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spring 2004
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Dedicated to Dr. Gill Holland
This little book is a project inspired by Dr. Holland. His keen interest in students’ religious stories motivated me to create a venue for them to be shared. For many of us, religious beliefs and experiences are so essential to who we are that our writings about these matters become not simply words, but small pieces of our souls.

These pieces represent a wide array of beliefs and perspectives. There are poems, journals, essays, and informal reflections that describe religious experiences and ideas. They are personal and honest, lacking the comfortable cover of fiction. Together they make an interesting collection of stories and statements about things that people hold dear.

And so here is the first volume of what I hope will become a semesterly publication. It has been a pleasure to put together. I hope you enjoy it.

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I waited for my eyes to adjust in the darkness. I walked slowly down the hall, toward the cages, toward It. A distinct part of me wanted to savor this moment. Shoes with no feet, locked in cages. Some were made of wood, like the shoes of large puppets. I looked for cloth shoes. I found them. They were green. I touched them. But my gloves. I shed them as quickly as I could. I had to feel their textures, their stories—I had to know them. I jammed my fingers through the cage wiring, drooling for a taste. And suddenly, there was nothing, silence. I wasn’t breathing. The barracks were filled with hundreds of thousands of shoes of dead Jews, and when I touched them I felt nothing. No flashbacks, no collective unconscious, no swollen throat, not even a tear. All I really wanted was a tear—some indication that I was alive. But there was only my breath warming the icy shoes in front of me. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

On a trip this past December with seventy other Jewish American students, I visited a number of concentration camps in Poland, the first of which was Madjanek. When we returned to the hotel after visiting the camp, some of my friends admitted that while they were walking through the camp they had been crying more out of obligation than anything else, as though we owe our ancestors our tears. I
felt the same obligation, but I resented the feeling. I was worried that it meant I was a bad Jew if I didn’t feel personally invested in the atrocities of the Holocaust. A close friend of mine on the trip, Svetlana, was also overwhelmed with guilt because she was not moved to tears in Majdanek’s gas chambers. When I asked why, she immediately replied, “Because I owe it to my grandfather to recognize the terrors he endured during the Holocaust. The only thing he cared about was the safety of his future children. His only motivation to live was a hope in the wonderful person I might become!”

I felt relieved to know that Svetlana also felt an obligation to be sad, and we stayed together all night talking about Jewish duty. Svetlana’s grandfather survived the Holocaust, as did the families of my grandparents. Yet Svetlana and I were lying in bed in a Polish hotel, fighting a fight that our ancestors won—a victorious battle that nonetheless got the best of them. We returned to Europe to resist a regime that has been dead for decades, and we were here simply because—on some level—fighting makes people feel alive. And it certainly did after Majdanek. I felt more alive that night with Svetlana than I have at any time in my life.

We helped each other realize that we came to Poland to pick a fight with ourselves as much as with anti-Semitism. We wanted to taste what our grandparents endured and triumphed over—the sweet taste of freedom fighting. We now have the freedom they fought for, but we’ve lost their passion. And what good is the freedom that the last generation fought so hard for if we feel dead inside? In October 1942, after women smuggled gunpowder piecemeal into Birkenau by hiding it in their vaginas, a group of Jews obliterated a gas chamber and crematorium. This past December, when I saw the remnants of this building in person, I tried to imagine the incredible sense of purpose that those men and women experienced that year and especially on that day. Svetlana and I wanted to feel the same righteous sense of justice, and all it took was returning to Poland to crystallize our enemy, our scapegoat. We were brimming with hatred, and it felt good.

Ultimately, these are ploys to resist the guilt that we impose on ourselves for not being sad; after all, we don’t have to endure oppression anymore. It sounds absurd, but this is what is known as Jewish guilt. And it comes when you identify with a group that has been singled out and decimated. Yet under the guise of tenacity, we have transformed this guilt—this hatred of ourselves for not being equally miserable—into hatred for a dead regime. And we continue emptying our rage onto it, defining ourselves in opposition to it, just so we can feel as alive and guiltless as our ancestors must have felt on that October day. What’s more, this sense of guilt that we are fighting off is absurd to begin with. We don’t need to feel guilty for being happy; it’s what our ancestors died for. Even more outrageous is the tendency to repress that same sense of guilt in order to discover a vivacious (and hateful) sense of purpose. But we are doing it anyway; we harbor this hatred and actively seek enemies to fill our lungs with poisoned air. With a different lens, this inclination is equivalent to women becoming professionals simply because they feel they owe it to their grandmothers who did not have the opportunity, and in the process vilifying men for their sexual tyranny. This fight is, for the most part, over. I can hear my grandparents scoffing at my desire to struggle passionately: “If you are fighting something, it means that you hate where you are—it means that you would immediately want to come right back home, where you’re safe and healthy, where you can have kids and not worry if they’ll be ripped out of your arms tomorrow.”

And these voices are absolutely right. It’s all about contrast. In Poland in 2003 Svetlana and I asked, “What good is freedom if we don’t feel impassioned?” Yet in Poland sixty years ago we would have been asking, “What good is passion if we have no freedom to obtain what we are passionate about?” Unfortunately, it seems that we are most passionate about the things we sense we can’t have. Svetlana and I wanted to taste the experiences of our grandparents, so long as we have the guarantee that we will not be executed. This is a childish fantasy that many people, not just Jews, have to outgrow. It is insulting to our ancestors to yearn for their plight. They died trying to get out of Poland, and we are desperately trying to return in a pathetic attempt at self-realization.

I can only hope that at some point we realize that pain is not the only source of happiness. Suffering merely provides a frame of reference—or contrast—with happiness, and we mistake this for its cause. Guilt is never a healthy motivation, nor should it be the energy surreptitiously utilized to
spawn invigorating hatred. Judaism is my guilt, but everyone has got something just like it, something pushing them (at best) toward self-inflicted misery and (at worst) toward the kind of displaced hatred that inspires tyrants. Either way, the dead always have unreasonable demands. And strangely, our first reaction is to love them for it.

The trip that we took to the orphanage in Ensenada, Mexico was one that I worried about taking. I worried that the kids would get the wrong message about who we were and why we were there. I didn’t want them to expect something more from me than I could ultimately give them. So I went there with a few guards up, to prevent something like that from happening. As the week went on, I became less and less worried, and I really started to experience what it means to simply be in that place.

When we pulled up, it looked to me like there were far more than the 80 kids that we expected to be there. Considering the sheer numbers of them, the fact that we only had a week, and the fact that my Spanish skills are notably limited, I wondered how I would ever get to know them on any meaningful level. Not ten minutes later, we were walking around and a girl came up from behind me and grabbed my hand. I was shocked to see that this wasn’t one of the young 5 or 6 year olds, which I would have expected. This girl was my height, and must have been at least 15 or so. Her name was Beatríz.

With that, I became a little less terrified, and actually started trying to talk to her. I knew a few semesters’ worth of Spanish, and she knew a few words of English . . . and it
worked. I found myself feeling incredibly indebted to her. “Why did she choose to befriend me out of all of us?” “She’s being so patient as I butcher her language.” “She’s not afraid to try her English out on me (which I am figuring out can be a very scary thing).” That relationship didn’t change from there. And as time passed each day, I slowly built relationships with more and more children . . . or I should probably say they patiently built relationships with me. By the end of the week, there were dozens of children who had done exactly as Beatríz had.

I heard a story about halfway through the week about my friend Beatríz. She was fairly new to the orphanage. And when she had first come, she was less than a pleasure to deal with. She had also come with all of her guards up, but in a much bigger way, for much bigger reasons. She had had an incredible temper, and been completely unwilling to let anyone near her emotionally. My first thought . . . “funny, she was the first one to open up and be a friend to me.” It amazes me to think about what she must have experienced in that orphanage between the time she arrived and the time I came to visit. Whatever it is, it was one of two huge lessons to me about what a loving, child-like environment can have on the kids . . . even the older ones who have already developed walls around their hearts to protect them from being hurt again.

My second story involves a 15 year old boy named Javier. The older boys took a little longer to get to know. But about halfway through the week, not only had I gotten to know them, I couldn’t believe how generous and open they were, not just with us, but with everyone there. They watched after the little kids that I somehow expected them to pick on; they worked every afternoon with some construction men who were building a new dorm room; and they were patient with us and our deficient Spanish. One afternoon, I played a one-on-one basketball game with Javier. I ended up losing, but I hope I at least scared him. We had a great time, laughing and talking smack to each other.

Our last afternoon there, Jesse came outside to me and told me that my wallet was open in my room, lying on my bed, with no money left in it. I knew I had had a pretty good bit of money in there. I was shocked, not so much because my money was gone, I could do without that. I didn’t really care whether I actually got my money back. Rather, I was shocked because I had grown to assume that there’s not a child in that place who would steal even a piece of gum, much less all of the money out of my wallet. I began to second-guess that assumption, and we wondered a little more about each kid who had been in our building that week, frustrated that any of them would feel the need to be that sneaky. I went and talked to Deborah, the owner of the orphanage, not wanting to make a very big deal of it. She then walked out of the room and walked right back in about 5 minutes later with my money. She then explained where it was and how she knew where to look. I didn’t realize that she was talking about the kid I had played basketball with the day before, but she was telling us how he was new there. This is roughly what she told us.

“A lot of kids come into the orphanage with their guards up, unwilling to love, and very willing to steal and be deceitful. This is no fault of their own, it’s just what they’ve had to do to get them by until now. It takes them a while to realize that here, they don’t have to do that. They have everything they need. He is new, so he hasn’t figured that out yet. He will eventually, but we have to show him that, and give him time.”

It wasn’t until dinner that night, when she called him forward to “ask for my pardon,” (which I wasn’t expecting), that I knew who she had been talking about. I tried my best to convey to him that I wasn’t mad at him. I tried to tell him I had so much fun hanging out with him that week and that was what I would remember when we left the next day. I’m not sure how well I said that, but I could see in his eyes that he only did it because he felt like he had to. And I could also see that the patient love of Deborah and the others at the orphanage were starting to show him that he just doesn’t have to do that anymore.

That has become a kind of all-encompassing memory for me. I remember Javier fondly because there truly isn’t a hateful bone in his body. That story, like the story of Beatríz, was an illustration for me about what a place like that can mean to the kids that come there. Javier is starting to figure out that he can trust people. We can’t expect those kids, or anyone for that matter, to jump into (what is for many of them) their first loving community and automatically know
how to respond. Love in Estado 29 is patient. They trust their love, because they rest assured that their kids will eventually learn to trust them. I didn’t leave at the end of the week feeling like I had built up hopes and let them down, as I had feared. Rather, I left with dozens of valuable new friends, assured that they are in a place where they can flourish. If there is any lesson that I want to hang on to from Estado 29, it is the value of patient love. I know it is simple, but it is also unspeakably valuable if we can just give it time.

I left my feet behind me as I walked toward the sky, but the roots of trees entwined me, and I heard the emmet’s cry. And I heard the emmets crying and the lonely beetles hum, and the moonlit clouds were sighing as I wandered from my home.

And I heard the emmet’s cry and wondered softly how my path from hence could call forth such a sigh. But still the gates of wrath were closing and their twilight gleam grew dim; and at that hour, the fingers of the frost crept in to pluck the midnight flower.

I raged and fought and broke and tore until I’d forced my way back to where I could behold the closing gates of day; and with my dying vision set upon the setting sun I continued on my way to where my journey might be done.

The moonlit clouds were sighing as I wandered from my home, and I heard the emmet’s crying and the beetle’s lonely hum. I left my feet behind me as I walked into the sky; but the tree-roots could not find me, and the emmet ceased to cry.
As missionaries in Rio de Janeiro, we are not strangers to danger. My family and I have found ourselves in many shootouts—bullets have come through our kitchen window—and we often work with individuals who are stereotypically feared. Long ago my family reached the conclusion that if we were to do the things that God had called us to do, we would face many risks. Instead of living in fear and avoiding countless ministry opportunities, we decided to place our trust in God and rely on His protection.

The dangers that arise working at medical clinics are always interesting, to say the least. It is not unusual to have a drug lord cut in line with a gun, to hear many threatening shouts from a tumultuous mob, or to set up a consultation area with a board stretched over a puddle swimming with parasites. After ten years of wandering through slums, I thought I had seen it all. Nothing, however, had prepared me for the terror that gripped the Morro do Dende.

It is well known that the city of Rio faces the possibility of being overtaken by a drug gang. Two main factions, the Comando Vermelho and Terceiro Comando have been at war with each other for quite some time, and the innocent public has been caught in the crossfire. For me, this conflict meant going to bed with shots sounding in the background and having to leave school early because of a nearby police operation. I had never fathomed what it meant to the prisoners of Dende, one of the last strongholds of the Terceiro Comando.

As our bus of American doctors and nurses, missionaries, and interpreters climbed the hill for the first day of our one-week clinic, we could sense an aura of fear and violence. Few people were walking about, and those who were looked cautiously over their shoulder with each step. The walls were spray-painted with the letters “TC”, a constant reminder to the people of which faction they belonged and the power of the group that would have their throats if ever someone were tempted to betray them. In every alley, piles of cocaine and marijuana were clearly discernible. For the first time, I was not anxious to set up another clinic and get to know the people. I was scared.

Our anxiety increased as a member of the community association stopped us at the bottom of the hill to warn us that the police had just been there—and that there had been an exchange of fire. Our fearless leaders decided that we had already made a commitment to the people in that community to offer medical assistance, so we continued our way up. The line started blocks before the community center. It was the most organized and quiet line I had ever seen outside a clinic. Then I saw why. Up ahead was a nicely dressed, gruff looking man waving us in with his silver pistol. As I stepped off the bus, I saw yet another scene that will haunt me forever. A few meters away stood a boy no older than eight or nine aimlessly waving a long firearm. I wondered what kind of place this was, that even children held weapons as a symbol of their authority. I also realized how much these people needed us to shine the light of God amongst them and offer them some kind of hope.

As I settled into my table and got to know the pediatrician I would be working with, I looked around the open terrace to count how many bullet holes I saw. One, two, three... nine, ten, eleven, twelve. “Comforting,” I thought to myself. I did not realize then that we would all find out a little more than we were prepared for about the reality of this hillside.

We got caught in two shootouts that day. When the first one started, the Americans (who had never heard the sound of gunshots) took too long to hit the floor; they
thought balloons were popping. Finally everyone ducked to the ground, then slid across the floor to get nearer to their loved ones. The shots eventually stopped, and we all searched for the strength in our knees to stand up again. Right then I saw a young boy grab one of the nurse’s hands and say to her, “Don’t worry, tia, this is normal.” What kind of hopeless environment had this kid grown up in that led him to accept that anyone could be hit with a stray bullet at any time, and that this was normal?

The second time the shooting started, no one had to tell us twice to drop. My doctor and I had just witnessed to a father and his young son, and were praying with them to accept Christ. After the shooting, everyone was scattered and we could not find the father or the boy. About an hour later, the two came back to us and said that we had a prayer to finish, that they wanted to know this God who had taken us to them and given us the heart to stick around after witnessing the darkness of their community. My eyes filled with tears of joy that our caring for the poor of Dende through any circumstances had shown the people a glimpse of God’s love for them.

Against many people’s better judgment, and much to the community’s surprise, most of us went back the next morning, walking up the muddy hills with trunks full of antibiotics, stethoscopes, and candy. Our main lesson the previous day had not been how to discern a gunshot or where to duck, but that this community was filled with incredible people, trapped by the chains of poverty and fear. We received a hero’s welcome when the people saw us coming. Ironically I am very grateful for the experience of that day. It gave me an understanding of what the challenges of the poor are like. It also gave me and many others a unique hope and a sight of God’s grace. That is, after all, what we had gone to do.

The expressions on her face were not encouraging; I knew my aunt was not ok with my going to the States. With all the political turmoil in the world between America and the Middle East I did not blame her. My mother had also been worried for some time now. Anytime somebody would mention that her eldest son would soon be leaving for university she would shut them up. On the other hand my father was convinced of the decision we made, that I am going to study in the United States of America at Davidson College for undergraduate education.

He had visited the college with me in April 2003 and loved it. Loved the Honor Code, professors, educational system, everything. In fact, it was he who opened my eyes. He made me understand what religion is, what peace meant, what the right approach to life is. It all goes back to the horrible act of September eleven. When it happened my father was the first one in the family to see how bad that was for the reputation of Islam and the Arabs. He then explained to me how Islam condemns such acts and how these terrorists had twisted and politicized Islam to justify their crime. In the Qur’an God says:

“Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but
begin not with hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors.” Surah 2: 190

So I wonder how these people claim to be pious and to follow the tradition of the prophet Muhammad peace be upon him when it is evident they have not followed God’s orders. The prophet himself warned the Muslims when in war against harming old men, women, children and even cutting down a tree. So many verses in the Qur’an tell people to take care of orphans and what do the terrorists do? Massacre children’s parents and so produce more orphans. That was a turning point in my life; I had never before understood Islam’s trueness and simplicity. Thank God for everything.

So Davidson College it was. It is very well encouraged in Islam to travel to seek knowledge and here I am traveling to a country where the media has practically ruined the reputation of Islam (with the help of Al Qaeda of course). No wonder most of my family is worried. May God help me. The first weeks were difficult. In a new culture, new place, literally new world it was tough getting adjusted. Alcohol is prohibited in Islam, so I never went down to any of the parties on weekends. I went once and disliked the drunken atmosphere, with all due respect to anyone who might be offended. Parties were never part of my culture, unless it was birthday party or anniversary or some celebration, but loud music and alcohol were never there.

I became the Secretary of the Muslim Student Association and I represented Islam in religious council meetings, something my father might not be too excited about especially considering the current circumstances. However I was a highly honored to represent my faith on the Davidson campus.

Davidson did a great job at pairing me up with my roommate, a very well mannered, smart person who respects other faiths and is keen to learn. I pray my five prayers every day and he respects that. He mutes his music as I pray without even me telling him. He goes and talks with hall members outside the room if I am praying. Simply a great guy whom I pray God protects. Thank God for everything.

Then Ramadan came, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast from the break of dawn until sunset for thirty days and on the first day of the next month a huge celebration takes place. I was fortunate enough to have met a Muslim couple in the community who invited me over for iftar (to break my fast) for many days in the holy month. One day my Christian professor invited me over for iftar, which was very nice of her. That is how special people at Davidson College are. And that is how life should be lived where Muslims, Christians, Jews, people of all faiths live together as a whole as the Qur’an says:

“O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.” Surah 49:13

I never see reason for war unless one is being literally attacked. One is obliged to defend oneself, but there is always another way to solve a problem. We celebrated the end of Ramadan with a wonderful group of students and faculty who showed up for the dinner. It was very nice of President Vagt to join us. It really showed how much the college supports diversity on this campus. Thank God for everything.

This semester Adam Martin told me of a series of discussion sessions about the patriarch Abraham with Christian, Jewish, and Islamic students. I loved the idea and thought it was great way to get to know people of different faiths on campus and to seek similarities between the three religions. The sessions were fantastic, the discussions ran smoothly and we got to know many people. More importantly we realized for the first time that we were cousins, all descendants of the great prophet Abraham peace be upon him, and that if we look at our similarities rather than what is different then this world would be a much better place. Thank God for everything.
I had wanted a fish on my ankle. One of those icthus-I’m-a-Christian-and-drive-a-Honda fish that I wear proudly on a James Avery bracelet and draw aimlessly in the sand when lounging at the beach. I had always wanted a tattoo, and it seemed to me that the only way to reconcile that desire with my conservative upbringing and—according to Cosmo and emode.com—my classically practical style would be to decorate my ankle with a stylish, dainty fishlet of the traditional Christian variety.

That was, of course, until a few summers ago, when I decided I was actually going to go through with it. My aunt, the same one who took me to get my first perm when I was eleven, told me that she’d be more than happy to take me to a reliable looking tattoo parlor while vacationing in California. Doodling in my journal several nights before the much-anticipated day, I deliberated over my choice of placement. Suddenly pictures of old ladies running with wrinkly, tattooed ankles flashed through my mind. Continuing to stare at my soon-to-be-inked skin, I wondered if perhaps my foot wouldn’t be better. My best friend Kelly down at Baptist-central Baylor University told me that it was “totally hip” to get an icthus on the top of your foot, kinda like the Dixie Chicks and the chick tracks over their sun-tanned tootsies. I imagined a little fish, tickling my toes, pretty in sandals and hidden in tennis shoes, ready to be seen when I wished.

But a fish? I began to think it might look like a cheddar cheese goldfish cracker or a key chain you would find in Family Christian. I needed to spice things up a bit, but how? Shouldn’t a tattoo be something personal? Determined, I flipped my Bible open, skimming the pages for traces of highlighter and pencil rather than relying on my faulty memory (I didn’t exactly ever make it up to Bible Quiz at summer camp). Maybe I’d find some little verse that I could squeeze inside my tiny fish to make it look fatter and filled. What I found—or should I say what found me—jumped out as I hit the end of Proverbs. It was a verse that I had underlined and starred and highlighted several times, part of the “Wife of Noble Character” section that Hilary, my mentor and friend, had assured my Bible study had less to do with being a wife than being a deliberate woman of God. I stopped, feeling goose bumps jump up and down my arms. Proverbs 31:25. Perfect. Frantically I set my pencil back to paper and for the next half hour traced circles and squiggles and signs. Smiling, I snapped my journal shut.

“We don’t do feet,” the pierced, purple-haired girl behind the counter explained to me. “When you tattoo feet the ink bleeds, and besides, one day you’ll get lots of wrinkles there.” Drat. My old lady defense was foiled. I handed her my folded slip of paper and tried to remember the last time I had seen my grandmother’s feet. As she looked it over, the buff, pony-tailed artist who would be handling me came over and shook my hand. When he saw my kindergarten sketch, he smiled. “Cool. Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll see what I can do.” When he returned, the sketch had not only been artistically rendered and dramatically improved, it was also three times bigger than I had intended. Doe-eyed and sweaty palmed, I told him I couldn’t possibly put something that huge on my ankle. “Then why put it on your ankle?” he asked.

Why put it on my ankle? The ankle seemed less offensive somehow, as if a passerby could rest assured that it might just be something temporary picked up at the drugstore, a pretty little picture that could be covered, if necessary, by a quick cross of the leg. Not like a Popeye the Sailor-strongman arm tattoo or those tacky lower back tattoos that
scream when you lean over, “Look at me! Look at me! I have a tattoo!” Of course I didn’t tell him this. I went back to the large books of patterns available to customers, and a few minutes later came sheepishly back to the counter. “Here,” I said, showing him the tiniest cross in a corner of a laminated page. “I want this instead. On my ankle.” It reminded me of the logo on camp brochures that I had seen every summer in the San Bernadino mountains. Sure. That was personal. Memories of friendship and commitment were surely more meaningful than a little cracker goldfish. Not to mention smaller and less painful than my own creation. He gave me a knowing smile and told me to think about it for a few minutes. “However long it takes,” he said. “I like your design. You’ve obviously thought a lot about this; don’t give up on it so easily because you’re scared.” He glanced back at the cross. “I don’t like to stamp people with something easy. We don’t stamp here; we create art.”

So I sat. And thought. And sat. After fifteen minutes had passed I decided that I needed to excuse myself and go to the one place I knew I could always think clearly: the restroom. After squeezing past artists, gazing wide-eyed at the pictures plastered over the walls of particularly daring men and women, I shut myself inside the tiny room and began to pray. What on earth was I doing? Could I really go through with it? Why did I even want to do this? I took a deep breath, and as I did the walls of the restroom faded away.

A flash of burning orange and yellow-beamed clarity struck me senseless as the water quietly lapped the shore. Exhausted, disgusted with my own frailty and inability to recognize the futility of my pursuits, I was sitting dejected on a spider-webbed dock leaning out into the lake. My freshman year of college was drawing to a close, and nothing was certain. The seniors that I had idolized were graduating. My roommate and I were at odds. My parents were thinking of moving. Projects and papers were coming out of my ears, and my carefully constructed plans were falling to shambles. I hadn’t opened my Bible in weeks; did that make me a horrible Christian? “God,” I muttered, half plea, half curse, as the calming water reached out to me ever so gently. In silence I waited as summer blew in gently on the breeze, unwrinking my brow and softening my face. I belonged here. I had known that if I came outside, to the wind on the water and the sun in the sky, I would find peace and strength in the stillness. Be still. The pink of the clouds, that pink moment that Grammy used to call me out onto the porch to drink in when I was small, trickled its way inside to that hollow place I had locked so tightly. Be still and know. Through the tears, the sighs, the broken prayer, I knew. How could I have forgotten where to place my trust?

My brown eyes stared intently back as I looked hard at myself in the mirror. I whispered, “She is clothed in strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.” So I laughed. And with strength and dignity I marched out to the artist and handed him the sketch of my tattoo. “I’m ready,” I announced, “and I want it on my back.”

There is a work of art that colors my body. Orange and gold, the sun shimmers as it sets into the cool blue green water, reflecting its rays on the surface and into the depths where it reads Proverbs 31:25, and illustration becomes reference. Placed so keenly out of my sight and only occasionally in the view of others, it often surprises me when someone else is affected by it. One night of my sophomore year a freshman lit up when she realized who I was. “So you’re the one with the tattoo!” she exclaimed. I straightened my Ann Taylor blouse and tried to listen as if I was used to being identified by my body art. Apparently her roommate had sat behind me in a class first semester, and had seen my tattoo when I leaned over. One night she came home and asked to borrow a Bible – a book that she had never been interested in opening in her life – to figure out what was so important to me that I had it inked on my back.

I don’t know if a Body Art Ministry movement would ever take hold, but if it did, heaven forbid it be like the WWJD craze. All I know is that without even looking at my tattoo, I know it’s there. Like the hand of a protector on the small of my back, I feel it gently nudging me forward, ever reminding me to laugh, to let go, to drive out to the lake and watch the sun set. I can only imagine where my tried and true little fishie would have led.
Dawn, or Incarnation, or Eucharist

The moon
crisp as a wafer
seals up the heavens
Until day breaks;
    the moon’s shattered beams are
Pressed into our palms,
and the Life that began in darkness
dissolves into
LIGHT

Elegy to Thomas Merton

What song shall I sing you,
Thou silent servant?
Shall I pollute with noise your heavenly cloister,
Shall I rattle the stars
among whom you pace
in the night watch?
Let not my voice intrude upon your secret meditations,
Nor draw you out from holy hiding
    behind your cowl of moonshadows.

I will sing you the silence
    that cushions the toll of the bell
I will sing you the silence
    that washes through Kentucky hills,
speckled with the pulses of
    precious
    useless
    rain
I will sing you the silence
    between your fingers as the wafer falls,
Crucified
I will sing your quiet words of ink
    which bleed as martyrs without vanity
I will sing your quiet love
    which has no words
    and bleeds your heart so beautifully
I will sing the ancient wind of wise mountains in the East,
    the silence of color as flags dance humility under the
sun’s new light
And brother,
Let me sing the stark white
of your cross
inside the gate
a quiet homecoming, O Pilgrim.
I could talk any interested person’s ear off about the unbelievable unconditional love that comes from the kids, or about the way they give beyond what they have with their whole hearts. Maybe the stuffed animals and letters in my room would tell their own story, or better yet a tape recording of our laughs would tell of radical human solidarity that cuts through unspoken barriers. Yet there is something else about the orphanage that has come to amaze me more and more— the stable loving presence of the workers. These are the people that wake the kids up each morning, knowing which ones walk straight to the shower without argument and which need a harsh tug to get out of bed. Part of this view reflects my own appreciation for my parents as I move out of adolescence, laugh at what they had to deal with, and gape at their grace and patience. The community of Estado 29 has had many battles, and the additional tasks of mending broken hearts, softening hardened hearts, and teaching kids a new life.

While I’m at Estado 29 I hear again and again about planting seeds. This tends to become a flowery Christian analogy, but if you watch Ana as she sows seeds in the lives of 20 teenage girls, you’ll wonder where the ease of meadows and yellow sunshine have gone. The true, honest beauty of her love for them is that she maintains respect for these growing women, laughs with them, but also punishes them and expresses her disappointment when they behave badly. Miriam and I watched the older boys finishing a writing assignment. I told her I was impressed by how dedicated and thoughtful Luis was, to which she said, what he dreams will come true. She has the privilege of watching these boys grow up into themselves, and watching them develop passions. It’s beautiful to go back to the orphanage and witness the developments in the kids and know that those changes are the blossoms of seeds sewn.

Part of understanding the fullness of this stability and sustainability requires recognizing its contrast to the surrounding environment. Having spent five weeks at the orphanage, I accumulated bits and pieces of life stories, enough to get the sense of the places where the kids come from. Some homes are torn by abuse, others by dangerous habits or the desperation and violence of poverty. What is interesting to me is that although these are problems that demand attention on personal, societal, and political levels, the orphanage has a related but separate agenda. What about the children? God calls us to love the least. It’s a back to the basics response— the workers embrace the children, love them, and raise them to know God.

Seeing that kind of stability and a service to the least of these of Mexican society that encompasses the lives of the adults at Estado 29, evokes a deep respect for them, and also a personal challenge to me. How am I putting my entire life into God’s hands?

Faith does not only consist of thinking with the mind, but giving over your heart and your life.
(La fe no solamente consiste en creer con la cabeza sino en entregarse con el corazón y con la vida)
-Monseñor Oscar Romero
The most grievous enemy of greatness is goodness. So many go through life settling for good when there is greatness to be had. I was midway into my sophomore year of high school. Rather appropriately I was immature and superficial—sophomoric indeed. My friends and I were signed up to attend a camp in North Carolina during winter break. This would be my first occasion to see snow. It would be a first for many things. I expected a good time. Naïve and depleted were my expectations. The event of the lucid memory came to pass on the third night at the camp. There was something mystical about that place nestled in a valley amidst soaring mountains eager for glory. It was evening. We were sent out into that dark night to be by ourselves: to think, perhaps to pray. The cold night air was piercing. I found a patch of grass by a stream. In an attempt to fight the cold I sat down and held tightly to my knees. I lifted my head to sky. Never were the heavens so brilliant as that night. The stars illuminated the surrounding mountains with a strange and beautiful light. I prayed in that spot for a long while. It was then that I realized that I had never prayed before. I had spoken out into nothingness millions of times before but I had never prayed. That night I knew that I was not alone and my prayer was not in vain. Even as my eyes were fixed upon the spangled night sky I saw something I had never seen before. A shooting star darted across the sky. In an instant it had come and gone. Somewhere along its journey from one end of the sky to the other it made its way deep into my heart. I have never been the same since then. Somehow I think I will carry that star with me always. Indeed, that night greatness enjoyed a sweet victory over good and won my heart eternally.
reality that her words were only partly in jest made it all the more awkward. Soon, though, the disgust turned to anger. I kept replaying her words in my head, “How ‘bout some a that @!#% … for Thanksgiving? Ha Ha Ha.” I was made sport of and left completely speechless. I had just been played, and by a prostitute no less. I thought to myself, “I should have been quicker. I should have said something back that really would have shut her up.” And then I proceeded to run through all the things I could have said to put her in her place. “How ‘bout some Jesus?” That’s what I should have said. Surely that would have silenced her. But I was not that quick. I had missed my chance. Or had I?

As if irony herself had ordained it, later that very same day I headed to that very same bus stop and that very same lady and I were again sharing a sidewalk. She passed by me without a word, only to look back over her shoulder and hiss, “You want some [insert lewd name for female genitalia here]?” This time I was ready. Play me once, shame on you. Play me twice, shame on me. Without a thought, my lip curled like a pit bull, and I barked back at her, “How ‘bout some Jesus?” My countenance and tone carried about as much compassion as an attack dog, but hey, it is a dog-eat-dog world. Maybe I was not really dripping with Christ-likeness, but I was satisfied to have won this bout. Much to my chagrin, my victory celebration was cut short by her reply. “I need him every day. You should be praying for me,” she explained. Then she pointed to herself as if in self-identification and said, “Mary Magdalene.” Victory celebration officially ended. Commence guilt trip and life lesson. By many, perhaps even herself, this woman is regarded as not much more than a dog. To Jesus, however, she is no dog, but rather one of his own. To the Pharisees, Mary Magdalene was dirty and untouchable. To Jesus, she was one of the few who truly understood the gospel, “for the one that is forgiven much, loves much.” Mary Magdalene saw God’s forgiveness as her only virtue and thus loved freely.

The real irony is that while my Mary Magdalene is considered a “hooch” in our neighborhood, I needed little prodding to start acting like a dog myself. I suppose then we are in the same boat. That is both the scandal and the comedy of the gospel. Nothing can quite bring two very
different people together like their sin. By trade and by vice, this woman is a prostitute. By trade and sometimes also by vice (albeit a more Pharisaical vice), my vocation for the year is “loving God and my neighbor”. We appear to be very different creatures by our trades, but our vices have left each of us in desperate need of forgiveness. It was this forgiveness that allowed Mary Magdalene to love so freely. It is my task to do just that, love freely. Often, though, the nobility of my task stIFles me. It is difficult to exchange the virtue of my trade for a greater virtue, the immensity of God’s forgiveness. This is a luxury (and a pitfall) not afforded to a prostitute.

Fortunately, this story has a bit of an epilogue. A few days later, as I walked down the street I heard a familiar voice calling out to me. “You been prayin’ for me?” the voice asked. When I looked across the street, I did not recognize the new lime green weave, but the boots were unmistakable. I crossed the street and told her that in fact I had been praying for her. We had a civil conversation in which we introduced ourselves and exchanged pleasantries. Then as I was leaving, she again caught me off guard with a comment. She said, “Love you.” This time, however, I was shocked because the gesture was both platonic and genuine. The simple act of praying on her behalf had caused her to love me. On the surface that sounds like someone who is starved for love. On a deeper level, however, it is also the sound of someone with a great deal of love to offer. My own personal Mary Magdalene. And so I find myself learning about true love from a prostitute. It seems absurd, but as I said earlier, I am coming to expect the unexpected.

Learning to love, 
Ryan

1/19/04

As I get more and more personally acquainted with the mess that is inner city Oakland, I can not keep myself from asking the question: Who is to blame? I want to know where I can point the finger of guilt. The injustice I see causes my heart to swing like a pendulum between rage and nausea. Often I find myself searching for the guilty party whose face I can greet with a fist¹ or whose feet I can grace with regurgitation, depending on the swing of my mood. By no choice of their own, simply by being who they are and living where they do, children such as my next door neighbor Kelly are severely handicapped from their very first breath.

Though I wish to deny it, all logic concludes that at age five Kelly is already destined for a life of failure. He lives in a make shift garage apartment with a mother who dearly loves her son but also calls narcotics precious. Add to Kelly’s inheritance an already apparent learning disability and a dysfunctional school system, and the silver lining becomes increasingly hard to find.

Kelly’s case arouses unhesitant sympathies. However, other neighbors of mine, take Dre for example, arouse sympathies much less quickly. At age 20, Dre has long forsaken any sort of quest for a silver lining. Instead, he’s grabbed a hold of a commodity that, on the streets, is far more valuable and much easier to attain: drugs. Dre is the frontman for the block’s drug trade. Along with a small posse, Dre supplies products for a steady flow of customers, including Kelly’s mother. Perhaps Dre is the one to blame. He is the one that responsible parents tell their kids to avoid. He is the one we need off the streets. He is the one that the police arrest and incarcerate. He must be to blame.

I teeter back and forth, but ultimately I have one major dilemma with that line of reasoning. Fifteen short years ago Dre was Kelly. The particulars are different, but Dre was born onto the same streets and in similar circumstances. If we are going to blame Dre, we are simply blaming Kelly fifteen years removed. Kelly and Dre are two ends of one continuum. Between the two, speeds a rather disturbing progression that seems inevitable. I am not contending that Dre is inculpable for his actions. I am simply contending that I cannot foresee a more promising future for Kelly.

So who then is to blame? That is the question Jesus’ disciples asked when they themselves encountered a man handicapped from birth. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And as usual, the disciples did not get the reply their question intended. Jesus’ response

¹Fortunately for this person, my fist carries about as much punch as a Kool-Aid juice box.
served as a perspective shift: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” The disciples preoccupied themselves with placing blame for this man’s handicap. Jesus, on the other hand, viewed this man’s handicap not as a cause for blame but as an opportunity for God to work.

While this lesson is poignant for me, I must admit that my first response is to cry foul. In a way, it is disheartening to think that one person is born handicapped, just so God can do a work in his life, while another is born free from handicap. In another sense though, it brings me hope. It is refreshing to flirt with the idea that my neighbors are not destined for failure but for a monumental work of God. At least according to Jesus, my neighbors have not been purposed for what they are currently experiencing but rather for glory unseen as of yet.

With the man born blind, Jesus went on to do the unthinkable and give him sight. Never was a man so glad to see the light of day, and yet the Pharisees and other religious folk could not rejoice with him. Instead, they blamed the man for celebrating Jesus’ work. To them Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” Often when I busy myself placing blame as the Pharisees did, I lose sight of my own handicap. I assume that someone else is all wrong, and I am completely justified. The reality though is that my guilt remains. In actuality, none of us, especially me, is free from either handicap or guilt. If I am going to point the finger anywhere, it first must be at myself. So the question for me is no longer, who is to blame for these handicaps, but rather what is my role in witnessing an act of God amidst these handicaps?

The more I ask this question, the more confident I become that my specific role is with Dre and his cohorts. I hesitate to concede that confirmation because it sets me up for a good deal of failure. We are an unlikely paring, but I suppose God’s never been all too conventional. Just as he did with the man born blind, I am beginning to ask God to do the unthinkable in the lives of Dre and his posse.

Yours Truly,

Ryan

2/9/04

“It’s cold outside. It’s cold on the streets.” As we spoke James kept repeating this phrase almost as a mutter under his breath. I can assure you that he was not speaking of the northern California winter weather. For half an hour or so early one Thursday evening, James left his post at the corner and let his guard down. We stood on the sidewalk afront my house, and without much prompting, James chattered as though we were long lost friends. Three times during our conversation passers by stopped to ask James for drugs of one sort or another. All three times he simply shook his head and waved them along. I am not sure if he was simply out of product or abstaining out of respect for me. After the first woman, he shook his head and said, “Dope fiend.” The second instance was actually a couple, and after they passed, he gave a disgusted laugh and then remarked, “I saw that guy beating on her just ten minutes ago in the street, and she’s still walkin’ around with him.” The last girl that he refused service could not have been more than fifteen. With a pained expression he looked at me saying, “I got kids fourteen and fifteen years old coming to me.” Then after a short pause, he continued, “It makes me look pretty bad don’t it?” I could not help but nod in assent. The majority of James’ words that night were words of lament. He is the one who started most of the kids selling drugs in our neighborhood. “I know we all gonna end up shot or in jail. But these kids don’t got nothin’. Their parents do drugs, and they don’t learn nothin’ at school. There’s no clean money out here. No one wants to hire an uneducated black man. I’m tellin’ you. It’s cold outside. It’s cold on the streets.” James went on to admit that if anyone was without excuse that it was him. Unlike the vast majority of kids in this neighborhood, he has grown up with a committed, churchgoing father. He respects his father and his father’s “religion”, but he resents that his dad tries to push his “religion” on him. James knows that like his father I am a man of faith. I shared that while I do not hope to elicit the same response as his father, I am in a bit of a quandary. “I don’t want to force my faith on anyone out here, but at the same time when I see these kids, who I’ve actually grown to enjoy, destroying themselves, it’s heartless to just sit by and watch without saying a word,” I told James. His response both surprised and convicted me. “Nah man. I ain’t sayin’
that. You gotta speak up. These kids need you to say some-
thin'." And so I have a drug dealer telling me that I need to
open my mouth and warn his clientele of their woes. As I
look forward to the future of my relationships here in the
neighborhood, this conversation was both unexpectedly
encouraging and daunting. In a sense, a miracle has already
occurred. I have moved from a passing acquaintance to more
of a friend, and even confidant at times, with the neighbor-
hood’s rougher characters. However, the more difficult task
lies ahead: speaking out. When God sent Ezekiel to speak to
the Babylonians, he gave him these instructions: "Son of man,
I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear
the word I speak and give them warning from me." The
watchman’s position comes both as a privilege and at a price.
He is privileged to see and know what is happening inside
and outside of his camp. The price of this privilege is that the
watchman is accountable for what he knows. It is his task to
speak out concerning that which he sees and knows. As a
watchman, should Ezekiel not have spoken warning, God
himself warned Ezekiel, "I will hold you accountable for
[their] blood."

Truly it has been my privilege to know this raggedy
but endearing cast of characters here on Campbell Street.
That privilege though comes at a price. I am accountable for
what I see and know. But honestly I fear speaking warning to
my newfound friends. They can be intimidating simply
because of who they are. More than that though, I fear losing
already precarious friendships. The first question that comes
to mind is who do I love more- my friends or God? Perhaps
the better question though is who do I love more- my friends
or me? Do I love them enough to risk their friendship and
affection in pursuit of their welfare? It is comforting to know
that before speaking to the exiles, "Ezekiel sat among them
for seven days- overwhelmed." I too have spent some time
tongue-tied and overwhelmed. Still, my task remains and
should I not speak warning, I will be held accountable for
their blood.

Sincerely,
Ryan

3/1/04

Practical humility. Humility lived out and functional.
Humility not simply as a character trait or a praise winner,
but humility that changes lives. That is the humility I see in
Jesus. Not weak and wimpy, and certainly not self-effacing.
In grace all things are possible. That is the mantra of
practical humility. Practical humility is strength; strength
born out of need. And thus it is the strongest strength, for
only the strength found amidst our need is of divine origin.
All other strength is our own and as such very much limited.

In washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus gives a physical
close that is as well a spiritual paradigm for his life and
mission on earth. “When he had finished washing their feet,
he put on his clothes and returned to his place.” While on
earth Jesus shed his heavenly robe and clothed himself in
flesh. He did not assume a position of power and privilege
but instead one of service. Even amongst the lowly with
whom he dwelt, he chose to be lowlier still and wash their
feet. Nothing he did was of his own accord or strength.
Every step was one of dependence. “By myself I can do
nothing", are words Jesus spoke in explaining his ministry.
He relinquished his heavenly powers only to find them again
in his need. He approached the Father not with the merits of
his sufficiency, for he “did not consider equality with God as
something to be grasped.” Rather, he came to the Father in
the humility of his need. The Father then freely gave him all
power and authority in heaven and on earth. In his earthly
humility, Jesus found his heavenly strength. Once he finished
washing the world’s feet by his death, he put on again his
heavenly clothes and returned to his rightful place next to the
Father in his resurrection.

Nothing has made me more acutely aware of
my need for this type of practical humility than community
living. I have long been able to feign humility. It is not too
difficult a task to appear humble in the company of people
with whom contact is intermittent and unsustained. This
year, however, I have been cramped together in a small house
with five other people who share the same bathroom, the
same cupboards, the same common room, and the same
schedule. In this context, my humble pretenses have quickly
crumbled. I have come to find that in comfortable settings, I
can play humble. In extreme situations, however, I rush not
to serve but to be served. I am quick to speak and slow to listen. I am easily hurt if I am not the center of attention or overlooked in any way. I am by far the most fickle of all my housemates, and yet a running criticism of each of my housemate’s foibles persists in my head.

My need has become evident. For me, this has been a painful process- a death of sorts. Given Jesus’ example, though, this is not necessarily bad news. Perhaps, it is just the beginning of the good news. For, in fact, my need can be my greatest resource. It is in my need that I come to know God’s grace; his granting strength where my weakness abounds. If the revelation of my need has been a death for me, resurrection is found not in turning a blind eye to that need or somehow escaping it. Deliverance is found only in facing the depths of my need, and finding God’s strength there. To access his strength, I will ever have to be aware of my need. The two do not exist apart from one another. Living in the reality of that paradox is the practice of practical humility.

Sincerely,
Ryan

4/8/04

When Chunga showed up on our corner, fresh out of prison, he was an almost mythic figure. The younger kids treated him with reverence in his presence and in his absence, told stories of his hard earned street credit. Now, months later, Chunga represents a sort of last man standing, a stalwart among a dying breed. Recently, the police have targeted our neighborhood and arrested many of the regulars that once made the corner their marketplace. Therefore, Campbell Street has been unusually quiet as of late.

Amidst this time of relative quiet, Chunga has gone from a distant mythic figure to my closest neighborhood friend. A twenty-two year old drug dealer and self-proclaimed “pimp” educated on the streets of West Oakland meets a twenty-three year old transplant who’s “got religion”, a rather mild social life, and schooling, which until now has been strictly private and suburban. That is the plot line of this odd-couple friendship. I hesitate to concede this, but I relate more naturally and easily with Chunga than the majority of people I have met here in Oakland- white folks included. I am not exactly sure how this friendship emerged, and I am even more perplexed as to how it functions as it does. Chunga, though, has an explanation of his own. “You know why we get along so good?” he asked me not too long ago. “Cause we both crazy. We different, but we both crazy. Ryan, you know you crazy,” he said with a bobbing head and his magnetic smile.

We certainly are different. And while my life seems to be rather tame in light of his, Chunga does make a convincing case. What, other than an altered mental state, would give me warrant to be chummy with a drug-dealing “pimp?” Perhaps I have indeed gone mad. Or perhaps I have simply met the real Chunga. I have discovered the hero of a younger generation’s tales to be simply a projection behind which the actual Chunga hides. From a distance he can play the role of street legend, but with some proximity and genuine interactions, illusions quickly fade.

The legend is tough, and so he talks hard and is ever ready to fight. However, the Chunga that I have encountered is more eager to make friends than enemies and is extremely loyal to his companions. The legend is an uninhibited man of many women, and so he considers himself a “pimp.” And yet the Chunga that I see unknowingly reveals his family-man tendencies. He cannot hide his love for Sariah, his two year old daughter, and Ronda, his “baby’s momma.” While he does not live with them, he is almost always near. Sariah is too adorable not to be daddy’s little girl, and I often catch Chunga and Ronda side by side on late night walks around the neighborhood. The legend is a man of wealth and status, and so he deals drugs. Despite his hustle, the Chunga that I know has more the heart of a shepherd than that of a wolf seeking prey. He naturally tends with care to the younger kids who so admire him.

And thus a disconnect exists between the myth and the man. But which is reality? I believe ultimately that is for Chunga to decide. The myth is exalted, but with it comes a hopeless fatalism. “If you don’t see me, I’m either in jail or I been shot.” Chunga said matter of factly in response to my inquiry as to whether I would be seeing much of him this week. In such moments, I realize that the legendary image he projects is really just the vibrato needed to conquer the pres-
ent moment when future demise is all but certain. In light of this fatalism, for Chunga, trusting in his own myth is not an act of faith but rather one of conceit. If faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see, then faith makes reality of that which is unseen and myth of that which is seen. Real faith believes in the man that hides behind the legend, the friendly family-man with a shepherd’s heart, the man Chunga was created to be.

It is clear to me who the real Chunga is, but still the choice is his. His identity will be defined by his faith. Will he resign himself to the hopelessness of a fleeting myth or will he come to believe in the man of hope and substance I know him to be? I do not have any sure answer, but I do have faith. So while Chunga’s faith remains unformed, I’m asking God that mine will suffice.

Sincerely,
Ryan [Ferrier]

We trudged along an open path in the spring desert, seeking a sight said to be startling and sweet. The cleared sandy path ascended a hill, with behind us civilization, and ahead of us open space. My friend and I carried our supplies in hope of a shot or two of the southwest scenery, and perhaps some video to appreciate back home. A large, prominent saguaro stood directly in front of us as we ascended the last part of the hill. A small, granite cliff made up the left boundary and this saguaro made up the right. As my friend laid down his camera bag to set up shot, I noticed then what was in front of me, and tossed my bag to the side like a pillow tossed onto a bed. There in main focus was a smooth drop off and a sight no human eyes could view all in their limited scope of vision. No, this expansion of desert spread across a mountain range so long that I had to turn and turn and turn to take in the entire scene. This valley was enormous, pure, untouched, and surreal. I looked at my partner and said with utter amazement, “Can you believe this?” My friend, experienced yet still in awe of this tremendous view, smiled and continued to set up his lens.

I pulled out the video camera to capture the moment, figuring that such a grand view can only last so long. I panned the valley what seemed like hours, simply watching, not
narrating as I enjoyed doing on most occasions. What was to be said in response to such a vista? I truly only knew of one phrase that I repeated it in amazement, “Oh, my God.” The video camera could not capture the glory of this scene, so I retired in filming it and simply stood with joy at the picture now painted in my mind. And as I continued to look and be overwhelmed, I again said, “Oh, my God.” Soon I realized the reason for this redundancy and why I said it.

What was it that so amazed me of this desert scene? I truly said it, over and over again, not realizing it at first, but then catching on as I admired this piece of land. It was “my God” that struck me the most from this snippet of His creation. How huge is God compared to this land that He looks down upon as a dot, a speck. I saw with great awe the wonder of our God in this scene, and started to think bigger, about His power, His grandeur, His vision. I thought to myself, “If God can carve out such wonders in lands, how much more can He carve in the human heart?” I pondered my Father as I continued to stare in delight, and occasionally observe my friend look out now into the mighty distance ahead of us to capture a still. We continued to take in this precious scene, and then headed back to civilization, to confinement and limits, opposite of this desert place.

I thought and thought about this impact of my view of God the scene had on me as we descended to the lot of automobiles. How I live in a compact world and get intrigued by such limited things, when God desires for me wider, expanding things in my life through His vision? I came to love the freedom I saw in the desert, learning about a life with no boundaries. I kept the image in my mind not to store away in some dark place in the back of my mind, but to hold as a constant reminder that I want to be boundless, and be in the kingdom of His Highest. I reached the car and reached for the handle only to pause, turn back, and see that saguaro, that cliff, and that horizon still in perfect view. Life was truly worth living for – an eternity full of expansion in the heart, the mind, the body. I turned back to capture it. Yes, a life without confinement satisfies, fulfills, gives purpose and joy to a life in need of something big, so big it cannot fit on one still, one film, but simply in one soul to cherish and remember.

What is it that draws man to the waters? What can one attribute this love to, this modern-day addiction to fly fishing? It is this question that I seek to investigate. Henry David Thoreau writes, “Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.” But wait! This presents a paradox to the ordinary reader. If fishing is akin to most other hunting sports then the prime objective is the catch. The fish presents itself to the hunter as object to be caught. The emphasis is on the result, not on the process. But what would be the take of a fly fisherman on this assertion of the two-dimensional nature of fishing? Setting out to discover the true call of the waters, we must rise to the mental disposition of the fisherman.

The stroke itself is a simple one: a periodic rotation between two and ten o’clock. The rod extends from the hand like a kind of attached prosthetic. The hand and rod exist as one unit. The hand acts in sympathy with the rod, feeling the tension as the rod rips through the air. With one abrupt flip of the wrist, the rod begins its voyage. First the shaft, then the line, then the tippet. Every element works in a syncopated rhythm which brings about the harmony of flight. At just the right moment the propelling force of the line lifts the fly out of the water. With the breaking tension, the water molecules
fall from the fly. The water capillaries are like pieces of lambent glass that fall from the sky carrying with them the visible spectrum of the rainbow. The fly, now in flight, migrates through the vastness of the air. It continues to be propelled onwards by the line that paves the path for the fly’s journey. For one brief moment, the line itself fully recoiled, the fly seems to dangle, as if magically, from only the air itself. But this idealized moment is burst as the hand fitfully whirls itself forward. The shaft, the line, and the tippet, they too must follow the movement of the hand.

The bead head nymph comes to its final resting place on the surface of the water. The fly lands in a calm and serene pocket of water, nestled underneath the shady branches of an overhanging spruce tree. All around the surrounding current creates a continuous whisper interspersed with what sounds like the popping of bubbles. The vortices of the furiously whirling current directly contrast to the still patch of water, the home of the fly. The fly rests on the water shining in all its glory waiting for the moment of truth. Will it or will it not become dinner? Three yards away the fly fisherman detects a small change in the slight rippling of the current. The time has come. With the hand tuned to utmost sensitivity the man must wait.

It is one of the great blessings in life to endure testing. In Areopagitica Milton writes, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.” The trials produced by the exigencies of life herald a revelation of character. The fly fisherman not only learns the importance of patience, but patience draws man out of himself into an introspection of greater ideals and events. The fisherman must patiently wait for the gentle tug of the line, but he waits with the realization that all is now beyond his control. He has performed his duties to the utmost and must now endure the passing of time.

It is at this time of liberation of control when man fully appreciates an immersion in nature. The fisherman is freed from his own existence and begins a search into the surrounding environment. For fishing reminds us that man is part of this passing current of water, but the skies, the river, and the land are a source of constancy. Ruskin writes, My entire delight was in observing without being noticed – if I could have been invisible, all the better. I was absolutely interested in men and their ways, as I was interested in marmots and chamois, in tomtits and trout. . . . The living inhabitation of the world – the grazing and nesting in it – the spiritual power of the air, the rocks, the waters to be in the midst of it, and rejoice and wonder at it . . . this was the essential love of Nature in me. . . (514)

Within this immersion into nature, man becomes affected by the transformative power of the sublime, and he is uplifted out of himself. The turbulent waters, the velocity of the wind, the ever-changing forms of the clouds, all remind him he is witnessing the creation of some greater power.

There is also some kind of universality that thrusts itself into the mind of the fisherman. With the casting of every line he is taking part in the passing of time. For just a moment he becomes an active participant and connects with all who have come before and all who will come after. Much like the cave painting in El Castillo, Spain, where the outer tracing of a hand signs man’s presence, fly fishing too allows him to make his mark. In a dark cave a handprint brands the spirit of humanity. This hand painting shows the image of a hand with the applied color framing its shape. At some point in time, a human being was in this cave and was called to leave his impression. This painting signifies more than a representation of a hand. It reminds and humbles all who see the work of one man’s desire to make a lasting image. The hand is almost like a hieroglyph speaking a universal language that is bounded by neither time nor language. In its symbol are the words, actions, and spirit of one man, who at the same time stands for all of mankind. Whereas one man’s hand is transient in the face of the lasting rocks, the hand of humanity is eternal. Through fishing man is able to connect his soul to the soul of all humanity.

The universal notions of man and life and their connectedness with nature received utmost expression in the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, the great British landscape artist. In the nineteenth century, landscape painting was not confined to the representation of the beauty of creation but also embodied the prophetic powers of nature. Landscapes were
viewed as a revelation of God. This notion of going into the wilderness to meet the Creator was directly influenced by the idea of the sublime, an encounter with a power greater than we are. Nature became a type of “Holy Book” (Novak 46) through which the word of God could be read by an appreciation of His creation. God and nature became an intertwining force and power (Novak 46). When landscape painters sought to recreate nature they embraced the transformation of the word of God onto canvas. Wilhelm Wackenroder writes, “I know of two miraculous languages through which the Creator has enabled men to grasp and understand all things in his power. . . . One of these miraculous languages is spoken only by God, the other is spoken by a few chosen men whom he has lovingly anointed. They are: Nature and Art” (Novak 55). The painter of landscapes has the power to unify these two prophetic languages and merge them into an interwoven revelation of God (Novak 55). The artist became a sort of prophet transcribing the warnings found in nature to all humanity (Mack 399).

Within his examination of nature Turner sees revealed ideas of human testing and humanity and captures them in The Slave Ship of 1840. This work depicts the overthrow of chain-bound slaves into the ocean. This murderous overthrowing of innocent human beings does not go unnoticed. Nature itself bears witness to this crime. The swirling, emotional brushstroke ascribes to the work a sense of emotion and attachment. The waves with their piercing troughs seem to reverberate the cries of those being pulled under the bloodstained water. The density of the clouds envelops the ship and heralds in the promise of judgment. This coming of justice also ushers in the promise of a Divine transformation. This promise of redemption gives hope. In Turner’s painting this Divine promise is signified by the use of “typhoon” in the title. The typhoon follows the aftermath of the slaughter, but it also serves the purpose of cleansing. The typhoon alludes to the flood that wiped out all corruption and was followed by a grand promise of rebirth. This promise is felt by glowing light that penetrates the painting. This light alone has the power to defeat the bloodstained water and atmosphere. The light illuminates the shackles and hands of the slaves, but it will bring freedom. “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burden, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward” (Isaiah 58:6, 8).

Turner’s painting can represent universal human suffering and testing. It extends not only to slavery but also to the enduring of unjust or incomprehensible pain and agony. It evokes the contemplation of such questions as the cause or reasons on these horrific events. But oftentimes explanations lie outside the reach of human rationalism. Last fall a close friend of mine, Billy Jemison, was diagnosed with Ewing’s sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer. He was a brilliant student who double majored in philosophy and neuroscience. A fellow lover of fly-fishing, he had planned a fishing trip to Patagonia, but he had to cancel it to undergo chemotherapy. He faced his testing with courage and strength. It was as if he embodied the optimism toward life found in Tennyson’s dramatic monologue “Ulysses”: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” He pressed on all the while striving towards the hope of life. He died on October 12, 2001, at the age of 26 because of complications with his bone marrow transplant. Although defeated in body, he was not defeated in spirit. It was his endurance, his unyielding strength that prevailed even to the last. After his death I was humbled to receive his fly-fishing vest, filled with floatant and other gear he had purchased for his trip. Someday I may be able to go to Patagonia and fulfill Billy’s dream.

Although we may never know why such tragic events occur, we can maintain hope for the cessation of suffering and the promise of a grand transformation and healing. This eternal promise can be seen in The Slave Ship in the radiant light that breaks through the painting and dispels the darkness of the horror and suffering below. In “The Two Boyhoods” Ruskin writes of Turner, “For the first time, the silence of nature round him, her freedom sealed to him, her glory opened to him. Peace at last. . . . Freedom at last” (115). With the opening of these warnings of sufferings and horror springs also the promise of “glory.” This glory lies in the knowledge that one day all human suffering will be abolished, and freedom will stand triumphant. At this moment of
Divine transformation and eternal salvation, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

The fly fisherman is pulled back from the contemplation of life to the waters where he feels a soft pull of the line. The hand responds with an abrupt and upward lift. With utmost care the fisherman begins to reel in what looks like an 18-inch rainbow trout. He grabs the net and pulls the shiny and slippery fish out of the water. Patience has paid off with a beautiful catch. In this moment of holding the trout in the air the fly fisherman makes his hand painting and reunites with fly fishermen, like Billy Jemison, who have tested the waters before him.


