don't think we want to stop moving. Standing still means missing opportunities. It means having your head in the clouds while the "real world" bites at your ankles. It means things like permanence, loyalty, and peace when this world is more and more concerned with the quick fix, the big score, the highest bidder, and war. And whether we realize it or not, our movement within this structure (the world of time) creates room for more of these false ends in life. We become the next opportunity, scam, or scandal. We get crucified at the hands of those seeking power or seeking to hold onto it, but we have somehow convinced ourselves that we stand to gain much by endurance. Someone somewhere along the way promised us that if we keep on trying, keep on moving, what

we want would be ours. We are taught to never give up, never surrender, and never stop fighting, but why? Because if we do, we will lose according to the unrealistically high standards of this world, and nobody wants to lose because no one likes a loser.

I think we are finally getting to the root of our problem. We all want to be liked by others, by all if possible. This desire causes movement. All our desires are the cause of all our movement. The reason for this relationship is because of the nature of desire. Desire is fickle; it changes with the wind. One minute you are searching the depths of the ocean and the next you are soaring through the clouds. On Friday you profess your undying love for your sweetheart and on Sunday you break up. Nothing is consistent, especially when it comes to what you want. Why is it that what we want always changes? It changes because we are never satisfied with what we have. We always want more and so we go looking for it. We are constantly moving, searching for more. It might be affection; it might be forgiveness; it could be drugs, alcohol, sex, money, stamps, or baseball cards; it doesn't matter.

Give me more is not just a toddler's motto. It applies to every human being. It all boils down to the fact that we always desire more. You rarely find a rich man who wishes he had less because he could have less if he wanted. He could give to charity, live in the country, own a minivan and a 19 inch TV, and go sledding down the six-foot hill in his backyard; but instead, he lives in the city with two big screens, three sports cars, and season's passes to four ski resorts in Colorado, and he has the nerve to call being rich a burden. Ha! Millions of people in this world would love to bear his burden for him. People always want more.

The irony is that such a search for more possessions, in turn, possesses us. We become so used to changing desire and the pains needed to accommodate those changes, that before we know it we are stuck in this cycle of constant circular movement— our desires always bringing us back to where we began. Of course this is unsettling, but instead of folding our hand, we stay in the game, hoping to get lucky. And when we fail we tell ourselves we were playing with someone else's money or living on borrowed time.

And this is the tragedy of such movement: someone always gets hurt in the process. This is nothing new, the world has always been this way. All that matters to us is our own interests, our own desires, and in moving to obtain these, others gets pushed aside, stepped on, and heart broken. That is why there are so many starving children and homeless people and broken families. But perhaps even more tragic is what the movement does to us as individuals.

Speaking on a purely individual level, movement is not literal. It is not traveling from point A to point B in search of C. The movement within each of us is this changing of desire I have been harping on for quite some time. This kind of movement kills our souls. The reason for this movement is that we don't know what we want, and when we don't know what we want we find what we don't need. The saying, "if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there" could not be more true of our souls. So ultimately, I guess this search, this constant motion of the soul, is a quest for desire. The eternal part of us desires to know what to desire. What is the meaning of it all? What is our purpose? And we look for it in friends— they let you down; we search for our soul mate— it turns out you are star-crossed; we turn to family— they die; to wealth— the

stock market crashes; to sex— you get a disease; in love— you get hurt. All these things when left alone in the world as ends in and of themselves are completely void of meaning. But we keep trying, searching the same back alleys of our souls in an attempt to redeem what was lost or sacrificed in each previous attempt.

It is this internal movement, this unsettledness that compels us to the external movement that hurts others. It is impossible for us to break this cycle. We all have ADHD of the soul. Why can't we stop? We can, but we are too afraid of the consequences. You see, to a point we can control our movement when it comes to desires and actions. To let go of this control is terrifying. So we keep moving and eventually lose control of who we are. We lose who we are. Desire takes over and we become subject to our deepest and darkest selves, and then we become our deepest darkest selves.

But “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”* Is it that easy?

Fear

When desire consumes us we are no more than savages. Animals live off instincts, merely responding to physical needs. If we as humans live like this, we degrade the greatest part of who we are— our soul. Gratifying our darker desires is what leads us on this downward spiral of the spirit. On the way down, as our path gets darker and darker, we get scared and latch onto anything. As a result, more things enter and drag us further down. Maybe it is drugs and alcohol, for many it is sex, for others money, for all, pride and ego. These things kill our souls. The seven deadly vices— lust, greed, gluttony, envy, sloth, wrath, and pride— are just that, deadly.

Pride is the source of all evil because pride inflates the image we have of ourselves, effectively squeezing out the goodness within our souls. Pride most violently manifests itself as ego, which is simply pride internalized. No one wants a bruised ego— no one likes being wronged, ashamed, embarrassed, lied to, cheated on, put down, or defeated. All these things scare us because they make us look badly in the eyes of the world. As you can see, we have come back full circle to the root of our desire— the need to be loved and accepted. As people we are completely terrified of not being loved and accepted.

This is the trap that fear and desire get us into. It is a cycle of self-love, anxiety, and grief. Self-love leads to anxiety when our integrity, the motive of our desires, is questioned, and that always spirals into grief either at the way we are or the way the world around us is. Then we seek to correct this by either rebuilding our torn down self-love or building our wounded self-image up even higher over against the hurtful arrows of others. And this soul-killing process just repeats itself, but our pride and ego don't allow us to see the falsity of the cycle. Pride's ears don't let us hear the lies. Ego's eyes blind us from seeing the truth. This is terrifying because whether we do it willingly or not we all buy into lies.

Satan Lies.

God doesn't exist. All religions mean the same thing anyway. You're not pretty enough. You're not skinny enough. You're not muscular enough. You don't drink? Everyone's doing it. I love you. Of course I mean it. Do this for me and I'll be your best friend. You won't lose respect for me will you? Of course not, I promise if you do this I'll still respect you. All lies. All the world trying to trap us in our pride, exploiting our desire to be loved and accepted. That is what Satan does; he gets us to seek the truth—in the form of love and acceptance—in places where we will never really find it. He tells us to get into that relationship, to have sex, to get drunk all the time, to talk behind people's backs, to hoard material possessions. You see, Satan is a coward, and he boosts his self-love by getting everyone else to come down to his level. Pride is his weapon.

Pride is the disguise of cowardice.

Cowardice is another word for fear.

We are all cowards resting on our own pride because we are too afraid to step out of the shadow of desires and lies and embrace our true, spiritual selves. I think it is kind of funny, but mostly tragic, that we all tell ourselves how unique we are and how we are different from everyone else, and thus special. Yet, we are all the same. We all hide behind lies of who we are and who we should be. We are all afraid to be different or unique because to truly be so is loss— a loss of our identity in relation to this world, a loss of friends, a loss of pride and ego, a loss of control over our own lives. This fear of loss is what I mean when I talk about fear.

All other forms of fear derive from this fear of loss. To be afraid of the dark is to fear being lost or losing another or fear of what might be lurking in the shadows. To be afraid of heights is to fear not being in control. To be afraid of being alone is to fear losing what could have or should have been. To be afraid of death is to fear losing your life; it is also to fear the loss of what we know. Because when we don't know, we are at a loss. When we are at a loss, we have lost control, and this loss of control is the source of all our fears. And as I said earlier, loss of control is the result of desire, of movement in our souls. Self-love and pride, then, which tell us what to desire, cause our fear. We are our own worst enemy.

In reality, our pride is the scariest part of who we are. We need to fear the proud because they will stop at nothing to meet their own ends, to control a situation or a group of people, or to get us to serve their interests. And Satan leads the proud, and he is certainly worthy of our fear. He twists the truth; he hides the facts about who we really are. He makes us all cuckolds, cowards, and bastards— animals.

Animals live on instincts and desire because they fear being eliminated from the food chain. It is truly survival of the fittest, and as long as we continue to succumb to our fears, gratify our desires, and bathe in our own self-love, we are little better than the brute. This animal side of us is as far from who we truly are as people as the east is from the west. In order to discover who we truly are we must cross over the huge gap that is the terrible obstacle of fear. This in itself is a scary journey; maybe that's why so many of us choose to live in fear and die alone, all the while desiring something real and positive, just looking for it in all the wrong places.

Faith, Hope, and Love

When looking for meaning and purpose, look no further than to ask, “where am I looking for meaning and purpose?” It seems that all our problems and shortcomings boil down to looking in the wrong places. We must ask ourselves: where is our faith? Where is our hope? Where is our love? If any of these is directed at anyone or anything other than God, first and foremost, it will fail.

Let me begin with faith. Faith in anything but or above God is no faith at all. Faith, as I am describing it here, has to do with the believing in that which is not and cannot be seen. Thus, faith applies only to God. To apply it to anything else diminishes the power of the word. To have faith in other people is ludicrous. You can have confidence in them, but to say “I have faith in you,” or “I believe in you” is stating the obvious, and makes the speaker look like an overly sentimental idiot. Of course you believe in someone. After all, you can see them. And of course, you have faith in their ability to do something because you have seen them act. Seeing is believing in this world. And this is the crime. Seeing is not believing, it is acknowledging. Therefore, faith cannot be a product of sight, and thus it cannot be applied to other people.

The same can also be said for things. It is impossible to put faith into something because you know it exists and functions in this world. We can’t have faith in our car or

that it will make it through the snow. We can't have faith that a million dollars exists. We know it exists. That is another reason why seeing is not believing. We believe more because we know, not because we see. Faith is not knowledge, but we constantly try to reduce it to that. The sixth sense is stronger than our sense of sight. I wish we would realize this, but in this world we tend to cling to our sight, and walk by it, not by faith.

The atheist might say, "I have faith. I believe in hard work and getting what you deserve. And I believe that people are truly good at heart." This is not faith. This is taking something one is completely comfortable with and attaching to it the label of faith. This has become the norm today, and as a result true faith gets questioned because of lack of visual evidence. Is seeing believing?

Built into the framework of this world's faulty faith structure is a false sense of hope. I define hope as "hopeful people hoping that having hope in someone or something will hopefully bring them hope and meaning and purpose in life." Seriously, this word is so tossed around so much it has lost any meaning it ever had. This, too, is tragic because what this world refers to as hope is not true hope. It is expectation. And there is a world of difference between the two. Hope is a kind of faith in something unseen, unreasonable, or yet unattained. But the things that people hope for are usually the opposite: seeable, reasonable, and attainable. Hope, then, is actually expectation. I hope I win the lottery. I hope I make it big in Hollywood. I hope he feels the same way about me. These are not things worthy of our hope. They are petty and insignificant. With reality TV and get-rich-quick schemes taking over society, anyone can hit it big. With the diminishing morals of society and a total disrespect for the sanctity of love, marriage, and sex, anyone can make it to the top. Does it bother anyone else that things like

multiple sexual partners and divorce or the norm now? And what about the stupid little games people play? Anyone can create a desired effect in anyone else. Are there any “real” people left, with real faith and real hope?

No, only people with expectations. We are expected to fill certain roles. Gender, sex, social class, job, family— our roles in these positions are pre-defined, and thus expected. As a college-age, middle class male I am expected to make good grades, acquire good social standing, be a part of extra-curricular activities that round my character, and move from my schooling into a solid career. In relationships I must initiate contact, make the first move, be wholly monogamous, pop the question, and then get married in a wedding she plans and have 2.5 children. All of these things are expected of me, not hoped for me.

Granted, I may be being very stereotypical here, but our world has become this way. Everything and everyone is reduced to a stereotype and thus everything and everyone is expected to behave in a certain manner. This cannot be hope because hope has in it, no expectation. Hope is free of stereotype and selfish desire. The things we say we hope for often have selfish ends. What about heaven? Anyway, it is this selfishness in hope and misuse of faith that makes us abuse love.

Love is the single greatest force in the universe, but it has been belittled by misapplied faith and selfish expectation. We think we love, and that may be the root of the problem. In this world we have defined love rationally. All love really is is hormones, right; it is science— easily explained, not at all a mystery.

Love is knowledge, but it isn't scientific knowledge. It isn't even rational knowledge. It is the knowledge of the soul. We choose to either listen to that knowledge or not when we make the choice to love. Love is a choice.

Unfortunately though, it is a choice too often poorly made. People love money. They love sex. They love to be loved. They love themselves. They love others because others complete them, fill them in where they fail. Love was never meant to fill in the gaps. Love is the source of the soul, not the by-product of self-exaltation. Today people choose love because they themselves are not complete, which is part of the initial choice, but they choose to invest their love in all the wrong things. That is what I am getting after. Where do we put our love? Love is precious and doesn't deserve to be wasted on money or material things or even other people!

Now I realize the red flag has just gone up, but yes, loving other people is a total waste of emotion apart from or in place of God. This kind of love for others is self-serving and misplaced. Love is self-discovery through the loss of self, not a loss of self through discovery of another. Love is so completely over-romanticized to the point that people embrace what they think to be love so they can forget about everything else around them. Love, then, becomes their pride and their obsession. It becomes a dream, an illusion. This is not true love. True love is disillusioning, not delusional. True love is hard and real, not easy and romantic. Have we truly spiraled downward to the point of losing the true meaning of love. I think so.

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be Apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured

hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you; you have forsaken your first love.”*

This is Jesus speaking to the Church in Ephesus, but he is also speaking to all of us, telling us that this cycle of the self that we are on continues. And the only thing we really want— love— we have lost. If we cling to misplaced faith, expectation under the guise of hope, and self-fulfilling love, then we entirely miss the point of life, blinding ourselves from true faith, true hope, and true love. God makes all these real. To invest them in anything else is frankly a waste of time and a waste of soul.

Brokenness

Just as desire causes movement in our soul, the actions that come from that desire cause brokenness in our soul. Spreading our faith, our hope, and our love around to different people, places, and things divides us. It divides us because different parts of ourselves are dispersed unevenly among many different areas. I call these areas attachments, but they are more like magnets exerting force on our soul, pulling pieces of it away from its center. The result is brokenness.

We are all broken people. We have all divided ourselves in an effort to please either ourselves or someone else. Our search for love has rendered our souls ragged and disjointed. Our hearts, which I will use interchangeably with our souls, have many kingdoms. We are broken because we try to rule every kingdom no matter how important or insignificant it is. We struggle with alcohol, drugs, sex, roommates, friends, family, church congregations, annoying neighbors, all the while failing to realize that we only make these struggles worse by trying to control them. It doesn't matter what the problem is, we always have a better chance of getting help in solving it and actually solving it when we give up our control over it. But we don't. We insist on control, on being the center of attention. We put up an edifice of boldness and perfection and immortality. Nothing can faze us. There is nothing I cannot handle or fix on my own.

So thanks for offering to help, but no thanks. I guess we figure we got ourselves into the problem, we can get ourselves out of it. Seriously, how foolish and selfish is that line, yet we tell our children that all the time. After all, they have to learn to fend for themselves, right? Bullshit. I may have only been alive for 22 years but I know that the most important lesson one can learn is to ask for help. Yet in our society, we teach the opposite. Asking for help is a sign of weakness. We would rather lie to ourselves that everything is okay than we would ask for help. Because of our selfishness we have reduced the role of community in the world. All we are is a bunch of individuals with broken souls, running around alone, broken off from our sources of help— other people and God.

Now I am certainly in the minority here, but I wish communism had succeeded. Not Stalinism, but pure Communism. Okay, maybe not succeeded but certainly not made out to be the terrible worldly evil that it is. In its pure state it is beautiful. Nuts and bolts, it is a community supporting itself by supporting its members. The emphasis is on community, not the individual. And let's be realistic, God is a communist, for that matter so were the first Christians. God has given every soul and an equal chance to attain salvation. Jesus Christ preached equality and brotherhood and was a strong defender of the poor and downtrodden over against the rich and powerful. And if the first Christians, who sought to obey the teachings of Christ, pooled all their resources and supported the entire community according to need, is it not at least reasonable to believe that is what Christ taught or at least that that is the way He and His disciples lived while He was alive?

Anyway, my point is we are way too consumed with ourselves to acknowledge our need for others. We try and solve our own problems so as not to give up rule over the many kingdoms in our hearts. And we wind up divided. Everyone has heard the phrase ‘a house divided will not stand.’ Well that couldn’t be more true. If we insist on trying to control our own lives and its many different attachments, we will destroy ourselves. Our souls cannot live divided, separated from the center. This is brokenness. Desire, movement, attachment, control, brokenness, destruction, nothingness. We are all broken people, but being broken on account of our own pride gets us nowhere.

Sin, Death, and Hell

Brokenness is Sin. Our Sin is what divide our souls. I have often heard Sin defined as that which separates us from God. This makes sense in terms of brokenness. If being broken means being attached to things away from our spiritual center, and God is our spiritual center, then brokenness is the state of being away or separated from God. Socrates used this line of reasoning all the time. If $A=B$ and $B=C$, then $A=C$. It is a mathematical and philosophical principle.

Anyway, because of our Sin we cannot see God. We have turned our backs to Him, and chose instead to look towards death, for it is written that, “the wages of Sin is death”.* A wage is something earned. We have all sinned, and thus all fall short in God’s eyes, of being worthy of His Kingdom. Because of our Sin we have all earned the penalty of death, eternal death, hell. Hell is eternal death, everlasting separation from God.

I love Dante’s description in his *Divine Comedy* of the ninth circle of hell, where all the great sinners are. It is dark and cold, so cold that Satan is frozen in place and cannot move.* In a sense, this is the perfect metaphor for death- cold, dark, and paralyzing.

Nothing more, nothing less.

I sometimes laugh when people tell me they fear death. I know it's not funny but I laugh anyway at such a foolish and selfish fear because I know they are talking about physical death. In my mind this sort of death doesn't matter. What matters is the spiritual death, the death of the soul from sins that not only kill ourselves but kill others as well. An evil look; a sarcastic laugh; slander and libel; a wince at first sight of someone's new haircut; averting our eyes from the homeless, the drunken, and the prostitutes, the people in wheelchairs and walkers, or the ones with not enough hands; putting our heads down as we pass the salvation army bucket at Christmas time, or worse, looking the bell-ringer in the eye and saying something like, "I'm sorry, I don't have any cash." All these things are manifestations of sin that kill others. That kind of stuff is such a far cry from what Jesus did, yet we all do it all the time. Perhaps more than anything, the Gospels stress the fact that Jesus never passed anyone by without engaging profoundly in his life, yet we pass thousands each day with out heads down.

You know what really gets at the difference I am trying to get at— September 11, 2001. Millions of people guilty of everything above came out in droves to aid those in need, physical need. Where have they been the other 364 days of the year when people's souls have needed a boost? The soul is what is important; the body is merely a vessel. Now do not get me wrong, I am not saying we should just trash our bodies, nor am I saying we should ignore the bodily suffering of the afflicted. Not at all. There is a strong connection between physical and spiritual well-being. All I am calling for is a consistent balance between the two. Without that balance we cannot truly help those in need, physically or spiritually. "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye"?* Beware of judgment,

especially when we are not fit to do so. Too much of one, either the spiritual or the physical, and not enough of the other separate us from the God at our center.

Too often today, though, we forget about one part, and it is usually the spiritual side. We are a visual society, and if it ain't visually pleasing then it's got to go. It just makes me sick. Our country was supposedly founded on equality, yet its first two hundred years are scarred by oppression based on difference of appearance- the British had red coats, the Native Americans had feathers, the slaves had black skin, and then, of course, there is women. It makes me sick.

Sin makes me sick, so sick that if I stay in it I'll die. Living in it is like being on life support with the switch turned off because we'd rather die than accept help. Sin takes so many forms, and often it disguises itself as that thing we don't want to give up or yield to. It is a terminal disease with infinite symptoms, and the greatest symptom, as I have said before, is pride. The building up of and looking out for the self is the source of all our sin. And if it is not that, it is the tearing down of or looking away from the self, which is equally selfish. To seek the true self anywhere outside of the God inside is just the same as being your own God. A sin is a sin is a sin. And they all kill.

Death is the result, the effect of our sin on ourselves and the affect of our sin on those around us. Spiritual suicide and homicide. The only thing worth truly fearing is the death of our souls. I can't speculate on what death will be like, and I am talking about the spiritual, because physical death is nothing— eternal life begins with Salvation, and eternal death begins with Sin. This is all I know or can gather, assume, whatever. This, and that when our souls die, they die alone. Death is not nothingness. If it were, it

wouldn't be that bad. It wouldn't be anything— nihilism. Death is eternal hell— hell, eternal death— forever separated from our Creator.

Like I said, I can't speculate on death, or hell, or separation from God, and quite honestly, I don't want to speculate. It is dark there, and cold, damp, and smelly, like ashes and vomit, and probably small, constricting, and suffocating. Imagine living for all eternity in a casket, looking straight up into heaven, forever unable to attain it. That might be hell. That might be death. I don't know and I don't want to know. Hell is a state of mind that I choose never to enter, because just thinking about it leaves me feeling empty inside.

Emptiness

I don't have much left to say, and besides this is a somewhat hollow subject. Emptiness can be a good thing. When we empty ourselves of ourselves, leaving room only for God, that is a good kind of emptiness, but that really wouldn't be in line with all I have said thus far.

Emptiness is not "having nothing." Emptiness is "not having anything." There is a difference. To "have nothing" would be to possess nothing, to be attached to nothing, and in this we would actually have room in our souls to have everything. We could have God. This is good. But to "not have anything" is to possess things with no true value. It is to have no meaning or purpose in everything we have, and are, and do. This is sad. Death is emptiness. Eternal death, hell, is eternal emptiness. When we are empty, we are broken, divided to the point that a vacuum, a black hole stands where the center of our soul, our heart once stood. Nothingness, or better yet, not-anythingness, is all we have.

All of this because we choose to live in a world governed by time. We choose to live according to *our* desires, which create movement in our souls. And we fear because our faith, hope, and love are in places they don't belong, rendering us helpless to the pain, broken by the cold reality we have made for ourselves in this world— a reality of Sin. Abiding in this reality is death. Death is the world's greatest illusion, it's supposed end.

It is Satan's greatest lie— "You will not surely die,"* he said to Eve, who gave to Adam, and thus all man sinned, and died, earning Hell. Hell becomes our state of mind in this shadow of a world, and we exist as a shade of who we were created to be. We are empty, with no substance, meaning, or purpose. Empty, without true love, which is all we ever really wanted.

the man of **eternal rain**

Waiting

As I lie dying,* upright in a field,
I cannot see. I imagine the night sky salty.
The ground is frosty. Grass crushes,
melting beneath my hasty steps.
The Wind blows its chilling daggers through my body.

Standing in Ice, waiting,
I pray for an outpouring of
warmth from within, and an
object is placed in my hand,
long and silent, tickling
my nose with its sweet, flickering
warmth, spreading through
my fingertips, wrapping
itself gently around my heart.

The warmth I feel is
like hot chocolate after a day in the snow,
like shaking the calloused hand of a
homeless man, or like seeing
a child smile for no reason at all.

The warmth is real and
transcendent, making me forget
everything else in the world.

I could die knowing no better *thank you* to God, so I do.

The Wind's bite is now a distant memory
that goes unnoticed by my soul.
I remove the blindfold and see the source of
light and warmth. I am whole.

Timelessness

It is as if you have just woken up. You don't really know where you are, or more importantly where you have been, or most importantly where you will be. You feel completely stuck in a moment only faintly aware of your surroundings.

As your vision regains its focus, your eyes adjust to the new found light and you begin to see all at once that you are alone in a room, the light your only company.

Everything you hear is jumbled noise, indistinguishable and loud. But as you become more aware of the light, the sounds you hear begin to separate out and grow quieter. Oddly enough you realize that you have heard all these sounds before, but this time they are heard differently than before. You hear them with the light.

Coming out of the dark coma it is as if you emerge from what you were sleeping on, and the things around you regain their tangibility. The floor beneath you is hard but inviting. The back of your head hurts from the carpet-covered concrete but you don't miss having a pillow. It is as if now you don't even exist in the world of material things. You float above the floor, resting your head on the wind, and wrapping yourself in the blanket of light.

You finally become aware of your breathing and all the sweetest aromas dance in and out of your nose; lilacs at dawn mix with a hearth fire at Christmas and get

swallowed up by the smell of ocean waves meeting white sand. Aah, the smell of the ocean, real water, full of life. The scent causes you to lick your lips and you can taste the salt on your mouth, salty like your blood, but you are not scared. This is different blood, blood that in the light serves as water does everywhere else. It cleans, purges, purifies, and washes away. If you could live forever from simply licking the sweat of life from your lips you would, because for the first time in your life you are no longer thirsty.

This new awareness, all these sensations fade to one in the light leaving the sole memory of water and blood.* You just sit, wondering what you could be doing or how long it has been since you have been awake, or asleep for that matter. In your rest you were actually more in between being asleep and being awake and you remember the sights and sounds and feelings and smells and tastes you experienced while sleeping. You remember your thoughts and where you were, are, and will be. All of it comes back to you as a single shade in the lifetime of light you now call home. Finally you laugh, looking at the clock and noticing it is only three minutes since you last checked the time.

Timelessness is an extremely difficult concept to grasp. I try using the metaphor of sleep because we have all had one of those sleeping experiences where we can remember all our thoughts and we feel like we have been asleep for days, but it has been only minutes. I venture a guess that this is almost how time is in our relation to God. Our souls, like God, are not bound by time. In this sense we are timeless beings. To be exposed to God's light means to be forever in the waking moment of our eternal selves. We just think we are sleeping, while all along we are awake, in search of the light. The part of our life on earth spent in the darkness is when we are searching for God. The part of this life on earth that is spent with God, once we find Him, is this waking moment I

have described when we realize whom and where we truly are. And just like when we wake up and realize we never actually sleep, we see that with God we never actually die. Our eternal life with God begins the moment we enter into a covenant relationship with Him.

People want to always say, “I thought eternal life began with death,” and I Say, “no, it is already ongoing,” asserting that the most important part of who we are, our Spirit, does die a death to sin the moment we enter a covenant relationship with our Creator. It is then that we enter eternal life. And even though our physical bodies taste death, our spiritual selves fail to take notice from our heavenly perch. For saints, timelessness, eternity, everlasting life, and forever, are all present in this life.

This unity of time, or lack thereof, affects how we start to see the world. Seeing the world with timeless eyes is a difficult discipline, but is one worth expanding. Timeless sight enables us to experience complete freedom with full assurance of salvation. If we truly believe in the redeeming power of Christ we believe all our sins are forgiven past, present, and future, and more than that... they are constantly being forgiven.

Chew on this: God is omni-present so it follows that the same can be said of Jesus, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. You say, “Yeah, so what, everyone believes that.” But now read omni-present to mean not only that God is always here but also that He is always in the present, that is to say, the present tense. In the Book of Exodus God’s name as revealed to Moses is “I am Who I am.”* Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus echoes this self-title telling the Jewish leaders “Before Abraham was, I am.”* ‘I am’ is the verb ‘to be’ conjugated in the present tense, first person singular. To say ‘I am’ literally

means to be always in the present, so to be timeless for God means to be literally ever-present. For Jesus, then, this means that every moment He is born; every moment He heals and teaches; every moment He is crucified and dies; and every moment He is raised from the dead. C.S. Lewis best sums up this idea of timelessness when he says, “this moment contains all moments.”* Taking all this into consideration, every moment we experience is the fulfillment of all that has ever passed and the basis for all that ever will be. This is what enables God’s hand to reach us today: Jesus is always in the present atoning for our sins.

This is faith with timeless eyes, and it means that we embrace God’s free and ever-present Grace and abide in our spiritual eternity despite our earthly bodies being ultimately bound by time. Perhaps this is truly what it means to live life in the Spirit. Only in the sense that we are timeless are we ever truly free. Choosing to cast off this worldly body and live in the Spirit allows us to embrace the freedom that is in Christ and begin living forever, right now.

Stillness

The development of timeless faith is a necessary step in stopping the movement of our souls. By seeing ourselves as timeless beings and by disciplining our bodies and minds to be in harmony with our eternal selves, we are able to discover meaning and purpose in our lives. Now don't get me wrong— this does not mean that we immediately cease movement and achieve eternal calm in our soul— it simply means we begin moving along the only road that can lead us to this meaning and purpose. And the movement, the changing of fleeting desires, the suicide of self and soul, and the consequential harm against others begins to slow. Our desires are stripped away, becoming more simple and focused until they come to rest on a still, fixed point at the center of all things. This is what I call the Big Bang of the soul. It is a dense point of light and life just waiting to be discovered so it can explode and spread its contents all over our entire being.

This fixed point is total rightness. It is perfect harmony. It is uninterrupted silence. It is a small lake on a windless summer morning. It is a clear sky on a crisp autumn evening. It is fresh snow on Christmas morning, hot chocolate after your first day of ski lessons, or cold lemonade on a hot day. It is everything good. It is everything peaceful. It is a place of total rest, and it lives inside each of us.

In order to stop all our motion we must rest all of our soul on this point within ourselves. Doing this allows the point to radiate out from its center and affect the rest of our being. And it is only when we do this that our actions, thoughts, perceptions, and consequently, our desires can begin to change. It is where total meaning and purpose are revealed. And it is like you are breathing for the first time in your life— the breaths so easy, so pure, and so refreshing. All of this because we stop desiring for ourselves.

Only when we focus our desire by seeking the will of God can we ever come to this place of total stillness and rest. This still center, this fixed point in our souls is God; it is the mind of Christ; it is the Holy Spirit. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus invites us to come to him and find rest for our souls.* It is only in Christ, seeking after God's own heart that we can find our meaning and purpose. Ironically, it is only here where we can finally move freely, not bound by the restrictions of desire in a world of time. What is this movement?

Another part of the passage mentioned above from Matthew's Gospel has to do with taking upon us, the yoke of Christ (our own cross). This is an action requiring a movement of our soul, and it is the only "real" movement we will ever make in our lives. After we pick up the Cross of Christ and make it our own we achieve this perfect rest upon the still God of our soul, and we rest there forever, never to move again (I wish it were that simple). But there is strange truth in this idea of the cessation of movement once we fully abide in Christ. Instead of moving through life and through the world, we remain still and the world, and even life, moves around us. We never travel anywhere. We never reach out to anybody. People and places, all things are attracted to and drawn into this point, and when you stand on it, you are the center of the universe. But this is

not arrogance. To move is arrogance. By moving we exert force on the world in an attempt to impose our will upon it. By being still, we open ourselves up to be vessels, channels for God's movement. Thus, people and things are attracted to the center, to the movements of the Holy Spirit within, and God's will, not our own, gets imposed on this world.

So quickly to recap: all negative movement ceases with the act of taking up our cross, and we find ourselves resting completely within the will of God, the mind of Christ, the Holy Spirit. The feeling is total peace. I cannot describe the feeling, but I'll try. If you've felt it before, you'll know what I am talking about.

You went to bed the night before afraid because it was your first night alone. You can remember the sights and sounds and smells: the pale glow of the nightlight illuminating only a square foot in the corner of the room farthest from you bed, the moonlight peering through the slits of the blinds, the whisper of the gentle wind, the soft echo of a coyote in the nearby desert, the ticking of the grandfather clock downstairs, the smell of cinnamon cookies on the kitchen table. You sleep out of necessity bribing the morning with your tossing and turning to come quickly.

You wake up in the same lonely bed, in the same lonely room, in the same lonely house. You are lonely but not alone. His presence comforts you as you remember there is nothing to be afraid of. Instead of creeping nervously down the stairs you maybe slide excitingly down the banister.

Sitting at your kitchen table overlooking your desert surrounding, you see snow for the first time in you life. The purity sears the windows and sparkles the glass of

orange juice in you hand, filling your inquisitive spirit with wonder and awe. Running outside in your underwear, you dive into the snow. The chilling wetness unexpectedly steals the breath from your body with a shiver. Unable to even utter the exhilarating scream welling up in your chest you run back to the house laughing hysterically.

You put on your favorite warm, lazy morning clothes and wrap yourself up in your favorite blanket and sit in your favorite chair and read your favorite book. And suddenly the warmth and calm of your soul overcome you, and you pause to reflect on this newfound stillness. It is a peaceful breeze at even tide, a warm blanket and a Disney movie, Thanksgiving dinner with the family. Your heart smiles because you realize your oneness with your Creator— all because one real movement put you in a place of complete submission, dependence, and rest. Nothing can ever hurt you or cause you pain because in all that typically does, you realize, is simply an opportunity to love others from your resting perch on the still center of your soul.

The phone may ring, interrupting your meditation, and inform you of the death of your favorite aunt. She was the one who saved you from the wrath of your parents on that one vacation when you threw a fit. She was the one who bought you your first Nintendo and taught you how to cook macaroni and cheese from the box. She would take you golfing and teach you about the beauty of enjoying God's creation. She was the one who taught you to love. And now she is gone, forcing the tears to well and the heart to break and the thoughts of "why?" to creep in, yet there is peace.

All that comes out of your mouth is "I'm so sorry" as you attempt to comfort your cousin and promise her your prayers. You hang up the phone and smile through your

tears whispering softly to no one that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* That is what she taught you. There is no pain or suffering in death, only love.

You continue reading your book as the sun begins to melt the frost on the windows. When the warmth outside matches the warmth inside, you have discovered the great truth that total harmony lie in perfect stillness.

When we experience the stillness of God and restfully abide in Christ and take comfort in the promises of the Holy Spirit, we are forever untouchable. There is no such thing as pain or hurt or death or destruction. We possess all the power to overcome any trying time. We are Christ on the cross, willfully surrendering our Spirit to God. Sadness and tragedy do not break us, nor does the weight of the word; rather, we see in the most difficult of situations the chance to give up ourselves for the sake of love, just like Christ did for all the world. Find your still center and rest upon the Jesus in your heart.

“For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be you strength.”*

Here lies all strength and all hope and all love. Fear is a distant memory.

Fear

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”*

This is exactly what I mean by fear. Earlier I mentioned the close relationship between fear and pride, but now I speak of the even closer relationship between fear and love. But I believe pride and love to be opposites, so I must be talking about a completely different kind of fear.

To say that perfect love has no room for fear means that perfect love has no room for pride. Love and pride cannot co-exist. One is the root of all evil. The other is the root of everything good. Our goal for ourselves should be to become perfect in love. That includes, first and foremost, stripping ourselves of all pride. But this is very difficult, nay, impossible. So then how can we do it?

We must put our faith and trust in God, for He is Perfect Love. Once we do this we can be open to change within our souls. His perfect love for us will slowly eliminate all our insignificant fears and worries. But most importantly, we will be humbled, stripped of our pride, layer by layer. It is only then that the word fear can take on its new, true meaning. When we begin to experience the many changes God brings about in our souls, then we know the scariest thing we can do is look in the mirror. When we see our

true selves, naked, lacking all the excess we have worked so hard to build up in our lives, and we see how insignificant we are next to God, it is terrifying. And if it is not, then there is still pride in our reflection.

When we experience this loss of self that is so vital to our life's experience, our entire perspective changes on everything. Fear becomes awe and reverence towards the God of the universe who didn't have to create us or love us the way He does, but instead invites us to work with Him and for Him. He invites us to abide in His perfect love, completely detaching ourselves from the shackles of self-love, and to love others with the love He has given us. Love, just like fear, moves out of us from within. Of course love, unlike fear, moves out of Goodness, not of pride. And this is only because of the Holy Spirit.

It is extremely difficult to give ourselves wholly over to love, eliminating every selfish bone from our being, but that is what we are called to do. After all, Jesus did.

"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross. Therefore God also

highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

This is all we need to know. The Apostle Paul’s words still echo strongly in the hearts and minds of the faithful. For the saint, perfect love comes in imitating Christ, in knowing and doing God’s will. In fact, to love perfectly is to become the living, breathing will of God.

My greatest fear is living outside of God’s will for my life. I want to be doing what he wants me to do all the time. And it is so hard, but He is faithful always and will reveal Himself to those who seek Him with a genuine and humble heart. I have learned that over my years of searching— both with selfish eyes and selfless eyes— that it is much easier with selfless eyes.

How do we get there? It is simple: where is our faith? Where is our hope? Where is our love? If any of these looks anywhere but up, we cannot be in God’s will, doing the work He invites us to do. The Cross of Christ is a scary responsibility, but as He promises it is an easy yoke, and a light burden.*

Faith, Hope, and Love

Why are we so afraid? Why do we let our fears dictate our actions? I think it all goes back to our desire for love and acceptance. We are afraid of getting hurt by others, so we choose to not enter into relationships or pick up hitchhikers or help the homeless. To put fear to rest, people have always said to face your fears. This to me is ludicrous. How, for example, can you face your fear of death without actually dying? How can you face your fear of being alone in an age of cell phones? The only way to overcome fear is to simply not have any. We must crucify our fears, nailing them to the cross, realizing that He died so we would no longer fear. So it follows: to put our fear to rest we must place our faith, our hope, and our love in the Cross of Christ. When all of who we are and who and what we desire is directed upward, then we will realize we have nothing to fear— what could possibly happen to us?

Oddly enough, but not without purpose, this meditation falls in the middle of each series of meditations. And it makes perfect sense because faith, hope, and love— and the choices we make regarding these— lie at the center of who we are and who we will become as people. Hope breeds faith, and out of faith comes love. They are easily the three most important keys to our walk with God. Hope, faith, love— all these gifts are manifestations of grace that culminate in and are given their meaning by Christ.

I begin with hope this time because I feel it is the first step in discovering faith and in learning to love. I mentioned earlier the difference between hope and expectation. Nuts and bolts, expectation results in us getting disappointed. It results in nothing ever being good enough. Bottom line, it leads to broken hearts and wounded souls, but hope, true hope does not disappoint.* Hope mends hearts, fills souls, and is necessary for true happiness. So it follows that our ultimate hope should be in our ultimate happiness. Our ultimate happiness is found only with God in Heaven. So bam, above all else, if we hope in Heaven we should never have a dull or unhappy moment. Right? Wrong. Hope alone is not enough. Paul hits this concept right on the head in Romans when he says, “since we have been justified by faith... we boast in hope of the glory of God.”* By faith we are justified and granted eternal life beginning now, and then we hope for heaven and God’s glory revealed.

But faith and hope also work the other way. If you are at all like me you have faith because you have hope. I have hope that God, who or whatever God is, has a plan and will make all things right. It is this hope in a world that offers so little— a world in poverty, with starving children, rape, murder, abortion, bi-partisan politics, false democracy, war, I could go on— if we let this world get to us we would have no hope, but we must hope. Hope gives us the meaning and purpose we desire for our lives, and that hope, when channeled towards love will result in faith in God. So that makes God the pinnacle of our hope.

Hope gives us reason to do good and to love, and to love, most importantly, with reckless abandon. Hope is what gets us up each morning. Hope is what sustains us through difficult days. It is what keeps us aspiring to better and greater and higher and

more wonderful things. It keeps us reaching for God. The hope we have in goodness and love leads us to faith in God because God is goodness and love. Hope does not disappoint because God does not disappoint. In this way hope is almost tangible. It can be grasped, perceived, held, and cherished.

Faith, on the other hand, is an interesting and intriguing concept because it is so abstract. It is not tangible. It does not rely on evidence, but rather, feeling. Granted, many try and prove the existence of God, but ultimately it comes down to faith. I believe because I feel it. Faith is beautiful, many-sided, and unique. It comes from hope.

I spoke earlier that hope leads us to the conclusion that God might exist. Faith then, is the ultimate form of hope. It is knowing God exists. But it also has very real applications. Faith in God allows us to put faith in others because our faith is in the God in them, not in the actual people. Faith is trusting the good in others. Isn't that all faith really is... trust? Maybe.

But if faith is abstract, how do we show we have it? Part of it is trust. We trust God and others, but always God first. This way, if others fail us, we still have our faith and hope in God, who never fails us. To not trust is to not love, and to not love is to fear, and if we still fear, then Christ's died for nothing. And we all know that is not true, so we must crucify fear.

Another way to show faith is by action. After all, faith without deeds is dead.* I always have trouble discussing this because how we choose to serve is a personal decision. Service has many manifestations. Some listen to others. Some talk to others. Some preach. Some touch. Some heal. Some give care. Some aid the homeless, the starving, the sick, the lame, and the dying. Some give of their resources— tithing,

supporting missionaries, etc. Some serve our country in government or the military. The list goes on. I have often heard it said that it doesn't matter how we serve or how we act as long as we try and imitate Christ in it. And that is true. So true that someone made a lot of money embroidering it on those little WWJD bracelets. But I think this is an impossible ideal. Service is a giving of self, and the self we give of falls tragically short of Christ's self. We are merely human whereas Jesus was us plus God. Therefore instead of treating others like Christ would have treated them, I recommend treating others as if they were Christ. Faith then, and consequently service, isn't just trusting the Jesus in others, it is serving the Jesus in others, and doing so with reckless abandon.

I once gave a talk on faith, and I mentioned how faith must be like that of a child. A child is always asking questions because he is always seeking to acquire knowledge about a world that is a budding mystery to him. But why is it, when it comes to the question of whether God is real or whether Jesus was who He said He was, the questions cease? Trust and confidence in those truths are there. That is faith like a child. For a child seeing isn't believing; believing is seeing. In this way, I believe because I always have, and matters of faith I see and perceive, I see because I believe. Belief, faith, must always come before sight. This alone is the most important key to this whole mystery, this journey, this walk. So if hope is the 'maybe goodness and love exist,' then faith is the 'yeah, goodness and love definitely exist.' Why? How? Jesus. Jesus Christ is faith realized. He is the only evidence that can serve as a foundation for faith.

But what does it mean to say we have faith? Again, it is a choice. We choose not to let hope disappoint. We choose goodness and love and trust over evil and hate and

mistrust. We choose love. We must choose love. It is the single greatest force in the universe.

“For God so loved the world,”* begins perhaps the most recognized and beloved verse in all the sacred Scriptures. Love is what we ultimately hope for and have faith in. Love, itself, like faith, is an abstract, so how do we define it? God is pure love, but love is certainly not purely God. But love most definitely has divine qualities. In fact, it is the perfect mix of human emotion and divine feeling. So it might follow that love is Christ, who is also human and divine. This works. Love cannot be defined as God because ultimately God is unknown. He transcends logic and empirical study. Jesus, however, does not. He is real and therefore can be used to define love. And to love is to realize our highest calling— to be Christ in the world by serving Him and loving others. Truly then, true love is putting Christ at the center of everything we do— all our career efforts, relationships, daily actions, words, and thoughts— all of it. We are called to “walk in love.”* This, as we all know, though, is hard to do. But we must do our best to walk.

It follows then, that to even have the capacity for true love, one must have Christ. If one does not have Christ, he is incapable of true love. Apart from Christ, any love one has, feels, gives, shares, or experiences is simply a watered down version of the real stuff. So many times we put our love in places it doesn’t belong, in places where it can never be fulfilled.

The problem, as I see it, lies in our thinking about it. We think we need love to complete ourselves, and that is why so many of our pursuits of love along these lines leave us wanting. The only love that completes us is the only love we truly need— the love of Christ. His love alone is sufficient. What comes after that is up to us. We can

choose to love others to enhance ourselves. In love there is no need for fulfillment, there is only a choice for enhancement.

That is why it is truly impossible to fall in love. Yes, I said it is impossible. To fall means to go from standing upright to laying horizontal. The choice to love is not falling, but rather leaning. Leaning against the tree that is God, which is the cross of Christ. And if we choose to love another we lean against Christ and the other at the same time. This is love.

This does not mean that love is easy. It is still a choice and choices can be either good or bad. But love is the exception. People think to admit love is weakness. I argue that the person who chooses love has never been stronger. That is why I believe the decision to love is never bad, but unfortunately, it can sometimes be less than good. That is why we see abused women cling to their abusive husbands, or cuckolded men remain with their unfaithful wives, or soldiers die in support of their country's cause. Choosing to love can always have such drawbacks. That is why it is essential that we seek God and lean on Him first. Loving out of the love Christ gives us is true love. Choose this love because to gain Christ is far greater a reward than is being hurt by choosing not to love. In looking for love, we must first look for Christ. He won't disappoint.

So if God is love, then love is Christ. Choose love and hope to abide faithfully in it always. Love is realizing the power of God in the person of His gift to us, Jesus Christ. The fullness of that Love is Christ crucified and raised again, and what follows is ultimate truth and ultimate peace in the person of the third, the Holy Spirit.

Brokenness

“I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may *become* what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (italics are my words).*

Peace comes in the form of brokenness, and is the result of faith, hope, and love in Christ. As I said earlier, we are all broken people. Now, that brokenness can either leave us in pieces or it can leave us in peace. The choice is ours. When we channel all our faith, hope, and love back towards the center, that still, fixed point at the core of our being, a strange and magical thing happens. Although we are broken, fragmented by the many kingdoms in our hearts, we are whole, we are united. We are like an earthen vessel, once shattered, but now pieced back together and held in place by the glue that is God. When we give Christ rule over every kingdom of our heart; when we forfeit control over every part of our lives to Him; when we detach ourselves from our attachments, He reunites our souls. No longer are we spread thin among many insignificant attachments (those are simply thrown away), but we become fully involved in new things given us by the governing will of God. All things, when our desires yield in favor of God’s will, do

one of two things: die or take new shape. This is the difference between seeking God's will and being God's will.

Knowing that Christ is the glue that unites our fragile human spirits bonds us to Him, but also creates in us, a new place of warmth and compassion for others and to be shared with others. There is a beautiful and peaceful comfort in knowing that we all struggle, all lack, and all need, but that we all still cling to the love of Christ. This is called disillusionment.

Disillusionment is not an easy discipline. It requires an acknowledgement of and a peace about the many terrible and evil things of this world. But being disillusioned does not mean we resign to these things. Rather it means clinging to the real knowledge we have of God and to the real love we have from Christ. Christ never shied away from broken people, and they were always around Him. Instead, He felt compassion, pity, and sympathy for them, and He healed them with His grace, His mercy, and most of all, His love. He was not above brokenness just because He was God, but rather He embraced it as a part of our humanity, in which He Himself chose to share.

Sharing, that is what it means to embrace brokenness. What is sharing? Sharing is not proselytizing others or goings and converting the so-called heathen, but like I said, it is sharing in each others lives, investing in those lives, and loving because of, or regardless of those lives. Sharing is feeling. It is compassion. It is an investment in life and a vital part of what it means to be Christ, the will of God. When we do this, we confess the brokenness that bonds us all together and acknowledge our need for God, making room for the love of Christ to unite our spirit within ourselves as well as join our spirit to the spirits of all around us. It is through brokenness that we experience Christ

just as He was, a man, who knew what everybody was going through because He, too, experienced it. He had love and sympathy because he understood what it meant to be us. This is the natural beauty of Christ. He bore our burden, and thus we are invited to bear each other's burdens. The choice to be incarnational, to have the mind and heart and spirit of Christ, is to experience life the way it was intended to be lived: in love, plain and simple.

Grace, Life, and Heaven

Sin is brokenness. But now I am speaking of this relationship in a different light. Sin, not as this awful disease deserving of death, nor as the many evil things we do, but simply as brokenness, a state of being incomplete, insufficient, and hurting. The reason for this is because sin walks such a fine line between evil and weakness. What about the single mother who resorts to prostitution to raise her children because she can't get another job? Or the man who steals from the grocery store in order to feed his starving family? Or the refugees in a country where genocide rules who worship as saviors the soldiers that bring them bread? These are all examples of brokenness, of broken people not necessarily broken because of evil sin, but rather circumstance. Unfortunately the religious right in this country have made grace a matter of social class. But then again they have the illusion that they are not broken. And when I say brokenness I mean sharing in what it means to be human, and participating in the humanity of Christ. And just as Christ needed a divine side to complete his human self, we need the same. We need a touch of the divine that whispers softly, "It's okay to be human." This touch, this whisper, is God's grace and mercy.

I've heard grace defined as "undeserved favor" and as "something that just doesn't make sense," and I think both are true. Despite all our sin—no scratch that—

because of our sin, the fact that we are broken people, insufficient in and of ourselves, God graces us. His grace is in the form of unfailing acceptance, unconditional love, and undying responsibility, both on His part and ours. God created us in His image for one purpose, to live in communion with Him forever and always. And even when we sinned, when we turned away, when we became broken, He never stopped loving us. He never turned His back on us. He never gave up. God made a choice when He created us to love us, because God is Love. And His love didn't stop when ours did. It continued and persevered, timeless in a world bound by time, until God made another choice—to show us just how much He loved us by sending His only Son, Jesus, to die on the Cross.

Jesus is the visible manifestation of God's Love and Grace. Love's flawless example was God's Grace. Christ was necessary because we didn't get it. He died so we might see the magnitude of God's love and be restored to our rightful place before the throne of our Lord. Love and Grace, in the form of Christ, covering our sin— removing it, striking it from the records, so our souls would be reforged into the Garden of Eden they once were.

Grace is a difficult concept because it doesn't make any sense. But it all boils down to the fact that God has never and will never stop loving us. We can't choose God, and we can't choose Christ because God chose us when he created us, and He put His divine stamp on us when He sent Jesus. All we can do is choose whether or not to respond to what God has already set in motion. Earlier I spoke of a life lived unresponsively. A life lived for ourselves and for our own desires. It has its end. But so does the respondent life. Its end, well, actually there is no end. Only life.

Life. True life only exists in Christ. Anything other than that is a shadow of what life was designed to be, and life, sadly, has many shadows. I feel bad for the people who choose not to embrace life on account of the shadows, the many bad things of this world. I embrace life because of those things. I can relate to the abused, neglected, starving, and slave, for I was once all of these things, and I am broken because of my experience. In this sense we all share something in common— our brokenness and our desire to truly love and to truly be loved. Life is so precious, so hard, so easy, so short, yet so eternal. “To live is Christ.”* The two— life and Christ— are synonymous. We can’t have one without the other.

I have so much I could say about life, real life, the way it was intended to be lived. My words would fail me, but I would say it is waking up on soft white sand next to the bluest ocean after sleeping under a cloudless, starry sky the night before. The sun would be only half way up inviting you to enter it by walking across the water on its trail of light extending all the way to the gentle waves rippling over your toes. In the distance the songs of birds calling to the morning, begging for the day, sounds like your favorite melody— the one you heard in your heart the night you chose to love the person next to you, sleeping softly, the dawn warming her soft cheeks, slowly melting away the sleep from her eyes. She is total peace. And then, a miracle. From a cloudless sky, it starts to rain drops of pure, living water. You stick your tongue out to catch the rain, and a drop hits your tongue as a snowflake, and melts. You can’t control the smile on your face, as the corners of your mouth creep upwards towards heaven. You experience, for the first time, pure freedom, and you dance in the rain.

Life, to me anyways, is dancing in the rain. No other way, it seems, does this all fit together better. Dancing in the rain is enjoying God's creation, honoring it. It is glorifying God with our bodies, creating something beautiful, not caring about what we look like or how we will look or what others might think. We dance in the rain because we overflow with the abundant life of Christ in us.

Rain has always held a special place in my heart. It has always symbolized life for me. It replenishes and restores a dry cracked earth and brings forth new life as well as helps old life grow. Just the same, the Holy Spirit, our spiritual rain, waters our dry, cracked souls, replenishing them and reviving what once was dead back to life. We are called to walk in that spirit. We are called to dance in the rain.

Heaven. What else is there to say really? Heaven, too, is a state of mind, as well as, I believe, a real place. But since I've never been there I can't tell you what it is like. So I can only imagine it with my flawed and finite mind. Maybe Heaven is not just something that is to come. Maybe it is also experiencing fully the life that is now. Maybe true Heaven is something like perfection. But then our idea of Heaven is simply perfectly imperfect. The only thing I am sure of then, is that it is always.

Grace. Perfection within our broken souls thanks to Christ's death on the Cross. Life. Christ resurrected. Dancing in the rain. Heaven. Perfectly imperfect. *Perfection.* *Always.**

Fullness

Jesus Christ said, “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”*
Life abundant. Life to the full. This is true life.

It is hard sometimes, in this world, to believe in this kind of life— a life with no pain or suffering, worries or anxieties. We are surrounded by death, sickness, and poverty— brokenness. The only news we seem to hear is that of rapes, murders, and kidnappings. But as I said earlier this is an illusion. I am not saying that suffering is not real. The illusion is merely saying that all this suffering adds up to death. Disillusionment is a discipline of the saint. As saints, we are called to see these things, to suffer because of our bond to all who suffer, but to overcome the death in it all with love and grace and life. Christ suffered for us on the Cross. In rising from the dead he overcame suffering. He destroyed death. It is the hope of the Resurrection that allows us to experience true love and true life and share that with others.

When Christ said, “it is finished,”* He meant ‘it is completed.’ ‘It has been fulfilled.’ Then it follows that we are finished, completed, and fulfilled in and through Christ. And just as He rose, destroying suffering and death, we, too, must rise each day, suffering only for the Gospel. We must live. We must walk.

Although we live in a world of time, we live by our spirits, so our world is timeless. In this timelessness we rest forever on Jesus, the fixed, still point at the center of our being. We don't fear because all we are— all our faith, all our hope, and all our love are channeled through that stillness and made perfect by the Holy Spirit despite, or perhaps because of, our brokenness. It is God's grace that reunites our souls. And we know God's grace is real because it makes no sense, save in the person of Christ Crucified and Resurrected. In fact, this is the only true reality, and because of it we can experience life to the full. And that is our definition of Heaven, a state of mind fixed on the fullness of life in Christ. Always, in everything, recklessly abandoning ourselves to the foot of the Cross, the Holy of Holies behind the veil in our hearts. And there, waiting before an empty tomb, the stone of ourselves rolled away, we will see God. All we have to do is believe, and we will see Him everywhere.

Fullness of life, filled with meaning, purpose, and true love. And thus, in Him, we have all we ever really wanted.

the **BarRoom** Diaries

Poetry

is safer in the mind
of the author, free from
criticism and misinterpretation,
where tucked in the dark,
narrow recesses it burrows
and digs itself through the
sinews of the soul and
hides amid bones of
personal experience and
muscles of possibility.

Its melody travels at
light speed throughout
the body, the fire of
each synapse builds
and builds into a
crescendo
of painful repression
that causes the skin
to grow anthills and the
eyes to twitch and water.
Blood rushes to the stomach—
nausea, cold sweat.

The Symphony
tortures the soul until
the hand writes.

Introduction

Allow me to introduce myself. I come from Heaven... only I'm not always there. This obviously means that I am dead... yet not always dead. For example, right now, sitting here at this bar I am not in Heaven and I am certainly not dead. I'm actually meeting someone.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry, but are you talking to me?"

"Look around, there's no one else here. Of course, I'm talking to you. Yet, I am not just talking to you."

"What do you mean? Like you said, I'm the only one here."

"I know."

"Who else are you talking to, then?"

"Whoever has ears to hear."*

"Right... but I'm the only one here."

"I know that."

"Then how can you possibly talk to anyone else?"

"I have this story."

"You have a story."

"Yes, a story. Would you like to hear it?"

"I'm sorry, but I thought you said you were meeting someone."

"I am."

"And you are going to tell him a story."

"Yes."

"And you want to tell me your story to pass the time until he comes."

"Sure, if that's how you see it."

"How's that?"

"As simply passing time."

"You're losing me."

"Shall I begin the story, then?"

"Huh?"

"I will begin the story now. You may like it."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute..."

When I first met Lukas Green he confessed to not being the best driver. I smiled in sarcastic agreement admiring the new dent he had just put in my rear bumper, but before I could even open my mouth he had called the tow truck company and had arranged for my car to be completely repaired by his family's personal mechanic in Boston. It was a Tuesday afternoon, and all that was left of the damp, drizzly October morning were a few sparse wet spots on the road and a tiny puddle taking the shape of a pothole just a few feet to the right of where we were standing. The sun was cold, unable to penetrate the thickness of the air, making the extra layers of clothing necessary. It was uncharacteristically cold for this early in the fall, but if anyone looked at the already dead trees and heard the lonely sounds of birds chirping, left behind by their families already

gone in search of warmer climates, he would have known that the early winter would bring new and unexpected challenges.

“Do you like it so far? I think it is a good start.”

“Who’s Lukas?”

“What do you mean ‘who’s Lukas?’”

“I mean who is he and why should I care about him?”

“He is just a man with a story. But no more time for questions because we really must get going. It is a long story, with many parts and many people. Before we get into it, though, we need to go over some rules.”

“Rules? What do you mean rules?”

“Rules. Rules for telling a story.”

“Like what?”

“They are more like apologies, really. First, excuse me if I shift tense occasionally from story to story. I am merely telling each story as I received it.”

“Okay.”

“And if I tell a story in first person, it isn’t necessarily me telling it, but rather some arbitrary I, so don’t get confused.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope, only this is my first time, so if it takes me a while to find my groove, don’t give up on me. It’s good if you let it be good. I promise. Ready?”

“Are you sure you want to tell me this story? I mean your friend is probably going to be here any minute.”

“Woe unto me if I tell it not.”*

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Turn the page and listen.

The Reason for History

Synergy is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is this principle that I find to be true more often than not. Look at the comedies of Shakespeare or those of Dante. Look at any coach at a press conference after winning a game in which his team played poorly and should have lost. The end is what concerns us here, not the means. But we must be careful because if we don't know where we're going, any road will get us there. That being said we begin our tale with the tragedy, of sorts, of two souls, well, of at least one, but I warrant the reader not to be discouraged by this. This tale is just the beginning of the comedy that is the life of a hero, or of several heroes, I'm not really sure. Nevertheless, the two souls we speak of here may or may not have anything to do with our hero, or heroes; for all I know one of them may turn out to be the hero, or one of the heroes. Regardless, their story has bearing, as does any story about heroes. Oddly enough, they have no names save those given them by God, which unfortunately are unbeknownst to us down here. This is a rather inauspicious way to begin our heroic comedy, don't you think? After all, what kinds of heroes don't have names? Thankfully, poetic license grants us the freedom to just make some up, so we shall call them Laura and Joe for the ease of telling their story.

When we meet Laura, we shall look upon a young woman no older than twenty. The auburn tendrils of her hair fall delicately upon a soft, sweeping forehead often criticized for being too high. But the curls help to shape her round face well, offsetting her deeply recessed, bright green eyes that appear as black forests to casual lookers on. Her eyebrows are thick— just enough to give her face an overall dark and sour appeal. Her nose is average in size and shape, but always running, so it is fringed with dry, raw, red skin from where she is constantly and violently rubbing a tissue. Her lips are thin and pale, contradicting the dark upper half of her face, but they are attractive nonetheless, hiding perfectly straight, glistening white teeth. Behind all this oral pretense is a voice box that is constantly in use. Laura is a talker, some might say a philosopher even, never afraid to speak her mind and always confident she is in the right. It is her nickel and dime anecdotes and witty use of language that balance out what is a simply average, if not unappealing figure. She has no outstanding features. Her neck is short, giving way to relatively broad shoulders, an insignificant chest, narrow hips, and skinny, but strong, legs.

Joe, on the other hand, could not be more in opposition in nearly every category to Laura. His size twelve, thirty-year-old feet are nearly always covered with something, and he always wears pants. I think he does this to cover up his chicken legs. His upper half is muscular, making him top heavy, and his gait illustrates this perfectly, as he sort of lumbers, bouncing with each step as if purposely trying to make cracks in the earth with each footprint. His jaw is strong and its line pronounced, protruding outward into nothing, but his chin is flat. This heavy jaw makes it hard for him to keep his mouth shut, but he manages more often than not, which makes him a listener, and thusly, a foil for

Laura. But to call him a good listener would be a grave misunderstanding. Good listeners stare at the one they are listening to, as if they are listening to the heart, not to the words. Joe is more the hearer. He hears words emptily as his light brown eyes dance about the room and he thinks about other things behind his narrow forehead, hidden by a thick mop of sandy blond hair.

That is how the two of them met. She liked to talk and he didn't. And this is where their story begins, at a bar in the bronze hours of the evening. Mike's Bar had only a handful of patrons this early Tuesday evening— Joe and then an odd trio composed of two girls and a guy who seemed in a hurry, perhaps just passing through town. The weather had been warm for early spring, making a trip to the bar after work seem like a good idea, but the setting of the sun brought a bitter, clear night that sent most of the usuals home to their families. The stars above looked frosted by the cold, and the few stray clouds that dispersed themselves throughout the sky looked black against the purple dome.

Inside Mike's the lights were a notch above good reading level, perfect for Joe who simply wanted to sit and unwind from his long day barricaded in that corner office. His profession eludes me, but rest assured the information given here is sufficient. Joe is a happy guy, just lonely at times. He lives alone in an apartment for at least three. There was a time in his younger, more virulent years that he came and sat at Mike's in hope of finding someone to help him fill the emptiness. Over the years, his visits to the local spot have gotten progressively earlier and more frequent, and his reasons have become unbeknownst to any of us, really. "A beer please," he said, not really caring what kind. He used to be a glutton for Mike's famous Beantown Brew, a pilsner adored in the New

England region because of its light nature and bitter aftertaste, but another thing that has diminished over the years is Joe's passion for choice, or maybe they all just started tasting the same, or at least they all achieved the desired effect. Because of this change in taste, and ultimately worldview, I would probably call him a sadly indifferent man, perhaps jaded by loneliness and no longer comforted by the familiar stone walls with pictures of Boston legends on them. Aerosmith, Roger Clemens, Larry Bird, and Bobby Orr to name a few. They, like many other things had become unchanging fixtures in a life apathetic towards change. In short, Joe and Mike's were the perfect match. He wanted to be alone, and the bar let him be. The odd trio had left about fifteen minutes ago, so things were going great, at least until she walked in.

Laura, studying history at Boston College, had only started coming to Mike's around the New Year with some sort of resolution to get out more. She loved it for its quiet disposition in the early evening, so she chose to come and study for school, usually alongside a diet coke and some chicken fingers with soy sauce, a not so odd combination considering the oddities of her character, but perhaps puzzling to anyone wondering why a New England bar would have a need for soy sauce. Her clothes never matched and she wore old librarian's glasses. When she wasn't at school or at Mike's she was in her apartment (she shared with two girls and one boy) wrapped up in a blanket in front of the television eating popcorn and stroking her cat with buttery fingers, giving Jenga's milky gray fur a shiny tinge of yellow. Anyway, she had assumed her usual position at her favorite corner table, where the light was adequate for schoolwork because of the alley lights outside the window. She too had become well known around Mike's, so much so that within 10 minutes of her sitting down, the bartender had her usual meal delivered to

her table. But for whatever reason, today, she wasn't busy with schoolwork, so she got up shortly after the food arrived and sat down next to Joe at the bar. He half-smiled after taking a sip of his beer, as she began a one-way conversation with the bartender.

"You know what I realized today? Let me tell you. People don't really change. We've all been pegged from the start to serve some purpose or to do something, and everything that happens to us throughout life; heck, everything that has ever happened in the entire world serves its purpose. I have studied history intensely for about a year now, and I am just starting to see this concept. History has happened the way it has happened because it couldn't have happened any other way. And what I realized today is that the same rules apply to our lives that apply to history. After all, history is made up of our lives, is it not? It is just on a smaller scale. In a sense, our lives are like a chapter in God's history book. Ha, I just thought of a joke. Why do they call it history? Because it is *His story*, God's story. That's neat, huh? I never thought of that. Anyway, you get what I'm saying?" The bartender smiled and nodded while drying several glasses with the towel in his back pocket. Joe just sat confused because he really hadn't been listening to what she said, only a word here and there, so what he did hear made no sense whatsoever. "What do you think mister?" she asked. "My name's Laura by the way. I'm a student at BC. I see you in here all the time, but watching you drink I know you're not an alcoholic. Those guys are usually smiling this early in the evening. Doesn't your family miss you this time of day? How old are you? You there. Hello. Mister. Anything?" She stared at him with sarcastic eyes and jokingly did the half-wave thing in front of his face, trying to instigate a response. "Please say something."

"Joe is his name," said the bartender.

"Thanks," Joe said, looking at the bartender with aggravation.

"Well Joe. You just seem like a really nice guy, and a good listener at that. What do you think about what I said? I know you've got an opinion. People always do, about everything. Oh, and forgive me for skipping the small talk and maybe pushing a little, but I really enjoy conversation that is more than simple bullshit. It seems that that is all people really do these days. I think that's sort of sad, but I figure in a bar philosophers are a dime a dozen; heck, everyone is after they've been drinking for a while. At my school the philosophy club meets at a bar. That just proves my point. I'm sure you've heard something one of your many times in here that has stuck with you, huh Joe?"

"I hear a lot of things. Most of them I ignore."

"But surely you have some sentiment. And I'm sure that the only reason you choose to ignore all the others is because you feel they could probably care less about what you have to say, but I do care what you have to say. What do you think of my little speech?"

"Say something... anything... please?"

"Look Miss..."

"Name's Laura."

"Whoever you are, Laura. I'm sure these conversations go over pretty well with your friends, but I'm not interested. I'm content to just sit here and drink. I like my life when it is that way. Barkeep, I'm ready to pay my tab." Joe started to get up, but Laura spun his chair back around towards her.

"I don't believe that you are at all content with your life," Laura responded.
"Were you indeed content, you would value human contact and correspondence, two

things, which from the looks of you, you neither have nor apparently desire. You know what I think? I think you've been given a raw deal. You've got a good guy in there somewhere Joe, what happened?

"You're not gonna answer me, are ya Joe? Well then, I'm sure sorry for whatever did happen to you because I really would like to get to know you a little bit this evening. I don't think that's so much to ask, but hey, do me just this one favor and listen to this one thing."

Joe looked over reluctantly, taken hostage by her emerald eyes, which glistened ever so softly in the bar lights like a plush meadow bathed in sunlight after a gentle afternoon shower. His eyes, as she no doubt noticed, were tired and near the point of tears, yet too dry. His forehead looked aged by his apparent sadness and his jaw sagged in contradiction to its usual dominant presence. He sighed partly to say 'what' but also to signal her to speak her piece.

"There is a certain peace," she began, "in knowing that no matter what happens, it happens for a reason. I know that sounds cliché, but it is true. You seem not to believe like I do, but that is ok. I pray one day you do. Sorry I kept you so long Joe, you can go now," and she shooed him away with a wave of her left arm after slapping the bar. Joe just sort of nodded his head several times, slapped the table lightly with his right hand and ran it slowly across to his left as he spun counter-clockwise off of his chair and reached for his coat. "Can I ask you one more thing, Joe, and you don't even have to answer if you don't want to." He half shrugged and agreed to one last question.

"What brings you peace?"

The question must have come as quite a surprise to Joe because it caused him, after a moment of looking out the window, or maybe towards the ceiling, with his squinted eyes and his head cocked ever so slightly to the left, to sit back down in his chair. He spun back and looked into her eyes unsolicited this time and answered her, but not with the expected coldness or bite that she had expected from him. "Just sittin' here, enjoying a beer or two at the end of a tough day," he said. This response prompted Laura to smile partly because Joe finally responded, and partly because she liked his answer.

"Well Joe, I know you were getting' ready to leave, but if you'll stay and chat I'll buy you a beer. What do you say?" Joe half smiled and nodded with surprisingly little hesitation. He would humor her. "Jimmy" (that would be the bartender, a relatively stock character in our story and a relatively stocky man in life, but he always wears a smile beneath his thick moustache, and were he asked what he thought of Laura's earlier dissertation he would have most certainly agreed) "two beers please, Beantown Brew." She ordered with pride and confidence as if she had just won something and was ready to celebrate.

It took Jimmy a minute because he was on the phone when she had placed the order. He knew that she wasn't legally old enough to drink, but he chose to ignore the fact on account of her most impressive victory and grabbed some glasses. In the course of Laura and Joe's discussion, several more people had arrived at Mike's. A nicely dressed couple was sitting at the table Laura had earlier vacated and were already eating their food. And a three guys, all wearing blue shirts with their names embroidered on the left chest had situated themselves at the other end of the bar and were already on their third and probably final round, each man having bought one. Waiting for the beers she

ordered, Laura sat patiently and finished her food, now cold because she had neglected it while raving about the reason for history and successfully seducing Joe into staying for a while longer. Joe just stared at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Liquor bottles distorted the view of his face, which he laughingly imagined, in light of his recent and now apparently ongoing conversation, looked that way for a reason. He licked his parched lips in anticipation of Laura's thoughtful gesture. "Here you go," Jimmy said, placing the pints on coasters thrown down seconds before. A simultaneous "thanks" followed as Jimmy nodded, smiled, and walked calmly to the other end of the bar.

"Thanks," said Joe.

"Drink up," said Laura starting to laugh, "and maybe you'll start talking a little, and share with me some of your philosophy."

"Doubtful, but I'll humor you with my company."

"You're funny. That's a pretty quick wit for someone who hasn't said but ten words in the last half-hour. I'm impressed, Joe"

"I'm not an idiot, ya know."

"I know, I don't think you are an idiot at all. Just lonely." This remark caught Joe in mid-sip and saw him stop drinking, remove the rim of the glass from his lips, and look her direction out the corner of his eye. The pause lasted a brief second before he resumed his sip, but the effect of what she said registered in both of them.

"Good guess. What, did that only take you five times of seeing me in here before you figured that one out?"

"Sarcasm. I bet that's why you've been so quiet. It takes you that long to think of something like that to say. I guess I was wrong about the whole quick wit thing. Why

are you really lonely, Joe?" She was grinning, yet genuine as Joe let out a 'huh' that shook his frame and cracked a sly smile.

"You don't quit, do you?" Joe said.

"Well, ya know, I care about you, Joe."

"You don't care about me. You just met me. It takes people years to really care for someone, and sometimes you wait and never get it."

"I care about everyone, Joe, regardless of time, and I think you just let me get a glimpse of why you are so sad."

Joe realized he had let something slip and wished he hadn't, but there was something about this little college girl that almost made him want to open up. Believe it or not, Joe had always been a very open guy. He had even been married once before for about three years if I remember correctly, but he had left her because he suspected her of cheating. He doesn't know this, but she never did. She loved him deeply just didn't know how to show it that well. And it seems obvious from his conversation with Laura that Joe needs someone who knows how to show affection. I am not sure why his need for affection is so deep, nor his insecurities so quick to arise, but all that matters is that he is this way. After all, were he not, he would never have met Laura on this day.

"It's nothing really," Joe said. "What I said was just a part of my philosophy you so badly wanted to hear."

"Philosophies are always grounded in experience, Joe, or else they are paper-thin. And you sounded thoroughly convinced when you said what you did about people caring, that I really think that is your stance on the issue. What I want to know is why, Joe?"

Joe took a deep breath in through his nose, scrunching his face in anger. “All right, now you are really starting to aggravate me. Even if I did want to share my experience with you, which, by the way, I don’t, you couldn’t say anything that would help me, so just let me finish my beer and leave me alone.”

Laura exhaled forcefully causing the coaster to rustle along the top of the bar. Her hair had almost completely fallen out of its ponytail and her hands, made cold from the glass of beer, were now trembling with nervousness, concerned about what might happen next. Her feeling of helplessness at this point was compounded by the effects of the stout drink in front of her, which to the best of my knowledge was her first. Reacting to the dizzying panic, she did the worst thing possible, she began talking.

“She left you didn’t she, Joe. Your wife? She left. I knew it. You know, I could help you if you’d listen to me. I have dealt with this sort of thing before. Something very similar happened to my brother. His girlfriend cheated on him. He was and still is devastated. And I have helped him through it, or at least I have tried. Like you, he doesn’t respond very well to me. I think he still looks at me as his little sister— well I’ll always be his little sister, but I mean that he still looks at me as if I were eight years old or something and unable to help. In fact, a lot of people don’t ever want my help when I offer it. And that stinks because I know if they would just listen they might hear something that would help them, but they never want to listen. But at least they usually just ramble about their problems to me. You don’t even do that. I gotta tell ya, Joe, I’m at a loss here.”

Joe had become vehemently upset both with himself, his situation, and Laura, and had made up his mind to leave as soon as she granted him an opportunity. “Well that’s a

first. What? Nothing left to say. Well I've got something to say. Maybe people never listen to you because you never shut up enough for them to process all you say. Thanks for the beer, but that is about all you can do for me. I wish I could say it was nice to meet you. Good bye!"

Laura wept.*

The bartender walked over and placed a glass of water in front of her and wiped down the bar where the two had been sitting. "I called you a cab, Laura."

"Thanks Jimmy" was a teary response.

"And just so you know. I think you really did help Joe. That is the most I have heard him say and the most emotional I have seen him in quite some time. And I think he was wrong with what he said about people not listening to you. If anything, people don't listen to you because they don't want to admit that you are right. Joe is pretty hard on himself. I think he has convinced himself that he is okay being sad and lonely forever, even though it kills him deep down. Some people just can't be helped. But don't you stop tryin' because I think you're great at it, and one day someone will thank you for it."

"Thanks Jimmy," said Laura drying her eyes with her sleeve as she rose to go outside having heard her taxi honking.

"Don't mention it. And Laura, remember what you told Joe. All this stuff happens for a reason."

"Does it though," she said looking back as she slowly lunged out of Mike's bar, having left a healthy tip for Jimmy on the table.

The clock in the taxi read 8:30 as she slammed herself inside. The outdoor air was cool, not cold, but still the wet trails from the tears she recently cried felt icy as she

rubbed her cheeks with the back of her hand. The trip home was only a about ten minutes, but for the entire time she just stared into space, her forehead pressed firmly against the window, the moisture from her brow creating a fog that glowed blue in the city lights.

Psalm 30:5

*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.**

I seriously considered not telling you this story on account of its brutal and graphic nature, but she insisted that every last detail of it be penned and shared with the world, so I am therefore obligated. Please forgive me if at times I struggle with it, or get too choked up or sick to continue. This is not easy for me, but I draw from her strength. “Have no fear in telling my story,” she once said to me. “After all, it had to happen.” So I will tell it.

It was a dark, cold, and stormy night...

No, wait a minute. That is too clichéd a beginning. I beg your pardon.

Once upon a time, in a land not unlike Boston, Massachu...

Oh, I can’t start like that. A beginning like that conjures up images of cartoons through the looking glass, and this story is certainly no fairy tale. I think people, unfortunately get the wrong impression about stories, and about life really. They think this life owes them something. They think they deserve a fairy tale. Well, newsflash, life is seldom a fairy tale. It is often tragic and pitiful, but as Othello once said, it is “wondrous pitiful.”* So I guess life simply boils down to endurance. How do we endure? Anyway, I am getting a little bit ahead of myself. It must be my subconscious

trying its best to avoid this story. But like she said, it had to happen, so I will stop procrastinating.

Diane sat plainly behind the counter, rhythmically tapping the countertop with a parade of falling fingers. Her nails, recently filed down to just slightly above the fingertips, showed the scarce remnants of bright red nail polish that matched her lipstick, which vibrated off her sunken and hollow face. Her hands were tired and wrinkled but her arms and shoulders were strong from many years flipping pancakes and cutting up potatoes for home fries on the same greasy island, separated from real happiness, real freedom, by a miserable, yellow countertop.

Every night when she got home she would gracefully kick off her shoes, unbutton three or four buttons on her shirt, wrestle in wrenching the stubborn elastic from her frosty brown ponytail, and sigh heavily as she sunk into the discomfort of her silver loveseat. After fifteen or twenty minutes of sitting the day into the past, she would shower, put on her pajamas, fix her favorite bowl of cereal, and watch Nick at Nite. Her kitchen was large enough to fit only her, but she did have a dishwasher that was seldom used because of a strange affinity for paper plates and bowls and plastic silverware. She didn't have much other furniture in that small, single room apartment—a table that doubled as a desk, two chairs (both horribly uncomfortable to sit in for more time than it takes to brush one's teeth), and a bed, a twin, with a mattress that required unique positioning of the body to avoid a spring popping up through a worn spot in the fabric. She would sleep four restless hours every night with her television casting silhouettes about the walls and ceiling. And in the morning, she would wake up, go to work, and repeat the cycle.

She spent her mornings at work unloading the truck that would arrive with the day's food allowance every day at 5 AM. This process usually took about three hours once all the boxes were inside and in their proper places— the meat and other frozen stuff went in the freezer, the milk and eggs to the walk-in cooler, and the dry goods to the pantry— so she would hit the counter around 8, when Mike's Diner saw the biggest of the breakfast rush. All morning she worked, usually with the help of two or three other ladies— her age and station in life— taking orders, cooking food, and ringing tickets.

Her first break of the day ran from 11:30-12:30, and it wasn't until then that she ate for the first time— two eggs over-hard, one sausage patty, two strips of bacon (extra crispy!), some fruit salad (which she painfully waded through to pick out the wrinkly grapes), and toast with jam, usually blackberry. Also during this time she smoked at least eight of her two packs of cigarettes for the day.

The afternoons were typically slow. Mike's Diner wasn't exactly known for its five-star lunch and dinner menu. That honor was reserved for Mike's bar, which sat caddy-corner to its sister diner, buried knee deep in the dirtier part of South Boston. Both were presently second generation establishments but still did great business and complemented each other nicely, which is what Mike, the original owner had intended. 'The perfect customer,' he always used to say to his employees, 'what we shoot for here at Mike's is to have someone eat at the Diner for breakfast, eat and drink all night at the Bar, and then return to the Diner after last call for a late night snack.' His enthusiasm has always made me smile... Anyway, one such customer came around and supplied us with this story.

It was a Thursday in August, and Boston was in the midst of what most Bostonians would call a heat wave— sunshine and ninety degrees— and a man walked into Mike's Diner and sat down in front of Diane, who was mooning over a cold cup of coffee. The man was very gentle in appearance for one sporting such a massive frame. He was six-four and probably close to two hundred thirty pounds. He looked like a tight end for the Patriots. His hair was black, peppered with gray about the ears, and he was wearing a Red Sox hat, faded blue jeans, and a plaid shirt. As he eased into the stool across the counter from her, he sighed.

"Rough day?" Diane asked. It was quitting time for most.

"Is it that obvious? You look like you're still going strong, though. What's your secret?" said the man.

"Ha," roared Diane, "I am dead on my feet. Been in here since before this hot sun even thought about getting' up. And lunch was unusually busy today."

"Well I just pulled a double shift down at the factory— a third and a first. I am just beat," said the man.

"Coffee then, I suppose?"

"Please. Fill her up." He drank ravenously and Diane refilled him twice before the conversation resumed.

"It's good coffee," he said.

"The best in town, that's what we advertise," Diane boasted. "But I'm sure anything tastes good to you right now. Can I get you anything to eat?"

"I'm not really that hungry," the man said.

“Come on. It will not only fill you up, but it will help you sleep better. You are looking forward to sleep aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah, I don’t work again until second shift, Saturday. I figure I’ll probably sleep until then.”

“Let me recommend the breakfast sampler with the pork chops.”

“Well, if you insist on my eating, pork chops sound great,” the man said. They smiled simultaneously at each other.

Within five minutes, his food was ready— two grilled pork chops, three eggs over medium, and home fries— and in no more than five minutes it was gone. “Oh, that was great,” he said.

“I’m glad you liked it,” said Diane.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

“No really. That has to be at least an eight dollar breakfast.”

“No really. Your meal falls under our... ‘dog...days... of summer’ special. Local factory workers eat free from four to five.”

“Well, can I take you to dinner sometime then?” the man asked. Hearing the question Diane stopped wiping down the countertop for just long enough for the man to notice a reaction. “Dinner,” he repeated. “I would like to treat you to dinner, as part of the labor union’s ‘take a tired waitress to dinner’ promotion. We are trying to boost our image in the public eye.”

Diane’s smile grew into a giggle and then exploded into an all out laugh, which was accompanied by a reddening of her face and a nod, acquiescing to the man’s

proposal. The man smiled goofily, averting his eyes towards his empty cup of coffee, spinning it around clockwise with his right hand.

“Okay,” he said. “Great.”

“Okay,” Diane muttered, nodding, smiling, tapping the countertop nervously.

“So when are you available?” the man asked.

“Tomorrow,” she blurted out, then cringed, realizing that may have sounded too forward, but she ran with it. “But after that, I will not be off again until next Thursday.”

“Well tomorrow sounds great. How ‘bout I just meet you down here at seven.”

“Here at seven. Okay,” said Diane. And with that, the man left.

The rest of Diane’s day flew by, thoughts racing through her head like horses. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been asked out on a date. It had to have been at least six years. She was thirty-eight now, and hadn’t had a man in a long time, so needless to say, her routine was a little different when she got home that night. She cleaned her apartment, and rearranged her closet looking for something even remotely attractive that she could wear. Before getting in the shower she re-did her hair and make-up four times and tried on seven different outfits. She confessed the silliness of it all to herself, but in this silliness, a part of her felt alive that hadn’t felt that way since college. By the time she quit her madness it was close to two in the morning.

She couldn’t sleep, as she kept wondering about the man in the diner. He was a total mystery, she realized. All she knew was that he worked at a factory in Boston. She had neglected to even ask his name. She thought from his graying hair that he was close to forty, and she hoped that he was single, given the fact that he asked her to dinner. With his dark green eyes, ruddy complexion, and large frame she imagined his name to

be Russell— Russ for short. He looked like a Russ, or maybe a Rusty. She wondered what it would be like to date a Rusty, and part of her shivered, but she even let herself think about a second date, and third, and even beyond that. A whole day with no work to take her mind off their date would be unbearable.

She really didn't want to go back to work on her day off, but she figured that if she were a little late, he would already be there and she wouldn't have to wait long, and he was, so she was relieved.

"You look great," he said, referring to her mid-length black skirt and lavender blouse— the fifth outfit she tried on last night. Her hair was soft and down, which made her look older, yet more beautiful, and her black eyes were sparkling in the shimmering light radiating from the street lamp above. She smiled.

"Thank you."

"Well, what do you think?" he said, holding out his arms and turning a complete circle.

"About what?"

"My shirt."

"Oh, oh, it is very... red... and shiny."

"Yeah, I bought it today at the thrift store down on Carston Street. You know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yes, I've been there before."

"So?"

"So."

"So, you ready to go?" the man said.

"No."

"No, you mean to tell me you're standing me up in person."

"No, I mean that I am not going anywhere until I know your name," she said smiling. "You never told me your name."

"Randy. My name is Randy."

"Diane. Nice to meet you," she said, a little disappointed he wasn't a Russell, but glad he wasn't a Rusty.

"The pleasure is all mine, miss," taking her hand and kissing it softly, causing her to shiver and blush.

Both of them were smiling as he led her by the hand to the passenger side door and opened it for her with the grace of Cary Grant. The ride to the restaurant, The Old Stable Inn, an older, up scale place, provided pleasant conversation about work and personal interests and stuff like that. Both of them loved the water, sports, classical music, and days off of work. They both disliked Republicans, war, and sushi; and neither of them had just one favorite flavor of ice cream. All cheeky small talk, which is why the dinner conversation is intriguing.

"No, I disagree. I believe that you have to trust people completely from the very start," she said. "You trust people until they give you a reason to betray your trust."

"But what about the prospect of getting hurt?" he asked.

"It's possible, but wouldn't it seem less likely that you would get hurt if you did completely trust someone? It seems to me that not trusting would cause suspicion, and that is ultimately more damaging to both parties, whereas, you trust from the start, then if hurt does occur, it is only one-sided," she said.

“I don’t know if I agree with you, Diane. I mean, how do you know who people really are? I mean, for all you know I could be a serial killer.”

“You could be, but I guess you just have to trust people are who they say they are and just go with it.”

“I guess I have just been hurt too much in the past,” said Randy.

“Oh really, how so?”

“No offense, but mostly women. I have not had the best track record. All the women that have ever come into my life have gotten scared or something and abandoned me.”

“Tell me about it.”

Randy misconstrued this rhetorical comment from Diane and began to offer examples. “Well, there was this girl named Anna, and she just never returned my calls. Then there was Linda, and we actually got pretty serious, until she cheated on me.”

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Diane said.

“It gets worse. The next girl, Theresa, never really liked me and tried to get me arrested for beating her, something I never did.” This, of course, caused Diane’s eyes to widen slightly as thoughts of dating a Rusty came back to mind. “You see, it’s been a rough history. It can just be so frustrating at times. You start to ask questions of yourself. I mean, I like to think I’m a nice guy.”

“I know how you feel,” said Diane. “You know until you asked me out yesterday, I haven’t said yes to a man in over six years. I, too, have felt pain, but you know what?”

“What?” said Randy.

"I don't think I would trade any of it. Even the more regrettable moments have still been laced with gold. That joy far overshadows the rest for me."

"Well, I guess I admire your positive attitude, but I disagree. I suppose I am just too damaged, and I hate it," he said.

"Damaged? How?"

"Emotionally, I guess. Part of me just wants to be loved, ya know? But it always ends up causing me to damage others."

"That is what I think we all ultimately want," she said, "but I know for a fact that you have to trust people completely in order to love and be loved back."

"Maybe you're right," he said. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Of course I'm right." They both smiled.

After that the conversation slowed on account of the food arriving. He had a fourteen-ounce steak, a salad, and a baked potato, and she had some kind of chicken with herbs and cheese and mashed potatoes and fresh vegetables. They decided dessert was to be ice cream back at Mike's Diner and then they would go their separate ways.

The young woman working the counter at the Diner must have been new because Diane did not recognize her. She was overall, average, about five-five, give or take an inch, with beautiful brown hair tinted red and braided into pigtails. Her eyes were green and youthful, yet tired, as if they had seen their share of suffering. It was only her eyes in certain light that salvaged a bright complexion for her typically dark and sour mien. She couldn't have been more than eighteen or twenty.

"Are you new here, Alison?" Diane asked, having read the girl's nametag.

"Yup, today is my first day," the girl said.

“Well my name is Diane and I work here also, but I’ve been off today. And this is my friend Randy.”

“Nice to meet you both. What can I get you two?”

“I’ll have a chocolate milkshake,” answered Diane.

“And I’ll have a banana split,” responded Randy.

“Great,” said the waitress as she wrote down the order and tore off their ticket.

The conversation was again friendly between Diane and Randy, but now they had this strange girl who just seemed to appear out of nowhere to talk about. Of the two of them, it was Randy who first said that he thought that he might have recognized her, which prompted Diane to utter a similar comment but with more assurance. But neither was sure. Alison had just moved to town to begin college. She was a very smart young woman with an interest for history, religion, and philosophy, but was also naturally gifted in math and the sciences. The only area of study she was not too fond of was the social sciences. She thought that way back when somebody who couldn’t hack it in the more advanced disciplines invented psychology and sociology. *The challenge is to know yourself*, she thought, *not to have someone else tell you who you are*. She had yet to declare a major, but she was leaning towards advertising, simply because she felt it was a deceptive profession and wanted to change it. She got a job at the Diner just to have a little pocket money.

She worked fast preparing their desserts, adding the later requested extra whipped cream to both orders, and served them with a smile. It was quickly consumed and paid for, and then Diane said her final “goodbye” and “see you tomorrow” to Alison, and left with Randy. The outside air was cold despite the daytime record highs, and clouds had

rolled in over the city, threatening rain. Alison quietly took Randy's arm, caressing it softly, which caused Randy to hesitate for a moment and the smile.

"Where'd you park?" asked Randy. "I'll walk you to your car."

"I'm over this way, back in the alley behind the Diner," Diane said, turning to her left and pointing behind the restaurant. And the two walked slowly, Diane trying to prolong the evening a little, and Randy thinking about his next move.

"I had fun tonight," said Diane.

"Me too," said Randy. "We should do it again sometime."

"We'll see," said Diane.

"We'll see?" said Randy, in disbelief. "You just said you had a good time, and you held my arm as we walked to the car, and you say 'we'll see' to the prospect of another date."

"Well, yeah. I mean, of course, I'd like to see you, but I'm really busy all this next week with work and stuff. So we'll see. I'd like to very much, but we'll have to see."

"The last women that said to me 'we'll see' I never saw again."

"Well then come and visit me in the Diner between now and 'we'll see,' and we can enjoy each other's company like yesterday. You'll see me again," said Diane smiling.

"We'll see," said Randy, just frustrated.

"Well, thank you, Randy, and good night," she said as she turned to open her car door, having thought about an innocent little kiss, but then overruled herself.

But suddenly Randy grabbed her arm and spun her around, said *good night*, and went to kiss her. A little timid, Diane turned him her cheek. This aggravated Randy. “A ‘we’ll see’ deserves a little more than a kiss on the cheek,” he said, and he grabbed her face, squeezing her cheeks so hard that Diane gasped at the pain, and he kissed her cruelly. Diane wrestled herself away as soon as she could and thanked him for the night. “What’s wrong,” said Randy, “was that kiss not good enough to warrant another?”

“No,” said Diane, “I am just tired and want to get home. Plus, I don’t kiss on the first date. Thank you for a fun time. I will see you later Randy. Good night.”

“No,” said Randy, “you will see me right now,” as he grabbed both her shoulders and shoved her up against her car. “I am tired of rejection, Diane. You are not going to treat me like all the others.” Diane struggled unable to move, as the massive Randy kissed her sloppily all over her face and neck. She tried to wriggle herself free but was unable.

“Let go. Randy, please let me...”

“Not tonight honey,” he said as he continued to force himself upon her.

Diane started to scream, but Randy stopped her by placing a hand over her mouth. “This will be a whole lot easier if you just shut up and cooperate,” he said as he began unbuttoning his pants.

Once she realized this Diane’s eyes widened and she started to shake even harder. Unable to move him at all, she kneed him as hard as she could in the groin, causing him to bend over temporarily in pain, allowing her to free herself and run for the back door of the Diner. Reaching for the handle with her right hand, she pulled the door open and swung herself around grabbing the doorframe with her left to pull herself inside. And

suddenly, pain. The slammed door seemed to slow at impact as it methodically crushed every bone in Diane's hand, sending shockwaves through her body, forcing a scream that was abruptly stopped by a vicious backhand from Randy. The punch sent Diane flying from the door without two of her fingers, which had been jammed in the strike of the door and had been severed by the latch's sharp edge when her body went in the opposite direction. As she hit the ground her head snapped back and struck the cold cement of the alley floor, splitting and leaving her unconscious.

With her completely immobilized, he seized upon her, dragging her over to a nearby trash heap, a crimson tide teeming from her head. He ripped her skirt and tore her underwear and shoved his entire hand inside the helpless Diane. The warmth and wetness excited him so he uncovered himself, and thrust himself inside her torn and bleeding body. For what was probably only two or three minutes, he ravaged her corpse, and with each thrust his eyes became madder and colder and harder— full of evil. About the time he had finished, the back door of the Diner swung open and the young new waitress, walked into the alley carrying a bag of trash she had been told to take out to the dumpster. Quickly Randy hid himself on the far side of the dumpster, in a home of shadows.

The young woman instantly noticed a foul odor in the alley, which she assumed was the trash. The only light was just above her and emitted a pale green glow that provided only a five-foot radius of light. She looked to her right for the dumpster, but could not see one. Then she looked to left, and saw it, a dark block in the distance. Her first step landed upon one of Diane's fingers that she harmlessly kicked out of the way as a rock. Then she slipped in Diane's blood, but assumed it was water or something

leaking from the trash. Slightly unnerved, but determined to just do her job and get back inside, she continued to the dumpster, opened the side door and threw in the trash bag. Turning to go back inside, she tripped and fell over Diane's dying body. The light was just enough to reflect the cold blood and frozen sweat on Diane's empty stare. Her eyes were looking to her right in the direction of the hidden Randy, and she moaned as if to say 'I'm sorry.' Then the life left her, cold and alone. Slowly, a look of terror crept over the face of the young waitress, and she backed away trembling, and turned to run into the Diner, but her momentum was quickly stopped as Randy pulled her down by a pigtail, ripping hair from her virgin scalp. Then he picked her up by the same pigtail and tossed her hard into the dumpster. The echo from the collision reverberated out of the alley and up into the heavens like a cry of dereliction.

Hitting the dumpster had temporarily stunned Alison, and by the time she had come back around, Randy was on top of her. She kicked and scratched and fought with all her strength, but he was too strong. Out of ideas she gouged her fingernails into his eyes. The struggle only lasted a few seconds, but she succeeded in making him bleed, which only infuriated him more. More punches across the face sent blood, cold sweat, and several teeth flying from her mouth, spattering the ground like marbles. But she continued to fight, that is, until he pulled a knife from his pocket and held the shiny blade to the side of her throat. Her eyes widened; her mouth froze open, and the little fight she had left was now gone. Inside, she felt numb, helpless, terrified. She just closed her mouth and eyes and started to pray.

He shoved her head up underneath the dumpster and gagged her with a piece of Diane's torn clothing, and then he grabbed some nearby cinder blocks and pinned her

hands down to the ground, away from her body so she could not fight back. With the young lady completely immobilized, he began to go to work, slowly. He ran the blade of his knife carefully about the curves of her face, then did the same with his tongue and lips, his hot stinking breath staining her young, virgin skin. Then he took his knife and began cutting off her clothes, again his tongue following the path of the blade with sick ecstasy. The ripping of her bra and underwear sounded like a scream in the cold, quiet alley; with every move the man made, the girl yelped helplessly like an abandoned puppy.

Nothing could be done to stop this, she knew that, but she kept thinking of something she could do to save herself. A painful stab by Randy's knife stopped these thoughts. Her head snapped upward only to hit the bottom of the dumpster and break her nose. The blood ran freely over her face, and her eyes rolled pointlessly back and forth but all she could see was darkness. Each cut was more painful, and at the same time, more numbing; her body was losing all sensation as his knife carefully carved up her virginity. The pain was incredible and she screamed as loud as she could through the gag, in vain. After several minutes of this Randy just stopped. Satisfied, or perhaps terrified, he fled from the scene and disappeared into the night.

It began to rain cold, unforgiving rain. She lay there completely mutilated. She could feel the blood ceaselessly pouring from the remnants of her flesh. She couldn't breathe, and struggled furiously to remove the gag, but it was too tight. She found she could move her arms free from beneath the cinder blocks, but the bones in her wrists had been completely shattered, so her hands were of no use to her. She wriggled herself free from underneath the dumpster, but lacked the life to get up or call for help, so she slid

over to Diane's lifeless body, nestled her head on her stomach. Her warm tears melted Diane's frozen soul, and brought it back to life. In some sort of miracle, Alison felt the soul resurrecting itself, as she passed out from the pain, with a look of indifference on her face that under any other circumstance might have signified peace.

The night passed slowly as the girl moved in and out of consciousness and sleep. The rain had numbed her body completely, but the cold of dawn was still unbearable; she prayed for death.

The most unbearable part of it all was the quiet. The nearest sound was the distant humming of people going to work in their cars or the insects and rats that scampered through the alley occasionally. And then, a loud noise, like that of an airplane. It was the truck delivering the day's food and supplies to the Diner. The men saw the two women and began frantically shaking them and asking them questions, but Alison couldn't speak. She was too near death. One man ran inside to call for help while the other found some blankets in his truck and placed them over the victims.

When, the help came the two women were placed in the ambulance and rushed away to the hospital. Diane was pronounced dead at 6:05 am. Alison, badly damaged in many places, tragically, although not unfortunately, survived.

"A miracle," they called it.

"A miracle," she frowned.

The Gray Man

My name is Arthur Gray.* Sometimes I feel as if I am the only one who truly exists, and I find it hard to escape. Everybody around me lives in the shade and has a release, something that helps him or her forget who he or she is or where he or she is or what he or she is doing. But not me. I am a prisoner—trapped inside my body, inside my head—I don't know where. Who am I? I don't know, but I do know what I am not, but that is not the same thing. For example, I am not what I wear. I know this because I am made neither of cotton nor wool nor silk nor suede nor polyester (I hate polyester) nor denim nor corduroy nor flannel nor anything else. Besides, clothes have no depth, and that is why they are our greatest illusion. We can make ourselves out to be whomever we desire. We hide behind walls of fabric and facades of first impressions. I hate clothes because that is the first thing people see when they look at you. It is the first thing they compliment about you and it is the first thing they talk about when you turn your back, women especially. No, I am not my clothes. Nor am I what I eat or drink. I can't believe some anonymous person actually got famous for coining the phrase "you are what you eat." That has got to be the stupidest thing I have ever heard. In fact, if I ever met the man who claimed to have been the first to use that phrase I would tell him to "eat shit!" because that is what I really think of him. If I were everything I ate or drank, what

would I call myself? Would my name change with every bite, or worse yet, my appearance? And what about my clothes if I were to morph from steak into mashed potatoes with one movement of my fork? They would be destroyed. It would be cool to be beer, but then again everyone else would want to consume me in excess and then flush me down the toilet after throwing me up because they had to “release” something. I have a high tolerance for alcohol; I could drink myself into a coma and never get sick, or get better for that matter. So no, I am not what I consume. Another thing I am not is what I possess. If I were my possessions I would be a garage sale because half the stuff I own I have no use for anyway. I live in a house by myself surrounded by a ton of things I have no use for, and the things I actually do have use for I don’t use. I hate stuff. Everything is stuff. Everything is a thing. What is a thing anyway? I have things everywhere. I have too many things upstairs where she used to sleep. I have too many things in the garage on the side where her car once sat. I have too many things in her old dresser drawers. I have too many things left in my mind that never leave. All these things. All this stuff. So why would I want to be stuff? No stuff. I hate stuff. But you might ask me what I do? “That is who you are,” you say. No it is not. I teach but I am not a teacher. I gamble, but I am not a gambler. I drink, but I am not an alcoholic. I ride horses, but I am no jockey. I sit and watch television, yet I am no couch potato. I have actually done each of those things today, but I am none of those things just the same. I am not what I do, so don’t think you were just helping me with your friendly suggestion. I am not even what I am. I’m talking hard, physical evidence— pure, elemental, biological, anatomical man. I am six feet tall and weigh one hundred and sixty pounds. I used to have gray eyes set deeply in dark eye sockets made darker by the rings that

surround them because I never sleep, but my eyes no longer work. My hair is gray and thinning and I like to comb it straight back because I am not ashamed, unlike many, that I am losing my hair. It is all part of life's meaningless ongoing cycle. We are born practically bald and we die practically bald. My ears are large yet receive no sounds, save with the use of a hearing aid, which I only wear on days I feel like listening to the world around me. My nose probably has lots of hairs sticking out of my narrow nostrils, and I've been told I have a beard that measures a good four inches in length. I haven't shaved in quite a while. She used to tell me that my hands were soft, "a sign of true gentleness," she would say. She would probably be sad if she saw me now, since I lost all my fingers to diabetes. I once tried to donate my pancreas, but the doctors wouldn't have anything of it. And I told them, "no really, I don't want it, someone else can have it." They just smiled and laughed. But doesn't anyone else wonder why no one has ever had a pancreas transplant. Seriously.

Anyway, all of this is not to lead you to the conclusion that my nature is that of a bitter and cynical existentialist. I consider myself a Christian, but so many do these days that it is hard to determine who is really telling the truth. We have fundamentalists, most often referred to as Protestants, and then we have dogmatists, better known as Catholics (of course if the former had their way they would call the latter heathen, which they do anyway). And then both these combined have a shadow called the religious right. They are just idiots, with their talk of world politics and just war and on and on. Hitler was one of these; well, sort of. But I don't fall into any of these categories because I don't believe in them. I have categories of my own, actually. There are literalists, who consist of members of both the fundamentalists and the dogmatists; in fact I would say that they

comprise everyone belonging to one of the factions above, except that they lack the worldly arrogance of the religious right. I define a literalist as one who does not believe in miracles. And in my opinion all fundamentalists and dogmatists fall under this label. The dogmatist won't believe in miracles unless the Church tells him to, and the fundamentalist refuses to believe in miracles because he has convinced himself he is on the level of God already. But that has only made him self-righteous and, in fact, corrupted the very core of Christian belief and given new meaning to the phrase 'spiritual warfare.' They take the battle to places it was never meant to go, like the drive-in.

The name of the second category I actually stole from the great Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov* written by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In it the Karamazovs are referred to as *sensualists*.^{*} By that term he means those who live and react according to feeling. In the novel this has a negative connotation in that feeling and desire pull one away from moral behavior and block the essence of religious practice. But what I mean by the term is something totally different. I still believe it involves feeling, just not desire. I am talking emotion here— deep, reverent, incarnational feeling. A feeling of duty and of bondage to Christ and to God, a feeling of submission and helplessness, of brokenness and peace— a peace that comes from consciously making oneself a burnt offering to the Creator. These are the people that discard Church doctrine in favor of the voice within, and they trade a self-made existence for one given them by God. And they believe in miracles, not necessarily big, huge, eye-popping, groundbreaking miracles, but the little ones— waking up in the morning, the clenching of a hand into a fist, a child being born, a child being conceived, the feeling one gets when they kiss the one they love, the child who asks a question about Jesus in a Sunday school class, the mother who works three

jobs to raise her children, the teacher who stays after hours to help one child understand why $2+2=4$ and $2-(-2)=4$ also, the coach who gives the outcast a chance to belong to a team, the missionary who is martyred, the atheist who consoles someone of faith, the homeless man who finds himself a job— all the tiny miracles of life that are things taken for granted or unappreciated, or worse— not cared about. The sensualist believes in these things. He believes true faith is performing miracles. He sees Christ in everything, not just everything good, but in everything, and he longs to live according to the rules given him by God.

I am somewhere in between these two categories. I am more of the literalist when I confront wild sensualists, in the Karamazov as well as in my sense of the word, and I am more the sensualist when faced with the icy beliefs of fundamental dogmatism. And I am just an insane asshole when I encounter the religious right and their worldly self-importance. But I desire to one day fully become a sensualist. I really just want to feel that way about God again, about anything really. But my remaining days are short, so what do I do? Well, my favorite thing to do is put in my hearing aids and go down to Mike's Diner on Sunday Mornings and listen to the people talk. Sometimes I speak, but most of the time I just sit and listen. Good for you, for today I feel like talking.

“Good morning gentlemen,” I say, “I am glad to see you haven't changed location on me” (you're probably wondering how I got here, well, I happen to have a driver) “I could hear you all from a mile away.”

“That's funny, because we were just trying to imagine where else you might be on this fine Sunday morning,” one man responds. What he means by fine is that the sun is

shining radiantly on this Sunday morning in early autumn, and it is comfortable, perfect golf clothes weather, the warm breeze making southern Boston feel like south Florida.

"Now, now gentlemen. How could I ever miss an opportunity to hear a handful of sermons by a handful of men at the same time? You guys are better than Church, more preaching in half the time, and I can enjoy a cup of coffee while listening to you," I respond. "What are we talking about this *fine* morning?"

"We were just discussing the nature of Jesus' teachings. I maintain that they have been maintained faithfully over the years, exactly as He said them," utters the fundamentalist.

"And I disagree because given the fact that the Gospel accounts were written posthumously, they are a blend of what Jesus said and what the earliest Church taught," speaks the dogmatist. "Even if the authors were eye-witnesses, they were still simple, illiterate fishermen at the time they followed Jesus. Few would have kept a diary or travel log, so how do we really know."

"We know because Paul tells us so," the fundamentalist answers back. "Scripture is the Word of God."

"Of course," argues the dogmatist, "because Paul is such a reliable source. He himself could hardly write, and just how many times does he quote Jesus in his letters. That's right, few, if ever. Now I am not diminishing the power of Paul's conversion experience; all I am getting at is the difference between a religion based on Paul, which you, Frank (the fundamentalist), seem to follow, and a religion based on that of the Apostles, to which the Church adheres. And don't say Paul was an Apostle. That is a title he gave himself."

“I think you are both taking what Jesus said way out of context,” interrupts a third man. “I think half the time He speaks, He is joking around. For example, the Sadducees question Jesus about the resurrection, and Jesus responds by saying that anyone who marries or is given in marriage is not worthy of the resurrection.* Do you really think Jesus is condemning marriage? Because if he is then both of you gentlemen are not living according to what Jesus taught, something which you both like to boast that you do. Or is He simply responding to the ridiculous question of the Sadducees in a ridiculous manner? And look at the parables. Today we view them as theological gold mines that solicit deep meditation and careful study, when in Jesus’ time they probably got a good laugh. He even says that is the reason He spoke in parables, so they would hear and not understand.* You see what I am getting at here guys. Your problem is that you take Him too seriously. Especially you Ted” (pointing to the dogmatist). “Answer me this, did Jesus ever laugh?”

Ted thinks for a second, his eyes cast downward at his cold cup of coffee and his right index finger gently massages the rim of his glasses that he just recently removed and placed on the table (at least that is what I imagine). “Well, John 11:35 says that ‘Jesus wept,’ and that is the shortest verse in the Bible.”

“Oh for crying out loud; now you’re sounding like Frank,” says Ed (the third guy). “It is the shortest verse in the Bible for a reason. Of course Jesus laughed. In my opinion, I don’t think He could have done what He did if He wasn’t able to laugh every now and then. He was still human, despite whatever else He was, and so God’s plan for Him was still a difficult cup to drink. To know what He knew and to not have laughed would have killed Him before His time.”

"Yes, He was human, but one can't just abandon His divinity," Frank says, rejoining the conversation. "Jesus was God, so I think He could've endured anything without laughing. And is the question even that relevant?"

"Of course not," begins to say Ted but I stop him.

"I believe it is," I say, causing all four men (one has yet to speak) to whip their heads around, fixing their gazes solidly on me, at least that is what I gather by their silence. "It is relevant, gentlemen, if I may speak, because your conversation has changed from a discussion on the teachings of Jesus to one about the very nature of Jesus Himself, so anything that can help us paint a brighter portrait of the God-man is certainly helpful."

A moment of silence follows, and I imagine the men a little fidgety, downing the rest of their coffee in one giant gulp and getting the attention of the waitress to bring more. They aren't whispering because I would hear them were they doing so. This continues for just a moment longer, and then the conversation resumes, but it is small talk. The men sit and talk about their weeks, the work they have to do, any family concerns, and what they plan to do to escape the business of their lives.

Ted has six children, the mark of a true Catholic family, and works sixty hours a week in a top floor, corner office in a bank downtown. He is overweight and, in his mind, underpaid, although he probably makes more than the other three men with him combined. His release is cars. He owns several and drives them wild on the weekends.

As for Frank, he attends church every Sunday with his wife and three children, tithes exactly ten percent of the income he receives from managing a small bookstore underneath that huge Citgo sign that one sees over the Green Monster at Fenway Park.

He sells sports memorabilia and does well enough to be able to send his kids to college when they are old enough.

Ed is a product of the Enlightenment. He is a liberal and a teacher at Boston University. I think that the great wealth of knowledge he possesses has distracted him from seeing the truth about Jesus. He finds Him to be an excellent model of moral behavior, worthy of imitation, but there is no need, in his mind, for salvation. He is single.

The fourth man, Joe, well, he has a lot of problems, but mostly he is just lonely. He seems content in his loneliness given that he doesn't say much, or that could just mean that he is so far gone that he couldn't care less. I find myself praying that he hears something from these men that will change his life. Unfortunately for Joe, these men are way too wrapped up in themselves to even acknowledge Joe's sitting with them as a cry for help.

Growing wary of the now incumbent silence I ask, "Would you gentlemen please humor me a little and resume your most excellent theological debate? I found what you were saying about the nature of Christ both interesting and valuable discussion. Sometimes I feel He is the answer to my questions, yet His very nature and existence has in it, so many questions. Any of the thoughts that you guys share really help spark my mind and add color to my spiritual journey, which has been dulled gray by the years.

"Perhaps it is loneliness. I am lonely, but you gentlemen refresh me with the *joie de vivre* that I once felt and that I still long for. You are the reason I get up on Sundays. You are the reason I put in my hearing aids and enter the world if for only an hour. You

are the reason I still seek God with my blind eyes, even in the twilight of my days. So please, speak. Save me."

And with the silence unbroken, my heart sighs as it breaks. I ask for Frank? Ed? Ted? I even ask for Joe, but no one responds, so I just sit silently and finish my coffee.

"Hey old man," a girl says, "where's the usual Sunday crew?"

I can tell who it is by the sound of her voice. I heard her earlier talking on her cell phone or something. I have heard her in here many times. Often she joins the gathering of men that have recently vacated the seats around me and talks with them. She can't be much older than 20, but she holds her own with the Sunday morning philosophers.

"I think they all just got up and left me. Didn't say a word."

"How sad."

"You can call me Gray, by the way, Joanna."

"Okay, Gray, but my name isn't Joanna."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought that was your name."

"Yeah, but that isn't my name, but you can call me Joanna if you want to, or Joann, or even Jo. Heck, you can call me Mary Magdalene. It makes no difference to me."

"Jo it is then. It has the fewest syllables," I say decisively. "So what brings you here this morning. It is a beautiful day, shouldn't you be out studying under a huge maple tree or something?"

"Probably, but I like coming in here and arguing with the men. It keeps my mind awake, whereas textbooks are merely anesthesia. Perhaps the better question is why are you still here if the guys are long gone?"

“I didn’t know they were gone, so I just sat here talking to them, finishing my coffee,” I say, “and then I was going to leave. I, too, had wanted to engage those men this morning.”

“Well, if you’re feelin’ up to it, engage me. But I gotta warn you; I am feeling good this morning.”

“Okay, but I don’t know where to begin.”

“Well then I’ll start,” says Jo. “You are old and blind and deaf except that you have the best hearing aids money can buy. Your diabetes has accounted for the loss of all you fingers and toes, so you wear mittens in the winter and shoes three sizes smaller than you used to. You seem lonely, yet perfectly self-sufficient, so I gather that you are probably a widower of at least twenty years. Personally, I admire the fact that you have remained faithful to Joanna, your wife, in her death, especially because you could not do so while she lived, and that has tortured you to this day. In fact, you have been so many different people in this life that you haven’t the slightest idea as to who you are. And the truth Gray— you will never know who you are because you are too stubborn to admit that you are wrong in anything. Why do you like coming in here and talking with those men? I have heard you in here before, so I know you don’t do it to increase your knowledge or your understanding of the world and how people think. No, you *engage* them in an attempt to prove yourself right, to prove yourself superior to them. Why, because you’re older and supposed to be wiser? What do you have to prove? Who are you trying to prove something to? Certainly not your wife. You owed her your love while she lived, not your self-aggrandizement in her death.”

“P-P-Please s-stop,” I whisper.

“Look I’m sorry. I have never done that to anyone before.

“Okay, so maybe I have, but please know that my intentions are good. Gray, I have a special place in my heart for you. I see you in here every Sunday hiding behind your self-assured words, and it breaks my heart. Look at me,” she asks in a soft, almost teary voice.

Knowing this is impossible she takes me by the hand and then runs her fingers up my arm and embraces my cheek in her palm, and turns my head to the left so I am presumably looking right at her. Her hands are warm, like the side of a coffee mug, and her fingers are long, with healing deep inside them. Her skin is soft and pillowy against my saggy, wrinkled, and unshaved face. I almost feel her concern in her touch. It is like magic, only more real. *I love you*, she tells me and she kisses my forehead and wishes me a good day, telling me she will notify my driver that I am ready to go. He comes in and gets me and I leave.

It is rainy today, and it has been two Sundays since my encounter with Joanna. In those two weeks I have not put my hearing aids in once, but I still hear her words, like daggers of truth, poking at my mind and soul every second of every day. She haunts me all the time— awake, asleep, everywhere in between. When I dream I think I see her; she is sitting at the table across from me, leaning forward and extending her velvet hands towards my face, yet despite my best efforts to move closer to her warm, welcoming touch I am always just out of her reach, and it hurts. It hurts to be teased by love. I have been teased by love my entire life. No one has ever taken the time to get to know me for

me. All people seem to be concerned about these days is themselves. Don't they know there are others who desire their love and attention? That is all I really want.

I should listen to myself speak.

I don't know. A part of me thinks that love and attention would actually bring some meaning and purpose to my life. But all I seem to get from people is pity. They pity the blind man with no fingers or toes who can't hear. The men down at Mike's Diner pity me. That is perhaps why they humor me with their conversation. Joanna, or whoever she is, just pities me. She couldn't love me because she knew everything about me, and I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing about me worth loving. That is why I am how I am. And that is why I am who I am. I have thought a lot about just who I am these last two weeks and I do not know if I am any further along then when I began. I can still say with confidence what I am not, but I have realized that that is not the same as who I am. I am... tired. I am tired of living this life. I am tired of being strong, considering I have no one to be strong for, and being strong for myself seems to me a waste of the precious little energy I have left. I am tired of being proud. What do I have to be proud of? Certainly nothing meaningful that I can think of. This realization wouldn't have done this to me two weeks ago, but now it makes me cry. That is perhaps the greatest thing about being alone: no one can see me cry. I don't have to be strong for anyone, and I don't have to be proud. But don't go thinking that I am sorry for anything. I make no apologies for who I am nor for who I am not.

I am me, and that is that.

I have no regrets, no last wishes, no deathbed requests or desires for spiritual enlightenment or conversion. I don't really need any of that talk now. I have no room for

it anymore. I tried to do it, and make it mine, but I see now that it just didn't work with me. I have no enmity with God. He tried to reach out to me. I see that now. But since I have no fingers I could never reach far enough back to Him. Oh well, we had our chance.

Another week has passed slowly, and for whatever reason I am here, kneeling at the foot of the woman's grave whom I have come to love very dearly very recently. There is a gentle mist hanging delicately over the cemetery, and as the rising sun burns green through the barricade of trees to the east my back is warmed. The dew on the ground around me is bubbling as the vapor rises slowly and vanishes into the air. To my left, someone has planted flowers by a grave, and to my right, a strong iron fence sings softly in the morning breeze a song of many years before, of loved ones dead and gone. *They are remembered in the melody*, it seems to say. *Listen to my music and find the song within yourself, and there you will find me. I love you.* Somewhere above, the robin, the bluebird, the canary, and the cardinal, harmonize together in a rich tapestry, echoing the wind. I breathe in the fresh scent of lilac and clover, and the sweet air fills my soul with such joy that I thank God. I feel the ground beneath me smile, and I realize that she is crying, her tears seeping upward, wetting the grass. And I begin to cry, not for her, nor for me, nor for what might have been between us had I let her love me, but just because. At least this is what I imagine as I sit here in silence amid the dry and withering grass. Tired, I get up, leaving a flower on her grave. No reason really, just because.

Blinking Backwards

He would die hours later in a coma.

The impact instantly knocked him unconscious.

And when his eyes re-opened he realized he could do nothing to avoid the collision.

The blink only lasted a fraction of a second.

He looked back up at the road, saw headlights, and blinked.

He glanced down at the air conditioner controls and turned the air on high.

Determined, he once again focused on the road and the task at hand. Driving home had been a slow process, but John passed the time by thinking about the weekend. But even that couldn't keep him from feeling slightly exhausted. The moon's suspicious absence on such a clear night when it seemed only yesterday to comfort the entire world with light made the inside of his car even darker than usual. He tried rolling down his windows, but the cold air made colder by the speed at which he traveled seemed to do more harm than good. He tried blasting the music and singing at the top of his lungs, but the radio seemed to play only songs he didn't know the words to, and his wife had their cd's in her bag; she was on route to Dallas for a conference. He still had about five hours to go to get back to Boston and it was very early in the morning. Pulling off the road to

rest was an option, but he stubbornly refused, desiring to be home by mid-morning. Weighing all these options in his tired mind, he decided to keep driving, so he glanced down at the air conditioner controls and turned the air on high.

With gas in his tank and a fresh cup of coffee to warm him, he got back on the road. After a mile he began to take notice of the lines on this four-lane highway. The yellow line bisected the road and was a boundary not to be crossed. It was there to protect him from danger. It separated him from everybody else. He thought how that line was not at all unlike the Word of God (John was a most reverent minister of Jesus and His Good News), which gives guidelines and sets boundaries for how we are to live as children of God. Like the yellow line, the word was eternal and never broken. The broken white lines in the middle of each side of the road separated one lane from another. He saw this line as representing the delicate balance between faith and deeds. In some ways the two most visible aspects of his Christian religion are separate lanes on the road to salvation, yet the line that divides them is broken. Thus faith must permeate one's deeds just as one's deeds must have the support of faith. And of course there was the solid white line to his right, which signaled no man's land. To cross that line meant serious problems, it meant abandoning the faith. It was never meant to be crossed. All these things came to him, and he meditated on them and thanked God above for such simple, yet glorious inspiration for a future sermon. He loved the way God worked in such subtle ways as to almost go unnoticed. He had always preached spiritual insight, though it never really came all that easily to him, but this night felt different. Everything felt right in his life, and he was completely at peace. This feeling renewed him with the

desire to get home, so determined, he once again focused on the road and the task at hand.

So he pulled off at the next exit, found a gas station still open, and stopped for a moment. The parking lot was empty except for the car of the sole employee— it was a navy blue, 1980-something Chevy Lumina with white-wall tires and a long scratch running fully down the passenger side of the car. Pale white lighting illuminated the two gas tanks that offered their contents at a mere dollar-sixty per gallon. Stepping out of the car, John heard the hum of the ice bin sitting next to the door and smelled the fresh scent of gas and oil and dirt that had massaged itself into the parking lot. He began to pump the gas, then locked his doors and went inside, where the clerk, a white, middle-aged man with jet-black hair, several tattoos on his forearms, and the name Sam embroidered on his shirt greeted him with a nod of his head. John responded with a similar gesture and headed straight for the coffee, poured himself a sixteen ounce drink— only 99 cents, grabbed a Snickers bar and walked to the counter.

“What’d the gas total come to?” he asked the clerk.

“Fourteen-forty-one,” Sam replied. “Will this be all for you?”

“That’ll be it.”

“Total comes to sixteen-sixty-three. Out of twenty. Ok. Three-thirty-seven is your change, that’s seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. Have a good night, sir, and drive safely.”

“Thanks, have a good night, and try not to get lonely,” John finished the exchange, which took no more than two minutes, left the store, placed his drink on top of his car, put the gas nozzle back into its slot, struggled with the gas cap, and then got into

his car, but quickly got back out remember the coffee on the roof. So with gas in his tank and a fresh cup of coffee to warm him, he got back on the highway.

Smiling and sighing, he shut his car door and sped away from the cabin, leaving the great weekend only to be replayed in his mind. John knew how long his trip would be, eleven hours, and that he would be lonely and tired, but he was feeling too good, riding high from a wonderful weekend with his wife that he was going to relive it in his mind all the way home. So he passed the first half of his trip this way in memory, stopping once for gas and another time for a Quarter Pounder, fries, and a milk shake from McDonalds. The road had been long and lonely, but the memory of his wife, the way she loved him all weekend, the way she looked when she told him her secret, and of course the feeling he felt— one first of shock and then of overwhelming joy when he found out about it all— these things comforted him as he drove six hours in total silence, making it about four in the morning. Then, the gaslight interrupted his joyous reminiscence for the second time, so he pulled off at the next exit, found a gas station still open, and stopped for a moment.

He left the airport barely unable to contain his joy and headed back to the cabin to finish packing and cleaning, and then he would drive home. The cabin was about a three-hour drive from the airport, but this time the drive just flew by. Their cabin, number 3309, which they had purchased just last year, four years into their marriage, so they could have a place to escape to when the world pressed a little to hard, was mostly clean, so he only had to straighten a few things up and pack the car. It had been their sixth weekend up here, but none had been as memorable as this one. Ready to go he smiled,

sighed, shut his car door, and sped away from the cabin, leaving the great weekend only to be replayed in his mind.

John found out on Sunday, after he had just finished preaching on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, that the Senior Pastor at his church, the Third Congregational Church of South Boston, would be retiring after Christmas (it was now October), and John would be promoted from his position as Associate Pastor. He was very excited and couldn't wait to tell his wife, so he asked for the rest of the week off so he could get away with her and they could talk and pray about what they wanted to do. But he knew that she would be as excited as he was, so without telling her anything, he talked her into canceling all her meetings for the week, and leaving with him for the cabin.

John's wife, Alison, a fairly independent woman, aged twenty-eight years, had steel green eyes and brown hair littered with blonde highlights. She was very beautiful, like Ingrid Bergman on her best day, and the resolve in her heart for Jesus and for tending His flock was inspiring. She was an excellent marketing executive for Boston Market Christian Publishing, and stayed busy traveling the country, holding conferences with other major publishers, or just running around town marketing her product. Thanks to her idea to branch out and publish works from other religions as part of what she called "The Armor of God" campaign, the company had become the leader in Religious publishing in the Northeast, and was in the top five in the country. She was very good at what she did, and she never missed a meeting, so one can imagine how odd it was for her fellow employees when she said she was taking off the rest of the week and would see them in Dallas on Saturday at the conference. In addition to her business clothes for the

weekend, she packed an extra bag with a couple pairs of jeans, several t-shirts, and plenty of dress down clothes like sweats and jogging pants, as well as a nice outfit for a dinner out, and a few extra items along more romantic lines.

They left on a Wednesday morning in which the skies were partly cloudy, and the afternoon was promising rain. They stopped at a Burger King for breakfast on the north side of Boston and were a hundred miles into Maine by noon when the rain started to fall. It was light at first, hardly requiring windshield wipers, but it quickly got worse about five hours into the trip. The highway had flooded a bit on the right side and three cars had hydroplaned off the road, so with emergency and road work crews on hand, traffic had come to a complete stand still. John shifted into park, they prayed for the people involved ahead, and then sat in silence.

"It is sort of peaceful, don't you think, John," said Alison, "the rain I mean."

"Yes, it is. I've always thought of rain as free Baptism. It is sort of God's way of reminding us of that most precious first sacrament. It would be nice if it rained all night, and we could just sit by the fire and just enjoy each others' company."

"Ooo, that sounds nice, but I have an even better idea, right now. Come with me." And she got out of the car, ran around to his side, and begged him to join her. "John, come dance with me."

John didn't move at first. He just sat there looking at his wife and shaking his head in disbelief at the goofiness of the woman he married, but at the same time he remembered just why he loved her so much—for her free spirit that loved the lowliest souls unconditionally and that could see beauty and opportunity in the worst situations. He remembered when he met her. They both happened to be serving as missionaries in

Ghana, South Africa. He was twenty-five and just out of seminary, she was twenty-one and still had a year left at Providence College in Rhode Island. He fell in love with her after three days of seeing her work with the poorest, sickest children in the world, and he vowed then to marry her. Thinking about all this, he smiled so big that it shook his whole body. He opened the door and grabbed his wife and gave her the biggest hug he had ever given her, and then danced her around the car.

Their dancing provides an opportunity to offer a little background on their marriage—four going on five years now, and the two could not be happier. John, being a preacher, finds time at least three or four days out of the week to meet his wife for lunch, and occasionally is able to accompany her to weekend conferences, which occur once or twice a month. They spend time together each morning and they are with each other from five o'clock in the evening on. Their favorite hobbies together are watching movies, praying, cooking, and collecting flower pots, which is a bit odd and too long a story to get into here. They own a dog, a black Labrador Retriever named Coal and a Siamese cat named Lucy. The animals serve well to take the place of children, which they have tried having ever since they were married, but have only met despair. It is Alison. She had an unfortunate experience when she was younger, and was told she would never be able to have children. They still try though, praying earnestly for God to grant them a child, and have looked seriously into adoption. But the absence of children has truly been a blessing in disguise because no two people on the face of the earth could love each other more wholly than John and Alison.

That doesn't mean that they can just hold up traffic, though. After a while, everyone around them started honking as the mess up ahead had been cleared off the

road and the flow of traffic was now only hindered by the couple's Ford Explorer sitting in the middle of the road with no one inside. Laughing and completely drenched, they jumped back into the car and continued their journey. It was lunch at a dive joint off the side of the highway, another stop at a small town Laundromat to dry their clothes, and dinner was a bag of pretzels and a slurpy, and the time in between they laughed together imagining what was going through the minds of the people who watched them dance in the rain. Before they knew it they were at their cabin in Madawaska, Maine, nestled away in the Saint John River Valley.

John loved the place. It was like medicine for John who was a man of average height and weight with blue eyes and brown hair. His face was well rounded and always seemed to sport a five o'clock shadow regardless of the time. He had this sort of presence that just attracted people, a sincere and genuine concern for humanity. He liked his space, and the cabin gave him that. He liked the countryside and the idea of retreat, and the cabin offered that. He was constantly in search of the quiet in his soul, and the cabin seemed to be one place he could always find it.

The cabin itself was in a spacious area, offset from civilization by at least two miles in every direction. The surrounding air was clean, and the land was green and very fertile for at least six months out of the year. The other six months it was the color of winter, a canvas of beautiful whites, grays, and browns. Now,, everything was sort of in between.

Regardless of what was going on outside, the inside of the cabin was divine. It was the perfect weekend home. The kitchen was fully equipped with ocean colored, tile floors and coral countertops. The master bedroom had plum carpet and a king size bed

with a thousand pillows on top of it, and was on the second floor and overlooked the living room, which was open to both stories of the cabin and had a fireplace on the right side if one was looking at the room from the front door. Every wall was open to light by the endless windows, and the stone chimney ran from floor to ceiling on the inside. The entire place smelled of campfire. There were two bathrooms and two guest rooms, and a basement that at times held twenty-five children on youth group retreats. Outside, a veranda along three sides of the cabin ran into a deck in the back that had a grill and a hot tub. The front porch had a swing made of cherry wood that John and Alison bought on their first weekend visit to the cabin. It was their favorite spot, so as soon as they unloaded all their bags, they curled up on the swing with a blanket and listened to the rain.

“You know what my favorite thing about the rain is?” asked Alison.

“What’s that?” said John.

“The music. It, along with the wind is the conductor of nature’s orchestra. It makes everything it touches sing. Just listen to the leaves on the trees. They are percussion along with the thunder. The ground absorbs the rain and plays the sad song of the strings as it is danced upon. The rooftop reverberates with the sounds of trumpets and French horns. I just love storms. They sing to my soul.”

“Aaahhh, I couldn’t agree with you more. When it’s storming, you just know that God is alive, and that He is in charge, and that brings me lots of comfort.”

“Yeah, well you give me a lot of comfort,” she said, and she leaned over and kissed his temple.

"And speaking of comfort," said John, "I am going to salvage some dry fire wood and get us a fire going inside. It is starting to get dark."

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll go inside and make us something to snack on." They parted for their tasks, and moments later, were cuddled up on the couch with a fire blazing, a basket of popcorn on the table in front of them, and classical music playing gently in the background (it was Alison's touch). After perhaps an hour of just sitting there in silence, each enjoying the closeness of the other, John spoke.

"Do you have any idea why I asked you to cancel everything this week and come out here with me?" John asked.

"None whatsoever, but you seemed very adamant, and besides my week wasn't really all that busy. We are ready to present this weekend in Dallas, in fact, I don't know if we've ever been so prepared."

"Well that's great, honey."

"John."

"Because I wouldn't want you to miss anything at work."

"John!"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Why did you want to bring me out here?"

"Well, I thought we could use a few days away just to pray together and enjoy each other, you know, just us."

"John..." Her eyes widened, and she leaned towards him tilting her head to one side trying to solicit an answer from her husband who was at this point just toying with her.

"I was asked to replace George as Pastor at the church when he retires after Christmas."

"Oh, John, sweetheart, that is just fabulous. Congratulations. I... I don't know what to say. I am so proud of you, and I love you so much. This is just so exciting for you."

"For us."

"Absolutely, us."

"John, I will do my best to support you and serve you the best way I can."

"I don't worry at all about that, Ally. You are the best wife any man could ask for. You are my strength and my song, and my inspiration to daily be a better man of God. You deserve nothing less." He leaned over and kissed her passionately, and then pulled away, his smile matching hers.

"So what else did they say?" Alison asked.

"Nothing really, but George asked me personally, and that really meant a lot."

"Uh, I am just so proud of you. You deserve this, and the Church couldn't be in better hands." She returned his kiss from earlier, and they eventually fell asleep in each other's arms on the couch, and prayed and kissed and made love all night.

The morning air was cold and the earth wet as the sun melted away the night's rainy clouds, and Alison was already back from the grocery store when John woke up.

"Good morning sleepy head," she said, "I ran to the store for food. I am cooking you a big breakfast to celebrate your promotion. But can you really use the word promotion as it applies to religious issues? That seems too much of a business term." They both laughed, smiling at each. When asked once what he loved most about

Alison, John answered 'the Jesus within.' That sums up their relationship better than anything else, and that is why they are perfect.

"This sounds strange," said John, "but all this is... well..."

"Perfect," she interrupted.

"Yeah, perfect."

"But not perfect like we have no problems," he began again, "but perfect in the sense that nothing can touch our love because God is the most important part of our relationship. That makes any problems that do arise easier to solve. We each seek God first, each other second, and ourselves third."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Alison replied. "I love you John."

"I love you Ally. You make me better than I really am. Your Jesus enhances my Jesus."

"I've never quite heard it put that way," she said with laughter, "but I like that perspective. You should use that in a sermon."

Conversation continued over breakfast— pancakes, sausage, eggs, home fries, and fresh fruit— as they prayed together for the day (a daily ritual in their marriage) and planned the day's events— a hike around the cabin, a picnic in their favorite spot, maybe dinner in town, and then they might watch a Canadiens hockey game on television that night. Regardless of their plans, the day was already perfect.

Their hike is worth describing for a moment. The weather was perfect, sunny and cool, but the ground was still wet from the previous night's rain. They began at eleven, she in capri pants and a tank top with a hoody around her waist, and he in shorts and a long-sleeve, three-button shirt, and they hiked out of the valley towards their favorite

spot. The spot was positioned along a ridge overlooking the northern part of the valley, out of sight of their cabin. There was a large, gray boulder that didn't seem to belong amid the lush, green grass and the rainbow of wild flowers that glowed in the rich sunlight, throwing their colors all over the earth, but that is where they ate their lunch—just salami sandwiches, an apple, chips, and water. The rock was hot from a morning in the sun, and warmed the two from the bottom up. When they had finished eating their lunches they laid a blanket out on the ground, fairly dry at this point, and took a nap, after which, John asked Alison a question.

“Do you ever feel like we were joined together to not ever have kids of our own?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t rule it out of God’s plan, but I honestly don’t think about it that much. I only pray that God would direct our love for each other wherever it needs to go, be it our own children, adopted children, or the Church’s youth group,” she replied.

“I love the way you look at things. Whenever I get down at all about this stuff I just think about how you are always so optimistic about serving Him, and I forget my selfish wishes.”

“Wanting children is certainly not selfish, John.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No, not at all. Children are an expression of two people’s love, and we love each other. Don’t worry, John, God has provided for us so far, and He will continue to do so.” She wanted to tell him her secret.

“You’re right. I love you Ally. Thank you for being a constant reminder of His grace.”

"I love you John."

At about two o'clock they packed up and hiked the long way back to their cabin, where they showered and got ready for dinner in town. The place was called Linda's Kitchen, a homey place that boasted of serving Maine's best lobster, which they both ordered along with a baked potato, green beans, and a bottle of wine. Then they walked around town a bit, rented a movie and watched the hockey game and it and went to sleep.

The closest airport that offered the best fares was in Quebec, Canada, only three hours from Madawaska; so the two were up early and ready to go. Linda didn't feel well, so she slept the entire way to the city, John singing softly to her the whole drive. In Quebec they spent a little time shopping and seeing the city, and then they went to the airport for her six o'clock flight to Dallas.

"Are you sure you're alright to fly?" John asked.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Alison replied. "It is that same pain I've been complaining about for the past couple weeks."

"You've been feeling bad for a few weeks?"

"Yeah, but I'm fine. Remember, I went to the doctor last weekend, and he said the pain was expected."

"Expected?"

"Yeah, expected. 'The only kind of women who feel your kind of pain,' he said," and her eyes lit up and her mouth widened into the biggest smile John had ever seen, taking his hands in her sweaty palms, "are pregnant women." John, in a moment of disbelief sort of shook his head and blinked his eyes furiously, looking anxiously down to

his right and then back into his wife's eyes. He began to open his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She stopped any attempt at speech with a kiss, and said with tears streaming down her soft, white face, "We're gonna have a baby, John!"

John's eyes began to melt as he stared into her face with pure and ecstatic joy. "Are you serious? I mean... really? I mean... we're gonna have a baby?"

"Yes," she cried, as he took her into his arms, lifting her off the ground, once again dancing her around for what seemed like a small eternity, this time in the middle of the airport.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"I was going to, but then you came to me all excited about going away this weekend, so I figured it could wait. And then, we got all caught up in celebrating your big news that I just kept putting off. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Honey, we are having a baby. Nothing to be sorry about. We're having a baby!"

"Oh, I love you so much," she said.

"And I love you... and that is why you'd better go, or else you will miss your plane; it takes off in twenty minutes."

"Oh, the plane, ok, I-I'll call you in the morning from Dallas to make sure you got home okay." A kiss.

"Okay, well... you travel safely, and bring our family back to Boston," John said smiling. A kiss.

"I will. I love you." A kiss.

"I love you... mommy." A kiss.

The word *mommy* caused the tears to well back up in both their eyes, and they parted sorrowfully, yet joyfully, in the middle of the airport. John just stood there as she disappeared through security and off to her gate, turning around several times to wave goodbye. John reciprocated and then left once she was out of sight. He skipped back to the car, thanking God for the miracle He had done in their lives. Once back in the car, he just sat for a while, praying more earnestly than he had ever prayed before, uttering a last word for safety as he drove, and he left the airport, unable to contain his joy, and headed back to the cabin to finish packing and cleaning, and then he would drive home, *the rest of his story yet to be told.*

The Cold Road

It was a cold night and Lukas had already had too much to drink. Mike's bar was quiet this early, its only inhabitants being the locals who wanted to get an early lead before the high rollers showed up later. Lukas was fresh onto the underground gambling scene having spent most of his time within the walls of the dingy, smoke-filled, back alley establishment since he had a fight with his girlfriend and roommate two weeks ago. In that short period of time he had managed to cripple himself with an enormous debt, but he kept coming back in the hope that someone or something would get him back on his feet.

Out the window his gray car looked white against the blackness of the alley. He figured it was raining outside given the drops of water racing down the window, the wet hiss of cars driving by, and the tall, gray haired man who just entered closing an umbrella.

"It's going to be a dangerous night once that temperature drops," said the gray man to no one in particular. He was referring to the weather, which had up until this point been typical New England fall weather. It had been threatening rain the last couple of weeks, but on this night it poured and was unseasonably cold, temperatures supposed to reach close to freezing.

Dark white smoked burned from Lukas' cigarette, warming his fingers, dry and cracked, and teasing the rest of his body, shivering from the open door. He hadn't always smoked. It was a habit he picked up in college when he would stay up late writing papers for various English classes. The habit, he found, kept him alert and inspired, able to churn out large quantities of work in a very short time. His job after college required similar results, working for a publisher as a literary critic and author in his own right, so the habit remained with him. Of course, after the break-up a couple of weeks ago he stopped going to work and was promptly fired. Smoking became for him warm consolation.

He had on a black trench coat, which covered a black sweater and gray pants. His clothes stood in sharp contrast to his milky skin, which glowed bright red on account of the cold. Moving beyond the cheeks, the hollows of his face were tinged yellow by his five years of smoking, giving him the appearance of a young Johnny Cash with a hangover. His bright green eyes set deeply in his skull looked black, suggesting that he hadn't slept in a couple of days. Normally sandy-blonde, his hair was brown, dripping rainwater onto his shoulders and into eyes. Just sitting there he wondered why it had to rain all the time and why the winters were so cold and why he got into a fight with his girlfriend and why he couldn't win at poker? His life had become one great big shiver.

The muffled ring of his cell phone buried deep inside his coat pocket awoke Lukas from his self-pitying trance, but by the time he could answer, the caller had hung up on the other end. Seeing it was his sister he quickly but reluctantly called her back. His sister had more or less sided with Lukas's girlfriend in their little dispute and had been constantly badgering him about what he needed to do to fix the situation. Lukas's

sister had always been nosy when it came to his personal life, but part of him liked the attention. She was six years younger than Lukas, so her advice was always simple if not grossly inadequate, but he knew deep down, she was genuine in her concern and love for her big brother. When it came to his life's most recent events, though, he didn't desire any advice. He hoped it wasn't another call about that; he wasn't in the mood.

"Hey, I just tried to call you," she answered.

"What is it this time?" Lukas asked.

"Don't start up like that again, Lukas," she said. "I need your help. I decided to go home for the weekend to see dad because mom says he's not doing so well, but I can't leave because my car has a flat tire. I think I ran over a nail or a crown of thorns or something."

"So what do you want me to do about that?" Lukas replied.

"I was kinda hoping you'd give me a ride. After all you said you didn't have anything to do tomorrow, and if we leave now you could be back by eleven o'clock in the morning, leaving plenty of time for any *big plans* you might have for the weekend," she said. Lukas did have big plans for the weekend. He was going to spend most of his time at Mike's bar, winning back his money. Also, he would try and catch up with Lisa to talk about things. He would probably even beg to win her back if necessary. He was desperate.

But he eventually agreed to the crusade, got his keys from the guy he specifically told not to give him his keys if he asked and headed for the door. His first reaction was one of shock. The sobering cold grabbed him, forcing his muscles and skin to tighten in resistance like when he was a little boy and would jump in the icy lake at the first sign of

spring. *April is the cruelest month,** he thought. Of course right now October was a close second.

He felt the gravel crush like ice beneath his feet. The scent from the nearby dumpster reminded him of his old college dorm following a guys night in. The bar was now dark behind him, and the only light came from a third story balcony at the end of the alley. Another shiver told him it was winter, and this feeling was confirmed when he grabbed the icicle that was his door handle. Opening his door, he climbed in and started his car. The engine sounded cold and distant, and it wasn't until the third turn of the key that it actually roared to a start. He was an idiot for driving in this weather, in his condition, but he was too far gone to really care enough about his life to let anybody stop him, even himself. His heart was as cold as his door handle, hardened by the frozen nature of love and the empty life of the underground. Winter had arrived two weeks ago, leaving him paralyzed and only able to remember with bitterness, a peaceful walk on a perfect fall day. The cold was all he knew.

He found his sister outside her apartment bundled up in her purple jacket like a queen awaiting a royal escort. Rising to her feet she looked as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders, bearing the burdens of a lonely mother, a sickly father, and a self-destructive brother. She opened the passenger door and climbed in, giving her brother a kiss on the cheek as if to say *thanks for coming*. Smelling the poison she asked, "Do you want me to drive?"

"No," Lukas answered, "I'm okay. I promise." That being said they began their journey home with Lukas at the wheel, thinking about the cold.

Getting out of Boston was a bit of a hassle as it is every Friday evening, but the traffic was no more than usual; it only seemed to pass much more slowly because of the deafening silence in the car. The radio played at that annoying low level where all that was heard was the bass line, and when accompanied by the drone of the engine, the lyrics were completely stifled. The windshield wipers ju-ju-jumped across the windshield, failing miserably to remove the raindrops, and the two could see their breath in the car thanks to the heater that had been broken since the end of last winter. The coldness finally carried them out of the city and onto the open road still in silence, thus beginning their six-hour trip back home.

The first five hours of the trip saw the silence interrupted only by intermittent stops for gas and restroom breaks. An hour from home, Lukas finally turned off the radio, having had enough of the noise, inadvertently signaling his sister to begin a conversation. "So, what were you up to when I called?" she asked.

"I was down at Mike's," replied Lukas.

"Dammit Luke, you know better than to be down there. I hate to see you wasting away like this, and for a stupid reason," she said.

"What would you know about my reason?" he asked, "and why is my personal life always a concern for you?"

"I know all about Lisa and Mark, and you've got a right to be upset, but it is no use in getting yourself into trouble with gambling debts and excessive drinking. And besides, I care about you. Tell me what I can do to help."

"Nothing!" Lukas replied.

“Hey, hey, there is no reason to be angry with me. I have never done anything or said anything with the intention of hurting you. What’s wrong? Why don’t you let me help you? Tell you what, let’s pull off at the next exit and get a cup of coffee. My treat,” she said.

Pulling off the highway so close to home seemed pointless to Lukas but he acquiesced. The drunken feeling had left him an hour ago, leaving him with a desire to quench his thirst, and coffee would do just fine. The diner parking lot was empty, and the midnight moon mixed with the corner street lamp to cast the damp parking lot in a pale yellow. Inside, the lone waitress had one other customer, a young woman who looked a lot like Lukas’s ex-girlfriend. She had brown hair and coral blue eyes and at the moment was reaching across the sticky table for another packet of sugar. The grill was hard at work cooking her breakfast—eggs and bacon and a piece of toast. The smell of smoke in the place reminded Lukas of Mike’s establishment back in Boston, which always smelled of stale tobacco and bad whiskey. The jukebox played ‘Bad Moon Rising’ causing him to laugh—*no kidding*. The young waitress approached; her white button-down shirt was stained with grease and coffee; her hair was falling out of her ponytail as if she had broken up a fight earlier in the evening. Lukas noticed that she wore a cross around her neck and that she had a scar behind her left ear as she scratched it with her long, ruby fingernails. “What can I get for the two of you?” she asked.

“Two coffees,” Lukas’ sister answered, looking straight at Lukas, preparing to restart their conversation from the car. “I just want to let you know that I love you, Luke.”

This simple reminder brought Lukas to his breaking point forcing tears to well up in his eyes. He realized that he was wrong to think his sister had anything to do with his girlfriend and roommate. She constantly badgered him about it because she wanted him to be okay. She was looking out for the well being of her brother because she cared about him. At this moment, he felt she was the only person who cared for him at all. For the first time in a couple of weeks he felt loved. He felt warm again.

He remembered a peaceful summer day at dawn just six short years earlier. The quiet breeze had sounded across the patio rustling the leaves of the trees, causing several to land in sharp contrast on the red brick. The shadows on the ground played to the rhythm of the wind dancing back and forth as if trying to hide from the hot morning sun, entertaining Lukas enough to make him smile. He sat quietly at the table in the soft-cushioned chair that felt like a giant hug as he sipped orange juice and read the paper. The birds sang their song to the dawn in the distance, and the sound of the water rolling gently up on the pebbly shore echoed in perfect harmony with the rest of its surroundings. He looked up from his reading to see his sister coming up from the lake after a morning swim with Dad; she was smiling as she wished him good morning. The sun glistened off her soft wet face; her hair was a painter's brush splattering water all over the warm earth in a beautiful pattern of disarray; and her shadow danced in a blood red dress on the ground. She sat next to him, without a care in the world and interrupted his breakfast ritual saying, "You know what?"

"Huh?" he muttered, trying to ignore her.

"I still love you. It was only a game and I don't care that you lost. I will love you always, no matter what," she said, getting up and going inside, sliding the glass door shut

behind her. Lukas laughed at her innocent, twelve-year-old's remark, and at the same time acknowledged that he would never forget what she said. *So what if he struck out to end the big game?* That day he was able to smile and enjoy the serenity of the sky, the warmth of the air, and the peace of an afternoon shower. He went to bed that night smiling: for the first time in his life he liked the rain.

His resistance to accept his sister's affection this time quickly froze the warm tears that threatened to roll down Lukas' cheeks. "That's good to know," he said, almost cruelly. He didn't deserve to be loved. He hated the warmth of it now. Taking one last drink of his now cool coffee, Lukas rose, slapping a five-dollar bill on the greasy table, motioning to his sister with a toss of his head that it was time to go. She rose, puzzled and reluctant, angered by Lukas's stubborn nature and abrupt desire to leave, and followed him outside.

Back outside, she noticed the drastic change in temperature and her body uttered the appropriate shivery response. It was colder, and she ran to car hoping to warm herself just a little. Lukas' pace was cool and slow, almost lifeless. Deep down what his sister said probably saved him in a way, but it was one of those moments that he wouldn't actually realize the power of until much later. The car engine roared and the two were back on the road, hoping to be home by sunrise.

The silence from the first part of the trip permeated the car again. Lukas's sister slept softly against her seat belt, and Lukas wished he, too, could take a nap. His mind was littered with thoughts of Lisa, Mark, and what used to be. Perhaps he was the one to blame. He had been working so hard on his writing and was so concerned with elevating his position with the publishing firm, that maybe he hadn't been as aware of her needs or

his friendship with Mark. Faintly in the background, a song reminding him of his and Lisa's wonder years played. The notes pounded his soul and the sweet melody just made him angry. He was crying. He had to fix things and decided that he would when he got back home. The tears burned, and he reached down to turn off the radio.

When Lukas looked up from his task he saw he had veered hopelessly onto the other side of the street where in not even a second his car would slam directly into an oncoming vehicle. It was black outside, the blackest the night had been and the soon to be rising sun had scorched the clouds away revealing the remnants of the stars. The trees that lined the right side of the highway were beginning to come to life with mother birds in search of food for the day. On its left, the highway overlooked the city, and saw lights begin to flicker in houses and on street corners. A few cars populated the streets, as the factories were making their morning shift changes. The world was coming to life.

As Lukas slammed on his brakes he could smell the hot tread of his tires as it massaged itself into the cold road, leaving twenty feet of memories on the highway. The squeal of the other man's brakes pierced his eardrum, and the driver honked his horn ferociously as he turned his wheel hard to avoid the inevitable collision, requiring Lukas to turn his wheel in order to avoid a similar fate.

Bringing his other hand up to grasp the wheel he had to remove it from his sleeping sister's gentle caress. She had been holding his hand this whole time and he never realized it. Her eyes opened.

When they did she saw two moons blinding her, causing her to gasp in preparation for a cry to her father. Her scream never precipitated as the two vehicles collided head on. The headlights shattered causing a chain reaction of destruction back

towards the driver, crushing the engine, and destroying everything else under the hood. Inside the airbag exploded in slow motion spewing chemical everywhere, burning Lukas' eyes even more. His sister had no airbag, and her body lunged forward from the momentum of the vehicle, snapping the seatbelt, allowing her body to proceed straight ahead according to Newton's laws. Her head hit first but it was the rest of her body that broke through the windshield. The glass shattered everywhere, ripping her clothes and gashing her frail, china skin. Her body flew like an angel, light and carefree through the cold dawn air; her spirit left her body in a flash of light at the crest of her flight, and like a kite in the wind danced on the morning, jumped from treetop to treetop, surfed the clouds, battled the remaining stars for supremacy in the sky, and then vanished into a hole in the Heavens made of purest light, singing a song. Her body landed lifeless on the cold, crumpled hood of the other car.

Everything was silent except for the steady buzz of the other man's horn as his body rested heavily against his steering wheel. And only twenty minutes away in a small New England town Lukas' mother awoke to the unwelcome buzz of her alarm clock. She got up and got ready for the day. It was Saturday and Tom had to go to the hospital for his treatment. She was smiling this Saturday morning, though, because her daughter had promised to come home to visit and bring Lukas, the prodigal son, home with her. She said a prayer for her children, that they would arrive home safely, and that they could enjoy their weekend as a family.

Arriving at the hospital she saw three ambulances with lights flashing madness and medical people frantically scurrying in and out of the emergency room. Part of her

wept for whomever was in those ambulances and for their families, not knowing her day was about to change.

Being unloaded from one of the ambulances, Lukas opened his eyes and saw the rising sun beginning to come up over the trees, evaporating the previous night's rain from the cool, blue streets. He was warm.

Sunday Morning

“My baby!” screamed Carol waking from her sleep. Instantly Tom bolted up out of bed, terrified.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

“I saw her, Tom, in my dream. She looked more beautiful than ever. She was wearing my white wedding dress, had her hair done up in two buns, and was holding a bouquet of beautiful white roses.” Carol’s eyes were bright with tears and she was smiling. “And as I went to run to her and hug her, a car starting honking furiously and ran her over. Oh Tom! Oh God! My baby Tom, she’s gone. T-o-o-o-m!”

“It’s all right sweetheart, Carol. Everything is okay. I’m here. Tom is here. Carol, sweetie, everything is going to be fine.”

“No it won’t be, Tom, she’s gone. She’s dead. We will never see her again. I miss her Tom.”

“I know you do. I miss her, too. I miss her so much. O God I miss her.” Tom joined his wife already in tears, and the two held on, comforting each other.

“I just don’t know if I can handle all this Tom. Our daughter is dead, Lukas in the hospital, and you aren’t healthy.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

"Tom, the doctor said the cancer has spread. Don't try and make me feel better. You can't."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Just hold me, Tom."

"Okay."

"Oh, Tom."

"Carol."

And they other, crying tears of mourning.

Alison hadn't slept all night. John didn't return her phone calls all day Saturday, and she was worried whether or not he made it home okay. Thankfully, the last day of her conference had been cancelled, so she had moved her flight up to early in the morning, hoping to get home early and surprise him. Because she couldn't sleep at all, she packed up and left for the airport early.

"Let me make you breakfast," Tom said.

"I'm not hungry," answered Carol. "I couldn't eat anything right now, Tom. It would just make me sick."

"Well then at least come to the kitchen with me and have a cup of coffee."

"Tom, no. I don't want anything."

"Honey, you have to have something. You didn't eat all day yesterday, and you can't do that today. Come on, sweetie, just a cup of coffee."

"Go, get it started, and I'll be down in a few minutes."

So Tom left, and Carol just started to cry, and cry, and cry, and cry, and cry, and cry, and cry. Her tears fell like waterfalls over her dry cheeks. *She knew that she couldn't let Tom see her like this. She had to be strong, for him, for Lukas, but mostly for herself. She was the one healthy one left, so she needed to be the strongest.*

Gathering herself, having dried her tears with the sleeve of her robe, she walked down to the kitchen, where Tom was sitting quietly at the table sipping his coffee. The only light came from the small lamp over the stove. The room had a peaceful disposition, and Carol felt that it was uncalled for given her circumstance.

"Coffee's in the pot," said Tom. "It is the best pot I've made in a while."

"Or maybe it just tastes that way because you haven't slept in a while."

"Possible, but I like to be optimistic."

"That's quite the challenge," she said, pouring herself a glass.

"True, but it is necessary. What do you think?" he asked Carol as she took her first drink.

"It is good. Hot."

"I think what makes it so good is its circumstance, or better put, our circumstance. We need this coffee to be good, so we can have hope."

"I don't think you can hang hope on a pot of coffee, Tom," said Carol.

"That's true. Okay, well then what do you hang your hope on, as you put it?" asked Tom. Carol sat silently for a moment, stirring a spoon in her coffee for no reason, staring blankly at the corner of the table.

"I guess doctors. Lukas' doctors. And lawyers. Our lawyers. Lukas could get charged with murder, you know. And I hope in... and I hope in..."

“Is that it? Doctors and lawyers.”

“No, I was going to say you, Tom. I hang my hope on you,” she said. Tom was silent. “My hope is in us.”

“Do you want to know what I hope in?” said Tom.

“What?”

“God. I hope in God.” Carol looked surprised.

“Yeah, I hadn’t thought of that. It seems just so hard to think about something we have never seen at a time when we are in need of such healing.”

“Ah, but you see. It is healing that He desires to give us. Spiritual healing.”

“I have always admired the depth of your faith, Tom, even though I do not share your same sentiment,” said Carol.

“Well,” said Tom, “He is the only reason I am still here today.”

“The only reason?” said Carol, eyes watering. “Well then how does your God fit into this?”

“Well, I have to believe this has all happened for a reason. God has placed this event in our lives for a purpose.”

“But how can you say that? How can you say that your just and loving God has caused this terrible affliction to befall us?”

“That is a great question, Carol, and I have no definitive answer. That is why it is called faith,” said Tom.

“And that is why I don’t have any faith,” said Carol, adamant. “It provides no answers. I have no use for anything that tells anybody in my situation to ‘just hold on to

me and everything will be fine.’ No I need something real, Tom. I don’t need some abstract bullshit that no one can see.”

“Then I guess you won’t ever have it,” said Tom, “because the point of faith is not answers, but rather purpose. It is not ‘how can God serve me,’ but instead, ‘how can I serve God?’ I have faith because I don’t have all the answers, not because I do.”

“But you are assuming that God does?”

“I believe that, yes.”

“Then why, Tom? Why this? Why now? Why?” asked Carol, as her face got red and tears burst from her eyes and she tossed her empty coffee cup across the kitchen, and it hit the refrigerator then shattered on the floor. “Tom, don’t hug me.”

“Sweetie, listen to me. Everything is going to be fine. Believe me. We are going to be fine. I know you are angry, and that’s okay. It’s okay to be angry. Just know that. Even Jesus got angry. I love you too much to let anything happen to you.” But Carol just continued to pull away, flailing her arms to keep them out of the grasp of Tom’s tender care.

“Not now, Tom. Just leave me... I just need a minute to be alone. Why don’t you just go away and pray or some thing. Pray to the only reason you are still here, and let me cry alone. I don’t say that name Jesus around me again. I hate Him.” The tears were flowing freely down Tom’s face like icicles melting on a sunny day. He realized the pain his wife was in, and he badly wanted to help, but he couldn’t. He knew that. So he left her at the table, and went into the den and fell into the couch.

You've reached John and Alison. We're not home, so leave us a message and we'll call you back. And oh yeah, leave your name and number, too.

"John, are you there? John? This is Alison. John, answer if you are there. Alright, well, I'm in Boston. I took the early flight home. Since you are sleeping and can't answer the phone, I'm just gonna take a cab to the house. I'll see you in a little bit. I love you, John. I sure hope everything is okay. We can't wait to see you." She hung up the pay phone and stared blankly at the coin slot. Needed to get home, so she hailed a taxi and left the airport.

God. Lord Almighty. Jesus, my Savior. Precious Holy Spirit. I come before you now, asking you to hover in our midst in this awful time. You are a just God, a good God. A God with a plan who weaves together all that happens for the good of those who love You. I love You, Lord, and I am asking for a miracle. Comfort us in this time of tribulation. First, embrace our daughter in your kingdom. She was the purest of souls and a faithful servant in your name. Clothe her in Your Light and Warmth. Lord, also watch over our son Lukas in the hospital. Be with his doctors. Give them wisdom and discretion in dealing with his delicate situation. Father Embrace him. Hold him close and heal him beneath the power of Your wings. I believe there is healing in Your wings. Restore my son to fullness of health and fullness of life, just like you did Your Son long ago. I pray also, Lord God, for my wife, Carol. She does not know you Lord, and I am afraid this circumstance is concealing the truth even more from her crying eyes. She thinks she needs to be this goddess of strength because I am sick and all. Lord, help her to realize that true strength is in weakness, in suffering, in experiencing pain, but in being

able to lean on You and others. If nothing else, bring her peace. I know it will take time, but we have a lot of that before You, Precious Lord. Help her to see Your love finally and plainly. Use me, God. Make me strong for her. You have blessed me with this wife and this life, and I would not do it differently. I see now, an opportunity to serve you through serving my family in this crisis of faith. Please keep my faith steadfast. Keep my eyes always looking upward. Hold us all now, Lord. We have never needed You so much. Comfort us with Your amazing presence and love, for You are Love. May the love I share with all be Your Love. God, I also pray for the family of the other man, I believe John was his name, and for any family who must endure such trials. We are all so broken, Lord. You made us that way so You could save us through Your Son, so we could experience fullness of life, fullness of experience. That is why I embrace this challenge of faith. Lord, make us all stronger and closer to each other and to You because of this. Holy Spirit, bring forth peace within my soul. May my cup overflow with love and compassion for all. May I not be selfish when it comes to this time in my life, but may I lose myself in serving You. May I lose myself in loving You. And may my wife join in the same love, the same fullness, the same life. Your will be done, Father. Lord Jesus, thank You. Holy Spirit, fan the flame. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Making the sign of the Cross, his tears like Holy Water anointing his tired brow, Tom lay in silence, partly listening to hear if his wife was moving, but mostly just waiting on God, waiting for a sign, a feeling, something, anything that could help take away the pain. Then she walked in, her face red from hours of crying, her eyes bloodshot, and trails of salt dried to her cheeks. She looked helpless.

"Come here honey," said Tom, and Carol fell beside him on couch, crying.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "This must be just as hard on you. I have been selfish, thinking only of myself. I have been sitting at that table the last couple of hours, and I have realized that if I am ever going to make it through this... I need you. Forgive me."

"Oh Carol. Honey, I love you, and I forgive you. Of course I forgive you." And they sat there, crying, silently. "Together," Tom whispered. "Together."

The morning air was cool, like a peaceful morning breeze over the harbor in summertime, and a cab carrying Alison pulled up to her house. The sun had already risen high into the morning sky, but was, at the moment, masked by the only cloud in Boston. She grabbed her bag, paid the cab and ran for her front door, fumbling for her keys as she tried to open the door. Once inside she dropped her bags and kicked off her shoes.

"John. John. John, are you home? John, where are you? John."

The kitchen was empty. Its tiles cold on her stockinged feet, like ice in winter. The countertops were clean, desolate. They were never clean when John was home alone, but usually littered with crumbs and empty cereal boxes or coke cans. The sink had no dirty dishes in it, and the trash was no more full than it was when they left.

"John. J-o-ohn."

Their bed was made, perfectly. The same could be said for every room in the house. Perfect. The sheer perfection of the place stunk, making Alison sick to her empty stomach.

“John. John. Where... are... you?” She began to cry, as she checked every room of the house, every closet, every crack in every tile, underneath every piece of furniture, then finally the garage.

John’s car was missing, and the sight of such an empty space in a three car garage made her fall to her knees, trembling with the weight of tears. Out of instinct, perhaps, she placed her hand over her stomach and began to rub her belly, their baby inside her.

With a blank stare, she returned to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, but she could barely drink. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably. She placed the glass on the counter and saw, out the corner of her eye, the blinking light of the answering machine. She didn’t want to check it. *What if he just left, the pressure of rearing a child just too much for his ministry? What if he got lost? Or kidnapped? Or an accident and was badly hurt? What if?*

“How ya doing?” asked Tom, after what seemed like hours of silence.

“I’ve been better,” said Carol, with a half smile.

“We should go to the hospital sometime soon.”

“Okay, but I think we should freshen up a bit,” and the two shared a laugh.

“You have wisdom beyond your years. You know Jesu... you shower first.”

“I love you Tom. You’re all I’ve got.”

“I love you. Now go get in the shower,” Tom said.

Hey honey, it’s just me. It is Saturday morning and I am safely in my hotel in Dallas. I hope you had a good trip. I love you.

Hey honey, it's me again. We just got out of the morning meetings and thought you might be home. I can't wait to talk to you, and see you, and lie in bed with you rubbing my belly. Give me a call here at the hotel. You've got the number, and my room extension is 2027. Bye.

This message is for Alison Crowder. Ma'am, this is detective Jenkins with the Portland, Maine Police Department. I hate to tell you like this, but we couldn't find any other way to contact you. Your husband is dead, ma'am. He was in a very bad car accident. He is at Portland Hospital as we speak. Please call us, the number is ...

She could not move. She instantly went numb and her glass dropped to the floor. The machine was still going with messages. One from John's mother, calling to apologize and say they would meet her at the hospital. Another from her mother who was on her way to the hospital as well. And another from her, just worrying about her husband. Outside, cars drove by her house on what was an unusually busy Sunday morning. The Red Sox were gearing up for the playoffs, taking batting practice at the park. And just down the street, people were filing into the church to welcome their future pastor. But inside, Alison sat, unable to move, unable even to cry, just staring in disbelief. And she stared. And stared. And sat staring. Staring. Disbelief. And finally, her spirit broke, and the dams behind her eyes opened.

"Oh God. Oh God. Dear God. Why? Why? John?"

"Why?"

"John. O John."

"God. Why?"

"O God. John. The baby. What about the baby?"

Her words became unrecognizable after that, as she choked on her tears and vomited in the sink. She just sat on the cold tile, crying, moaning, groaning like in a prayer of agony.

The telephone began to ring, but she just sat there paralyzed. But when she heard the voice of her mother, she made herself get off the floor and answer the phone.

“Hello,” she whispered in a teary murmur.

“O Alison. Alison. Honey. Alison. I am so sorry. Alison. O Honey.”

“O mom.”

“Yes sweetie. I am here. I am here for you honey. O Alison. Talk to me.”

“Why did God do this mom? Why?”

“O honey, I know this is hard. I know it is hard. Honey I am so sorry. It was a terrible accident. A terrible accident.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“What? O Alison. O God, Alison. I don’t know what to say. I can’t begin to say anything.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“Okay. Okay. It’s okay,” said Alison’s mother.

“Mom, what do I do? What am I going to do?”

“O baby. Honey. Listen, you stay right there and pack a bag. I am going to call the Boston Police and have them escort you to the hospital. That way you can get here faster. Okay?”

“Okay. Mom?”

“Alison, I am so sorry. I love you Alison.”

"Thanks." And with that she dropped the phone and banged her head against the cabinet behind her, and then lay down on the cold.

"Do you think I'll ever walk again, mom?" asked Lukas, heavily sedated.

"Of course I do," said Carol unable to look at her crippled son; tubes were everywhere— his arms, nose, and mouth. His face was badly burned from the air bag and the entire left side of his body was bruised. He had dislocated his left shoulder and broken his right wrist in addition to his paralysis of the lower body, but surprisingly all his vitals were normal.

"Dad?"

"I don't know, son. I hope so. I have been praying like crazy for you the past day."

"Prayers? I've been getting that a lot lately," said Lukas.

"Yeah, well, they're good for you," said Tom.

"How's my sister? They told me yesterday, as they were wheeling me in, but I have been on so many drugs I can't remember what they said," said Lukas.

"Oh, Lukas," said his mother, beginning to cry. "She... she... sh..."

"She didn't survive the crash, Luke," said his father. "The doctor's said she died instantly, and painlessly."

"She's dead?"

"I'm sorry, Lukas," said father.

"Dead?"

"Oh, Lukas," said mother.

“Dead. O God. O God. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh Lukas, it’s okay,” said mom.

“I’m sorry I killed your little girl.”

“Luke, it’s going to be okay. She is in a better place now,” said his dad.

Lukas just lay there sobbing his parents trying their best to comfort him. “What about the other guy?” he asked.

“He died, too,” answered his father.

“Oh God, I am so sorry. Where is his family?”

“Why, I don’t know, Lukas. I’m sure they are in the hospital somewhere,” said Carol.

“Find them please. I want to talk to them.”

“Lukas, you need to rest now. You need to get some rest.”

“I’ll rest if you go find them please. Please.”

“Okay, we’ll find them. Get some sleep, Lukas,” said his mother as she kissed his bruised forehead, letting a tear fall on his brow. “Get some sleep.”

The people at the desk informed Lukas’ parents that the man’s wife was on her way, and that the parents were here. They asked to be notified as soon as the wife arrived at the hospital.

Forgive me Father, but I can’t see You in any of this. Why? Why? His promotion and our child. Why did he have to die? Why did he have to die? It doesn’t make any sense. It isn’t fair. In fact, it is cruel. It is awfully cruel. Nobody deserves this. God, what did I do to deserve this? We were going to have a baby. God, how can

You finally answer our prayers for a child and then take away his father? How can You do it and call yourself just? Or good? Where are you in this mess? Where were You when he crashed? Why couldn't You save him? Why didn't You? That is twice now that You've let one of Your children die. But who did my husband save with his death? Huh? He was a minister of Your Gospel. He was the kindest gentlest man I've ever known and would've been the greatest father, but You let him die. You killed him, God. I hate you. I hate you. Why, God? Why have You forsaken me? Who was saved by his death? Why couldn't he have lived? Answer me. Answer me. Please, God, answer me. I have nothing left. I am broken and I am begging. Rescue me. Answer me. God. Please.

The trip passed as slowly as the tears rolling down her face. She felt dead. Part of her wished she were dead. But instead she just passed the trip in silence, rubbing her belly.

God? Are You there? This is Lukas. Hi. I know it has been a long time since I last spoke to You, and an even longer time since I have meant anything I said. I'm not sure whether I even know how to do this anymore, but I just ask that You hear me. Just this one time, hear me, and then, if You don't want to, You never have to listen to me again. I'm not asking for healing, part of me could care less if I ever walk again. I just pray now for my sister, who spent so many years praying for me, caring for me, loving me, and all the while going unthanked by me. She was the best friend I have ever had, and I never knew it, never appreciated the gift of family. And I never got to ask her forgiveness. May she rest in peace, hidden in the comfort of Your eternal salvation. As

for my family, be with my parents. Dad is sick, but mom is completely broken, devastated by all this. Make dad strong for her, and help her through this. Let them know I'll be fine, and help them rediscover life after her. I also want to pray for the other man and his family, that they might be comforted in all this. That they would forgive me for killing their son and husband and father and uncle and whatever else he was. I'm truly sorry. I'm truly sorry about a lot of things. I am sorry that I have not remained faithful to You. I am sorry that I have run off to live my life on my own, wasting my life. I don't blame You if You are not listening, but I ask Your forgiveness regardless. I know that Jesus died to forgive sins, and I embrace that here, again. Give me a second chance at life. Let me take in the air at a Boston Red Sox game, or listen to the birds singing as they fly across the harbor on early Sunday morning. Let me go sailing in the stiff summer breeze, and smell the drifting tide as it washes playfully over my sandy feet. Let me tell the ones I love how much I love them. I don't want to miss another moment of this life because I am too dead to care. God, save me. And sis, if you're listening, I love you.

When Alison arrived at the hospital, she was greeted outside by her and John's parents. They tried hugging her, consoling her, whispering 'it'll be all right' and 'I love you' in her ear, but she felt nothing. When she met the doctor, he told her that he did not die on impact, but was in a coma until Saturday afternoon. He died in that coma, so he felt no pain. Then, of course she had to identify the body, and did so with great reluctance. The smell was unbearable, like walking through a forest of dead animals. The room was cold, causing her to shiver. It was him. He looked the same only not. He had a pained look on his face, as if he had suffered in death. His eyes were shut, but

looked reluctant, hesitant, like one fighting sleep in the wee hours of the night. He looked as if he didn't want to die. This made everything all the more painful for Alison, who was looking pretty rough herself. Her face was completely flushed, irritated red underneath her nose and eyes. Her eyes and lips were swollen, and her hair was in tangles. Her skin was clammy to the touch, and she hadn't eaten anything in a while.

"I need some time alone," she said to her family, and she went into the chapel at the hospital.

The room was no bigger than a prison cell. It had in front, a place to kneel before rows of votive candles in green glass, most of them lit. Only one light in the center of the ceiling, pale yellow, lit the room, but above the candles and the altar was stained glass Crucifixion scene— autumn set against a background of blue and white, and the sun streamed through the pigment, casting a melody of color about the red-brick walls and burgundy carpet. Incense was burning jasmine in the corner, and on either side of the altar were bouquets of white roses. And of course, because she really needed to be alone, a man was there, kneeling on one of the benches.

Nevertheless, Alison approached, and knelt quietly next to the man who had his hands clasped so violently as to see the white of his knuckles; his eyes were shut tightly. He looked in pain. Alison made the sign of the Cross and began to pray alongside this man, who had absolutely no idea she was even in the room. She prayed that she could pray like this man. That she could have that much reverence and faith at this terrible time, but she couldn't. She pitied herself too much.

"What brings you in here, if I may ask?" the man said.

"I have much to ask of God," she replied.

“Well this is the place. Me, well I am here looking for peace of mind. What is it you are looking for?”

She wasn't really in the mood for conversation, but he seemed a peaceable man. “I am looking for answers,” she said.

“Well, then maybe you've come to the wrong place. No answers here; this is a place of refuge. A place you go to rest and abide in the loving arms of God, when the world outside here is beating you up. Has the world beaten you up, ma'am? Name's Tom, by the way,” extending his hand.

She took it graciously. “Alison,” she said, “and yes I am a little beaten.”

“Care to talk about it? Maybe we can help each other.”

“What happened to bring you here?” she asked.

“My son was paralyzed and my daughter killed in a car wreck. They were on their way home to visit us for the weekend.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry. I... I...” At this point she realized she was speaking to the father of the man who had killed her husband.

“What? What is wrong?” Tom asked. “You can tell me.”

“My husband was killed in a car crash, also.” Alison said. John sat and stared blankly for a moment at a candle flickering.

“Are you John's wife, by chance?” Tom asked. She nodded tearfully. “O Alison, I am so sorry for your loss. I would apologize on behalf of my son, but he has asked to see you himself.”

“I don't quite think I am ready for that. He killed my husband.”

"Oh Alison. I know it's hard, but it was an accident. Accident's happen. If I could get my daughter back and restore my son to health I would, but all that is done with. All I can do now is push forward, endure this trial. What matters now is my family."

"But John was my family. We were going to have a baby."

"Alison, I wish I knew what to say. I'm sorry. But when you are ready, please come and speak with my son. Take all the time you need. But please, if nothing else, do it for his sake so he can have some peace about all this. He is just a wreck. Please see him. I know you don't even know me, but I'm asking for a favor. Please."

"Give me a minute," said Alison. Tom nodded as he walked away, bowing before the altar. Alison was alone again, and she wept at the foot of Christ crucified, frozen in glass.

"Lukas," his father whispered. "Luke, are you awake? Lukas."

"Yeah dad, I'm up. I'm up."

"How ya feeling, son?"

"Tired and sore where I have any feeling left."

"Can I bring you anything?"

"No, I'm okay right now."

"Well, someone is here to see you. Lukas, this is Alison, John's wife." She walked out from behind the door slowly, nervously.

Lukas sat upright in his bed, unsure, really, of what to say or do. He just stared into the empty eyes of the young woman before him.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” his father said, and he turned and left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Neither one knew where to begin.

“Please, pull that chair over here and sit by my bed. You will be more comfortable,” Lukas said. She obeyed.

“What kind of man was your husband?” he asked, handing her a tissue to dry her eyes.

“He was... well... my everything.”

“What did he do for a living?”

“He is a... was, a preacher in South Boston. He was a brilliant, and charismatic minister that could control a congregation with a bat of his eyes. I used to love watching him preach. You could just tell that he had Christ. He got it. He understood what this life was about. He knew what it meant to preach the Gospel. He was a gentle husband and wonderful lover. He had all the qualities I desired in the father of my children... He would be the best father.”

“Have you no children?”

“None, but I recently got pregnant. He found out this weekend, right before the acc...” She couldn’t finish, instead burying her face in her hands.

“Oh my God. Oh. Oh. Oh God. I... I... I... don’t know what to say. I am so sorry. Oh, I wish I could tell you how badly I felt. I wish you could know how destroyed I am inside. I... I...”

Lukas grabbed a tissue for himself now, and tried to gather himself. *I’m still here*, he thought. “I’m still here,” he said loudly.

"What did you say?" asked Alison.

"I said I am still here. Alison, I don't know why it all happened, but I do know is that for some reason, I am still here. For some reason I am still alive. For some reason I was saved by these tragic deaths. I don't understand it quite yet." The two sat in silence as Lukas searched hard for a reason. "I have rediscovered my faith," he finally said. "I needed to live to rediscover my faith." Alison still looked confused. "Oh, I know this doesn't make you feel any better. But just know that I was saved by the life of my sister, and by the death of your husband." The tears in both their eyes flooded their faces. Lukas took her by her broken hands, looked her in the eyes, and blew dry her tears.

"Is there anything at all I can give you or do for you, Alison? Name it, anything. Just know that I am truly sorry."

The question rolled around in Alison's head for minutes, as they sat in complete silence, interrupted occasionally by sniffles. And suddenly, Alison shot out of her chair. Lukas was alarmed, but Alison paid no attention. *Nothing he could say or do could bring her husband back or make her feel any better about the situation. Nor could he do anything to help her raise her child. He could do nothing at all.*

"No," she whispered.

"Nothing?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, can you do something for me," asked Lukas.

"What is it?" asked Alison.

"Can you forgive me? Will you pray with me now, and if you can, forgive me."

Her heart broke. She loved to pray with John. It was the one thing they did together that she never wanted to be without, and that she would miss the most. She pictured him rolling out of bed early on a Saturday morning and making her get up and pray with him outside before they would go back in and go to sleep. She pictured John at his desk, writing a sermon, scribbling furiously at times to erase something he didn't want to say. And then moments later, sometimes hours, he would emerge from his office and kiss her gently on the temple, then read her what he had written. She remembered the passion he spoke with, how he dance around in the pulpit, full of life as he delivered every message straight from his heart. After church was always brunch or a picnic somewhere, just the two of them. She loved Sundays. Today was Sunday, and not even two days ago, she told him she was pregnant. She remembered his smile when she told him, and how he danced her around the airport and then just stood and waved until she had disappeared into the terminal. Then suddenly he was there, real in her mind, standing before his congregation, leading them in the Lord's prayer. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.** He looked right at her as he said those words, his robe white like the sun. Tears were in his eyes, as he repeated those words. She began to cry again, but this time tears of relief, of peace, and of comfort— tears of *I love you forever* echoed from the quiet places of her heart.

Then she looked up at Lukas. His head was down, and his eyes closed. He was praying. "I forgive you, Lukas," she whispered. "I forgive you." And she got up from her chair, grabbed the sides of his bowed head, and kissed the top of his hair. Lukas just sat there, head down, weeping.

Outside Lukas' room, his mother and father waited, and looked up as the teary Alison emerged from the room. She approached them both.

"I am so sorry for the loss of your daughter," she said. "I, too, know what it is like to lose a loved one. But I also know what is like to have someone left to love," as she rubbed her belly and smiled.

"I pray you can forgive our son, Alison. He is a good man," said Tom, as he embraced both her hands.

"I already have," said Alison. "I already have." Then she hugged them both, exchanging an eternal bond of tears, and began to walk back to her family.

Carol and Tom sat there holding each other. Tom smiled, and Carol prayed. *Thank you Jesus*, she said to herself. When they opened Lukas' door they found him sleeping peacefully.

Eulogy for All Souls

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well, what do you think of the story?”

“You mean that is it? It’s over? Just like that? Done?”

“You don’t like it.”

“It’s not that. I guess I just don’t get it. You told me it was one story, yet you told me something like six.”

“So you don’t see it yet, then.”

“See what?”

“It’s okay, some people don’t ever see it.”

“See what?”

“The end.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“Oh, there’s always more. There’s always things left untold and unseen.”

“Well, then, what’s the rest of it?”

“Look, if you don’t get it... if you don’t like my story that is okay with me. I’m not going to burden you with an ending that you probably won’t understand.

“Well, you’re never gonna know unless you tell me.”

“Do you really want to know how it ends?”

“Why not? You’ve had my attention this long. What is another few minutes?

And besides, your story isn’t that bad. It just has a lot of holes.”

“Are you sure you want to know how it ends?”

“Positive.”

“Okay, but I warn you— once you know this much, there is no turning back. You either believe me or you don’t, and that decision will haunt you forever.”

“Whatever, just finish the story.”

“Okay.”

We left Laura weeping, sort of a sad moment, remember, way back in the beginning. Can’t you understand her pain, trying so hard like that to help others, to expose the truth, and then having the door slammed in your face. Don’t you think it’s sad that the truth has been so concealed that people don’t want to hear it anymore. People don’t want answers. People want the answers they want, and if the truth hurts, then they just pretend it wasn’t the truth. This is what she encountered with Joe.

Joe’s story, I regret to say, ended regrettably. He died alone, just like he had chosen to live. There is wisdom in that statement. You die how you choose to live. It is a simple matter of choice really. You make it, and God honors it— simple. But it’s so hard, is it not? Joe was really hard on himself. He pitied himself, he disrespected himself, and as a result he shut people out. He shut Laura out. He shut love out. And he died loveless.

But back to Laura. Not long after we left her crying herself to sleep, she was back to work, this time helping a child, well, saving a child really. I swear the scene was right out of a movie. It was a sunny day downtown. The pavement radiated heat creating that really cool mirage effect, and a young boy named John, aged six, was practicing riding his bike in his driveway. His laughter filled the air, and his smile was heaven, and got even bigger when he saw a man flying a kite across the street. He wanted to see the kite, to fly it even, but he remembered how his mother did not want him leaving the driveway on his bike. So being the genius that he was, he got off his bike and began to run across the street, where, of course, he tripped, falling out of view of the big truck barreling towards him. Laura, out walking, saw all of this and ran into the street and stopped the truck. When asked later by John's mother if there was anything she wanted, all she said was, "Nothing. I only hope that one day he remembers this story, and knows that God is in Heaven looking out for him. And that in everything he experiences, he traces the fingerprints of God." And this became Laura's calling. She died from disease in South America, leaving God's fingerprints on every child she touched.

And of course, you know John's story quite well, and were he still around for questioning he would tell you that he did remember that day, along with the day he realized God's presence in his life, and the truth about that day. "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death,"* he read in a book somewhere. It was then he yielded; it was then he committed the rest of his life to serving God and man, just as Laura had done.

"Do you mind if I take a drink of water? My throat is dry."

"No, please do. Drink away."

"Aah, that is good. Shall we continue?"

"By all means."

Arthur was no slouch. Getting to him was tough. He was widowed and afflicted with millions of health problems, all vicious slaps in the face to such a proud man, but he never got it. At least not until Joanna came along. Joanna knew. She knew he needed that which he had lost— a woman to care for. That is why she approached him that day, and that is why she continued to haunt him even after her abrupt death only some two weeks later. I actually ran into to her not too long ago, in another story, and she was crying.

"What's wrong," I asked.

"Look," she said. And so I looked down to see what was causing her tears. It was Arthur, praying, leaving a flower by her grave. I remember; the grass was withering and the wind was cold and stiff, but unable to blow away the clouds. That flower, a yellow rose, just jumped up off the page, like a diamond in a lump of coal, or a rainbow on a gray day, or an I love you at the right time.

"And nothing's wrong," added Joanna. "These are tears of joy."

"Thanks be to God," I said.

"You're welcome," she responded, and I laughed casually at her unusual response.

You're welcome. That reminds me of the story of our young waitress. Reluctantly, she reported everything to the police, enduring all the invasive tests and procedures that had to be done on her. She was badly mutilated and told that she would never be able to have children. Anyway, the authorities indicted Randy, charging him

with rape, murder, assault with a deadly weapon, and attempted murder. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. Now this part of the story deserves some discussion, so please bear with me.

It was two days prior to his set date of execution, and Randy sat alone in a cell on death row. The room was maybe six feet by eight and had only a mattress on the floor and a trashcan for a toilet. The walls were cold, gray concrete, painted white, and peeling. All he had besides the clothes on his back was a flashlight and a Bible, given him by the priest, a Father Jeffries, who had been visiting him daily over the course of the past week, talking to him about the importance of repentance for forgiveness of sins, and other things that priests do to prepare a soul for death.

“You say you don’t remember that night,” said the priest.

“No, I remember it. I had a date, and I had fun, and then I went crazy. I lost it. She rejected me and I lost it. They probably deserved it anyway,” said Randy.

That is as far as Father Jeffries was able to get with him. There was no sorrow in Randy, no sense of wrongdoing, no remorse or need for forgiveness. He was going to die damned.

But on this day, Alison, the young waitress, accompanied Father Jeffries to see Randy. She was reluctant at first, who wouldn’t be, but she had prayed earnestly about it, and felt the opportunity to unburden her soul and maybe save his, so she went.

“Randy,” said Father Jeffries, “there is someone here to see you.” Alison stepped out from behind the Father and stood before the man who so brutally attacked her not long ago. Her head was pointed towards the floor and her hands were folded neatly in front of her. “Do you recognize her, Randy?”

"How the hell should I know, I can't see her face." Hearing this, Alison looked up and into his angry eyes. "Face don't ring a bell," Randy said.

"Perhaps that's because you had her head shoved underneath a dumpster when you cut her repeatedly with a knife," said the priest. Alison's eyes closed and she shivered at the vivid reminder.

"So what," said Randy. "I ain't apologizing if that's what you brought her here for."

"No, she wanted to come and see you, Randy. She has something she would like to say."

After a moment, her Gethsemane, she spoke. "I forgive you, Randy. I forgive you." Randy wanted to open his mouth and say something cruel, but he didn't. Something inside melted and made him pause at the sound of those poignant words. All he could do was bow his head and breath heavily in an effort to hold back tears. "You're welcome," Alison whispered, and she turned and walked away.

I love that story. No one is ever so far gone that they should be denied true love and forgiveness. But unfortunately, some just have a harder road to travel. Alison has been dealt quite the cruel hand in this life, but she has learned to overcome everything with three little words from the heart: *I forgive you*. When she speaks those words she changes lives. Forgiveness is a miracle. Alison works miracles.

As for her little miracle, Jonathan Lukas Crowder— an eight-pound, bald baby with big blue eyes and chubby cheeks— was born July 11, in a year so long ago I can't remember, but he should be in his thirties by now. Death does strange things with one's perception of time. Anyway, she gave birth to a son and named him John,* is how, I

believe, the story goes. And she decided to have him baptized as an infant. But first she went to see Lukas and ask for her favor.

Lukas had been back in Boston for about three months, after being released from the hospital after two months of care and six months of physical therapy. He worked as a host in Mike's Diner during the day, a kind favor from the owners, and he ushered night home games for the Red Sox, Celtics, and Bruins during their respective seasons. He was everybody's favorite. Yet he lived alone and spent much of his time at home just sitting on his balcony overlooking the harbor, reading, or watching television inside. He had learned to live with his condition, although it was sometimes a burden, as anyone can imagine. Often, as he was sitting on his porch he would imagine what it would be like to waterski or jump on his bed. Sometimes he would tease himself and pretend he could wiggle his toes. Occasionally he would bump into something in his wheelchair and pretend he felt it in his lower body. And at night, he would always go to sleep crying. Then he would wake up and just go right on living.

One day, though, he got an unexpected visitor. When he answered the door he saw before him Alison, holding a baby.

"Hello, Lukas," she said.

"Alison! Wow. It is so good to see you. How have you been?"

"Busy," she said, showing Jonathan to Lukas.

"And who is this little guy?" he asked.

"This is Jonathan."

"How old?"

"Almost two months."

"And everything went fine with the birth."

"No problems."

"Well, that's great. Jonathan Crowder. He bears a good name, Alison."

"His full name is Jonathan Lukas Crowder, named after my husband and you."

"Are you serious? Alison, I don't know what to say. I am honored."

"Me too, Lukas."

"Well, listen come on in, come on in. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"No. No, I heard you were settled back in town and wanted to see how you were doing and introduce you to the new man in my life."

"He is a precious boy," said Lukas.

The two continued in conversation talking about Lukas' recovery and the birth of little Jonathan as Lukas showed Alison around his house.

"How is your father," she asked.

"Father is not well," said Lukas. "He is losing his battle, but he is optimistic as usual."

"Your father is an incredible man."

"He is. He is. I wish I had realized it sooner. I may have turned out better."

"Oh, come on now," she said laughing, "that doesn't sound like Lukas, full of faith, that I spoke with in a hospital bed nine months ago. Lukas, remember, you were saved for a reason. There is a purpose for all this."

"Yeah, well, it's still hard," he said.

"Tell me about it."

“Well, I am pretty lonely because I can’t really get out and live it up, so I spend a lot of time here, not really doing much of anything. The people at work are friendly, but I always feel like they are just pitying me. And I still have nightmares about that night. I just want to forget it all happened. It is just hard sometimes.”

“I know it is. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t wish John were around. Hard doesn’t quite describe it. I still pray in the morning, holding my baby, pretending he is there next to me. I still dream that he is coaching little Jonathan’s Little League team or that he is with us on vacations in Disney World. But hey, enough of this sad talk, hah?”

“What do you suggest?”

“Do you remember that day when you offered to do anything for me?”

“Yeah, anything, why what do you need? You want me to babysit? Do you need money for anything? I have money. You name it. What?”

“I want you to be Jonathan’s Godfather, when he is Christened next month.”

“Oh Alison, I... I couldn’t...”

“Just please say yes. It would mean so much to me.”

“All right. Yes,” said Lukas in disbelief.

“Thank you so much.”

“No, thank you... I’m blown away... I’m honored.”

“Well, I love you, Luke.”

Lukas began anxiously moving his head, looking furiously around the room, twiddling his thumbs, a nervous habit he acquired since he could no longer tap his feet on the floor. His eyes were red. His mouth half open and unable to speak.

“Well, I gotta get going,” said Alison. “It was good to see you Lukas. I’ll be in touch to let you know dates and other information, stuff like that.”

“Okay, thanks for stopping by. It was... good to see you.” He never looked up.

And she left, just like that, and he was alone again. That night he cried himself to sleep, praying.

God, forgive me, for I have become cold and cynical and self-pitying in my affliction. As a result, I have failed to be Your servant everyday. I have so many regrets, so many. I miss my sister. I miss her because I never got to say what I wanted to say. So many regrets, O God. I have failed to see You in the everyday small things, the things I do still have, the sound of my alarm clock waking me up in the morning. That first big yawn that tells me I have another day ahead of me. The fact that I can use my arms to push my wheelchair. The friends at work that love me just the way I am. The smell of pancakes and fresh fruit on a beautiful Sunday morning. The peacefulness of my porch overlooking the harbor. The sound of the birds singing their healing song. The comfort of a good book. The breeze blowing the hair off my forehead. The renewed love I share with my family. And of course the gift of life in Your Son. Life on account of forgiveness, which I know I have, yet still sometimes fail to recognize. All these little miracles surround me, but I am wrapped in melancholy. I can’t help but feel dead sometimes. I just want to be fully me again. Lord, restore unto me the joy of Thy Salvation. Hear my cries. Save me Jesus. I believe in miracles, Lord, save me.*

He was heard.

“Lukas. Lukas. Lukas, wake up,” she said.

“Huh? What? Who’s there? Who is it? What do you want?” He was slightly groggy and scared certainly, unsure of just where he was or what was happening, and perhaps weary of the really bright light in the middle of his bedroom.

“Peace be with you.”

“Who’s there?”* Lukas asked.

“It is I, Lukas, your sister.”

“Joanna? Where? I can’t see you.”

Slowly the light faded around her and she stood before Lukas. He had turned on the lamp by his bed, so they were not completely in the dark. He just sat there staring, as if looking at a ghost, blinking his eyes repeatedly. He had so many questions.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“In your bed,” she said. “You prayed for help tonight, Lukas. I heard you.”

“Is that really you, Jo?”

“Of course it’s me. I’m even wearing the purple jacket I had on when you picked me up that night. Look, here, at the scars on my face from breaking through the windshield, and here, at the cuts on my arms and hands. Come, touch them if you like?”* He ran his hands ever so gently over her broken body as she wiped his tears with her hair.

“See, Lukas, it is I, Joanna.”

“O God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” he said.

“That’s okay, Lukas. It had to happen this way. You had nothing to do with my death.”

"O, I miss you so much. I know I was never that great a big brother, but this entire experience has helped me see what I have lost. I love you, Joanna, and I am so sorry for not telling you while I had you."

"You have just told me. But I already knew, Lukas. I knew."

"How?"

"I heard you that morning in the hospital. It rained your tears in heaven, and we all danced in them."

"Really? It rains tears in Heaven?"

"Oh sure. What else would it rain?"

"Wow. So why visit me now to tell me this?"

"I did not come to tell you this, Lukas."

"Well then, why did you come?"

"Your sins are forgiven you, Lukas."

"My sins are forgiven? I know that," he said confused.

"Which is easier to say, Lukas? Your sins are forgiven? Or rise, take up thy bed and walk?"*

"What?"

"Do you believe in me, Lukas?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you believe that I can forgive your sins, Lukas?" she asked again.

"I... I guess."

"Do you believe that I can make you walk again?"

Upon hearing this question, Lukas rolled out of his bed onto the floor and pulled himself over to his sister's feet and wept. "I believe. Lord, help my unbelief."*

She smiled at him. "Then Rise. Take up thy bed. And Walk again."* Lukas did not know what was being said or what was happening to him, but all of the sudden he could feel. He felt love in his heart, unlike any love he had ever felt before. He felt real forgiveness, real mercy, real grace. He felt restored to life. He felt... a twitch in his right leg, and then one is left, and they began to tremble into life. He looked up at his sister, fully immersed in light. She was an angel, but through his tears, she looked like a dream he would wake up from in a matter of seconds. Still, he fixed his gaze on her. He couldn't look away. She was so real. And around him the room began to change. The ceiling became the night sky, littered with billions of stars, brightly shining, and singing praises to God.

"Thank you, God," he whispered, as she ascended into the night sky, and vanished in the distance, like a shooting star.

Lukas awoke soon after in his bed, in his bedroom, in his house. He didn't know whether or not he had dreamed all that. *It was all too real to be a dream*, he thought. So he got out of bed and walked into the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal. Passing his wheelchair in the hallway, he paused.

"I don't think I want to tell the rest of his story. I'm sure, if you yourself believe in miracles, you can fill in the blanks."

"That's it? Some silly miraculous ending?"

"Funny that you call it that. Don't you see it?"

“See what? No, I don’t see it. You just wasted a lot of my time. You tell me you have this story, and you drag me through these brutal stories with seemingly no point other than *the world sucks*, and then you saddle me with this *deus ex machina*, and I am supposed to just swoon and believe in miracles. No. Where was the miracle when Diane or Alison needed it in the alleyway? Where was the miracle when John needed to get home so he could be there for Alison? No. I don’t buy your stupid ending.”

“Well, then. I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“I don’t want your apologies. I want the time you wasted, back. I could have been doing a million other things than sitting here and listening to your fairy tale. Where is my time? Give me that back, and then apologize.”

“I can’t give you back your time. I can only tell the story I was told I had to tell you. I promise you it is true.”

“Yeah, well, it sucked.”

“Well, I’m sorry that’s your answer, but I had to tell you. Here,” I said as I threw twenty dollars on the table to pay for our food and drinks. “The last bus comes at midnight. I have an extra token for it that I want you to have. I recommend you take it—the token and the bus, that is. Good night, my friend.” I smiled at him as I placed the bus coin on the table next to his hand, and then I picked my coat up and walked slowly out of Mike’s Diner.

“Where are you going?”

“Hey. I thought you were meeting a friend?”

“I did meet a friend,” and I disappeared into the night.

He sat at the table for a long time, angry, staring at the token.

Epilogue

I don't really know where to begin because I have trouble remembering where it all began. "In the beginning,"* to quote the beginning of some famous book would be a good place to start, but that would be a long story. I'm sorry, I am probably losing you here, which is not at all my intention. In fact, I don't like how most people today seek to conceal the truth. If I have learned one thing in all my time, and it has been a very long time, I have learned that more than anything people want two things. Love. And answers. Love, I have plenty, but it is not my intention to provide you with answers. My job is to mold your lives into stories, and in those stories, to allow you to find answers of your own. Anyway, back to the beginning, which is an odd way to begin, is it not, given the fact that this is the end of our story?

Nevertheless, allow me to introduce myself. I AM. But of course, you knew that. You saw me in Laura and Joanna and Alison and Tom. I was all of these people, or better yet, they were all me. This is really hard to explain to one who lacks faith, and by faith I mean that fundamental belief in miracles that would allow one to see four people as incarnations of one consciousness, one person, one real being who once walked and ate and slept and breathed like you. Lack of faith— that is perhaps my biggest obstacle. People just don't believe in miracles anymore. It blows my mind. How can they believe

that Three are One, yet not believe that four can be One? Or six? Or ten? Or ten thousand? Has mindless recitation of a creed expressing a belief in the Three really taken the place of the Living Source of all people and all things? Am I really that far removed from the here and now that you no longer believe that for me, anything is possible? Or are you just that aloof as to the meaning of this entire story? And when I say 'entire story' I am referring to the one that begins "in the beginning."* Yeah, that one. But anyway, I do not intend to retell that story because it is unnecessary really— unnecessary because all stories, at least all good stories anyway, tell that story. That is the way we created life to be— one giant story, where every story tells *the story*.

But I will tell you that that weekend, Lukas went home to visit his father and mother. "Mother," he said, "behold your son." At the sight of her boy she fell weeping, unable to speak. "Jesus has healed me, mother. Believe in Him, now that you have seen, and sin no more." Then he turned to his father. "I was once lost, father, but now I am found. I was dead, but I have been made alive again. Blessed are you, though having not seen, you have believed."* And he stayed there with his family for the weekend, and they laughed together, just like old times.

And that, I guess, ends our story here. You may well think that I, in fact, gave you answers to your questions regarding all the people told about here. But, come on, this is fiction, which means it is make-believe. It is simply a story. I have always been troubled by those who say fiction is more exciting than life. I say to those people, "what life have you been living?" We all have our own stories worth reading and worth sharing. The challenge is to read the stories of our lives and of others' lives, and find in them the same lessons, the same truths, the same miracles, the same small fingerprints of

God, and embrace them, and praise Him who gave them to us, and live for *The Story*. But if you are convinced that you have found answers here, well, all that means is that this story has become a part of your story.

My point is that when we choose to walk in the footsteps of Christ, we adopt His story as our own. Consequently, we all teach; we all heal; we all perform miracles; we are all persecuted; we are all crucified and die; and we all rise from the dead and return to help the ones we love. Walking with Christ is the only way to truly live out the Gospel.

All I have left is a prayer of sorts. At the heart of our problem as human beings is that we all need and we all want. Two things we want— love and answers, and in these we hop to find something to worship. Three things we need— Faith in Christ, Hope in Christ, and Love in Christ. Love in Christ makes perfect our love. Hope in Christ gives us something to Worship, something to strive for. And Faith in Christ gives us answers. We need Christ. He alone is worthy of our worship. And what do I mean by worship? I mean reckless abandon. I have used this term several times already but have failed to define it. It cannot be defined by words, only by actions. It is a lifestyle of ruthless and rigorous spiritual discipline. It is a total life commitment to discovering the Will of God and then being the Will of God in the world. It is bearing the burden of the Cross and living out the promise of the Resurrection in our every thought, word, and deed. It is being a part of something bigger than we could ever imagine— something timeless and eternal and perfect. It is being in the world, yet not of the world. And as we are a broken people, it means suffering all the many hardships of life, yet conquering them with love and life as Christ conquered death in walking out of the tomb.

Do you ever wonder what happened that morning? I do. The air had to be cool, with maybe a light fog hanging low over the Garden, and the sun getting ready to rise to the east. I like to think of Jesus lying there dead, cold, and alone, like everyone who had ever died before Him. Then a voice. At first a whisper, as He slowly reawakened from His sleep. Then louder, and louder, and louder, until it was an earthquake that rolled away the stone, and light streamed in and warmed His cold, dead body. Then a whisper again— “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.”*

That is what we must do. Life is not easy because we have made life so hard on ourselves. We want so badly to serve Christ that we forget how much we need Him. It is then that our walk turns into a struggle. You know, it doesn't have to be a struggle. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,”* and “Walk in the Light, as God is in the Light.”* It is that simple. We can have fullness of life if we simply seize upon the Promise that is with God in Christ.

Of course, it is never like that. Just what, then, is True Life for us? I believe that True Life is never being cheated out of any possible experience, good or bad. It is being fully human in every part, and allowing God to touch those parts and use them according to His Will. So my prayer for you is that you can share in being broken—that you can share in the hurt, share in the suffering, and share in the many toils of ministry. That you can share in the joys, the conquests, and the victories. That you can cry together with me, and laugh together, and sing together, and pray together. That you would never harm a brother or a sister, but rather build them up in love. That you would see the Love of Christ in all as the same Love, and that you would work together with the communion of saints to make that Love the most powerful force in this world. And I ask the Father

“that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that *Christ may dwell in your hearts* through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, *together with all the saints*, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge— that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”* And I pray you hear the voice of God in the silence of your own hearts, that It buries itself deep in your mind so you can never escape It, that It hides itself in the far reaches of your soul and lives richly so you can never deny It, so that in everything— in every choice, every thought, every word, and every action—

“He has shown you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

For Jesus Christ, the Soul of my Shoes

Notes*

Introductory Material

1. John 1:38-39 (NRSV)
2. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Act Five, Scene 3, Lines 327-328.
3. Matthew 11:28 (KJV)
4. Mt. 11:28-30
5. Aesop. *The Tortoise and the Hare*.
6. Acts of the Apostles 17:28 (NIV)
7. Chambers, Oswald. *My Utmost for His Highest*. February 2nd entry.
8. Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*.
9. James 5:17-18 (KJV)

The Man with Watercolor Shadows

1. Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. p. 310.
2. Williams, Evan. *No Word for Time: The Way of the Algonquin People*. p. ix.
3. Psalm 37:4 (NIV)
4. Revelation 2:2-4 (NIV)
5. Romans 6:23 (NIV)
6. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*. Canto XXXIV.
7. Mt. 7:4 (NIV)
8. Genesis 3:4 (NIV)

The Man of Eternal Rain

1. Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*.
2. Jn. 19:34
3. Exodus 3:14 (NIV)
4. Jn. 8:58 (NIV)
5. Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. p. 109.
6. Mt. 11:28-30
7. Philippians 1:21 (NIV)
8. Isaiah 30:15 (NRSV)
9. 1 John 4:18 (NRSV)
10. Philippians 2:1-11 (NRSV)
11. Mt. 11:28-30
12. Rm. 5:5 (NIV)

13. Rm. 5:1-2 (NRSV)
14. James 2:17 (paraphrase of the KJV)
15. Jn. 3:16
16. Ephesians 5:2 (KJV)
17. Rm. 12:1-2 (NRSV)
18. Philippians 1:21 (NIV)
19. Dainty, Ryan. "Washing the Car." *The Soul of my Shoes*. lines 20, 22.
20. Jn. 10:10 (paraphrase of the KJV)
21. Jn. 19:30 (NRSV)

The BarRoom Diaries

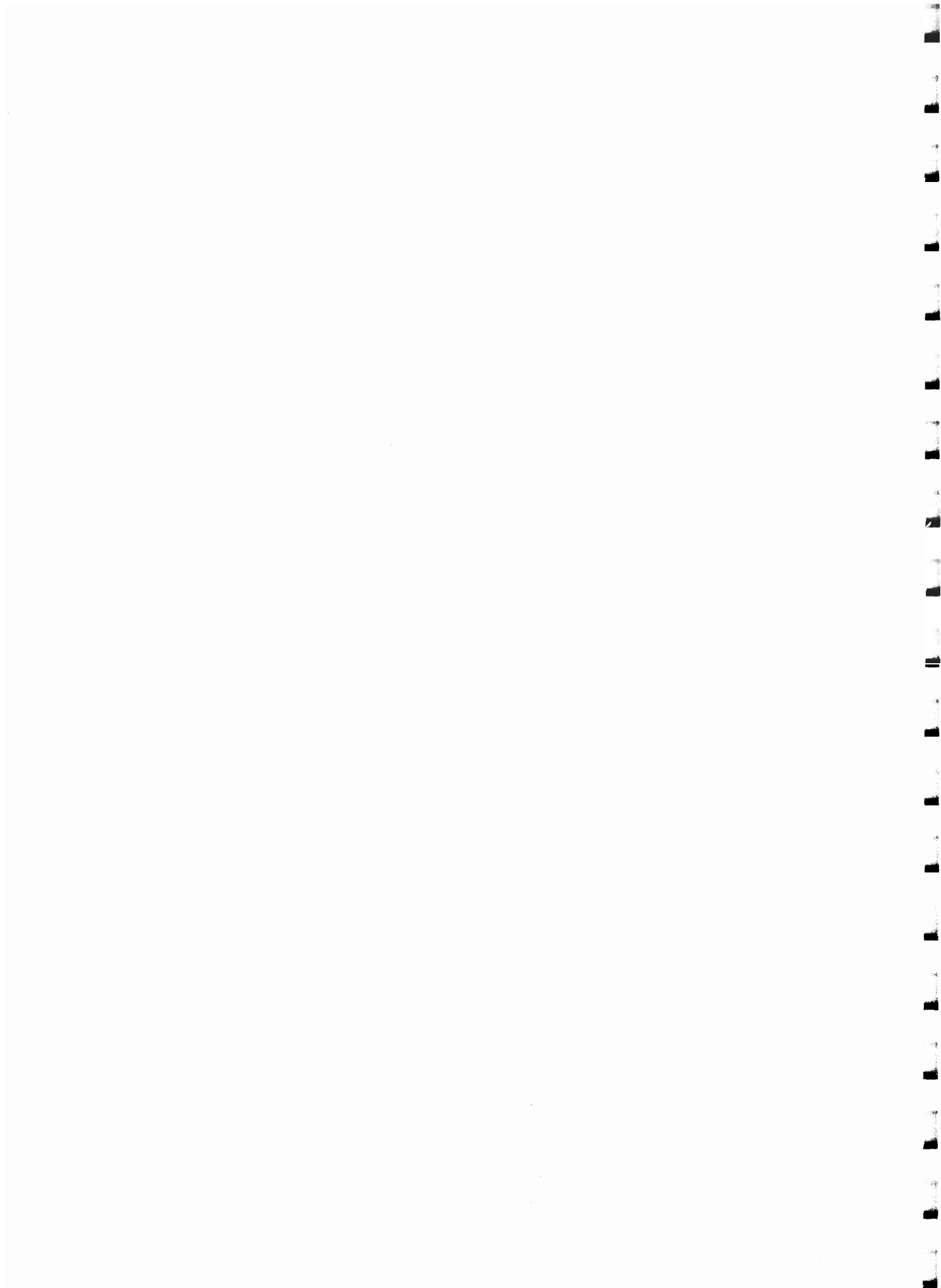
1. Mark 4:9
2. 1 Corinthians 9:16
3. Jn. 11:35
4. Ps. 30:5 (NRSV)
5. Shakespeare, William. *Othello, Moor of Venice*. Act 1, Scene 3, line 163
6. Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*.
7. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. part 1, book 3.
8. Lk. 20:27-40
9. Mk. 4:12
10. Told like the film, *Memento*.
11. Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*. line 1.
12. Mt. 6:12
13. Rm. 7:24 (KJV)
14. Lk. 1:57, 63
15. Ps. 51:12 (KJV)
16. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Act 1, Scene 1, line 1.
17. Jn. 20:24-28
18. Mk. 2:9
19. Mk. 9:24
20. Mk. 2:11

Epilogue

- 1-2. Gen. 1:1
3. Drawn from the prodigal son, doubting Thomas, the anointing at Bethany, John's Crucifixion.
4. Mk. 2:11
5. Mt. 6:33 (KJV)
6. 1 Jn. 1:7
7. Ephesians 3:16-19 (NIV)
8. Micah 6:8

* Notes in the text are recognized by an * and are listed here in the order they appear in the text.





appendix

a collection of selected works from my tenure as
an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee,
Knoxville

Kites

Here lies Sarah, cold
beneath the earth, being
teased by the coming of
spring. To her right, I notice
graves stained with flowers
left by loved ones; while to her left,
the rusty iron fence rattles as the
wind wrestles the gate. She used to love

flying kites. I can see her waiting
for that perfect moment when
the wind was right to toss
the bird high into the air, allowing
the breeze to unravel the spool of
string in her soft, tiny hands. O how

the kite soared,
darting and dashing,
flipping and spinning,
bouncing off the clouds,
daring them to drop
rain, racing the
birds, battling for
dominion in the sky. Then the

wind would fade, gently nursing the kite
back to the earth that had given it wings.
causing Sarah to curse heaven with her
tears, and I would tell her *kites can't fly forever*, and smiling,

I turn towards the gate, leaving nothing
by her grave to blow away in the wind.

Forgotten

I tried one night to catch her sleeping soft
against the marble floor where we had danced
not long ago, beneath the moon, where oft
I sat and waited patiently, entranced.
I thought about the snow and how she strived
to make her Jill from powder mixed with love.
Her smile alone could make the dead alive.
Unable, though, to bring down those above,
she labored painfully for baby Jill,
who never really had a chance to be
because she wasn't strong but rather, ill.
Distraught, from loss, she had forgotten me.
It came as no surprise the day she died.
Her head was gone. *From grief*, I said. I lied.

Watercolor Jesus

I lift my eyes now, and see, as the
light sears the stained glass,
casting the room in a
rainbow of blues and golds,
that He is frowning. The weight of
His Cross presses hard against my
shoulders, leaving me alone with the
burden of doing his work. While

all around me, the children run
smiling about the chapel, laughing,
enjoying the freedom and simplicity
of life. *Maybe they get it. After all
why shouldn't it be so easy. He came
that we might...* startled by a
child gently tugging my pant leg,
I look at the picture he painted in class.
I smile.
It is Jesus,
in watercolor.

The following is a short story titled “The Call.” It was a practice lesson in a creative writing class, and the goal of it was to write a good story in less than 500 words. It has less than 500 words, but whether it is good or not is up to you.

Jason dialed her number and heard Lindsey’s soft hello fade and echo as the phone went crashing to the floor. At this his heart skipped a beat and a state of panic came over him at the thought of what just happened. With the phone beeping frantically, he stormed out of the house like a mad bull, locking the door and his keys inside. Improvising, he found his old bicycle, but it had a flat tire. Finally deciding to run, he set out for Lindsey’s house hoping to find everything all right.

The two-mile run took as long as a car windshield defrosting in the dead of winter. With his mind on his fiancée, Jason failed to recognize the pothole just ahead of him that would be the cause of an ankle sprain. The pain hit him like a truck and his lower leg became a bowling ball, but he continued despite the pain melting icicles in his eyes, causing tears to stream down over his fiery cheeks, rushing off his chin and exploding on the ground in a splash.

Meanwhile, Lindsey tried calling him back at his house, curious at the sounds of a phone off the hook at the other end of the line. So she began to calmly search for his new cell phone number that she had not yet memorized. In the time it took her to find his number, Jason managed to trip and skin his hands and knees on the uninviting pavement and hit his head on a low tree limb. Practically unconscious he arrived at her house.

Finding her front door wide open, he feared Lindsey was in danger and what was left of him began to sprint to see if she was okay. He had just reached the front steps when he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. It felt like a jackhammer against his leg. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his new phone, which he forgot was on him, read Lindsey’s name and number on the caller id, and breathed an exhausted, self pitied sigh of relief. He answered with the same faint hello she uttered just an hour ago. “What happened?” she asked. “I had just picked up my phone after it fell from my ear as I was preparing dinner, and you were no longer there.”

“Well, I’m here now,” Jason responded while hobbling through the front door and crashing softly onto her big yellow couch. Upon seeing him, Lindsey began to cry and came to care for her best friend. Jason explained why he left the house so quickly and all that happened on the way. “Sorry,” he said, as if promising not to worry so much next time. Lindsey could do nothing but nod her head, laugh, kiss his nose, and drive him to the hospital.

Selections from a paper on Herman Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor called "Captain Vere as Melville's Testament," submitted 15 November 2002, for a course in American Romanticism.

Billy Budd, Sailor, for the incredibly short novel that it is, has spawned a cottage industry for critics ever since its initial publication in 1924, more than thirty years after Herman Melville's death. The novel itself is best discussed through its deep characters and their relationship to Christianity. So the question follows, is this Melville's testament of an acceptance to or a resistance of Christianity? The answer to this question lies in the character of Captain Vere. By creating Captain Vere as a mix between both Billy Budd and John Claggart, and by framing his actions in the historical context of a mutiny on board an English war ship, Melville depicts the captain as a helpless victim of fate who reflects the author's own effort to reconcile Christianity at the end of his life...

...Captain Vere was completely right with his judgments. Billy Budd was a sailor accused of mutiny and guilty of murder, and under naval law, Captain Vere was required to execute the sailor. But he is not without seeing both sides of the case, exemplified by his asking, "how can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so" (2089)? Still, Vere orders Billy to be executed despite the innocent sailor's completely good nature and passes it off as a prejudgment, an act that denies the potential for a special case. This sounds very much like a basic Christian belief about the necessity and inevitability of Christ's death. God could not have considered His only Son as a special case because He could not contradict Himself. If Christ was sin on the cross, then He had to die, and God could not change that penalty. This is undoubtedly something Melville had to be struggling with in writing this book, and by casting Vere as a helpless victim of fate, Melville places him tragically in the right.

From here questions need to be raised as to whether or not Vere's being right was acceptable or not to Melville. Was this his testament of acceptance or of resistance? Does he accept Vere's judgment as God's and believe that Billy (Christ) had to die, or does he resist this by maintaining the idea of a special case?

...Although it is clear that Captain Vere's decision was Melville's, the question hinges on whether this process held the ultimate truth for the author in his later years (Glick 105). There are only two possible answers, yes and no, and both apply to the story and the author. That is why Billy Budd, Sailor is both Melville's testament of acceptance and his testament of resistance...

...The best way to look at this extremely complicated issue is to view it in light of the supposed dual nature of Christ. Melville accepts the divine nature of Christ because he can see His tie to God, but he rejects Christ's humanity by, in effect, calling Him a coward. This back and forth reasoning as a result of the complicated nature of Captain Vere serves as a parallel to the struggles of Melville's own spiritual life, and Billy Budd, Sailor can then effectively be read as an inside narrative (Braswell 91). Problematic as it may be, this final work is still Melville's final testament. Only one more answer could possibly be helpful in providing the reader with complete proof of this fact, but he can no longer be reached for comment.

Selections from the end of a paper titled “Speaking of Hamlet,” submitted 5 December 2003 for a class in Shakespeare’s early plays. In it I set out to trace the play’s philosophy by simply studying Hamlet’s greatest speeches.

Fully ready for action, Hamlet returns to Denmark and stumbles upon Ophelia’s grave being dug. Here in the play’s most memorable image, Hamlet speaks to a skull, confronting the mortality that all humans face and that he has battled with throughout the play. The greatest heroes in history, from Alexander to Caesar have all died, and returned to the earth that gave birth to them (5.1.207-216). At this moment, I feel Hamlet realizes that his actions will have consequences, and he faces those consequences when he confronts the skull.

All of this leads up to the final scene, and although Hamlet has no long speeches he has several short, but powerful remarks. He has come full circle by the final scene, acknowledging that, “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10). This Hamlet is much changed from the beginning of the play when the world was useless. He has come to accept that people will die on account of his actions and I believe that he knows that he, too, will die. When he says that “the readiness is all” (220), he acknowledges that the divinity that shapes man’s ends uses people as need be, and all one has to do is be ready. This alone, Hamlet finds tragically noble.

In his final moments, Hamlet answers the great question of the play- “to be, or not to be?” (3.1.57)- when he says, “let be” (5.2.222). He chooses to be, and “the rest is silence” (360). For Hamlet, living is dying, but by the end of the play he no longer sees this as negative, but rather, as a worthy end.

Where do I begin to summarize my thoughts on a most enlightening look at Hamlet? I think it is clear that his great soliloquies and other memorable speeches and lines do help shape the thematic framework of the play. We move from a lamentable Hamlet in a lamentable world, to an accepting Hamlet in a divinely ordered world. Hamlet goes from depressed, to enthusiastic and mad, to hesitant, to ready. Most people experience all of these when big events happen in their lives. The play then, captures the essence of human existence, complete with its highs and lows, its struggles and its triumphs. And Hamlet’s speeches walk us through the human condition. So when I say that Hamlet suffers merely from being human, I think you can see what I mean.

I think the reason Hamlet is so intriguing for scholars and people is that he is each of us. Shakespeare seems to create extraordinary characters and put them into ordinary situations. However, with Hamlet, he creates a very ordinary character, and placed him in an extraordinary situation. His purpose in doing this, I think, is to ask us, ‘what would you do?’ And that is why the interpretations of Hamlet can and do differ so greatly. We read Hamlet through our own eyes, and because he is so universal, we can make him our own. We all have things in our lives that consume us, and we all struggle with whether to act on our desires or not, and Shakespeare’s Hamlet is close examination of human desire and the nature of human existence. Hamlet gives us hope in a world that at times, offers little. I love Hamlet because he thinks things through, looking at his situation from every angle, and then he acts for a cause he feels is worth dying for. In that way, he is like me.

Selections from a journal for a class in Realism and Naturalism in American Literature, submitted 30 April 2003. Commented on here are Charles W. Chesnutt's Conjure Tales, Jack London's The Call of the Wild, Frank Norris' McTeague, and Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology.

On the surface, Charles W. Chesnutt seems to present very clever and funny and even optimistic tales that end in either masters or bad slaves changing for the better, but upon closer inspection, Chesnutt is also exposing the dark side of humanity through commenting on slavery in America. His portrayals of slave beatings and the general mistreatment of slaves by separating them from their families, etc. are very realistic, and of course the horrors of slavery as perpetrated by slave masters lend themselves to the pessimistic view of humankind to which naturalism ascribes. The conjuring in his stories then becomes not just a humorous motif but a sad attempt by the slaves to deal with the horrible soul-killing effects of slavery, no more tragically seen than in the story of "Dave's Neckliss," where Dave believes that he has been turned into a ham and hangs himself in the smokehouse. Chesnutt then masterfully and ironically uses these magical elements in his stories, and thus succeeds in achieving a closet critique of the horrors of slavery.

...I really wish to talk about how London, I believe, realistically portrays dogs in The Call of the Wild and how he brilliantly uses naturalism in "To Build a Fire." By realistically portraying dogs, London achieves in constructing a metaphor for human beings, and this metaphor is naturalistic. For London, man is simply just another animal, so Buck's primitive side and his longing for and attraction to the wild is indicative of our own dark animalistic side as human beings. We are just as proud, just as stubborn, just as instinctive, just as resilient, and just as fragile as the dogs in The Call of the Wild.

London sort of fulfills this naturalistic portrait of man in "To Build a Fire." Again, like in McTeague, if we are simply the helpless victims in a cruel and uncaring world that we have created on an uncaring ball of rock in order to give meaning to a meaningless life, than life is the greatest tragedy there is. Obviously I disagree, but I must give credit where credit is due, and London deserves high praise for his unparalleled style and ability to capture individual moments with vivid detail.

To serve as a transition to Edgar Lee Masters, the next author I will tackle, I have written an epitaph for Buck:

Looking back on my life you would think I was a
cat

Because I think I had about nine lives.

Nearly beaten to death several times by sled
drivers,

Nearly eaten alive by wolves on multiple
occasions,

And who could forget my epic battle with Spitz:

That son of a bitch almost killed me, but I
survived.

I always do.

In fact, I outlived everyone who ever attached
himself to me:

John Thornton, the Judge, and of course all the
other dogs.

I live on though, in splashes of brown and rifts
of white,

All throughout the great white north.

Masters, of course, in his Spoon River Anthology recorded the dark side of small town life in America by lending voices to the dead, or are they undead (?), of a fictional town called Spoon River. This was one of my favorite works and I have decided to tell the story, in prose, of a character that is mentioned in an epitaph, but does not have one of her own. I will supply her with that as well. After all, the dead need a voice too. Just a note from the author: I gather my inspiration from Ezra Bartlett and Harlan Sewall.

After his positions as chaplain in the army and in various prisons both at home and abroad, Ezra Bartlett finally found a place to settle in quiet, innocent Spoon River. He gained a reputation early on for being a man of principle, of high morals, and many people would actually bring their stories and their confessions to him instead of the local priests and ministers. He thought he had known everyone in Spoon River, until he stumbled upon the virtuous and lovely Eliza Johnson. In his search for the divine amidst the mundane he pursued Ms. Johnson and in a night of drunkenness the two lay together, and unfortunately were caught by the church wives. Both reputations destroyed, Ezra decided to leave town, but he promised Eliza that he would return in the years to come when their sin would be forgotten and the two could live happily ever after. Eliza trusted in his promise and waited for her lover to return.

While away, Ezra continued his search for the divine and was led by the spirit to a far away monastery. It was there he realized that divinity was found within and not in women and wine. He remained away for twenty-five short years, purifying himself and healing the souls of others. One day, when his work in the monastery was complete he returned to Spoon River, having completely forgotten about his promise to Eliza Johnson. But when he saw her, he remembered and was instantly disgusted. Eliza had been his past, his sin, his mistake, and he hated her for corrupting him with that which does not fulfill the soul. He said he could never be with her and he cursed her and left town. Eliza killed herself. She is buried on the hill with the others and her tombstone tells her sad story:

I waited patiently for twenty-five long years.

As penance for sins past, I remained faithful to

Ezra,

Never knowing the touch of another man.

The day he returned was the happiest day of my
life until he cursed me.

I had denied myself for nothing

And was the past the age for bearing children.

Happiness would never find me except maybe in
death,

So I took my own life and found I was wrong about
death.

Happiness has never found me.

An In Class Essay for a Philosophy and Literature course, submitted in the Spring of 2003. In it I tried to discuss three poems according to a book by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle titled Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory.

Upon first inspection, none of the literary works given as material for this essay seemed to relate to each other in any way. But, when examined more closely and applied to the principles discussed in Bennett and Royle, two works distinguished themselves as having similar meaning. "A Continuity of Parks" by Julio Cortázar and "Crows" by Mary Oliver assert themselves as uncanny works dealing heavily with both character and narrative. And upon contemplation and forced introspection they seek to redefine what a monument is or is not.

First, both literatures contain elements of the 'uncanny.' However, I would not characterize "Crows" as an uncanny poem despite the anthropomorphizing of the crows because it does not deal with a sense of strangeness. One might think it odd that crows could cause a person to think critically about their own lives, but Oliver reminds us in line twenty that it is 'successes' that cause her to examine herself. This is the crux of the poem: seeing such simplicity and being aware of our individual successes makes people wonder, "have my ambitions been worthy" (line 22)?

In contrast, I would certainly classify "A Continuity of Parks" as an uncanny story. Through its utilization of silence, the lurking prospect of death, and potential repetition of action, this story promotes a feeling of uneasiness within its audience. Simply my use of ambiguous words like 'prospect' and 'potential' in attempting to define this story as uncanny seem to add to this sense of eeriness. The silence surrounding the man in the chair as he reads and the silence involved in the story he is reading coincide and enhance the prospect that the man in the chair is part of the story he is reading.

Still perhaps the uncanniest element of the story, repetition, can only be seen and understood as an aspect of narrative. "A Continuity of Parks" succeeds in jumbling the typical narrative sequence of beginning, middle, and end. When even does the Cortázar's story itself begin? Does it begin in the novel the man is reading? Is the story part of that novel? Are our lives just a story? Are our deaths written somewhere as the climax of a work of literature? Because of this unique narrative structure, these questions bother the audience greatly and add to the uncanniness of the story.

Narrative does not really pertain to the "Crows" because Oliver's work is a poem. But I would argue that, just like "A Continuity of Parks" "Crows" raises issues and questions that recall aspects of narrative in our own lives. Bennett and Royle are very emphatic about showing how narrative, how stories, are everywhere, and how our lives are in fact stories. But examining the implications of narrative to a poem is not the best way to decipher meaning from "Crows"

Looking at character, on the other hand, would be very helpful. In "Crows" the narrator experiences a questioning of self. This is brought on by her viewing of crows and her consequent thinking about her own successes in life. I think that everybody can relate to the narrator because we all at one time in our lives wonder if we should have done it differently. Some may have been more proactive and ambitious, some may have been more simplistic, but all people experience this process at some time in their lives. We all ask ourselves the question that Bennett and Royle believe to be at the heart of character: 'who am I?'

Likewise, the Cortázar's story forces readers to ask this question, but it also causes us to lose our sense of self. We see ourselves as part of a larger story. The line between person and character is lost and we do not know who we are. Do we exist apart from the stories we read? Are we real people or just fictional characters?

Both these literatures, though extremely different, can be defined by the same elements of literature, and they both raise similar, if not identical questions. "Crows" is about each person's personal life journey. Through strange encounters and revelations, successes and failures, we constantly examine our lives, and in the end, just like the poem, the sun rises on us all and we are comfortable. Through introspection we can find our peace. "A Continuity of Parks" is about losing one's self. If we allow ourselves to get absorbed into just anything, it can become reality for us. Nightmares, stories, other people, can all cause us to lose who we are. That, in a sense, is what literature does. It haunts us with ideas and forces us to examine ourselves. Literature itself is a monument, and so are these two works.

**An essay titled "Sophocles, Euripides, and Job," submitted 28 February 2003
for a class in Greek and Roman Mythology.**

In seeing that one of the quotations was taken from the *Book of Job*, I rejoiced because what I try to do in all areas of my academic life is make connections between different cultures, different religious backgrounds, and different myth-historical settings. It is an incredibly interesting discipline, and I always seem to arrive at very interesting conclusions. Upon inspection of the quotation for *Job* I quickly drew parallels to Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* because they deal directly with the main themes of *Job*, which are well illustrated in chapter 38, verses 1-4. At the heart of this passage is the double-sided question about the relationship of gods to people. Does God owe man anything in this life? To what extent is God involved in the lives of humans? Do the actions of men at all affect the ways of God? This is a very complicated issue that has plagued humans pondering the divine since the beginning of time. Sophocles and Euripides address these very issues in the said plays in very different manners, and the conclusions they arrive at reflect the values of the time in which they are writing. Just like the *Book of Job* Sophocles' *Philoctetes* addresses this idea of why bad things happen to good people and Euripides' *Hippolytus* deals with to what extent the gods are involved in human affairs.

I begin with a brief summary of the main issues raised in *Job*. They are embodied in God's famous "speech from the whirlwind" where he asks Job why God should have to justify His ways to man (God had allowed Job to suffer unbearably), desires Job to understand that God owes him nothing, and challenges him to respond by taking it like a man. It is these issues raised by God as to His relationship to humans that is what Sophocles and Euripides deal with years later in constructing their plays. This is what I will now examine.

Point blank, the *Philoctetes* by Sophocles asks the question of why bad things happen to good people. Philoctetes, like Job, suffers unbearably for no reason. He accidentally stepped on unmarked, holy ground and gets bitten on the foot. His fellow heroes abandon him and leave him to die with his stinking, festering foot on the island of Lemnos. Is this fair? Most would agree that it is not. By casting this as a tragedy, Sophocles takes the stance that unexplainable, unbearable suffering is a part of the human condition. By having Philoctetes do no real injustice to the gods, the playwright minimizes the role of God in human affairs, something that Job's author, by magnifying the role of God, also seems to do. In *Job*, like in the *Philoctetes*, life is not about what God does to man but about man's capacity to deal with what comes his way in life. Both texts answer this question in a manner befitting the cultural and religious backgrounds in which they were written. Job never loses faith in God while Philoctetes chooses to go to Troy and be the hero, rejoining his fellow men, and we can assume that later he will rejoin a polis and no longer be a polis (without a polis), something important in Sophocles' time.

Euripides' argument in the *Hippolytus* implicates the gods much more directly. The question is on what side does the playwright come down? Does he cast the gods as puppeteers who simply play with human beings or does he say that the gods are irrelevant and life is what human beings make it out to be? In other words, who is in charge of man's fate? This, too, is a question directly addressed in *Job*.

In *Job*, the author answers this question by asserting that God owes man nothing. No, He is not a puppeteer simply playing with mankind, but at the same time He is in ultimate control. In terms of man's role, he needs to be mindful of God, owing honor and due praise to Him, but he must also be able to deal on his own with his lot in life. This is what I think Euripides is saying in his play.

In the *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus has wronged Aphrodite by not worshipping her, and she decides to punish him beyond belief. Then the whole middle part of the play deals with how the mortals deal with the fate handed down to them. In the end, the goddess Artemis affirms the role of the gods in human affairs by vowing to carry out similar deeds towards friends of Aphrodite. It is certainly difficult to see where Euripides comes down here, but I am hesitant to say that he blatantly contradicts himself. I simply think he takes the middle road. He makes a distinction between the world of the gods and the world of mortals and each exist independent of each other, yet according to each other. They must co-exist in order for the cycle of life to continue.

One more over-arching theme in the *Hippolytus* that also appears in *Job* is this notion of being able to salvage what is truly important in this life despite horrible suffering, and again each text resolves this issue according to its religious and cultural context. Hippolytus reconciles with his father and dies at peace, reinforcing the importance of father-son relations in Ancient Greece, and Job is once again reconciled to God and finds blessings that abound because of his faithful endurance of the trials before him.

I have attempted to show several things. One, that the *Philoctetes*, the *Hippolytus*, and the *Book of Job* (best exemplified by the Lord's speech from the whirlwind) all pose similar questions dealing with a reconciliation of gods to men. Two, All also inquire in to why good things happen to bad people. Ultimately Sophocles, Euripides, and *Job's* author all answer these questions according to the context in which they were writing these texts. Sophocles tends to reinforce that it is all the will of God that ultimately rules. Euripides places more of an emphasis on man's role apart from the gods and the importance of salvaging what good we can from this life, and *Job's* author asserts man's duty to respond to God no matter what the circumstance. Overall, all three texts pose more questions than they offer answers.

These two selections were short essays from a final exam for a course in Theological Arguments in Poetry and the Novel. The first essay, "Seriously," is a reflection on the work of two poets, Wallace Stevens and Czeslaw Milosz. The second essay is titled "Armageddon, the Apocalypse, and the Eschaton," has absolutely nothing to do with its title, but is rather a meditation on the use of fiction as a means for religious and philosophical inquiry.

Seriously

If I can be serious for just a moment I would like to address the serious issue that the very serious Harold Bloom has raised as to when, how, and if we can seriously consider regarding poets as serious. Bloom has always been one to cause more harm than good, but I believe he is onto something when he questions not only the poet's use of his world but also the world's use for the poet. It is impossible as a reader to be serious or at least read seriously unless he is convinced that the author is genuinely serious about that which he is writing, and the only way to know whether he is or is not is to ask of him through meditating upon his work.

The two poets I choose to acquaint myself with for the purposes of this exercise are Wallace Stevens and Czeslaw Milosz. The fact that they are very different poets forces the question of just what is a serious poet? Bloom, in the question he poses also offers a satisfactory answer. A poet is serious if they make good use of their world and the world, in return, makes good use of them. Going along with that definition I would say that both Wallace Stevens and Czeslaw Milosz are serious poets and should thus be taken seriously, but for different reasons.

Milosz demands serious attention because the subjects of his poems are steeped in real experience. War, his native land, the human condition, and the nature of poetry itself are all things he tries to record accurately from his own experience, and these are without a doubt, very serious subjects. Of course, according to Milosz and the preface of "A Treatise on Poetry," poetry is of superior importance: "Novels and essays serve but will not last. / One clear stanza [of poetry] can take more weight / Than a whole wagon of elaborate prose."

Actually, Milosz's "Treatise" is the perfect example of why the author should be taken seriously. The first three parts of the poem deal poetically with very serious subject matter and are written from Milosz's own recollection of his own personal observation and experience. 'Beautiful Times' describes Poland before World War I, now granted this is not fully from personal experience, but it is based on his observation of Europe in the years following the Great War. Those must have been beautiful times in contrast to the awful times of post-war Europe. The second part, 'The Capital,' has everything to do with observations of Warsaw between the First and Second World Wars while 'The Spirit of History' recreates Warsaw in the midst of World War II. What is most unique about "A Treatise on Poetry" is that it is not a "how to" on poetry but rather an example of what poetry should be and should be about according to Milosz. The final section and the ode are more romantic in tone and subject matter and depict well Milosz's wonderful skill at using the language and capturing personal experience.

Milosz did not only write about history but also about the human condition. Poems like "Poet and Seventy," a self-meditation on his own life and work, and "An Alcoholic Enters the Gates of Heaven," which examines human suffering, showcase

Milosz's ability to probe not only his own past experience but his ability to observe the experience of others.

Milosz also has instances where you question how serious he can be taken. His poetry is very prosaic and his form often resembles that of lecture notes, not verse. In "What I Learned from Jeanne Hersch" Milosz examines the human condition but does it in the form of a numbered list. Is this even poetry, and if not, can we take him seriously as a poet? Or is he more a philosopher? But I ultimately classify him as a serious poet. He is too serious, his experience too rich, and his use of language too unique to not be classified as both serious and poet, despite a possible insufficiency of lyric.

Wallace Stevens deserves to be taken seriously on account of his poetry as well, but for different reasons than does Milosz. In terms of subject matter Stevens could be classified as a lighter, more romantic poet, but he most certainly examines the human condition in depth as well as perception, reality, and consciousness. Lacking the experience of Milosz, Stevens compensates by being perhaps the more pure poet. Look at his fascination with and brilliant use of language. He seems to savor every word that he writes, even if his words are nonsense.

A perfect example of art and theme in Stevens is his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This is a poem of imagination, which stresses the ability of the mind to perceive so many things at once and find the perfect words to capture such images. Other poems like "Anecdote of the Jar" observe how the world reacts to things that seem out of place. These may not seem serious upon a first reading, but they deserve serious attention because of their universality. You can apply the themes to anything: religion, philosophy, the human condition, anything.

But perhaps the two poems that deal most directly with this question of the seriousness of the poet and his poetry are "The Planet on a Table" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." "Planet" is parallel to Milosz's "Poet at Seventy" in that it is Stevens meditating on his own work looking back through time. He concludes that it is not important whether or not his poetry is remembered, but rather that while it existed it was a part of this planet because it faithfully captured life. This would seem to contradict Bloom's definition of a serious poet because Stevens is saying that the use the world make of him or his work is secondary to what use he makes of his world. But this is the very reason why Stevens is taken seriously for his use of the art of language.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is similar to Milosz's "Treatise" in that it is not solely a "how to" book on writing poetry but is rather an example of what poetry as the supreme fiction should be. This argument will be fleshed out in the next selection.

All in all, I take Milosz and Stevens seriously not because they fit Harold Bloom's definition but because they try to faithfully capture personal experience without compromising the free art of poetry. They both try to explain what poetry should be by giving examples, and they both deal with matters of the soul- with pressing questions of religion and philosophy. Their poetry is universal and eternal. I love it.

Armageddon, the Apocalypse, and the Eschaton

Ultimately I believe that poetry and fiction are great means of religious and philosophical inquiry. I actually prefer examining these things in such a way because when you deconstruct belief in the context of texts people hold to be sacred, people tend to get pissed off easily. Fiction and poetry provide a much safer means of deconstruction and inquiry.

Another reason that poetry and fiction are well suited for examining religious and philosophical questions is that they have the ability that Stevens asserts in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" to cause a transparency of being in the reader. Whether it is a sympathetic character in a novel or short story or a moving account of a universal human experience in a poem, literature both destroys our sense of self and affirms it.

Is it ever inappropriate? Well, I will never say never. There are many instances people cross the line in a text and blatantly and intentionally offend someone somehow, but for the most part. I almost find it the most appropriate means of attacking such issues. To those who would argue that it is completely inappropriate, that issues of such great importance should be confronted by studying the primary sources I ask just what are the primary sources to which you are referring? The Bible has fiction and poetry in it: the psalms, the parables, the Book of Job. The Bhagvad-Gita is a poem. If a religion has a sacred text at all, it probably combines elements of all types of literature. All in all, I am a fan of such a means of serious inquiry, but I am also very tired. Good night.

My love for T.S. Eliot and my admiration for his work finally had an opportunity to be expressed in an essay I wrote called "T.S. Eliot: An Evolution of Belief from The Waste Land to the Four Quartets." I have included a note from the author that I have written because the names in it will not be included in my bibliography at the end of this appendix.

A Note from the Author

I typically do not do this, but I found it to be necessary given the cottage industry of criticism that T.S. Eliot's poetry has created. And although my thesis is original given the fact that it deals with a comparison of two poems, I have still researched some criticism on both "The Waste Land" and the "Four Quartets," and I therefore owe the initial thought background of my paper to the critics. However, the comments and conclusions are mine.

As a means of referencing those who have guided my preliminary thoughts concerning these two poems, I want to thank Jay Martin, Nancy K. Gish, and Cleanth Brooks for their unique analyses of "The Waste Land" and Constance De Masirevich, David Perkins, and Paul Foster for their contributions to the bevy of "Four Quartets" criticism. I acknowledge them now because I will not cite them. I only used them as grounds for forming my own thoughts on the connections between to of Eliot's finest poems. Without further ado...

From the very day Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, it seems as if he has been searching for something. I only say this because his poetry reflects this grand wealth of personal experience and observation of the ways of people in the world that he either began at birth or has lived an incredibly rich yet, in some ways, difficult life. What does he seem to be looking for? Meaning, plain and simple. Eliot desires answers to life's deepest questions and in his life he chose poetry as the means of exploring and finding those answers.

Arguably his two greatest poems are "The Waste Land" and the "Four Quartets." On the surface these two poems seem very different but upon closer inspection, they are not so. Both were written surrounding the two World Wars ("The Waste Land" in 1922 and "Four Quartets" completed and compiled in 1942), both blend elements of eastern and western religion and philosophy, and both meditate on the spiritual state of the world and of its people in these troubling times. They differ however, in the conclusions that they draw in regards to the Christian ideal, and the difference in conclusion coupled with the point in Eliot's career when he wrote each work have caused me to read the "Four Quartets" as an ultimate conclusion to "The Waste Land." Whereas in "The Waste Land" Eliot defeats the Christian ideal in answering questions of our lives' meaning, his "Four Quartets," by meditating on time and nature, affirms the Christian ideal as the ultimate meaning of this life and the next.

"The Waste Land" could easily be the most difficult poem to study in the western literary canon. With its allusions to and quotations from many religious, philosophical, mythological, and historical sources Eliot creates a world of many voices with a central, permeating consciousness. He is describing the world as a spiritual wasteland in which human desire and experience are empty. Death seems to be the theme of the first four parts of the poem; even in the epigraph, death is desired because life is nothing but

endless, meaningless occasions of death. However, in the fifth part of the poem Eliot provides a possible three-pronged solution to life's questions and ends the poem with a 'peaceful' ending.

In 'The Burial of the Dead' Eliot prepares us for everything we can expect in the rest of the poem. He foreshadows the ending through references to the drowned Phoenician sailor, death by water, and the defeat of a 'Son of Man' (line 20). From the very first lines, spoken by corpses, Eliot is arguing in favor of the dead because at least they do not have to live in the world above them. This sets his audience up for the main theme of sections two and three of the poem- the emptiness of human experience, the wasteland of desire.

'A Game of Chess' describes this pessimistic view of life in two ways: according to the upper class and according to the lower class. He begins with a wealthy lady sitting in a chair, and he describes her setting, an elaborate home filled with beautiful and expensive things. Then he gives an account of a conversation between her and her husband, and it is clear that the two are not at all communicating. The wife wonders all these things and the husband answers with the most trivial of responses. He is either thinking about rats (115) or of that Shakespearean rag (128). To further illustrate this meaningless of life Eliot has her ask him what they shall do tomorrow and his answer concerns a routine: "the hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess" (135-137). Life for this couple has become a meaningless routine. The wife even with all her material possessions desires something greater, but the husband has resigned to accepting that life is nothing but a continuous series of meaningless routines.

The second part of this section concerns the lower class and is a conversation between two women in a pub. One woman has spent money her husband had given her to fix her teeth on an abortion because she has been having affairs while he has been away at war. Throughout, you hear the voice of the bartender saying "Hurry up please its time" (141) indicating last call, but it also seems to have more ominous overtones concerning life running out, the search for meaning over, and instead of finding meaning, all we have done is have affairs and work to acquire masses of material possessions.

I think that Eliot unites these two different halves of the same section by ending with "good night" (172). This seems to indicate that the same thing happens every night. The upper and lower classes each have their own meaningless routine existences. And Eliot will further exploit the emptiness of personal experience in 'The Fire Sermon' by commenting on the dangers of desire.

The poem's third part deals most importantly with the abuses of sexual desire. This argument consists primarily of a brief possible reference to homosexual love and then a longer account of a typist and a "young man carbuncular" (231). Here the two engage in the act of sex and the man whose "vanity requires no response" (241) leaves prompting the woman to comment "well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over" (252). This is anything but the fulfilling and beautiful encounter that sex is supposed to be, and for Eliot's narrator this seems just another instance of the world as a spiritual wasteland.

The third section of the poem ends with direct references to both Christian and Buddhist sources. "Burning burning burning burning" (308) is from the Buddha's fire sermon, from which part three derives its name, and "To Carthage then I came" (307) and "O Lord Thou pluckest me out" (309) are each from Augustine's *Confessions*. These

works are examples of both eastern and western asceticism, so by ending this part of the poem on the negativity of desire, it seems as if Eliot is suggesting that through the elimination of desire meaning could possibly be found. Also, this east-west dualism will be a vital part of the poem's final section.

Depending upon interpretation, the fourth part, 'Death by Water,' can possibly be the most important section of the play. For the Christian who believes in the baptismal sacrament, water symbolizes death AND rebirth, so the death of the Phlebas the Phoenician is redemptive, but for others this death is a fitting end to life lived the way it is recorded in the poem's first three parts; thus, it is a meaningless death without hope for a resurrection. I believe it is the latter given the defeat of the Christian ideal in the poem's final section.

'What the Thunder Said' continues this dualistic search for meaning. Eliot refers back to the 'Son of Man' passage from part one, and comments that if there were water amidst the dry rock, life would have meaning, but he emphatically asserts in line 358 that "there is no water." In my mind this defeats any notion of the death by water in part four having redemptive quality. Thus, the Christian ideal is shattered. It does not hold the meaning of life. He even goes as far to say that all the great cities of the world- Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London- all places that seemed to have the answers, centers of intellectual and spiritual wealth, have fallen. The west has nothing to offer. All that remains is an empty chapel.

Then, lightning crashes, it rains, and the thunder speaks. This imitates a fable in a well-known Upanishad. The thunder gives three instructions: give, sympathize, and control. Eliot then ends his poem with these three commands and "Shantih shantih shantih" (433) which translates "The peace which passeth understanding." This is a common ending to an Upanishad. Perhaps Eliot intended "The Waste Land" to be a meditative Upanishad on the meaning of life.

By ending this epic poem in such a manner Eliot lends himself to the religion and philosophy of the east as providing more answers to life's great questions. Only by giving, sympathizing, and controlling the self can we cease to exist in a spiritual wasteland. But ultimately, this is a poem that resists final explanations. It is hard to come to one monolithic conclusion as to its meaning because it is not a wholly monolithic poem. It seems to be more of a collection of many poems that form a frame where various themes, characters, and moods interact to produce a mixture of emotional responses. Eliot does not convince me with his ending. The poem still has too many unanswered questions. My soul is still left unsatisfied. Give, sympathize, and control- these are good- but just how do we do that? Where is our example? This is where I believe the "Four Quartets," in a sense, is a continuing of "The Waste Land" and succeeds in satisfactorily answering its questions and tying up its loose ends.

From the first lines of the first quartet T.S. Eliot gives the reader a clue as to the main theme of the "Four Quartets." What is time? What does it accomplish? How, if at all, does it make sense? These are all questions that Eliot seems to mediate on in the poem. He confesses that the present is all that matters: "what might have been and what has been point to one end, which is always present" (Burnt Norton I). He will later go on to speak of "the still point of the turning world" in part two of the first quartet. I make the connection between this still point and the present. And this sounds very much like Augustine whom Eliot quoted in "The Waste Land." Right away this return to

Augustine's philosophy in meditation clues the reader into the fact that this poem may have a different conclusion.

Also in the first quartet Eliot renews his argument on the nature of desire as seen most explicitly in 'The Fire Sermon.' To say in part four that "desire itself is movement / not in itself desirable" is to say that desire causes undesired movement, which moves us away from the still point, the present moment. What is desire anyway except a longing for the past or a hopeful anticipation of the future? Immediately after these lines, Eliot offers a solution: "Love is itself unmoving, / only the cause and end of movement, / timeless, and undesiring / except in the aspect of time." Love then is the still point out from which the present moment receives life. By arriving at this conclusion, Eliot achieves yet another blending of east and west, of Christianity and of Buddhism in professing a timeless freedom from suffering and dissatisfaction with life.

'East Coker,' the second quartet begins with the famous lines "In my beginning is my end," and this quartet is very much concerned with being liberated from this world of time. In this world, from the moment you are born it is only a matter of time before you die. Eliot rants and raves about there being a time for everything. How can we ever get free from this world of time?

In part three the narrator says to his soul "be still." Again we have this emphasis on being still. Here we are further told to wait for "the darkness of God." God was never mentioned in "The Waste Land," so again we get this possible shift in the emphasis of this later poem. Is Eliot saying that God is present in the stillness? This would most certainly agree with Augustine whom Eliot is drawing heavily from in this work.

The fourth part gives us even more references to western, more Christian beliefs. With references to bleeding hands, the healer, Adam's curse, absolute paternal care, and the Eucharist Eliot is seeing more and more where Christianity may be creeping into this spiritual journey. And he ends the second quartet by reversing its first line. He says, "In my end is my beginning." I cannot help but think back to the epigraph to "The Waste Land," where the Sybil has eternal life but all she wants to do is die. But here, Eliot is yearning for eternal life. This sets up the reader for a hopeful final half of the poem, and Eliot certainly does not disappoint.

Eliot begins the third quartet, 'The Dry Salvages,' with a strong notion that there is something to be found. This sense of discovery is realized when he admits that the "strong brown god," the river, and the sea are found both within us and all around us. I liken this to passages from the New Testament that refer to Christ as Living Water as well as the many occasions in the Gospels where the true Kingdom of God is said to be within and all around, not in some far distant place or time, but right now. This returns again to the notion of the fixed point. Eliot refuses to let this imagery elude us.

River and sea imagery also symbolizes things like continuity and connectedness. And it is this analogy that I believe to be Eliot's final synthesis, his acceptance of the interplay between eastern and western religious philosophy. Water is timeless; it has neither an end nor a beginning. And it is in this realization that there truly is no end that Eliot finally accepts death in part two of this quartet.

I actually read part five of this third quartet as the most important part of the entire poem. It is here where Eliot cements his acceptance of Christ and embraces Christianity when in "The Waste Land" he rejects it. He speaks of the unattended moment, in and out of time. This moment manifests itself in many ways: in music, in

nature, in people. And these moments are merely hints and guesses as to what is Incarnation. Incarnation is the key. It is the still point from which all else radiates. In the Incarnation we have the "impossible union" of spheres of existence and the past and the future are "conquered and reconciled." The rest, he goes on to say "is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action." This is very Christian. God incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ uniting all spheres of existence and conquering time, reconciling all things to Himself, and the rest falls in us in the form of spiritual discipline.

All of this is such a far cry from the arguments T.S. Eliot makes in "The Waste Land." Nowhere there would you ever find anything about the possibility of spiritual fulfillment and discipline. It did not exist for him then, but now through a belief in the Incarnation, hope exists.

The final quartet, 'Little Gidding,' is the homecoming. In the "Four Quartets" Eliot has led the reader on a spiritual odyssey from question to answer, and in the fourth quartet he finally arrives and sort of recaps everything he struggled with in the first three quartets of the poem. He mentions the broken king (a reference to Christ), a stranger, both one and many (a Trinitarian reference perhaps), and one of the many speaks to him of forgiveness; he moves from an acceptance of death to a celebration of death; he speaks of memory as liberation from time and love as liberation from desire; and he finally mentions, in part four, the descent of the dove, the Holy Spirit who redeems us "from fire by fire." Then he confesses that Love (God) devised all of this, the good and the bad.

The fifth and final part is a completion of his meditation on time. All things are their own beginning and their own end. We are all connected by Love. We all possess the river, the source of life within us, and Eliot assures us that all will be well "when the tongues of flame are in-folded / into the crowned know of fire." Yet another Christian reference, but this one perhaps more than any other expresses not just a hope but a belief that everything will be all right, that the world is not a spiritual wasteland but is instead beautiful and full of life and abundance thanks to Love, Incarnation, and the Spirit.

I feel almost inadequate in terms of my ability to wrap all of this up. I do not know whether or not I can successfully make the necessary connections. I think it is obvious that Eliot thinking about life, the world, and human experience certainly changed from early in his career as reflected in "The Waste Land" and later in his career when he wrote the "Four Quartets." In earlier poem he rejects Christianity. He does not see its ability to solve the problems of a world that is spiritually lacking. But in the later work, he affirms Christianity as possessing the ability to heal a wounded world. Christ is the center, the still point that makes all things one. Time and death no longer have dominion over the world. Eliot finally realizes that the Christian ideal that he rejected in "The Waste Land" in favor of an eastern solution is actually no different than that very same eastern solution. Finding the unity of all things in Love, Eliot asserts an argument based on hope and life, not on despair and death. The contrast of conclusions is remarkable in my mind especially because he was dealing with the same questions in the case of each poem. For this reason I argue that Eliot's "Four Quartets" serves as a fitting and final conclusion to "The Waste Land." It is as if these two works truly were the beginning and end of the spiritual journey of a man who is said to be the greatest "Christian" poet of the twentieth century.

The following is from a final exam in a course on Christian Thought. It is a brief comment on the theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin. The citations are references to a large anthology of theological readings, and will appear in the bibliography.

In commenting on the Theology of the Cross (1.11), Martin Luther makes a distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. The main difference is that the theologian of glory seeks God apart from Christ while the theologian of the cross knows God is revealed through the cross of Christ. Note the difference in the words seeks and knows. For Luther, the cross is the jumping off point for any theologian who seeks to know anything of God.

The reference to looking on the rearward parts of God is essential to the theology of the cross. Just like in the Exodus story when Moses only saw the back of God, most of God's revelations to man are hidden from us. In Christ's cross we receive the full revelation of God to man. This is why the cross is supreme for Luther.

And in terms of whether or not Luther would confess one can know God through natural theology, I think he would admit that this would be another example of looking at the rearward parts of God. For complete revelation, he would assert the centrality of the cross.

On sin and grace (6.31), Luther uses the analogy of a doctor and his patient to demonstrate how we are sin and grace at once, how we are at the same time righteous yet sinners. If we go to the doctor with an illness and he prescribes a treatment that guarantees success in restoring us to full health, and we have faith in the promise, then we are, in a sense already healed even though we are still sick. The point is that if we believe in the redeeming promise of God in Christ, then although we are sinners, we are righteous.

So to say that we are sinners in fact but righteous in hope means just that. We are righteous because we hope in the reckoning of a merciful God, yet we are unrighteous by the fact we are still sinners. We know that we sin, while we do not know that we are righteous because the knowledge of our sin contradicts why we would be righteous. That is why we are righteous in hope.

Calvin is slightly different from Luther. In speaking on faith and the promises of God, he asserts that the promise of mercy is the proper object of our faith. He mentions this right before mentioning God's Word. This implies that it is the promise of mercy that underlies God's Word, and as a result, is the most important object of faith. He goes on to say that faith is only valid if it is joined to Christ. This echoes Luther in cementing Christ as central to thinking about God and our faith.

From the same final exam the following material is a review of four films I viewed for the class. I added this to the appendix to show my interest in many different mediums for discussing religion.

In Ordet, Carl Dreyer presents his audience with a variety of Christian faiths so to speak. From Johannes' radical apocalypticism to Mikkil's lack of faith to the pastor's faith of form to the temperature difference between Peter the Tailor and Father Bergen, Dreyer seems to cover all possible Christian manifestations. Within the course of the film, all these very different beliefs are put to rest thanks to the realization that they are all Christian at heart. Even in Mikkil's unbelief, you get the sense that there is something fundamentally "Christian" about him.

Another thing Dreyer stresses in his film the significance of the miracle in everyday life. I think he is trying to show that today's miracles are often so small and so plentiful that they are simply taken for granted and thus their significance is diminished. Even the pastor refuses to believe miracles still happen while they are happening all around him. The birth of a child is a miracle. Ingrid's supposed recovery was a miracle. The change of heart between the patriarchs is a miracle. But in the end, it takes the greatest of miracles to renew the faith of the movie's characters, the resurrection of Ingrid.

In terms of individual characters and their faiths, four of the most intriguing are the doctor, the pastor, the child, and Johannes. In the pastor, Dreyer is showing that for some religion and faith has become form. It has become a doctrine and a liturgy of hollow prayers. The doctor lacks any doctrine, but he is a doer of miracles. He has a faith of sorts in the skills and knowledge that God has given to man. The child is the example of total faith while Johannes represents the needs of the Church, the desires of Christians in the epic of disbelief in which we live. In the child and Johannes the final miracle happens. This is Dreyer showing his audience that with perfect faith, the needs of the Church, our desires receive new meaning and miracles happen. Faith is made alive.

In terms of whether or not this film addressed any of the themes we discussed in our course, I answer yes and no. It really did not speak directly to any of the themes of our course. It did not prove the existence of God, or echo feminist voices in modern theology; nor did it affirm its viewers by a creed or defend the city of God against the pagans. What the film did do, however, is much more important; it captured the essence of Christianity that underlies every theme we discussed this term. All the personalities we studied did in their work exactly what Dreyer did in Ordet, that is they all sought to make sense of just what it means to have faith in the world in which we are a part. It is for this reason that I believe Ordet was a great conclusion to our course.

In relation to the films I chose to view for the rest of the course, Ordet is perhaps the most complete film in terms of summarizing the spirit of our studies in Christian thought; thus, it comes closest to the fundamental themes of our course. The other films I viewed all seemed to capture just a few aspects of our course. The Mission addressed religious life in Bonhoeffer's coming of age world. Dogma served as a humorous but heavy critique of Catholicism and Christianity as a whole. And Groundhog Day seemed to get at the futility of life apart from Love. Ordet seemed to do all of this. That is why it has become one of my favorite movies of all time. Thanks for showing it.

In search of a more complete look at the themes we studied in Christian thought, I decided to view one film from each of the three groups. My representative from Group A was The Mission; I chose my own film Dogma as a Group B selection, but fear not, it fits; and for Group C I selected Groundhog Day. My viewing experience led me to the far reaches of the South American Jungle; it led me on a cross-country trip to save the world; and it gave me this very real sense of déjà vu. But ultimately I achieved a full picture of many aspects of Christianity and how they apply to this life.

The Mission just ripped my heart out. I found myself sympathizing with the tribal people and with the Jesuits who literally gave their lives for their faith and love of fellow man. The religious men depicted are missionary priests who are trying to do what they know to be God's work in the face of brutal European colonialism, which was believed by some to be God's will. The tribal people view the priests as wonderful, saving people in the film while the Europeans view them as noble, but a roadblock to the ultimate end of flexing their colonial muscles.

Because of the faith of the priests and their love for the people they have come to serve, they die heroically, I think. The director succeeds in proving this point although the film is more about colonialism than about the religious life. But he is certainly not without a great appreciation for missionary priests. This is most evident in the type that shows on the screen at the end telling of the brave religious men and women that still give their lives today.

Dogma is a very different film. It is at once not at all as serious, yet much more so. Whereas in the first film, the critique was more on the colonial powers, in Dogma the critique is heavily on the Catholic Church and Christianity in general. Because the critique is so heavy handed, the humor in the film serves a truer purpose. It is there simply to make you laugh; it is also present to provide the audience with a break from the heavy doses of religious philosophizing; and it serves as a means of attracting viewers so they will be able to hear the film's message.

Although this movie the critique in this movie is so very serious, it does not make Christianity out to be this gravely serious and dull existence. The emphasis in the movie is on faith and on the mercy of God. The humor then is acceptable. The movie says, at heart, that this life is not about dullness, especially when it involves faith. A life of faith leads to fullness of human experience.

Some of the characters in the film are perfect examples of this. The Angel of God who serves as God's voice on earth is perhaps the funniest character in the film. And Rufus, the thirteenth Apostle, left out of the Bible because he is black, is a wonderful example of a sense of humor surrounding the serious implications of faith. And the Cardinal, played by George Carlin, is just hysterical.

In regards to the statement that comedy is really the secret core of a Christian approach to life, I am inclined to agree in the classical sense. The Christian life is all about happy endings, just like classical comedy. We examined this complex relationship last term in 313, so I will spare you my thoughts. But this film is not a classical comedy. It is your modern day, raunchy, obscene kind of comedy typical of today because it fits the tastes of the audience it aims to hit, young adults.

No people we read for this course apply to this film. The theology laid out in this film is so radical; it was branded as heresy by many religious groups and was boycotted all over the map. Its message is beautiful though, and I recommend you view this film.

Finally, Groundhog Day, easily the most complicated film in terms of dealing with the ramifications of what the film says, deals most directly with the idea that life apart from love is futile, redundant, dead. There was one instance in the film where Bill Murray directly addressed the existence of God, a theme we studied in our course. He had already relived the same day so many times that he knew everything about everyone in the town. He had also committed suicide many times, yet he was still trapped in the same day. He makes the statement that he is a god, that he is immortal. He goes on to say that maybe God is not really omnipotent, he has just been around for so long that he knows everything. This challenges many of the theories for the existence of God we studied in our course. I just found that striking.

Aside from that, this film really did not direct any other themes directly, but it did make a great commentary about the futility of life but with complex consequences and built in hope. The hope lies in the fact that we have many days to finally live rightly. The consequences are a loss of faith and a desire to be dead because the futility and repetitiveness of life is soul killing. In the end, he finally gets out of the same day when he finds love, when he turns from his bitter, selfish, and arrogant ways to love. Because of this, one can conclude a Christian conclusion: that life apart from Love, apart from God is futile. I also tried to think about whether or not this had any ties to what we read about last things but all possibilities were a stretch.

Groundhog Day and The Mission best show the strength of the Christian experience. The religious men are willing to die for their faith, and they become martyrs who live forever in the minds of the living. Through a life of helping others they achieve immortality. As for Bill Murray, he achieves the ultimate in love, and is freed from the trap of this existence. This seems to be at the heart of Christian experience.

Dogma most clearly, of the three films I viewed, exploits the holes in Christianity. It attacks the factioning of religions, Catholic dogma, notions of a white Jesus and God as a He, and points out inconsistencies in the Bible. It succeeds though by covering asserting faith as of the utmost importance. These other things, which are stumbling blocks to non-believers, are truly secondary to what it all means.

None of these films miss the point in my mind; rather, they each capture a unique aspect of the truth. In light of everything we have done for this course, I believe Christianity to be too narrow a term to summarize and contain all that is implicit in thinking about life and human experience, even from a "Christian" perspective. To label something so large, so beyond the capabilities of our finite mind, is to restrict the framework of our experience. This course has succeeded in presenting me with so much information from so many perspectives that I cannot help but conclude that this life about so much more than just one word, Christianity. Perhaps Ordet truly did capture not Christianity, but life best. It was about hope, about a belief in miracles, about love. Okay, now I am really done.

An essay written attempting to read St. Augustine's The City of God Against the Pagans as an extension of his Confessions, submitted in the fall of 2003 for a class in Greek and Roman Literature.

In his Confessions Saint Augustine tells the story of his life from birth through his conversion to Christianity, discussing everything from his thoughts and feelings as a little child to his education and passage into adulthood. What I find striking is that throughout most of his prayer-like meditations he often exhibits a change of heart. For example, as a youth he "delighted in the sorrows of Dido" (Knox 835), but he later condemns the Aeneid and much of the Roman education system as being virtually irrelevant. I see this as being a small part of a much bigger picture for Augustine, and this bigger picture gets fleshed out in perhaps his greatest work: The City of God Against the Pagans. In the first three books of this very long work, Augustine offers an interpretation of Roman myth history that aligns itself with his views on education outlined in the Confessions. The City of God, in its entirety, is an extension of his earlier work, arguing not only for the irrelevance of texts like the Aeneid in Roman education, but for the irrelevance of Rome's entire myth history for life's most valuable lessons.

I find it very significant that Augustine discusses his education in the Confessions. This sets up the fact that, looking back, he sees flaws in the Roman way of life. He makes very clear the true change of heart that his conversion has lead him to have. For example, when discussing his education as a Roman child, he confesses to being one who wept "over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas" (Confessions 838); however, looking back, on account of his love for the Aeneid, he considers himself "a wretch without pity" (Confessions 837). He even goes so far as to call his sympathy to such texts "sin and the vanity of life" (837). Moreover, he makes reference to the veils that hang in the entrances of literary schools as covering error rather than signifying educational prestige (838). All these things clearly exhibit changes in Augustine's way of thinking about the facets of Roman life.

Closely related to the idea of education in Rome is the impact of the theatre. In The City of God Augustine argues that the theatre is another avenue responsible for misleading many Roman citizens. Theatre was a vehicle for the public display of "disgraceful acts and licentious vanity" performed "at the command of the gods" (City 46). Worse than this, these plays were considered "honorable and liberal education" (59). In a nutshell Augustine is blaming the education of Rome's youth as partly responsible for the negative aspects of civic life. But he makes it very clear that it all goes back to the gods of Rome. They command plays to be put on, and they command epic and other literature to be written about them. Therefore, it is his insistence on the responsibility of Roman deities for the moral demise Rome's people that gets closer to the larger idea that Rome's entire myth history is deeply flawed.

Augustine makes it very clear in his preface to The City of God that he is writing this gigantic work to defend the City of God "against those who favor their own gods above her Founder" (3). Augustine, having been converted to Christianity for some time, acknowledges the Judeo-Christian God as the one true God, Creator of all things, so consequently, the true founder of the Roman Empire. This is the pathos of his entire argument. He is out to prove that Rome has wrongly based itself upon false gods. As a

result, his reading of Roman myth history will seek to expose its flaws and cast its adherents as pagans in favor of the City of God and the Elect.

Beginning with the Trojan War, Augustine makes very clear the "great and miserable error" (6) the Romans made in charging the protection of their city to Gods who could not protect Troy. He actually cites Virgil's use of the word "vanquished" as it applies to Aeneas gaining charge of the gods so they might escape Troy to help found Rome (7). Augustine's logic is clear: who would want to live in a city protected by gods who failed at protecting the city of Troy? This is clearly a negative take on Rome's religious and historical foundation.

He continues in his argument to question the ethics of the Roman gods- gods who "punished the perjury of Troy yet approved that of Rome" (96). Here he is again adhering to Virgil that Troy had to fall on account of the false oath of Laomedon, but he adds his own spin accusing Rome of their own kinds of perjury, especially in the senate. He defeats this idea and also the idea that the gods forsook Troy because they were "outraged by the adultery of Paris" (96). His conclusion from this brief discussion is harsh. He calls the Roman gods "the authors and teachers of sin, not its avengers" (96). This to me is very significant because it demonstrates the degree to which Augustine frowns upon the mythical beginnings of Rome. By systematically dissecting the behavior or lack of behavior of the gods, Augustine is exploiting the hollowness in worshipping such deities. I agree with this reading that Rome fashioned gods in its own image to suit its own needs. For Augustine, all that mattered was the will of the One True God, something lost in Rome's polytheistic, mythical beginning.

Augustine further explores this idea of moral skepticism as it applies to the gods in a brief discussion of Romulus. He concedes that maybe the gods did not care about a Trojan offending the Greeks (i.e. Paris and Helen), but they would certainly be concerned with fratricide by Romulus (98-99). He is basically saying that if the Roman gods had any moral aspect to them they would condemn the murder of a brother in the early stages of the founding of the city they are supposed to protect. He perhaps best sums up this entire argument saying that, "there is no evil to be attributed to Troy great enough to warrant the gods abandoning her to destruction; nor is there any good in Rome great enough to account for the gods dwelling there to bring her prosperity" (99). This is a bold expansion upon an argument that began with the critique of Rome's educational system but it is both logical and true to Augustinian form in that it reads Rome's myth history as problematic.

Another facet of Roman life attacked by Augustine is the ease with which the Empire wages war against its opponents. To illustrate his point he uses the rape of the Sabine women and the subsequent war. It would have been just for the Sabines to declare war on the Romans for their unjust acquisition of the Sabine women, but instead Rome wages "unjust war against their justly angered [enemies]" (70). According to Augustine this set the precedent for Rome's future war tactics. Obviously this is unjust, and it can be concluded that many of Rome's later wars, especially those of the myth-historical time, were unjust. Again, this fits perfectly into Augustine's critique of Rome's beginning and its ignorance of its true founding by the One True God, who he believed had a perfect and righteous will.

Next, he discusses the rest of Rome's seven kings and the things that made their reigns memorable. He is sympathetic towards Numa's peaceful reign, but also blames it

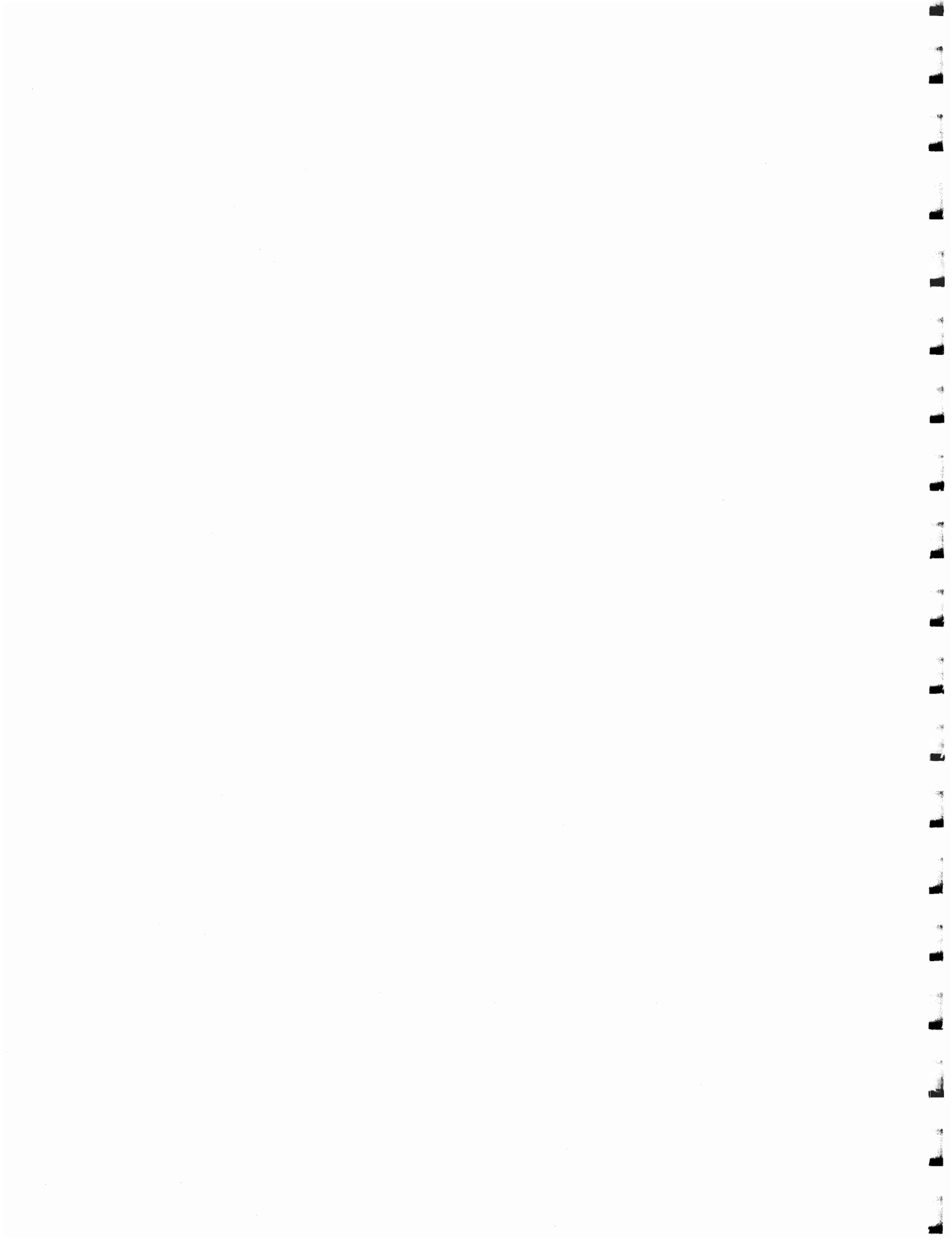
for the war with the Albans that followed. The stock of Aeneas suffered a “horrible and atrocious evil” (110) when the three Horatii fought the three Curiatii, a state of affairs “worse than civil war” (110). Yet the Romans rejoiced. He finds this absolutely ludicrous, desiring the evil deeds to be “examined naked” (111). That is perhaps what he is doing in The City of God, exposing the naked truth about Rome’s history from an elevated, “Christian” perspective. These are very harsh words by Augustine and cut right to the heart of Romans who believe in this version of their history.

For the sake of brevity I will skip over the rest of the seven kings, although Augustine discusses their reigns at length, commenting on such things as the slaying of Tarquinus Hostilius and the parricide of Tarquinius Superbus (114-115). He ends his discussion of Rome’s myth history saying that all the military victories, bloodshed, and calamity succeeded in expanding “Rome’s dominion scarcely twenty miles from the city” (116). I think this clearly shows his disgust with the Romans and their stubborn adherence to their pagan roots.

One last point worth dwelling on deals closely with the end of the reigns of the seven kings- the rape of Lucretia. He argues that she was not a willing participant and thus did not commit adultery (29). “How does it come about...that the one who did not commit adultery was the more severely punished” (29)? Augustine asks this question because he is again concerned with why Rome’s citizens would have endorsed such behavior. This complaint makes sense to me on account of all his previous arguments. Had the people of Rome not adhered to their pagan gods, seemingly void of moral virtue, then they would have an entirely different history, one perhaps more noble and worth of praise.

Augustine is not done here. He is puzzled by Lucretia’s suicide, suggesting perhaps that she were guilty of adultery, a willing participant in the sexual act (30). He asks why she is praised, then, if she is an adulteress and why she was slain, if she were pure (31)? This all may seem slanted and over the top, but I believe that Augustine successfully points out the many problems with the pagan aspects of Rome, sparing no length or amount of words.

I must admit that it is easy to read Augustine and say that his arguments are all very obvious to anyone looking at a pagan city over against high Christian moral and ethical principles. But for his time, The City of God was a tremendously effective and daring work. The Empire was on the cusp of having a Christian majority nearly one hundred years after the Edict of Toleration was issued in 313 CE, so his argument, to me, is sensible given this perspective. I have attempted to discuss what I noticed as similar between his Confessions and The City of God Against the Pagans. His argument against Roman education as he looks back on his life seems to be the starting point for his move backwards in time to Rome’s mythical beginnings. As a result, I do not think it a stretch to read The City of God as an extension of his Confessions. The arguments are similar enough in theme. Both critique Rome’s pagan understanding of its history as something not worth the belief of a true member of the City of God. By writing The City of God, Augustine appeals to the growing majority of Christians in the empire while heavily critiquing those outside the faith. This was, and is, a missionary text, so the question must be asked: does Augustine succeed in defending the City of God against the pagans? If the rest of the books are at all similar to the first three books that I focused on then I would say yes, he did.



A brief reflection on Athenian democracy for a course in Western Civilization, submitted 7 September 2001.

Since the conception of the United States of America in the late eighteenth century countries have attempted to take America's democratic form of government and make it their own. However, the government of the United States is far from being purely democratic; in fact history has seen civilizations come much closer to reaching the proverbial "Holy Grail" of governments. The democracy of fifth and fourth century BC Athens is most likely the closest example of such a government, since all native adult males participated directly in the lawmaking process. Athens' democracy, like that of the United States' was not nearly as democratic as one might think sighting the lack of the same freedoms for women and slaves as were granted to legal adult men.

The concept of slavery in classical Athens was very different from the United States' system that consisted of cruelty. In Athens, conquered people became slaves, and despite having none of the freedoms that normal Athenian citizens had, they were not treated with cruelty. Still, an idea that slaves were property existed. Aristotle argued that a "slave, being a living creature like any other servant, is a tool worth many tools" (*The Politics*, 30). Although Athenians recognized slaves as people, they still belonged to an owner. If slaves, as inhabitants of Athens, were not allowed to participate in government, than Athens did not have a "pure" democracy.

Although women had more rights than slaves, they still were viewed as second-rate when placed next to men. Women in Athens were stereotyped much like they are in the today's world. They were expected to tend to the house and bare children, particularly strong males. In Xenophon's *The Economist*, a man quotes his wife when she said that her duty according to what her mother taught her "is to be well-behaved" (33). Women were taught to be submissive and helpful. Perhaps this was an accepted role or perhaps it was forced on to women because of a feeling that Plato describes thusly: "all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also, but in all of them a woman is inferior to a man" (*The Republic*, 37). If women are inferior citizens denied certain rights, how can Athens be a "pure" democracy?

Athens most certainly had a direct democracy because those that were dubbed citizens were allowed to participate directly in government, and despite being the closest in history to a pure democracy; Athens still falls short by definition alone. When considering the government of the United States of America it is important to look at classical Athens, but one must also look to the Republic of Rome, where citizens elected senators to make decisions for them. The United States combined the forms of government from arguably the two most successful civilizations in the ancient world and combined them. The result is the democratic republic of America; similar to Athens in past treatments of slaves, women, and the desire to let the people participate in the decisions that will directly affect their lives.

Selections from an essay titled “Addicted to Drug Control,” submitted 24 April 2002, for a course in Western Civilization. It is a reaction to William B. McAllister’s Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century: An International History.

Since the beginning of existence, humans have sought to reach new heights whether through technological advances, the development of new philosophies, or seeking an altered state of consciousness. Drugs have been around forever and have been used by people throughout history for medical, religious, and leisure purposes. William McAllister opens his book Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century discussing drug use in an historical perspective. The only problem arises when he stays in the historical perspective until the conclusion of his book. It is because his book is presented more as a history than as an argument that pinpointing a specific thesis is a difficult task. However, if one is able to wade through all the personalities and organizations McAllister so deftly discusses he might arrive at this conclusion: The author is arguing that the history of drugs and of drug diplomacy reflects the steady progress of society by illuminating such areas as the government, the economy, culture, the environment, and the social interactions among all people.

Why does McAllister not point out that it was America involved in such activities? It is because his book presents a very biased view of drug diplomacy. The Americans are never to blame. It mentions how the United States was the self-proclaimed moral leaders involved in the drug dispute, and the simple fact that the author points this out shows that he agrees. He points out how that U.S. would pull out of negotiations that did not give them all they wanted and deserved. Moreover, the only reason Americans were forerunners in the drug picture was because they had to cover their dirty tracks, not because they were worried about the world’s growing drug problem.

Further analysis proves the American bias in the book more. Why did the Americans not join the League of Nations, which was President Wilson’s idea in the first place? It was simply because it did not cater to America’s immediate taste. But, when the League started making strides that infringed on American economic interests, particularly in the drug realm, the U.S. gets involved. Why did the author not comment on the sudden motives for U.S. involvement? Instead, McAllister mentions America’s role only as a positive. Furthermore, it mentions the roles of other countries only in relation to the United States.

The fact that McAllister does not address several of these underlying themes reflects the main weakness of the book. In writing Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century, he wrote a book report. His failure to comment on such a detailed history detracts from the usefulness of the book in the world of academia. People do not enjoy listening to book reports, but they love to debate. But, the author leaves the reader no grounds on which to do so. As a result his thorough history is reduced to nothing more than a third grade paper on Charlotte’s Web.

This essay, titled "An Evolution of Satan: Part of speech to Prince of Darkness," was written for a class in Ancient Biblical literature and is a reaction to an article written by Elaine Pagels.

Growing up in a Catholic-Christian tradition, one of the main things I was taught to believe is that evil and sin exist in the world and that God, pure goodness, has overcome evil with love in the form of Jesus Christ, God's Son. I remember having to memorize the Apostles' Creed, which states that Jesus "descended into hell" before He was resurrected. In hell, we were taught that He fought Satan for our souls, and, of course, He won. This main belief structure assumes a great deal about the nature of the cosmos, primarily that there is a divine war being fought between the forces of good and evil over human souls. When I was young, I ate this stuff up, believing it most likely out of fear that the devil would win me and I would spend eternity in hell. As my life has progressed different factors have helped evolve my faith into what is now, the most important factor being my academic college life. And one issue I have encountered that has me thinking deeply about the nature of the divine order that I once took for granted as simply adversarial- good versus evil- is the topic of the evolution of Satan throughout the body of biblical and extra-biblical texts and times.

In an article titled "The Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy': A Preliminary Sketch," Elaine Pagels addresses this Satan issue and makes some very bold but plausible claims. The thrust of her argument is very much chronological, stressing that the notion of an evil Satan figure directly opposed to a totally benevolent God did not become widespread until a time between the closing of the Jewish canon and the beginnings of Christianity. She points out the scarce occurrences of 'Satan' or 'the satan' in the Hebrew Bible, found only in *Job*, *Zechariah*, and *1 Chronicles*. Then she references several extra-biblical sources written around the time of the Maccabean revolt, such as *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, as well as Essene Qumran texts like the *Damascus Document*, the *War Scroll*, and the *Rule of the Community* that date from the first century BCE and later. All of these texts have one thing in common: an evil force, often called Satan, is at work against the people of Israel.

Even more interesting for Pagels is the fact that these later texts seem to be exclusive to different sects of Jews that became very frequent in this turbulent time period. So when she coins the phrase "the intimate enemy," she is claiming that the different sects of Judaism, the first Christians being included, developed an 'us versus them' mentality that cast those who believed or lived differently as the enemy, saying that they had been overcome by evil, by Satan. By pointing out the disparity and evolution in the frequency of references to 'Satan' between canonical and non-canonical Jewish sources, Pagels is trying to show that it is a possibility that the existence of Satan, an evil force acting against the people of God, is merely a construction of people trying to justify their own religious faith over and against outside oppressive forces and other religious faiths that differ from what they each hold to be the one true way.

I think that the evidence of the scarcity and ambiguity of references in the Hebrew Bible alone is enough to prove that the existence of the devil is problematic. But when set against the great number of references in later Jewish non-canonical texts I believe Elaine Pagels constructs a very plausible argument in her essay, especially given the

extremely complicated issue she is addressing: an issue dealing with the nature of the cosmos, the nature of divine justice, and our own human nature.

Her argument seems to uphold what is an accepted explanation for the nature of the cosmos according to *Genesis* when taken at face value. God alone was in the beginning and brought the world into being and declared it good. Where in this account is Satan? Where, even, is evil? Some might say, well, "Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden," but that is easily refuted with "No, the serpent did," and even then, it is not the serpent's fault that Adam and Eve sinned; it is their own. So literally speaking, Satan is not present here, which would mean he has been constructed and interpolated back into the story of the fall. If Satan, then, is a construct, as Pagels seems to suggest, then it is man who is responsible for the evil, the ungodliness of the world.

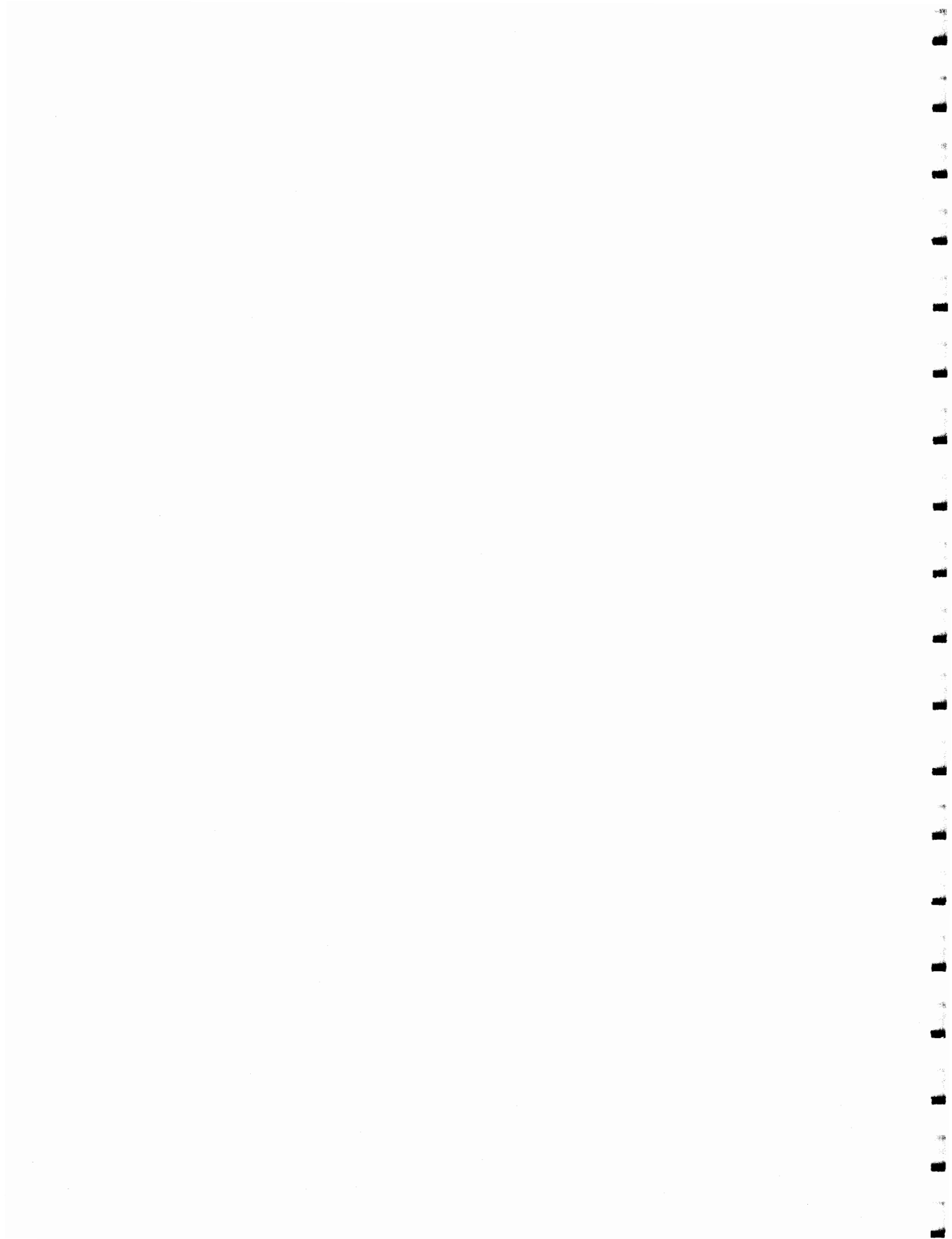
If we are then responsible, what does Pagels' argument suggest about our own human nature. I think she is saying, that we made the devil so we would have a scapegoat, something on which we cast our blame for our own faults and our own misfortune. Pagels' main argument of 'the intimate enemy' is based upon the supposition that people used the notion of evil as corrupting others who opposed, either in their belief or disbelief, the religious faith, or more accurately the religious interpretation, of a certain people, specifically, a certain sect of Judaism. So not only do people use Satan as an excuse for themselves but also for others. To say "The devil made me do it," or "Satan has gotten a hold of you" seems to me to be a very easy out, but as she has proven, this was very frequent in the first centuries BCE and CE.

Pagels also shows that the use of Satan as an excuse is not frequent in the Hebrew Bible either. The prophets, messengers of God, did not even use Satan as an excuse for the incurring of God's wrath. Their emphasis was on the sins of Israel against their God. They were not concerned with overcoming some external evil; they were instead concerned with adjusting the actions of the people to whom they spoke, and bringing those actions back in accordance with the will of the divine so that external evil might cease. The bad things that happened to the nation of Israel were from God as a result of the people's disobedience, not from some evil Satan figure with an agenda to turn Israel against God. For me, this advances Pagels' thesis by further showing the possibility that Satan is a purely human construct. If Satan is out of the picture then, what does this say about the nature of God?

If there is not an evil force in the universe diametrically opposed to God and His pure goodness, where does evil come from? Is it from God, or did we create it when we disobeyed God? Trying to stick somewhat to the main points of Pagels' essay, I would assert that humans are thus responsible for evil. We created it in others by declaring our own goodness and righteousness, and others created evil in us by declaring themselves in the right as well. I will not go into this issue any further because my paper would become a thirty-page sermon and not a five-page impression paper.

Finally, after deconstructing Elaine Pagels' argument in her essay on the history of Satan, I admit that it is logically sound. The evidence is intriguing because it succeeds in convincing me of her supposition that the character of Satan has evolved with the needs of people looking for answers and explanations in a changing world while not fully disproving that there could be a Prince of Darkness and he could have existed all along. After all, there is sufficient, logical evidence that God does not exist, but that has not kept myself and billions of others from whole-heartedly believing in God. So can the same

not be possible with Satan? Ultimately, I am yet to make up my mind as to whether or not I believe in the devil, but I can say that this issue has opened a new area of thought that I will continue to explore. It is all a part of my own spiritual journey, so I maintain the right to stay undecided for the time being.



An essay titled "Purity Laws for an Apocalyptic Jesus," submitted 9 October 2003 for a class in New Testament Origins.

At first guess, one would probably say that Jesus followed Jewish purity laws. He would have to in order to convert the Jews he came to save. This logic makes sense, but upon closer inspection of the man Jesus, I have found that the answer to whether or not He followed Jewish purity laws is very problematic. The answer is yes; and the answer is no. On several instances in the canonical Gospels Jesus says something or performs some act that supports the Jewish laws, but other times, He is in direct opposition to notions of ritual purity. One good example of this problem is found in Mark when Jesus debates the Pharisees as to what is clean and unclean. Jesus is questioned about why He and His disciples do not wash their hands before eating, and Jesus responds, "Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean" (Mk. 7:15). This is tricky because it can be read two ways. Reading it as what comes out being sexual discharge, to use a quick example, has Jesus in support of what the Jewish law says in regard to purity. But read with the emphasis on what goes into the body, Jesus is contradicting Jewish dietary laws. This example best shows how difficult the question at hand is. I propose that Jesus' seeming back and forth in terms of following Jewish purity laws is further evidence of His apocalyptic worldview that Ehrman emphasizes.

Before I get to Ehrman I wish to lay out the argument in Paula Fredriksen's article "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?" Her first strong point picks up on the fact that Jesus engages the Pharisees in debates over these laws, asserting that, "argument implies participation" (Fredriksen 23). If Jesus had no stake at all in Judaism or its laws He would certainly not engage in discussions about them, especially given His apocalyptic worldview that I will discuss later. Jesus obviously has an interest in these laws.

Next, Fredriksen defines impurity by saying it "is not sin," it "does not correspond to social class," and it "is gender blind" (23). These definitions support the claim that Jesus did not break any purity laws in his life by helping to define the kind of people to whom Jesus ministered. Fraternizing with sinners, tax collectors, and women, which Jesus did, did not make one unclean. These people were not necessarily impure because of their class, gender, or sin history. One was impure because of contact with the sick, or the dead, or others unclean, or from their own bodily emission, which ties in nicely to my next point.

Jesus was constantly in contact with the sick and the dead. He is seen throughout the synoptic Gospels as healing the sick and casting out demons. So did performing these miracles make Jesus unclean? It is difficult to say. For example, and to use another example of Fredriksen (25), when Jesus cleanses the Leper by touching him, He orders the now clean man to go and make due sacrifice as the law prescribes (Mk. 1: 40-44). This makes it appear that Jesus is in support of the purity laws, but then one must ask why Jesus has not purified Himself; after all, He touched an unclean man, and as a result, is unclean according to the Law of Moses. So again we see how problematic this question can be.

Fredriksen continues her argument by describing the events surrounding Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem, where he was arrested, put to trial, and crucified. What is most important here for my argument is her conclusion that Jesus was "too different" to make

a call as to whether or not He followed the purity laws (Fredriksen 46). In order to perhaps better understand this complicated question, she recommends trying to see how the historical Jesus grasped his own culture (46), which is where Bart Ehrman's argument of Jesus' apocalyptic worldview now comes into play.

Ehrman actually begins his argument much like Fredriksen by saying that Jesus' followers followed Him because they agreed with what He taught (Ehrman 251). Ehrman is talking about an apocalyptic outlook, but I say that this also applies to interpretations of the Jewish law, including rituals of purity. For example Jesus is questioned about why He and His disciples do not fast (Lk. 5: 33-39). If Jesus' followers did not agree with what Jesus said and did, then we would not have this passage in Luke or any like it in the other Gospels.

Ehrman's next important argument is more relevant directly to Jewish apocalypticism. He emphasizes that Jesus was not a Pharisee, "who emphasized scrupulous observance of the Torah," nor was He a Sadducee who focused on Temple worship (Ehrman 255). Again, though, I assert that this can be read as regards to the adhering to Jewish law. Here, the conclusion can be drawn that Jesus does not observe the Torah laws as closely as the Pharisees. This offers yet another answer to our question of yes and no.

I have already examined Jesus' company and his miracles, so I will discuss Jesus and the Temple. Ehrman reads the Gospel accounts of Jesus in the Temple as evidence of His apocalyptic mindset. The end was coming, so Jesus would stop at nothing to convert his audience, even if it meant turning over the tables in the Temple. In regards to this specific event Ehrman suggests that it is an "enacted parable," and that it symbolizes the coming destruction of the Temple that Jesus foresees (260). In Mark's Gospel, the most apocalyptic of the synoptics, Jesus is more blatant about the Temple, saying, "every one [stone] will be thrown down" (Mk. 13: 2). Here is where I make the connection between Jesus' apocalypticism in Ehrman and the question of whether or not He follows Jewish purity laws. When Jesus dies "the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mk. 15: 38). When the Temple, the center of Jewish worship and its chief symbol of purity, falls, the law is destroyed with it. This is the symbolic meaning in this part of the Gospels.

Jesus' apocalyptic preaching was ultimately not concerned with purity laws. Ehrman best sums it up when he says Jesus "appears to have believed that what mattered was at the heart of the Torah, the command to love God... and to love their neighbors" (Ehrman 268). This is what is important to Jesus in his apocalyptic mindset. This resonates with Jesus saying, "I have not come to abolish them [the law or the prophets] but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5: 17). Again, I point out the problem of a Jesus who does not abolish the law yet destroys its seat with His death. So does Jesus actually adhere to Jewish purity laws? No, he does not, but He does not have to follow them. They are not important to Jesus in the world He is living. With the end of the world coming, one cannot waste time worrying about whether he is clean or unclean. The important thing is to teach, and heal, and cast out demons so people might repent and believe, and thus be saved. This is the nature of Jesus ministry. This helps explain all the urgency and extremity of His message. When Judgment comes, it will not matter whether or not one is clean. For Jesus, what mattered was sin, and as Fredriksen pointed out in her article, sin and impurity are not synonyms in the context of the Jewish laws (Fredriksen 23). As

I have shown, and it is worth repeating once again, Jesus' problematic relationship to Jewish purity laws is in direct relationship to the nature of His apocalyptic message, ministry, and death.

The following is an assignment done for a course in "Ancient Images of Jesus." It concentrated on the Gospel accounts, both canonical and non-canonical, as well as other gospel-like literature of the ancient Mediterranean. The point of the assignment is to hypothetically construct Luke's use of Matthew. It consists of a detailed chart and answers to questions regarding my findings.

Verses from Luke	Verses from Matthew	Luke's Procedure	Commentary on Why Luke Did What He Did
4:14-30	4:12-17 & 13:54-58	alteration	Whereas Matthew's Jesus has prophecies dictate his mission, Luke's Jesus uses a prophecy to explain his mission. Luke's Jesus comes across as very self-assured of who He is and what His mission is. Luke's Jesus has a major social agenda, seeing that He fulfills a prophecy about aiding the poor, lame, and downtrodden. Matthew's Jesus almost seems surprised when He is not accepted. Luke's Jesus puts words into the mouths of his audience to show He is out of place at home, thus validating the Gentile mission.
4:31-32	7:28-29	alteration	Matthew's reference to Jesus' authoritative teaching occurs at the end of His Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is Jesus' first public teachings in Matthew. Luke mentions Jesus' teaching early on in his narrative. This achieves a more reasonable chronology of Jesus' life. I doubt Jesus only taught in large chunks. As a result, Luke's Jesus, although much more aware of his divine side, appears more human, giving him more credibility as a typical demigod figure with which Luke's Greek/Gentile audience would have been familiar.
4:33-37	none	addition	Luke adds this section to further set Jesus up as a man of authority. Even the demons listen to His commands. Also, on account of the demon calling Jesus the Holy One of God, we see Jesus again portrayed as divine which his Gentile audience would notice. The only problem here is that Jesus rebukes the spirit for making his identity known. This seems to contradict the demigod mold Luke is working with, so I chalk this contradiction up to his following one of his oral sources.
4:38-39	8:14-15	alteration	The main difference is in the way Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Because Luke has Jesus rebuke the fever, he is able to construct a very authoritative Jesus. Even illnesses obey him. The immediate return to work by Simon's mother-in-law could be indicative of what happen to those who have felt Jesus' touch or call. They immediately turn around and serve. This will soon be the case with Simon Peter, and later in Acts, Paul.
4:40-41	8:16-17	omission	By omitting the prophecy found in Matthew, Luke is able to show Jesus' actions as not being dictated by fate or prophecy. His power is solely from God, and His divinity is evident to Luke's audience. Matthew is still trying to show Jesus as fulfilling the Jewish law and the prophets. Luke has Jesus fulfilling scripture very early on (4:21) and then makes no reference of any kind of Jewish fulfillment again. This demonstrates a quickening to the Gentile mission, which is one of Luke's goals; Jesus' Jewishness is not.

4:42-43	none	addition	Luke adds this passage and for the first time clearly announces the Gentile mission. This also fits Luke's traveling, demigod, teacher mold he is working with. Jesus, not welcomed by his own people, is now on a mission to deliver His message to the other (Gentile) cities. This theme gets further explored in Acts, the second half of Luke's overall narrative.
4:44	4:23	omission	I take it that Luke means for Judea to mean the whole of Palestine, not just the southern part because Jesus has not yet set his face towards Jerusalem. Oddly, Luke only mentions Jesus as preaching where Matthew has Jesus also casting out demons and healing people. These are signs Matthew has as strictly done to the Jews. Luke's Jesus has moved on to a worldlier, Gentile mission so needs only to preach, but as we will see, He will do miracles of another sort.
5:1-11	4:18-22	expansion	Luke expands Matthew's story by adding a miraculous catch of fish. This is both symbolic and significant because it fits further with the theme of the Gentile mission that will be carried out especially in Acts. Matthew would never have included this because his concern was more teaching the Jews the new way. For Luke, just as Simon is called by Jesus and catches many fish, later in Acts, Paul will be called by Jesus and catch many men. This plays more on the idea of action following the divine touch of Jesus.
5:12-16	8:1-4	alteration	In Matthew, Jesus has just finished His Sermon on the Mount and is coming down from the mountain. Matthew is beginning a block of healings/miracles. Luke, attempting to show a more orderly account has Jesus in one of the cities teaching when the leprous man approaches. He also adds a "don't tell" but news of His power spreads anyway. It is almost as if Jesus is using reverse psychology. I say it is the will of the Holy Spirit, a huge part of the news reaching the Gentiles later in Acts.
5:17-26	9:1-8	addition	Jesus is again found wandering in a city teaching in a house. This fits the wandering teacher paradigm of Luke. Also, news of Jesus' power has reached all the way to Jerusalem, a central theme of Luke's Gospel. Luke adds the part about the roof to show further just how popular Jesus is. He then remains fairly faithful to Matthew's account until the end when Matthew mentions the crowd praising God for giving such authority to men. Luke has no such thing because Jesus is no such man.
5:27-32	9:9-13	alteration	Matthew's line of 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' is not found in Luke because Luke is not trying to appeal to a Jewish audience. As far as the name change (Luke uses Levi), he could be trying to marginalize the Jews even more by having one of the twelve tribes represented as fellowshiping with sinners. Or Matthew could just be using Matthew to interject himself into his narrative, if in fact it was Matthew the tax collector who wrote his Gospel. Regardless, Luke's social agenda re-emerges here.

5:33-39	9:14-17	alteration	This actually begins to reflect a slight shift in the mission of Matthew's Jesus if the Jews can be assumed to be the old cloth and old wineskins. Luke has 'they' ask why His disciples are not like the disciples of John and the Pharisees (Matthew differs slightly) to show yet again that anything having to do with Judaism or John the Baptist is out of the picture. Luke also has it placed in a place that makes it seem like a continuation of the dinner at Levi's house whereas Matthew's account seems new. Luke's is just smoother.
6:1-5	12:1-8	omission	By omitting Matthew's attack on the temple leaders and the line 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' Luke is again distancing his Jesus from having anything to do with the Jews. Luke's Jesus is sold on a completely Gentile mission. This break with Judaism will become even more evident when we get to Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Also, Luke's narrative seems more cohesive and orderly at this point. We had to skip about three chapters in Matthew.
6:6-11	12:9-15a	omission	Luke leaves out a big a big part of Matthew's account here, but includes it later in a discussion with the Pharisees (Lk.14:5). Here, Jesus is seen as much more antagonistic towards the Pharisees, a further reflection of Luke wanting little to do with them. This passage serves as the first in a collection of miracles that Jesus does. Oddly enough he chooses only Matthew's stories that have to do with conflicts with Jewish leadership at this point in his narrative.
6:12-16	10:1-4	alteration	Matthew has a Thaddeus where Luke has another Judas, son of James. This non-betraying Judas, I think, is Jesus' own brother, which would give Luke a family tie. If in fact, part of Luke's oral source is from a family member (Simon, the Bishop) this information could be factual or strong family propaganda. Either way, Luke potentially gains lots of credibility with this slight alteration.
6:17-19	12:15-21 & 4:25	omission	Luke has no need to mention the prophecy of proclamation to the Gentiles that Matthew mentions because his Jesus is already in the middle of His Gentile mission. By placing this intro to Luke's Sermon on the Plain immediately after his calling the twelve, he achieves makes the sermon more directly focused on his disciples. Thus, there is no huge Jewish audience needing teaching. Luke's Jesus gives a message that will be more focused on social issues right now.
6:20-26	5:3-12	alteration	Luke makes it clear that it is not good to be rich. He does not address the poor in spirit and those that hunger and thirst for righteousness but rather the literal poor and hungry. This feeds Luke's social concerns in his Gospel. This idea is furthered by the woes he adds in verses 24-26, making it even more clear that to be rich is to not be a disciple. All this adds up to the feel that Luke's Jesus is dealing with a more Gentile audience, not a richer, aristocratic Jewish one like Matthew.

6:27-30	5:39-42	simplifies	Here Luke shortens Matthew's exhortation on love of one's enemies. By doing so he simplifies the message, not having to be so thorough. Part of the reason for Matthew's thoroughness is his having to cover all aspects of Jewish law; since this is no concern of Luke's, he can trim Matthew to suit his narrative to better accommodate his audience. As will be obvious, Luke cuts any part of Matthew's sermon that deals with the Jewish Law.
6:31	7:12	omission	Luke omits a line very central to Matthew's overall emphasis. Luke has no concern as to whether or not the "golden rule" is the law of the prophets, but this is of great concern to Matthew who is trying to convert a Jewish audience. What is important to Luke's Greek/Gentile audience is simply to do unto others, as you would want them to do unto you.
6:32-36	5:45-46	alteration	Matthew makes specific reference to tax collectors and Gentiles, which further proves he is trying to reach a Jewish audience, whereas Luke is speaking to tax collectors and Gentiles so his emphasis is simply on sinners. Here he expands Matthew's teaching in an attempt to be more thorough for his audience of sinners and fresh Gentile converts.
6:37-42	7:1-5 & 10:24 & 15:14	alteration	This is a classic example of Luke picking and choosing his way through Matthew's Gospel, combining similar elements and teachings to give his narrative more flow and order.
6:43-46	7:16-21 & 12:35	alteration	Again Luke gathers from a couple different areas of Matthew to simplify and make easier to read. What is most striking about this passage though is in the end. Matthew has Jesus mention his Father in heaven, showing a humility that Luke does not have. In Luke, Jesus says to do what He tells them. For Luke, if you do that, you do the will of the Father in Heaven. This is more on the divinity of Jesus, but almost to the point that Philo deifies Moses.
6:47-49	7:24-27	alteration	The only difference here is some slight wording. For the most part Luke holds to Matthew. This is important to both authors and does nothing to contradict Luke's agenda either on the social level, the demigod, wandering teacher level, or the Gentile mission level. It is an appropriate end to both Gospel writers' teaching sections. To reinforce though, Luke leaves out any part of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount that deals with the Jewish law: such as marriage, adultery, murder, etc.

7:1	7:28	addition	This is a vague reference in Matthew. Luke really adds this part as a transition to begin again with more of Jesus' actions. Oddly enough, he resumes his narrative with Jesus healing the centurion's servant, a story that Luke excluded from an earlier miracles section. By placing it here, Luke's Jesus is fully into his Gentile mission. Luke will also go on to include other miracles done to the Gentiles that Matthew lumped together with those done to the Jews. The distinction in Luke is necessary to accommodate his larger themes.
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1. What role does item 1 (the first entry in the chart) play in Luke's narrative?

Item one is essential to understanding several things about Luke's narrative: the order, the theme, and the audience. It contains the basic formula for Luke's Gospel and his second part, The Acts of the Apostles. The most important part of this opening section is not the fact that Jesus is rejected in Nazareth, but that he knows He has to be rejected. The prophecy He reads, which also introduces Luke's social agenda, accomplishes the same things that all the prophecies Matthew mentions do: Jesus has come into the world to save it. But while Matthew insists on a Jewish audience, Luke jumps immediately to the Gentiles by reminding his audience of how Elijah and Elisha saved the Gentiles instead of the people of Israel. So in just sixteen verses Luke outlines his agenda for Jesus and the early Christian Church. In sixteen verses, Jesus goes from fulfilling the Jewish scriptures to putting his focus on the Gentiles and His mission to teach and save them. This progression carries on throughout Luke's Gospel as I will demonstrate with my following answers, but it is also the progression of Acts where Luke begins with Peter and his commitment to the Jews and ends with Paul taking the message of Christ to the Gentiles and the ends of the earth.

2. What might be Luke's reason for rearranging the stories he found in Matthew?

Luke rearranges the events in items two through seven to quickly include some stories he feels are important like the driving out of the evil spirit and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. What is most significant and most adheres to my answer in question one is verse forty-three where Jesus makes His mission clear: He must go to the other cities and teach the Gentiles. That is His purpose. This is a mini-evolution of the larger theme in Luke. In these fourteen verses, Jesus goes from teaching in synagogues to having to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. Luke is trying hard to make Matthew hold to this order he has in mind.

3. What is the symbolic meaning of the miraculous catch of fish?

This symbolic narrative is in place to further foreshadow the spread of Christianity to the Gentiles. As Simon (Peter) catches a bunch of fish at the bidding of Jesus, so will he and Paul catch many men on account of the Holy Spirit in Acts. Also, this shows again what happens to people when Jesus calls them: they immediately respond. Simon's mother-in-law immediately gets up and serves, Peter immediately follows Jesus, and later Paul will go to the Gentiles. Luke strategically places this passage here to further set up this idea of what it means to be a fisher of men as he will demonstrate in greater detail in Acts.

Matthew leaves out the miraculous catch of fish because he is not concerned with the Gentile mission until much later.

4. What is the common theme among the stories Luke chose (items 9-14)?

The obvious theme in these sections of Luke's narrative is confrontation with the Jewish authorities. The part of Matthew's narrative that includes these miracles also includes such miracles as the healing of the centurion's servant and the raising of the dead girl and healing of the sick woman. These are miracles performed to the Gentiles. Because of this Luke omits these stories in this early section of healings, concentrating on the conflict with Judaism. Later, after Jesus and His disciples are fully immersed in the Gentile mission, Jesus will pick up these miracles and weave them into his "more orderly" narrative. I am trying to show that although Luke promised to give a more orderly account (that of a demigod's biography), he is also concerned with showing this evolution for Jew to Gentile. The way Luke handles this chunk of Matthew is very telling of that.

5. Explain Luke's Sermon on the Plain.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain, a truncated version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount also succeeds in depicting this getting away from Matthew's Jewish influence. Luke's selects from Matthew only those teaching that have nothing to do with the Jewish law. He leaves out, for example, the teachings on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, and the passage that Jesus has come to fulfill the Jewish law, to name a few. Instead, Luke concentrates on a version of the Beatitudes that is heavy with a social agenda, emphasizing the literal poor and hungry. Also, Luke adds a section of woes to such as the rich. This serves as further social commentary, and would speak directly and effectively to a predominantly Gentile audience. Then he includes the teaching on love for one's enemies, obviously applicable to the outcast Gentile community; judging others and a parable about the tree and its fruit, significant to the Gentiles in that during the time Luke was writing Christianity was a religion of action and proselytism. Finally he includes the teachings about the wise and foolish builders to hammer home the importance of doing what Jesus says. This is also a tangible image to anybody. All in all, Luke's careful selection of Matthew's material makes his narrative that much more open and understandable to his audience.

6. Explain Luke's entire arrangement.

In this short but telling section of Luke's Gospel Jesus starts in Nazareth and ends in Capernaum. He begins by having Jesus say He has fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures to having Jesus focus on the mission to the Gentiles. Throughout, Luke is phasing out any Jewish influence that Matthew seems to cling to for the better part of his Gospel. This section of Luke is also indicative of the way the narrative in The Acts of the Apostles flows. There, Luke begins with Peter ministering to the Jews and you end with Paul going to the Gentiles to preach the Good news. The assignment stopped us just short of the story of the centurion, which mirrors the conversion of Cornelius by Peter in Acts. With this in mind, the significance of the miraculous catch of fish is perhaps more understandable. The Gentile mission is a necessary part of Jesus' message. The missing Jewish influence in Luke's sermon mirrors the fact that it is unnecessary to go through all the Jewish rites to be a Christian, as discussed in Acts. And the concluding

remarks succeed in showing Jesus to be someone worthy of imitating. The most important thing is to do what He has told you. Then you will have life. Overall, the flow of this section in Luke's Gospel is designed to introduce his major themes: the demigod paradigm (stressing Jesus' divinity), the Gentile mission (fulfilled in part two, Acts), and to provide a more orderly account. Luke's version has more a storytelling feel to it, and is thus more orderly as he promised his audience he would achieve in his prologue.

7. What is your personal assessment of Luke's rearrangement of Matthew?

At this point I feel like I have answered the exact same question six different ways, but as for my personal assessment I say that Luke succeeded in what he intended to do. He intended to portray Jesus as divine and did so. He intended to provide a more orderly, better flowing account and did so. He wanted to assert the importance of the Gentile mission and he did so. The way he arranged Matthew's text was necessary for his agenda. Matthew's reads more like a law book, going back and forth between teachings and miracles, and this makes sense for Matthew who is trying to reach a Jewish audience still married to the law. Luke is not concerned with that so his narrative can take the shape of that of a demigod biography, a literary convention with which his Gentile/Greek audience would have been very familiar. I like it better. It is easier to read in that it is not as heavy and I like the way Jesus is portrayed in Luke's account. It is funny because Luke goes to great pain to paint Jesus as divine, yet to me He almost seems more real and that is because of the shape of Luke's narrative. Also, it is hard to ignore the parallels between his Gospel and Acts, making his Gospel arrangement much more the first part of a two part series. Luke's Gospel needs Acts to be complete. It is not as powerful if it stands on its own. Luke's Gospel also has the most influence of Paul. Whereas the Matthew casts Jesus as God's messenger, Luke and not coincidentally Paul, cast Jesus as God's message to all of humanity.

An essay submitted 23 March 2004 for a Seminar titled "Images of Jesus II," a follow up to an earlier class in "Ancient Images of Jesus." The essay, titled "D.H. Lawrence and the Returned Soldier" is a reflection on his short novel The Man Who Died.

I don't know just how it came to me, but it finally did. I was sitting at the table staring at my notes and it just came to me. Everything connected. Everything made sense together. "The Risen Lord" and "The Man who Died" blended into perfect harmony in my mind. The Risen Lord, the escaped cock, the man who died, all these metaphors for Jesus add up to one main and terribly depressing image for Lawrence, that of the returned soldier. The nausea at existence, then the disillusionment, and then the subtle yet tragic unfolding of appreciation for the grotesque and base pleasures of life- all these are the feelings a soldier experiences when he returns from war, especially from the war to end all wars.

Using Christ Crucified and Resurrected is the perfect metaphor for a returned soldier, and D.H. Lawrence creates this connection slyly, poignantly, and brilliantly. He takes the very touchy resurrection account of the Christ, runs with it, and completely destroys the chance of any remotely holy image of Jesus. When Jesus awakens in the tomb he is not convinced that He is raised, but rather that He was taken down too early and never actually died. I think Lawrence wants us to be clear that He did die, or else he would not refer to Jesus as the man who died or make constant references to body parts once dead. But, Lawrence also wants us to see Jesus' death, and consequently our own, in a new light. The man who died thinks he has merely died a death to his own self-importance and self-conceit, and has been given a new chance to live alone. Why Jesus think this way is what is important to Lawrence. Jesus has been killed at the merciless hands of the evil Roman empire, and when he rises from the dead, is completely disillusioned, having no sense of his life's mission or a desire to fulfill it. He has been broken by death and really has no reason to live. This would have to be true of the soldier returning from the war. He would be completely dejected and utterly disgusted by life, by a world back home that has seemed to just continue unchanged. He, too, like Jesus, was sent to the slaughter by the evil empires of the world, and he, too, has lost any sense of pride or mission or love for his country, just like Jesus has lost his love for His people.

So where does the escaped cock come into play? I think it represents the purity and beauty and goodness of the generation of young to middle-aged men that were completely destroyed by the Great War. They were beautiful, and full of potential. They were going to be the crown jewel of such an optimistic period in history, but they were lured in, and tied down, forced to go to war and defend their country. They were never really allowed to grow to their fullest potential, nor show their true colors. The war damaged them greatly. How? Well, Lawrence tells us in the cockfight scene (183). The escaped cock absolutely destroys the other man's cock. This is a symbol of the soldier's damage. They became violent, bitter people, with no choice but to fight, and to kill their brothers, their own kind. That scene is such a poignant moment in the short novel, and Lawrence uses it masterfully.

The escaped cock is also a symbol for life. Lawrence is tedious in referencing the appeal and persuasion the cock has over all hens. He will spread life. Just as the

gamecock becomes a source of life and beauty and virtue to the man who died, as depicted on the Road to Emaus (183), Jesus later becomes "the escaped cock" of the priestess of Isis. He is the object of her search. He is her source of life. And, it follows, that as Jesus, the man who died, is slowly restored to fullness of life by engaging in the ultimate sign of life- sex- the cycle of life will continue. Whether or not Lawrence considers sex to be the pinnacle of human existence is irrelevant. What matters is that it is a perfect symbol to capture the need to find life in the aftermath of so much death. If Jesus experienced it, then it is okay for a soldier to experience it. After a war that wiped out an entire generation, life had to be restored. The earth had to be repopulated, so this image of the cock and of Jesus as sources of life is very necessary and poignant.

Having given my thoughts on what I feel is D.H. Lawrence's image of Jesus in "The Man who Died," that of the soldier returned home, wounded and damaged by the brutality and naked death of war, and searching hopelessly for the faintest shreds of life, I wish to attempt to answer the second question: what did Lawrence hope to accomplish in "The Man who Died?" The answer, I believe, lies in the other work we read by Lawrence, "The Risen Lord." In it, Lawrence discusses just what happened to the image of Jesus in the hearts and minds of men and women once they were affected by the war. The result is an ironic portrayal of the Christ. It is ironic because I believe Lawrence is trying to give a destroyed and disillusioned race some hope. One might say, well does not Salvation and the Atonement for Sins provide hope enough. The answer is simply no. Europe was completely destroyed. Their optimism was completely shattered and along with that, their belief in a good and just God and a saving, life-giving Jesus fell apart. No, it disappeared. So hope, for Lawrence and for the war torn Europeans had to change shape, and Lawrence tried to pioneer that change, that shift in hope.

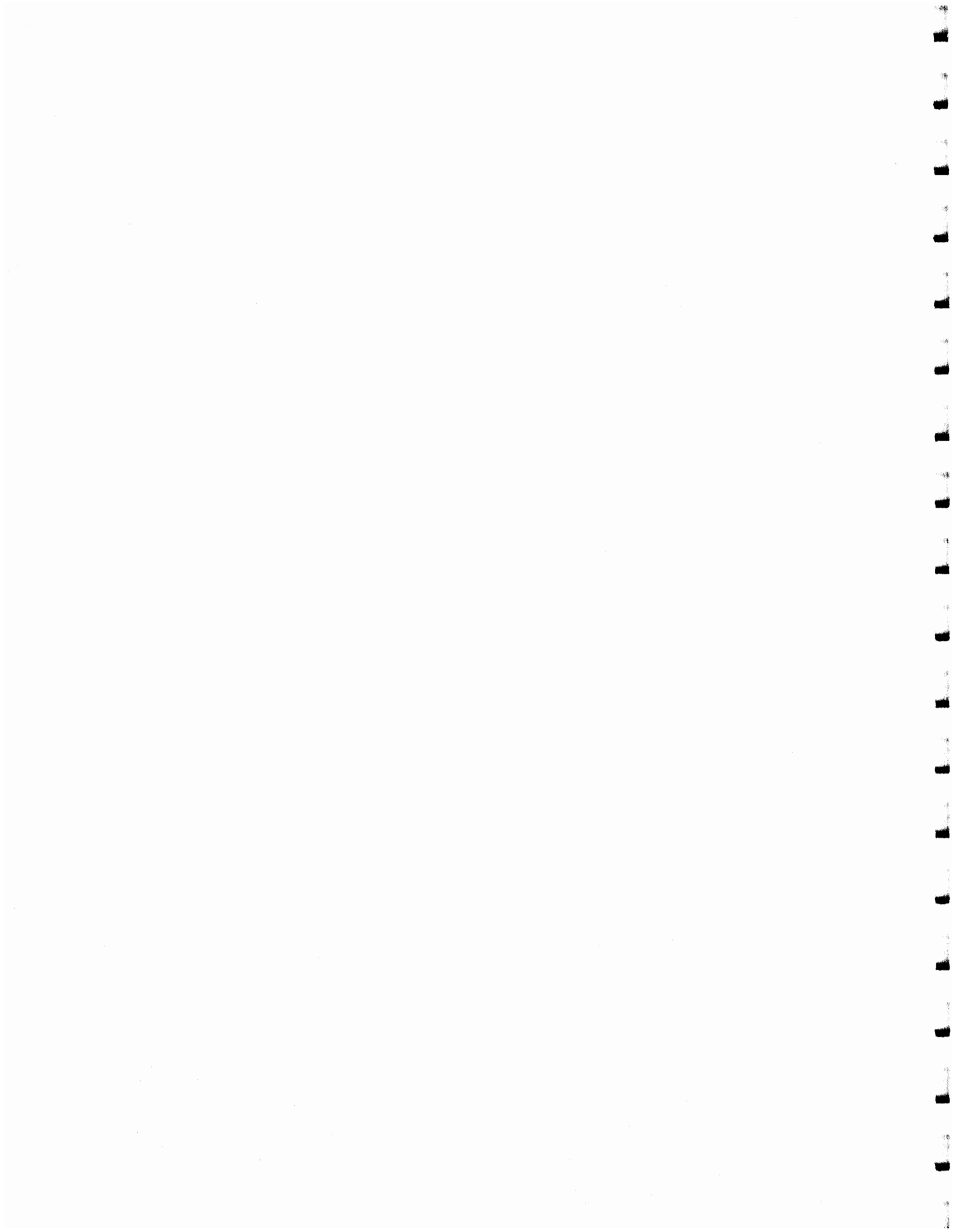
"The Risen Lord" mentions three images of Jesus, and all three of these images appear in "The Man who Died." The first is the image retained by the older generations and by women not directly affected by the guns. This is the image of the Madonna and the Christ child- the innocent boy and the virgin, all-healing, all-protecting mother. This image is embodied by the Lady of Isis in "The Man who Died." She has seen her share of suffering but it pales in comparison to the suffering of Jesus. As a result, she is unable to understand him. She doesn't know why He appeared, or why He later has to leave. She cannot connect with his suffering.

The second image is that of Christ Crucified and is embodied by the generation of men forced to go off and fight the war. This is the image the returned soldier would have, so this is the image that the man who died possesses, and it is best summarized when Jesus says, "My triumph is that I am not dead... I have survived the day and the death of my interference, and am still a man... I am glad it is over" ("The Man who Died," 174). Death and suffering were all he knew for his entire life. Death and suffering are all the soldier knows from the war, yet, both have survived and are still men. They still have a chance to live. But this is not yet an embrace of life. Jesus is still struggling with death. He is still hurting. He is yet to be healed. It is not until later that he realizes what he was saved for.

The third image, that of the Risen Lord, or perhaps better understood as man raised in the flesh, is symbolized by the escaped cock. Later, Jesus comes to symbolize this when His manhood is raised and He is able to share in the process of creating life. But what I find most interesting about this third image is that it is not exclusive. It

derives itself from the first two images after they have been changed by the war, or in the case of Jesus, by His death. Much is made in "The Man who Died" of physical contact, of touch, and of compulsion. Well, in the end it is the healing touch of a good and pure woman, with no compulsion, no motive behind it, other than to share in the mystery of life, that finally restores Jesus. For the soldier, he must rejoin the human race. He must learn to embrace life and live again.

The image of Jesus is ironic because it is so jaded. Jesus has seen and endured the awfulness of death and has no desire to complete his mission. He has become so disillusioned that He sees death as only a return to the earth and a necessary part of life that He will not interfere with. This reflects beautifully, although painfully, the mindset of the soldier returning home from the war, which I believe is the image of Jesus, Lawrence is trying to communicate. It is a far cry from holy, a far cry from Savior, or even God, but to a jaded and crestfallen generation, it gives hope- the hope that there is goodness and healing in love shared with others. There is life still to be lived. There is a world that needs to be repopulated and restored. So live well. It is an ironic Jesus for those unaffected by the war, but it is perfect for a soldier's homecoming.



The following is my final reflection on my course in Ancient Images of Jesus. It is also a testament to the way I try and view everything in this life.

A. On Origen: My Apology for the Gospels

I find Origen's three options for the careful reader as reasonable now as I did when I first came across them. If anything, they have helped me see just how delicately the Christian canon balances on these four very different, yet very similar accounts. Without proper guidance one could easily become disillusioned on account of the differences among the canonical Gospels and lose faith; or, like many in late antiquity, one might just choose one account and discount the rest. Marcion comes to mind here. The danger in this option is short-sightedness. One's view of Jesus, in my opinion, would be incomplete. Therefore, although I acknowledge all three as possible choices, I prefer Origen's third choice- viewing the Gospels as a complex blend of literal and symbolic truth that, when seen together, paint a real and touching picture of a great man.

But for argument's sake, what would it be like to reject all of it entirely? Are the differences that exist so great as to lead anyone away from faith in Jesus Christ? For starters, the differences in the portrayal of the Jews and Judaism might be one very touchy area. To any Jewish person today, I would be very offended by John's Gospel and its references to "the Jews" as the children of Satan (ch. 8). Also, Matthew 27:25, has the Jews desiring the blood of Christ to be on them and their children for all generations. The anti-Jewish elements of the Gospels and of Christianity in general could be a turn off, not only to Jews, but to humanitarians of every ethnic and religious background.

Aside from this very major element. I do not see reason why discrepancies should lead believers or potential believers astray. Then again, I have a very biased opinion, which leads me to say that the degree to which the differences affect people has everything to do with what they bring to the table. The skeptic would see that Jesus is crucified on a different day in John and say, "well, you would think they could agree on this pretty important point. They must all be false;" or upon seeing that John and Mark have no birth narratives would say, "did this guy really ever exist?"

And furthermore, if anyone were familiar with biblical scholarship they would know that more than four gospels exist and want to know why. Why did those four make it in the canon when these others didn't? It could easily be concluded that Christianity has something to hide. And thus, it should be entirely rejected.

Perhaps though, one has had a powerful experience of the risen Lord, much like, say, Paul, and refuses complete rejection of the Gospels, but they are unable to see the differences between the accounts as anything but a problem. He would be forced to choose one and run with it. I argue that this gives us a shallow depiction of the life Jesus. For example, if one were to choose Luke's Gospel because they are convinced that Christianity is the story of the prodigal son, then he would miss the beauty and confidence of John's incarnate Logos, or the powerful tragedy of Mark's passion narrative, or the thorough and refreshing sermon on the mount from Matthew.

If one were to only choose John, well then, his version of Christianity would look nothing like "orthodox" Christianity today. First, he would be docetic in his view of the Christ, a completely divine being who inhabited a human body for a brief time and left at

the crucifixion. Then, he would have no sacrament of the Eucharist or even maybe baptism because it is not in John's Gospel.

The same kinds of things could be said for Matthew and Mark. The image of Jesus would be incomplete. This is why it is so important to weave the four canonical Gospels and even the non-canonical gospels together and form a mosaic of Jesus that is deeply layered and perfectly imperfect. To see Jesus like this one must see the Gospels as a blend of literal and symbolic truth. When John has Jesus crucified on the Passover day, he is symbolically depicting Jesus as the Lamb of God. When Luke re-orders Matthew, he is literally taking Matthew's message of salvation to the Jews and bringing it wholly to the Gentiles. When Mark combines and shortens Matthew and Luke, he is doing so to emphasize the power of Jesus, even in the face of his horrible death. All the specifics that the evangelists choose to include in their accounts are there for a reason, a symbolic purpose. They were not concerned with a blow for blow biography of Jesus in today's sense of the word. Instead, they sought after the essence of Christ. And if one is able to see Christ as fully God and fully man, as a helper of the poor and the poor in spirit, as a servant washing his disciples feet and bouncing a child on his knee, as a powerful man whose death, although tragic, saved the world, and as a man who loved above all else, then he would have a good start at the complete picture the Gospels offer of Jesus. By viewing the Gospels as this beautiful blend of literal and symbolic truth one can have the power "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ... [and] be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph.3.18-19, NIV). This is what Christianity is all about.

B. Final Conclusions: Putting on the Armor of God

The course was great. I was perhaps most impressed by how carefully constructed the course was. The sequential presentation of concepts made sense and were easy to follow, although very challenging, and at times tedious. But its intentions were genuine and appreciated. It had to be tedious. Only when we could really see was going on in the Gospels, could we start to develop our own image of Jesus. Because of this course I am a better, more careful reader of the Gospels and I am not so naïve to think that the entire truth is contained in four books (the Gospels).

Was I surprised at all by the course content or the blunt way in which it was thrown at us? Not at all. Nothing really surprises me, especially when it comes to Jesus. He is so deep and so abstract and so beyond my comprehension, so to say I know anything is arrogance and close-mindedness. I agree with Plato's Socrates that knowledge is realized in not knowing you know everything. And anything that can add to this knowledge, or lack thereof, canonical or not, feeds my need to know Him deeper.

On the whole, I was encouraged by the course. I was encouraged by the faith and loyalty of the evangelists who sought to capture Jesus on a page as they saw Him in real life. All the accounts, I think, are faithful and beautiful images of Jesus. I was also encouraged by the fact that a course like this exists at a secular university. It is the most theological religious studies course I have taken, and that is most encouraging.

If anything has discouraged me, it is looking at how far we, as believers, have fallen in today's world. Today, we take Christ for granted. We believe what Mom or Dad or Reverend Smith tells us to believe about Jesus. I was more or less disgusted at myself for my narrow-mindedness and biased reading and presuppositions and high perch

when it comes to something so much bigger than me. I think I have all the answers because I know do not. But this course taught that the answers I had were in fact questions that needed deeper answers. And this process just continues. I will never have the answers until I can be with God forever, and then, the answers won't really matter.

I best sum up what this course has done for me by again quoting Ephesians: "Put on the full armor of God... the belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace... the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph.6.13-18, NIV). In my personal life I strive to be more and more like Christ everyday. And the reason I study religion, whether Christianity or another, is to become better able to serve my Lord and Savior. Knowledge is the missionary's most powerful weapon. The more I know about my religion and the religions of the world, the better I can be Christ's ambassador in the world. Throughout this course, I have dealt with this complex calling to be a missionary, but this class has affirmed in me the desire to go ahead with it. I feel more prepared to minister in this world, and I also have the tools to grow deeper in my knowledge and further equip myself with God's armor. Anything I can acquire, whether a skill or a piece of information, that can help me serve God, I consider gain. This course has given me both. It has helped clothe me further in Christ and has strengthened me with more of God's armor.

The following essay is my personal favorite out of all the things I have written in my tenure as an undergraduate. It is an essay for a course in Religion and Comedy, which explored everything from the drama of Shakespeare to the films of Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin. Its epilogue serves well to summarize this entire project.

My biggest problem with the world is that everyone in it complains about the bad when they should be rejoicing in the good. In my very few years one of the very few things I have learned is that life, inevitably, happens. And with that come the good and the bad. Do bad things happen to good people? Well yes, but don't bad things also happen to bad people? Of course they do. Man's biggest problem, in my meaningless opinion, is that he believes this life owes him something. If that is the case then every man is the hero in a great, big tragedy. So much emphasis is put on the tragic. One can hardly pick up a newspaper or turn on the six o'clock news without being overwhelmed by reports of really awful stuff. But what we fail to understand is that the comic is just as big a function of society as the tragic. If only we could all realize that good and truth and joy lie behind all the sadness, disaster, and darkness we might be able to live this life in a new light and with a new purpose. Many people find this hope in religion. Religion serves society by allowing its members to walk with purpose and peace through this life. Unfortunately, insistence upon portraying life as tragedy has successfully blocked people from seeing that comedy, and religion for that matter, is more important and certainly more enjoyable aspects of this world. To draw one large conclusion about comedy and its relation to religion and the world would be impossible, but by reconciling the many themes that comedy and religion have in common perhaps we can find that place in this world where the two not only co-exist, but permeate everything in this life, and perhaps, the next.

To even begin to examine this complex issue, it is important to establish society on the grounds of comedy. Robert Bechtold Heilman, in his book The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society, examines this issue in great depth. The title alone indicates his overriding thesis that comedy is one of the ways of the world. His discussion centers on how comedy seeks to resolve the waywardness, the disparateness, in the world. This disparateness is caused by the many differences among people. He uses the Mutt and Jeff principle, which simply is an analogy for people who are polar opposites in all ways, to show the contrast between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. One is tall and lanky, the other short and fat, and each experiences the world in very different ways- the Don being a romantic idealist, while Sancho Panza represents the realist. But for all intents and purposes here, the two characters, by fitting the Mutt and Jeff principle, prove that disparity exists in the world. Heilman argues, rather strongly, that because of all the differences in the world, all the waywardness, comedy is a necessary part of how we seek to reconcile our differences of the world.

Implicit in Heilman's argument is the idea that rationality is a requirement to understanding the workings of society and to experiencing comedy. Only by rationally looking at the world can we first, see the disparateness, second, understand it, third, accept it, and fourth, see comedy's role in reconciling the waywardness of the world.

This emphasis on being rational is important to understanding some of society's attitudes towards the world, in particular, conflict. The first attitude Heilman mentions is

flight. This consists of people leaving society to avoid this waywardness. One with this attitude could move away, could spend two years on Walden Pond, or shut themselves in their own houses for all of eternity. We saw this attitude in Some Like it Hot where some mobsters squeeze Joe and Jerry out of Chicago because they are going to kill the two musicians. At the heart of Joe and Jerry's conflict is their inability to reconcile differences in the world, not only in the case of leaving the city but also in embracing their "sex change." Part of the resolution, then, especially for Jerry (Geraldine, then Daphne) is coming to grips with this disparateness in a rational manner, which does not happen until the end.

A second attitude of the world according to Heilman is challenge. This can take several forms such as rant, tirade, punishment, and conquest. This attitude really makes a lot of sense in the world because typically when people cannot reconcile differences, mostly because of their own ignorance, they become aggressive and seek to repress the many disparities so as not to shatter their own ideal world where all people think like they do. In Big Business the country Rose has a big problem with the corporate people in New York and goes to the city to rant and tirade all over the city Sadie. In this highly comical film, this idea of challenge as a way of eliminating the disparity and unfairness of the world is very clear.

The third attitude, conciliation, or acceptance of the ways of the world is very evident in two films we viewed. In The Producers, the two play producers accept their prison sentence, and actually make the most of it by attempting the same con in the joint. This seemingly senseless acceptance of one's situation is also present in Smiles of the Summer Night where the Count just accepts that his youthful wife runs off with his son. Granted, he had Desiree there to cushion the fall, but his acceptance is nonetheless unsettling. This would be an example of what Heilman calls overacceptance, a subdivision of the attitude of conciliation. All the characters just accept these inconsistencies and puzzling situations in their visit to Desiree's mansion.

The opposite of this idea would be underacceptance. In such cases, characters might be cynical or stubborn in dealing with their situations. These situations usually involve little disparity except what the protagonist invents in his own mind, or the protagonist just thinks the impasse is too great. In the end, characters usually see the error of their ways and are redeemed. Examples of underacceptance would be The Marriage of Figaro where the count fails to trust his faithful wife, and You Can't Take it with You where Alice cannot reconcile the differences between her family and Tony's. She too, in the end, sees that the gap can be bridged and all are redeemed.

The one constant in these attitudes is their dependency on the rational for attempting to reconcile the waywardness of the world. In Truth and the Comedic Art Michael Gelven argues that it is comedy that allows us to see the world rationally. He centers much of his argument on comedy around the ideas of folly and grace, and he begins with the statement that "only the rational can be foolish." Already he is claiming that the folly found in comedy is inseparable from our rational beings. Only by being rational can we see our own folly and the folly of others that is responsible for the world's waywardness.

He takes great pain in distinguishing between the different roles of laughter, by saying that an understanding of comedy is shortsighted if it simply begins with or solely contains laughter. Laughter only helps us to understand comedy when it comes out of the

recognition of folly in the characters and in ourselves. And by acknowledging this folly with our laughter we initiate the search for truth that comedy, at its core, is all about. Laughter, then, is not simply hollow and vulgar, but it recognizes truth, according to Gelven.

So what is this truth that laughter because of folly realizes? Gelven offers only a manifestation of this truth, grace. Gelven defines grace as "that species of worth or bestowal that is neither earned nor compelled, and is based rather on who we are than on what we do." Grace in this sense, and at this point in my argument, is irrational.

Forgiveness is the first of four manifestations of grace that Gelven discusses. It, much like the resolution of a comedy, requires that perfect moment when folly is realized and forgiveness is required. Forgiveness is grace granted. This, too, is often irrational. Why does the countess forgive the count in The Marriage of Figaro when he has questioned her fidelity and all the while was trying to seduce Susanna? But it is this forgiveness by the countess to the count that graces his folly.

Grace's second manifestation is sacrifice. To sacrifice means to "make holy," so sacrifice in comedy is an attempt to justify one's own folly. This is no more evident than in the character of Silvius in Shakespeare's As You Like It, who sacrifices his own feelings for Phoebe by helping her to woo Ganymede. This too is irrational. Why would you help the one you love woo someone else? Oops, I said the word... love.

Both forgiveness and sacrifice are favors, the third manifestation of grace. Gelven says that "to see another favored without envy is grace, and it is a grace enabled by comedy," meaning that to sacrifice and to forgive is to favor another by choosing not to let the disparity and waywardness of the world keep us from whatever it is that attracted us to that person in the first place. And that is love, and love leads us to the fourth manifestation of grace, delight.

Delight is then the joy of love reinforced and perpetuated by the hope that something higher and greater exists and can be reached by grace. It is because of this belief in love and in the existence of something that radically transcends this world that makes grace, which on the surface seems irrational, a rational and redeeming act that reveals the truth of who we are.

Confirming grace as the rational answer that Gelven gives to Heilman's question of reconciling disparateness in the world, we must now examine how this end to folly gets communicated in the end of comedies. Zvi Jagendorf expounds on several endings of comedy in his book The Happy End of Comedy. The first and most simple is the request for applause. Another ending would be the finale, a grand ending typical of comic operas like The Marriage of Figaro where all the characters are on stage and the performance ends in a rush of music, singing, dancing, and artwork. Some endings more common to non-operatic comedies are epilogue, play, trial, unmasking, repetition, and sequence and tableau.

An epilogue places the artist's stamp of approval on the play and typically appeals to the audience for the grace of their approval. Shakespeare's As You Like It contains one of the most well known epilogues in all of western drama, while Shakespeare's The Tempest is known for its use of play in its resolution. This is the most complicated of endings for me to understand but it consists of a retelling of what has occurred. In The Tempest, Miranda re-entering the scene initiates the retelling of Prospero's putting away of his magic.

Trial is perhaps the most amusing of comedic endings, usually involving confusion and bogus accusations. This device is used in Frank Capra's You Can't Take it with You. Vanderhof and his family are accused of distributing Communist propaganda, which is ludicrous, and are forced to stand trial. In the very comic scene, the whole town comes to the aid of the accused, imparting grace in the form of money, paying the family's fine. The Producers also contains a "last judgment" trial scene where the men are graced by the old woman, but to no avail for the rightfully accused criminals.

Unmasking as an ending takes two forms. Either it occurs in the final scene, as in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, where Jack's real name, Ernest, is finally revealed, or the unmasking occurs to set up the final scene as in Big Business. When the two sets of twins finally find each other out, they are able to resolve their conflict shortly thereafter.

Repetition, like that which occurs in Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors and Big Business exhausts the plot and brings about the end of the comedy because any more mayhem and misunderstanding would just be too much to handle. And finally, Jagendorf mentions sequence and tableau, scenes with all the actors either coming together for one last gathering, a song or dance, and/or exiting little by little off the stage is also a popular ending. Much Ado About Nothing ends with a large dance scene in the film version we viewed earlier.

What is important about these endings is that they all hinge on the recognition of past conflict. They all seek to recall the action, or the music, or the theme of the comedy, and these endings typically make a blanket comment on the ways of the world, citing art as the one constant that has always been there to communicate meaning and truth to the audience, the world. By reaching into the past, we see our own folly and can then be redeemed by comedy's end.

I have mentioned many of Shakespeare's comedies, and rightfully so. The resolution of most of his comedies depends on the audience believing in the idea of change- of characters, of relationships, etc. This change has two faces. One is the belief that through error and misunderstanding and mayhem, the characters see their own folly and acknowledge their need to be changed by the grace of another. The Comedy of Errors has the constant confusing of the two pairs of twins. Some Like it Hot concerns itself with the constant sex changes of Joe and Jerry, and in The Importance of Being Earnest Jack and Algernon are constantly trying to make others think they are Ernest and Bunberry. This instability, a lot like repetition, brings the action to a boiling point where the situation just must be resolved.

The other side of this change deals with a revelation that serves to resolve the instability, and the three aforementioned plays contain this element. The Lady Abbess in The Comedy of Errors graces the folly by finally telling the story of what happened when the two pairs of twins were separated at birth. Osgood Fielding III graces "Daphne" in Some Like it Hot by assuring Jerry that "nobody's perfect." In The Importance of Being Earnest Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism are brought together by chance and Jack's true identity is revealed, and he is redeemed.

It is this revelation that answers questions of the past while gracing the folly of the present. The conclusion can then be drawn that this belief in change as an element of resolution is dependent on grace and is necessary to reconciling the world's disparity and ultimately finding the truth of who we are.

If comedy serves to bring individuals in a society together by eliminating the disparity through grace and love, thus helping us to answer the question of who we are, is it any different from religion? Does religion not seek to answer the very same question of "who am I?" by means of grace and love? Does religion also not seek to eliminate disparity and waywardness in the world by gracing us with an understanding of the ways of the world? And does it not give us hope that something greater exists that transcends this life? The answer to all these questions is an emphatic yes, so the question follows, can we actually separate religion and comedy?

In light of all the films and plays we have viewed over the past three months, I argue that no you cannot separate religion from comedy. What we have watched has showed me what is religious about comedy, and by reflecting upon that, I have discovered for myself what is comedic about religion. Two films, one play, and one comedic opera have helped me to best see these parallels and have helped to heal the disparity in my world and in my soul.

Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro is perhaps the best example of grace manifesting itself as forgiveness that we viewed this term. The count, mired in love/lust for Susanna, fails to trust anyone- Figaro, the countess, Cherubino- and his antics lead us to the final scene in the garden where he is trying to catch the women in sin. He is tricked into thinking that his wife is Susanna and attempts to woo her. He is humiliated into seeing how he has been a fool, and begs forgiveness from his wife whom he does indeed love. And she graces his folly with heartfelt forgiveness. So this comic opera is religious in the sense of forgiveness and redemption. We have all done things out of folly and sometimes stupidity, and in being forgiven we are reminded that everyone messes up sometimes, and that it is okay. This opera also celebrates this idea of grace by forgiveness better than any other because of the mere fact that it is an opera, and comes fully equipped with music and song, very powerful ways of communicating meaning and joy.

In Some Like it Hot with Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon, and Tony Curtis, we see several religious aspects at play throughout the movie. First, we see this idea of sacrifice that Gelven talks about in the character of Jerry/Geraldine/Daphne. He comes to sacrifice who he truly is because he does not want to disappoint Osgood Fielding III, who he finds to be a truly genuine man. Jerry even accepts a marriage proposal from the rich, old man. In the end Jerry realizes that he can no longer keep up his façade and reveals himself as the man he is. However, his folly is graced by Mr. Fielding who simply responds, "Well, nobody's perfect." This realization that nobody is perfect, save maybe one, is an essential part of realizing man's need for forgiveness (a staple of Christian theology). And only by realizing our own faults can we understand the world's faults and come to a place of acceptance, grace, and love, which is what all religions teach us.

Frank Capra's You Can't Take it With You is just ripe with Christian motifs. First, this idea that believers are not really of this world is present in the fact that Mr. Vanderhof and his family really ignore what the outside world tells them to do, and they live by what makes them happy. In a sense, they create their own heaven right there on earth. In the end, we have the trial, which could parallel the last judgment, and again we see providence and grace in the family's rescue by the town's people. Also, we have the conversion of Mr. Kirby from a rotten businessman to a lovable harmonica-playing character, and through his conversion, he too begins to impart grace by not buying

Vanderhof's house. Mr. Kirby passes from death into life, an obvious parallel to the Christian doctrines of baptism and ultimately, the resurrection.

Finally, William Shakespeare's The Tempest, the most mature of his comedies, deals with notions of magic, grace, and God. I see Prospero as the god of the island who creates and makes people and things serve his own desires and needs. In the end, he puts away his magic; he puts down the sword and chooses grace. He decides to let those on his island live for themselves. He puts away his vengeance towards the Duke who cast him out, and forgives by allowing freedom to those on his island. I am able to stretch this to parallel God's granting human beings free will, as well as seeing the transition from the Old Testament God of Wrath and Divine punishment to the New Testament God of Grace and Forgiveness. Truly, in this play, we see the delight that Gelven spoke of in the human soul, and in his delighting in others Prospero redeems the others and is himself redeemed.

So do these great parallels between comedy and religion mean that all comedy is religious, or that religion is always comic? Can this comic ideal prevail in the face of horrible tragedy? The Charlie Chaplin film, The Great Dictator, raises this question. It is a parody of the Hitler regime and takes several shots at the German treatment of the Jews. Now in light of all the destruction that Germany caused and because of the awful realities of the Jewish Holocaust, can we actually find laughter and comedy? Can we even find God? These questions of laughter are tackled in Henri Bergson's essay titled "Laughter." He argues that when a certain comic effect is rooted in cause, the effect is more comic. In the film, there is lots of slapstick humor surrounding the folly of the German army and its leadership, but it is rooted in the cause of freedom and democracy, and this is evident in Chaplin's final speech where he stresses liberty and justice and love. So is all the humor that glosses over some very awful things not then justified by the ultimate cause for freedom and love? Bergson continues by stating that laughter is a social gesture that softens the surface of a social body. I think that the laughter one experiences in watching the Chaplin film does indeed soften the social context of war and holocaust and makes it, if nothing else, bearable. I think Bergson ultimately argues that laughter, that comedy, serves as a coping mechanism for dealing with the tragedy, the waywardness, the disparateness of the world. Comedy and laughter allow us to feel like human beings in a world that is constantly trying to turn us into machines, a theme evident in The Great Dictator and another Chaplin film, Modern Times.

Tying all of this together is as daunting a task as it was to present it all, but I shall try my best. Heilman presented us with the problem of how comedy serves to reconcile the differences of society. Gelven said that grace is the most important part of this reconciling. Jagendorf argues that this reconciling through grace is always found at the ending of a good comedy. And Bergson showed that comedy and laughter serve us by giving us joy and hope even in the face of tragedy. I would like to think that the world is more comic than it is tragic. Ultimately, I believe that this life ends and a new, everlasting life begins, and this gives me hope and helps me see that the happy end of comedy prevails over this world's seeming tragedy. Whereas tragedy asks the question "who are we?" comedy answers that question with, "see, this is who we are." In fact, a tragedy is simply a comedy without a graced, happy, and redeemable ending. Tragedy exiles us and leaves us to contemplate ourselves whereas comedy brings us all together in a celebration of who we are. So who are we? I think we are imperfect but rational beings

in need of seemingly irrational grace, forgiveness, and love. Religion gives us a rational explanation of these seemingly irrational precepts, and it accomplishes the same things that comedy does. It brings people together to share in their imperfection, to see the need for love and grace, and to hope together that something greater, something better, exists in this life and the next.

Epilogue

This attempt at reconciling religion and comedy may very well have been a comedy of errors or much ado about nothing. But I did my best to answer all the questions in a rational manner. I could have told you a winter's tale about a tempest that blew for twelve nights, or maybe if you like it hot you would have preferred a midsummer night's dream. But as for my making sense of the ways of the world, religion, and comedy, I beg your forgiveness and your grace. Deal with this paper as you like. It makes no difference to me, but I hope you have enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. All I have left to say is both comedic and religious: "All's well that ends well."

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