Davidson College

AVAILING
COLLECTED WORKS ON RELIGIOUS LIFE
COLLECTED WRITINGS AND ARTWORK

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INTRODUCTION
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In putting together this publication we considered various ideas for themes before finally settling on the idea of the sacred meeting the ordinary. Why the sacred meeting the ordinary? We all too often attempt to neatly compartmentalize religion or spirituality and limit its influence in our lives. Yet, the truth is the rest of our lives cannot help but be touched by a higher force or forces outside of ourselves.

As we gave people this theme to frame their thoughts, we watched as submissions came in with example after example that reiterated this point. From Nicaragua to New Orleans, students have shared stories and art work that illustrate that the perceived division between what is sacred and what is ordinary, is just that — a perception. There are stories from a variety of traditions that we hope demonstrate the sacred and the ordinary are not as different as we believe.

Lastly, this publication could not have been possible without the help of many, especially those who submitted pieces. Regardless of whether they were included in the publication, we thoroughly enjoyed them and they truly spoke to us. Also, we would be remiss if we did not also thank the following organizations for their help - Campus Outreach, the Canterbury Club, Catholic Campus Ministry, the Chaplain’s Office, Interfaith Fellowship, Methodist Student Fellowship, and Westminster Fellowship for all their help.

So, here it is, enjoy.
A JOURNEY TO ETHIOPIA

CHRISTIE KILBY


The calendar is thirteen months long and eight years behind our own. Amharic script looks like the Hebrew alphabet doing acrobatics. Stories and celebrations revolve around the centuries-old coffee ceremony, and animals howl when they catch the scent of hyenas or spirits on the night air. Bother a priest, and he’ll swat you with his horsetail. Wash the feet of an old woman, and she will bless you.

My experience of Ethiopia took place in a small town in the western countryside, Mettu, a two days’ bus ride from the capital city of Addis Ababa. As part of a small team connected with the Presbyterian Church (USA), I taught English – as a third or fourth language – to Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant students in the public high school. We stayed as guests of a church in Mettu and walked the muddy mile to school each morning. Our lessons emphasized conversation and writing, but our presence was foremost a diplomatic one: we gave and received hospitality, visiting students’ families and talking about our dreams. Ethiopia planted questions in me that will unfold throughout my life: this is my beginning.

July 18

“Our Sabbath day consisted of a long and bumpy ride from Addis to Jima. The countryside at first was flat, then eventually we wound our way through gnarly mountains, across the Gebe River where a hippopotamus was bathing. Strewn among the woods and fields were corn, false banana trees, and gojos (round grass huts) with their inhabitants staring at us from colorful robes. Women squatted by their washbasins, children ran, men plowed their wet fields with yoked oxen. Every time we passed through a village, a parade of women and children came to our van’s dusty windows to try to sell us mangoes, lemons, sugarcane, and roasted corn.

“We are learning how to greet people on the street – saying ‘ashamaa’ and bowing to those carrying loads, ‘attam jirtu’ to others. Especially the older people seem to appreciate our efforts.”

July 20

“First day of classes. The rain stopped so the tin roof was quiet and there was enough sunlight to see the chalkboard. Our lesson focused on greetings and phone conversation – we used bananas for telephones. One boy, Gashahun, used his banana-phone to ask me about my life and why I came to Mettu.”

July 24

“Our dinners have been intimate. We sit around white plastic tables in a yellow room and see each other’s faces
by the 25-watt bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling. We tell stories.

"Telile said her father was a political prisoner for 11 and a half years. Telile and her brother remember going to the prison every other week, and standing in a sticky crowd of visitors who shouted across a short fence to the swarm of prisoners. Since Telile and her brother were so young, the guard would pass them over the fence to the prisoners’ side so their father could play with them."

__July 26__

"This afternoon, my student Dinke came to the compound to walk me to her house for her brother’s graduation celebration. She is thin, with such determined eyes. We walked through a gate and a pretty yard of fruit trees and flowers. Her home is built from mud-covered sticks with metal roofing. The floors are dirt, but the ceiling is high and the living room area has wooden chairs set around a low table. Her father is a lawyer.

"Dinke first invited me to meet her mother, a gracious wiry woman named Elfinesh. She kissed me five times. Dinke translated for me as I told her mother how proud she should be of her daughter. Dinke then introduced me to her mother’s friends cooking wat in a hut outside, filled with smoke. She showed me their plot of sugar cane, their water source (creek), and their toilet area (sticks laced over a small pit, cloth hung for privacy). I came home with two beautiful zinnias, bright pink and coral, and a whole stalk of sugar-cane."

__August 8__

"On Sunday at the synod church here in Mettu there was an emphasis on HIV/AIDS. Bekele (a social worker for the church) led a prayer. He put his full lungs and body into it, and as he prayed, the whole congregation – hundreds of people – started murmuring and groaning, clicking their tongues ‘tsk, tsk, tsk....’ Sometimes it sounded like whimpering, sometimes moaning with pain. It was an eerie experience, as if that church were embodying the groans of the whole earth, suffering deep within its bones.

"Every day in Mettu someone dies from the disease. We have seen them come into the church gate carrying a covered body on a stretcher made of eucalyptus branches. We hear their wailing from our little yellow kitchen while we eat."

I went to Ethiopia because I believe that when we encounter others with love and respect, we greet the face of Christ. Through authentic friendship, we also learn to see our own faults and misconceptions and to live in ways
that are compassionate and just. At least, that is the idea. I still do not know what to make of the funeral wailing and the old women bent under their wide bundles of wood. Pity feels disgusting and wonder seems romanticized – I confuse dreams for development with condescending materialism. I hope that my journey was as simple as an ashamaa, a bow and a word of well-being to a country that is carrying a heavy load.
Excerpts from a journal entry from a monastery in Chiang Mai, Thailand

The discipline of meditation expected at the monastery was higher than I had ever imagined it would be. Day after day I meditated from the dark hours of 4 o’clock in the morning until 10 in the evening—walking, sitting, walking, sitting, walking, sitting. At times it was the most tedious discipline I have ever practiced and I slugged though ever motion.

There were also times when meditation was almost addictive in the sense of elevation it offered. Maggy, a meditation practitioner of the center, described the sense of elevation using a scene from The Dead Poet’s Society. She likened the vision of meditation to the view which Robin William’s character offers his students from the top of a classroom desk from which one can, “see more.” “Meditation is like this training the mind to see more.”

One night after meeting with the abbot, I took a straw mat and my meditation pad and arranged myself to one side of the cheti in front of a small trough of candles and incenses. I lit two yellow candles and performed my requisite mindfulness prostration, slowly and precisely in the dark. Meditating in the dark seems easiest to me; the darkness blurs everything into a bluish haze like that which I hope to blanket the rapid sequence of thoughts in my mind.

On the porous stones of the cheti, I performed my walking meditation. With each step I imagined it as the most important step I would ever take in my life. “Right goes thus, Left goes thus, Right goes thus,” I chanted. The language of walking meditation is the language awareness, recognizing the ground beneath my feet. The challenge is to quiet the mind to the point when it becomes aware of even the simplest tasks, which we perform in our everyday lives without mindfulness.

The language of intention is as simple as it is profound. Before lifting a foot to walk, I acknowledge, “Intending to walk, Intending to walk, Intending to walk.” What would life be like if I daily labeled my intentions as such, giving voice to them and then following through step by step?

During sitting meditation that night, I was able to reach a level of stillness which I had not been able to reach previously. I sat without the chatter of lists, plans, or expectations and focused on the rising and falling of my abdomen with each breath. I recognized gaps between breaths through which thoughts crept in. Gently I recognized my thinking and returned focus to my breath. I cleared my mind and filled the gaps between my breath with the thought, “present, be present, acknowledge the present.” I sat in silence on one side of the cheti breathing in the present moment, joyful to be
living and needing nothing more. I sat for over an hour, breathing.

Mediation offers the present. The present is not weighted down with any worries of the future or regrets of the past. The present is always new, always open; in the present I am capable of all things. Like the breath of meditation which rises and falls out of existence, each new moment offers a chance for a new possibility. It is the only substance in which I live. It is the only thing that matters. If I can remember this, how can I ever be weighted down with suffering?

The next day, I packed my bags and returned my sleeping mat and blankets. I walked by Maggy’s room, and peeked in at her lying on her bed facing the wall. I walked away, but she noticed me. “I came to tell you goodbye,” I said looking down at my street clothes and luggage bag, “I leave today, but I leave with sadness.” I looked down and away as I started to cry. She saw my tears and explained, “Tears are like rain in the desert; they are nourishing in a place that has been dry and barren. You cry because your heart knows you still have more to learn.”

Gillian Siple
LIVING IN BETWEEN

SCOTT BUCKHOUT

Each morning and afternoon our group would pile into a fifteen passenger van and make a 40 minute drive to get to where we worked and where we slept. Some members slept, others talked, but a lot of us just looked out the window. We went back and forth six times, and each time we noticed new and lasting reminders of Katrina’s devastation.

Perhaps the most lasting mental images were the signs that people spray painted on walls or debris across the region. Some signs were informative. On the twelfth story of a hotel that faced the Gulf of Mexico, someone had written “Mom, we’re OK.” Others were reminders. A church had a huge sign that reminded passersby that “Katrina was big, but GOD is bigger.” Laurie posted the directions to her lot on a destroyed trailer home that was left on the corner of the main drag in Bay St. Louis. Even if it was just the address of their property or a FEMA number tattooed on the side of a house, everyone seemed to have some kind of graffiti letting everyone know that they were there.

For me, all these signs sounded like cries for help, even the signs reminding of God’s goodness and majesty seemed to be more for the people who wrote them, and not for those who read them. I felt terribly overwhelmed. When I saw the huge piles of rubble, the foundations that held nothing, and the huge oaks that had been snapped like small twigs, I could still trust that everything would be rebuilt, and I even had hope that in the process of rebuilding, the communities and towns could build better, stronger, and even more just. However, these signs, these overwhelming cries for help, made me dubious of God’s ability to restore and renew the lives of His people in the Gulf Coast. Realizing this made me feel ashamed. I could trust God’s provision to build new homes, roads, and schools, but I couldn’t trust the Lord of Love to repair the hearts of His beloved?

My doubt frustrated me because I knew I had no reason to believe that. I could quote Scripture that promised me my doubts were unmerited. I even saw the efforts of the church working beautifully towards redemptive and transformative ends, but I just couldn’t see how all these people – who are crying for help, who have tragic stories of loss and death, and who have nothing to stand on, live in, or hold onto – could put their trust back in God after He seemingly took all of those things away from them. It just seemed too messy, too personal.

There was Sherri. I met her while I was building a shed for one of her friends. Many of the people in Biloxi had their homes completely destroyed, so they were living in small trailer
homes provided by FEMA. Often families of four or five struggled to fit all of their salvaged possessions (and even themselves) into these trailers. Working with Mission to the World, our group went to victims’ properties and built sheds, so they could have some extra space in their trailers. Sherri approached me with her dog to see if she could put her name on the list for a shed. As I got her contact information and address, she started telling me about how she rode out the storm on the top of her car inside her garage. She said riding out the storm wasn’t the hard part. It was now.

Sherri is married with three kids and three dogs (she says it’s hard for her to tell the difference sometimes), and her husband was recently deployed to Iraq. Sherri was left alone to take care of her kids, find a job, rebuild their house, and deal with her insurance company. She feels overwhelmed and doesn’t know where to start, and so she just doesn’t.

Then there was Stanley. Along with his father and brother, they were the local fix-it men in town. Our group met them when we built a shed for each of their families. Stanley rode out the storm, and he spent 3 hours swimming in 30 feet of water over his property. He said he found a boat, got it to start, and drove it around picking people out of the water and taking them to land.

After acting so heroically, he doesn’t want to face the injustice and the pain that the storm left for him. Instead he is leaving Mississippi for the first time in his life and he is going to visit his son in Maryland and daughter in Florida. Stanley must feel like he has gotten the short end of the stick. He saved lives, lost everything in the storm, and now he gets a FEMA trailer and a shed. I’d imagine he wants to ask, “God, how can you treat me like this? What have I done to deserve this?”

I know I would want to ask those questions because I have asked God those questions before in situations of far less significance and consequence. I was asking those questions myself when I was talking to people like Sherri and Stanley.

Another tradition in our van rides to and from the worksite was to write haiku poems that described and brought humor to the events of our day. The topics varied from sunburn to beef jerky; our themes varied from hilarious to somber. But one haiku really spoke to the questions I faced throughout the week:

Living in between
What is here and what could be
Drives me to the Cross.

While I didn’t have spray paint, I think it would have made a great graffiti sign. In the midst of doubts, fear, frustration, self-pity, and everything else, we can bring these feelings to God, and draw near to Him, not withdraw. The reality of God’s grace and love means that I don’t have to avoid God when I doubt or question what is going on around me, when I question the destruction and torn lives. Instead, I am free go to Him with these things through Christ’s grace, and be refreshed by the reality that God is working toward the reality of what will be.
Second Station of the Cross
Peter Daniel
Garlands of light and gold—
Where are the many who built this palace?
Where are the saints of this Holy Land?
Lost in deserts, streets, seaside ancient sites,
Who left the widows to pray?

Hearing the incense approaching,
Not smelling it till it’s gone,
Spirit of God,
Aroma of God,
Aroma of life to those who are being saved.

A gift of pennies for candles, four,
And what for?
For sons long years gone,
For husbands taken,
For comfort received,
For healing needed—
For symmetry of light?
The pennies a bottle of perfume
Broken at the feet of Jesus
To kiss his feet—Mary Magdalene
A widow in Greece.

In a sanctuary lined with gold,
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Written into the ceiling, transfigured,
Carpet to carpet Persian,
A priest Eastern, like our Jesus,
I hate to see candles, the widow’s gift,
Delivered in recycled milk crates,
in bulk.

Where are the men here,
To love their brides as God loves the church,
Why don’t they lay down their lives, too,
In candles, in kisses.

“How beautiful on the mountains…”
(Isaiah 52.7)
REFLECTIONS ON A NICARAGUAN CAMPESINO BOY

CHAD BARLOW

When night drapes over the Nicaraguan valley called Samulali, there is as much scintillating light above as smothering darkness below. A billion stars fill the sky, making it look heavy, as if it might at any moment come crashing to earth in one brilliant catastrophe. But for a village so close to the heavens at night (and so close to the Garden in the warm, green light of day), Samulali is not without its problems and its toils. There is poverty here, stark and ugly. There is hunger. In every house there are painful memories, scars of Nicaragua’s troubled and turbulent history. And it is against these dark hues that the people of Samulali emerge bright and beautiful, not unlike the starry hosts above which shine their bright light out of deep, deep darkness.

It’s easy to feel insulated from a people whose language you don’t speak. Communication through a translator finds me overly self-aware: putting my best foot forward, picking the right words carefully, eliminating entire strands of thought that seem superfluous or accidental. All of this self-conscious editing refines and focuses the conversation, but the vulnerability and honest contingency is lost; often the spectrum of speech is so narrowed that most of the speaker is left out. But children have no patience to negotiate a conversation through translation—their words are their bodies, their eyes, their laughs, their screams, and their movements. They say that 90 percent of communication is nonverbal. When I am around children I don’t feel the pressure of the remaining ten percent. Children are not nonverbal; children are verbs.

I met Joel in Samulali, in the back of Doug’s pickup truck while we were bouncing over the roughest terrain that has ever been called a road. I say I met him, but no words were exchanged—I only offered him my “Sandino Sombrero” and he wore it famously, gratefully. A few kilometers further down the “road” my friend tugged at the hem of my shirt excitedly. Through the squatty ash colored trees where he pointed I could see a red brick and split-lumber home. Joel pointed vigorously toward the campo and then toward himself and me. I nodded to indicate that I understood I would be staying at his house. A wide, bright smile appeared underneath the Sombrero.

After we dismounted onto the parched, fertile earth and introduced ourselves to Joel’s family, Doug announced that he had to leave for an hour and would return after I “got situated.” I stood in stunned silence and watched as my only translator left me alone, as it were, armed with only 12 words of Spanish. To my host mother, Dora, I volunteered a reluctant Como
Estas? and was met by a torrent of very foreign-sounding words in reply. I merely shrugged, embarrassed. Repeated attempts from both sides proved fruitless, and Dora eventually gave up. I could not blame her. Uncomfortable silence settled in the room. It was accentuated, I noticed, by a hushed, giggling refrain in the kitchen: No entiendo, no entiendo! contributed by several adolescent girls whom I hadn't noticed before. Despairing of my predicament, I took out a piece of paper and frantically began draw, as it was the only thing I could think to do at the time. Joel was the first to graciously acknowledge my rough and irregularly-drawn airplane, and before very long the two of us had mapped out mi casa and su casa in carefully approximated places on a chart of the Americas. The childish stubby-nosed airplane joined our houses with a thin, arced line, and the drawing was complete. Dora and her three daughters crowded around our picture. There were rounds of Si, si in the circle, and one of the daughters traced her finger along the flight path from east Georgia to central Nicaragua. I smiled and exhaled all the nervous energy I had built up over the past ten minutes. I had missed my first connection, but thanks to Joel, I knew I had made a later one.

From that point, Joel never left my side as long as he was able. He became my teacher. A farm set was brought out so that I could learn all the animal names (I promptly forgot all of them). Joel took me on a tour of su casa pointing out and demonstrating how to do the simplest tasks which confounded me, such as how to wash one's hands in a dip-and-pour basin without contaminating the water source. Having done this, Joel lead me carefully out into the yard, making sure to illuminate my path with his flashlight and advising me when any rock or divot might cause me to stumble. Finally, we arrived at an appropriate spot and Joel hid his flashlight. He tilted his head back and stretched his body toward the sky, as if proud of the height that he could reach. But his gaze extended past his arm and into the milky-white cosmos, and so I looked. Estrellas, he pronounced softly, and my eyes had to adjust, not to the darkness of the firmament but to its awesome fullness and stunning brilliance.

I am back in the States now, and I think of Joel often: what he is doing, what he will do, who he will become. Joel was a good teacher. He taught me how to become childlike again, how to acknowledge my basic vulnerability and how to share in the fellowship of human weakness. How to let go of my restless compulsion to prove myself and to only receive the perfect Love which is meant for who I am, not what I can do. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. Joel taught me the meaning of seeing a light in dark places. His smile underneath the dark shadow of my sombrero. The hazy morning light which framed his small body in the doorway as I roused myself from a long night's sleep (again, his smile was there). His undeniable resolve to acquire my bright, new flashlight as a gift for his nocturnal
ventures. And then there were his stars. Estrellas was the only word out of probably a hundred that I can still remember from my Spanish lessons with Joel. I know I will never forget it. Joel, a simple 11-year-old Nicaraguan campesino boy, taught what hope looks like. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. Before I left my two-night stay at his home, Joel wrote the following on a postcard. I will close with his tender words.

Nicaragua—Samulali.

De: Joél David Estrada Martínez.

Para mi amigo CHAD DANIEL.

Cuando mires hacia el cielo y mires las estrellas recuerda que en Samulali tienes un amigo que siempre te va a recordar con mucho cariño.

Que Dios te bendiga y te proteja siempre. "Regresa Pronto!"

03/03/06
March 7, 2006
Is not this the fast that I choose: to
loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo
the straps of the yoke, to let the
oppressed go free, and to break every
yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the
hungry and bring the homeless poor
into your house; when you see the
naked, to cover him, and not to hide
yourself from your own flesh?

If you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the dark-
ness and your gloom be as the noonday.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of
many generations; you shall be called
the repairer of the breach, the restorer
of streets to dwell in.

--Isaiah 58:6-12 (NKJV)

Ministry is incarnational living. Incarnational living is ministry. I believe Henri Nouwen was right when he said that compassion is not going and giving to the poor from our lives of privilege, compassion is going and liv-
ing among the poor.

Over Spring Break, I met
Stephanie, a young, single, white
woman who moved into the Desire
Street neighborhood—a neighborhood
from the opposite demographic and
socio-economic status of her own. I
realized that it doesn’t matter whether
Stephanie is in full-time ministry or
not. It doesn’t matter if she earns a liv-
ing sharing the gospel or selling cars—
the point is that she lives incarnational-
ly among the poor. She shares her life
with those whom God has chosen to
inherit His kingdom—those whom
God has commanded her serve. Her
ministry is solidarity. She ministers to
those around her by saying, through
action, that the people in the Desire
Street neighborhood are valuable
enough to live next door to, to bake for,
to speak to on the street, and to play
with. The neighbors of Desire Street
are of royal destiny and Stephanie is
their minister.

Incarnational ministry is built
upon a foundation of love. I have come
to believe that the only test people
require that you pass in order to be a
part of their life is: do you love me?
This question is then followed by the
personal question to the asker: Am I
willing to be loved by you? Not: what
color are you? What color am I? Where
are you from? How much money do
you have? It’s simply: do you love me,
and am I loved by you? This makes
ministry easy. The prerequisite of
Godly servanthood is no longer being
equipped, trained, or good enough—it
is the capacity to love, which frees up
the laborer to pursue a life of kingdom
work in spite of sin and imperfection.
God’s labor is the work of love; not of
skill.
Finding God in the Swamps

Rachel Hope

Around me is complete silence except for the occasional sweeping of an oar through murky water. The trees stretch toward the sky as if to give glory to their Creator. Their strong roots come above the water and look like legs ready to start walking toward my canoe. The waterway ahead twists and curves around patches of these glorious beings. An alligator, the remnant of ages past, stretches across a log to soak up the rays of the sun that penetrate the tree cover. Small plants eagerly spring up from an old stump that once supported a king of the swamp. Bubbles ooze to the surface where the water meets the soft earth. I am floating through the artwork of a perfect and glorious God. As my senses take the scene in, I know I am only experiencing a small piece, one brush stroke, of the painting of an unbounded universe.

The trees part and the dam is in sight. The silence is broken as 21 canoes clank and bang together in their approach to the muddy bank and 35 restless students climb the shore.
ECUMENISM

JESSICA KOLANSKY

I guess I would call myself ecumenical, though I had to double check the meaning of the word before I started writing this. According to oed.com, ecumenism is “the doctrine, or quality, of universality” and I know a thing or two about universality. The Jewish daughter of a Roman Catholic mother and Jewish father who attended a Quaker school for thirteen years, followed by a Presbyterian college where I’m learning Arabic, I’d say I am pretty open to other religions and traditions. But none of this compares to my very favorite ecumenical experience in which the sacred truly did meet the ordinary on a particularly chilly, rainy day last April.

As the newly-elected Jewish Student Union president, I was in charge of organizing our annual Second Night Seder for Passover. With guidance from the exiting leaders, I had most of the control for that dinner of 60. I talked to the Commons caterers, I booked Erwin Lodge, I made sure we had enough Seder plates and shank bones and I rolled more Matzo balls than I care to remember. I was particularly excited when my Arabic teacher, a Muslim man and former caterer, agreed to cook my mom’s special brisket recipe. Brisket, for those unsure, is a specific cut of meat which takes a long time to cook but is incredibly delicious and worth the wait!

Anyway, Bassam said he would prepare the brisket and my only duty was to purchase all the materials. I eagerly made my rounds at the grocery store, looking for the perfect ingredients and, happy with my purchases, returned to campus on Friday afternoon before the big Sunday meal. Since my fridge/freezer/microwave combo deal didn’t have such a large freezer, I decided my eating house, with its overly huge freezer, would be a perfect place for the meat before cooking it on Sunday morning.

I was wrong. I pried myself out of bed early Sunday morning to go meet Bassam and begin the cooking. Sleepily I shuffled into the kitchen of my eating house to retrieve the brisket when, to my extreme horror, I found only one brisket where I had left three. I slammed the door shut, took a deep breath, opened it again and burst into tears. Who, anywhere on campus, would know what the heck to do with a raw piece of brisket meat? And who would just take it from the freezer mid-weekend?

After standing there in shock for far too long, and freezing myself by the open door, I rushed out to my car and over to Erwin Lodge to meet Bassam, who had gone out of his way to get up early too. Tears streaming down my face, I explained the ordeal, gave him the one piece of meat left, and decided my only option was to go find more meat. Three stores into my hunt, I was beginning to freak out – my parents remember those phone calls all too well. Finally, Wal-Mart came through for me and I hurried back to campus only to find that we had encountered another problem.

The oven in the kitchen at Erwin Lodge could barely hold one of the trays of brisket we had prepared. As I mentioned, it takes quite a while for it to cook, including a break mid-cooking to slice it, and there was no way we’d have enough time to cook all of it in the
one oven. As the tears began to well up again, another problem... the caterers didn’t deliver enough water glasses for everyone. Deep breath. We had the caterer’s card and immediately called him so as to cut the problem off at the pass. He was back with more glasses in no time and, upon seeing several worried faces, inquired as to our dilemma.

“Here’s my house key. My wife isn’t home and I’ll be working all day but you’re more than welcome to use our oven for the rest of the brisket.”

Again the tears welled up but this time it was out of gratefulness and not panic. This man offered us his house key and oven for the day without a second thought? Only at Davidson, I thought as I climbed back into my car en route to this man’s house.

As we sat down to begin our Seder some six hours later, I looked around the room at the many hungry faces and couldn’t help but smile. Sixty students and faculty, friends and the Rabbi, Jews and non-Jews alike gathered to celebrate Passover with us. Once the food was served and I heard rave reviews about the brisket, I was again overwhelmed with the urge to smile. If they had any idea the effort that went into getting that brisket to them - a Muslim man cooked, a Christian man opened his home to us and all of this for a Jewish celebration. It is times like that, everyone working together without the slightest issue with the other’s beliefs, when I am proud to say I believe in ecumenism.😊
Syracuse, Sicily

Praise God from whom all blessings flow from my knees to the prayer-benched altar, to the match stick heating my finger, glowing into a candle of the Virgin Mary of tears. I prayed for you here today, in two separate churches in Sicily, ancient Syracuse, church of first century of Christ, you who I hardly knew, whose last name scapes me.

This morning in the church of St. Lucia, an ancient Greek temple converted to Yahweh as if He only came around once Christ died—and yet, where were the children of God in this place in that age? Wandering the desert, exiled to Babylon? Children of their own divine empire? Athena, the temple’s first patron, was no god—perhaps a human exalted for too many generations for the men to remember they ever shared the same race with their duel ing, embittered gods of the mountains. Did you sit high, rising above Mt. Olympus which you crafted in a word, waiting, knowing their glory, empires, devotion would fade? Do you still sit high, knowing we will always forget our first love, and seek you only after the earthquake, a renovation of our ruins? I envy a heart big enough to break and yet still carry the broken.

I prayed to You today in this temple’s side chapel flanked by Athena’s peristyle donated to your memory as an afterthought. My heart breaks too. I didn’t know why my tears flowed out of my eyes bound by my knees bowed to a God from whom all blessings flow. How dare I—I who force you into my heart’s periphery—be Your first love. ☪
February 27, 2006

I often sympathize with those who brought the loaves and fishes, when Christ fed the 5,000. They came to the gathering prepared. They came with food, because they understood the inevitability of hunger. They were looking out for themselves – and with good reason.

I envision their faces when Christ asked them for their food, the food which they deserved to eat. I imagine a knee-jerk reaction of selfishness, with each clutching the small amount of food. I would expect each to weigh the costs and benefits of forfeiting the food. And, I think we all, both yesterday and today, sneer at the thought of sharing. For us, the concepts of compassion and solidarity are hardly natural.

In America, we, the people who have and hoard the loaves and fishes, worry about the risk. If we are to share our food, we are concerned much more with the return on our investment. We need some form of insurance, which promises compensation – be it recognition, self-righteousness, or more of those damn loaves and fishes.

With these concerns and fears, we misunderstand and misdirect Christ’s request, when he asks us to share with our brothers and sisters. Even if he demands our riches, our loyalty to wealth and our compensation, he – much more importantly – invites us to participate in His miracle, which expresses His power more than our willingness to share. For me and this group, the Journey to Nicaragua embodies that invitation and our participation in His miracle as well. We have come to this country with scraps of stale bread, broken Spanish, insensitivity, and ignorance. For the time being though, we have abandoned our prosperity and security, accepting Christ’s challenge, accepting the risks of living in community with other Christians – whether American or Nicaraguan.

Once we choose, however, to participate in Christ’s miracle, without hopes of compensation, we receive great rewards – in a characteristically Kierkegaardian way. For those who offer their food to Christ, they walked away from the gathering fully satisfied. And, the journal entries before mine reflect that satisfaction and that reward – in many tangible ways. We’ve all embraced a culture full of people, who cannot afford pan y pescados at times, enjoying the rhythm of their music, the freshness of
their food, and the warmth of their smiles.

For Alex and me, as we live here with Marta and her family, we have also recognized the reciprocity in that Biblical story. Each person in that crowd receives food and reward, for seeking Christ and the gospel. When our family gathers after dinner here in Nicaragua, each person enjoys the company and friendships, each accepting their own reward. For the two of us, gratitude is self-evident, as we constantly mutter gracias. But, Marta’s soft and gentle laughter, Leo Jr.’s curious questions, and Leo Sr.’s slow nods of approval also express deep and profound thankfulness for our time together. Tomorrow, when we leave our home-stay with the Sandovals, we will not leave empty-handed. Instead, we will carry small scraps of paper, with their address scribbled on them, scraps of paper, which commemorate Christ’s invitation toward compassion and risk and also the sweet gratitude – shared between us – for our time together.

Alex Gregor
THE WAY IT IS

JOHN FRY

February 28, 2006

A voice being played via speakers, probably a priest, has just quoted Chuang Tzu about the value of silence. About a parable when after you catch a fish, your net is forgotten; a rabbit caught, the snare forgotten; an idea grasped, the words used to describe the idea forgotten. Chuang Tzu, or one of his Taoist masters, remarks: Where is the man who has forgotten words? He is the one I want to talk to. Where is he indeed.

Arrived at Gethsemane yesterday early evening. All of the landscape, it seemed, welcome our silver Volvo with open arms, branches, fields of grass gone dry in winter and fine as hair, and a shock of sky brilliantly shot through with beams of light beyond a bank of clouds. Truly, the angle and layout of each arc seemed to spread out in whatever direction we turned. Gorgeous, I thought. Near-prophetic. Even, perhaps, miraculous? Beautiful, undoubtedly, which was enough. Let me be taken into your arms, I thought and prayed, landscape I do not know — yet — but will be immersed in before the sun sets and the monks give up their souls to God in the words of the Nunc Dimittis. Thrown head-long and -first into the current of Silence, which is so loud and overrunning with music — not Delillo’s “white noise” — freshet by freshet, over and around rivulets free, utterly, of eddies: like Komachi’s tanka where she says that she’s but a cut and empty reed, a current has come to carry me into the desert where every grain of sand becomes a mirror. As with her, I am ready, wanting, willing to be taken.

An almost absolutely clear sky rinsed of clouds this afternoon, after Sext. As with morning, altho I didn’t attend Vigils, Lauds, or morning Mass — my body, oh Judas-flesh, demanded sleep — the hours of the day, today’s god growing into woman- or manhood now, sound rife with birdsong to the point of being raucous. Occasional roar of cars hauling aimless ass along the road, tho I’m not bothered by it anymore. Wind, yes, yes, wind whispers into the drums of my ears stretched taut to the point of thrumming. How can one ever describe the words of the wind, or the absence thereof? Poe, in “Silence—A Fable,” depicts absolute terror and horror residing not in a chaos of cataclysmic action but, instead, in a silence that overwhelms and makes one flee the hell away as fast as legs can run. Perhaps for a mind buzzing with opium or laudanum draughts such would horrify but not so with me. Besides, in a place like this, as with almost any place on earth, silence is rarely if ever an absolute but something relative to one’s ordinary surroundings. Silence, and her sister Solitude, becomes unbearable for the person
habituated to the hustle and tramp and trudge of Clarissa Dalloway's London on a Monday or Tuesday; noise and febrile activity distract, and Delillo is right to portray, scathingly, how unable so many of us are to consider ourselves in relation to our surroundings as simple, single selves-souls without the ways in which we compulsively distort our reflections for our own sakes.

Solitude and silence, a la Eckhart vis-a-vis Shunryu Suzuki, serve as "one mirror reflecting another with no shadow between them" where we, divested of such shadow — smoke-screens — and naked now, find ourselves caught. When one considers the desert the opposite of the oasis, one will quite literally flip her shit once she discovers that, thanks to solitude or silence or both, ideally both, she has left the oasis and's in the desert now. Bewildered, disoriented, she cannot realize, at first, that they are neither opposed to each other nor fundamentally different and, actually, are one and the same. Once she finds that the unadulterated fact of herself, alone in the midst of the Alone, which is to say God(s), not a thing to be feared but embraced as what is, she will find that the desert hides an oasis in its heart, and, in turn, the oasis so overwrought with noise and distraction, hides a desert. Insofar as I understand it, which I hardly pretend I do in any complete sense, the desert and oasis are akin to Dogen's mountains and rivers. As the saying goes following that beautifulutra, before I grasped Zen, the mountains were nothing but mountains and the rivers nothing but rivers. When I got into Zen, the mountains were no longer mountains and the rivers no longer rivers. But when I understood Zen, the mountains were only mountains and the rivers only rivers. So too, I think, with silence and solitude, with the desert and the oasis.
I, along with fifteen other Davidson students, represented Campus Outreach in the massive cleanup efforts in New Orleans. We partnered with an urban organization called Desire Street Ministries located in the upper Ninth Ward, one of New Orleans’ hardest hit areas. According to the workers at DSM, before Katrina unleashed her fury on the Gulf Coast, the Ninth Ward had been rated one of the most dangerous and impoverished areas in the United States. Now, however, it is one of the safest as it is virtually devoid of human presence. Five months after the storm, silence still haunts the once lively streets, and the weather-battered homes remain desolate, marked only by sloppy spray paint to denote a search team has swept the area.

Our job was to gut houses that had been untouched since the evacuation in late August. The overpowering stench of rotting food and mildew evoked my gag reflex as I walked through the door of our second project. We soon discovered that dinner had been left half-baked in the oven, marking the haste in which the owners had fled. Little had been taken with them. Water-warped photos of an aged, dark skinned man lay in a pile in the corner of the first bedroom. Closets were filled with personal items like clothing, birth certificates, and a marriage license. I couldn’t help but feel like I was invading the privacy of this poor, elderly couple.

Our eleven-man team spent two six-hour days laboriously removing personal items, tearing down mold-splotted drywall with sledge hammers, scraping up mud-stained floor
tiles, pulling nails, and removing waterlogged insulation—all with the hope that someday soon the couple who once lived here would be able to return to their home and rebuild.

Being in New Orleans and seeing such destruction made my heart ache for restoration that I knew only the Lord could provide—not overnight through a supernatural miracle, but through His commissioning of the Christian community to serve others. The verse in Isaiah illustrates God’s desire for physical—not just spiritual—restoration of the earth. With trips like these, I believe the Davidson community is finally bridging the gap between the secular and spiritual, realizing that the division of these two realms is merely a human-made construction, not the Lord’s. 🙏
THE PLACE WHERE GOD FAILED

JESSE SHARP-WILLIAMS

I knew we were getting close by the smell: sharp, acrid, burning. It felt invasive, like the smell of abandonment, of the things society casually tosses into the garbage without a thought as to where it ends up. Our bus turned a corner and I saw it. La Chureca. The Managua city dump in Nicaragua. This was the place I had been envisioning in my mind for three years. Two of my friends went to Nicaragua freshman year and came back with a determination that I envied. They had seen something that moved them to work for change, and I wished that for myself.

Finally after so long, I was in the dump. I thought of all the facts that I knew about La Chureca: there were 177 families that lived and worked in La Chureca sorting through the garbage to find plastic and metal to recycle; they earned less than one dollar a day; many people sniffed glue throughout the day, not only to escape from the reality of living in a dump but also because the glue stifled their hunger pangs; there was a church, a health clinic and a school located on the dump. I looked out of the bus window at the expanse of trash and quietly recited these phrases like my personal mantra, reassuring myself that I could handle this, that I knew what to expect.

The bus stopped in the middle of the dump as the garbage trucks moved around us and people walked by the windows, looking in with a slight interest. A group of five cows trotted by, moving towards a puddle of brown water to drink. The cows were fatter than the humans.

I felt myself grow hot. The voice of Yamileth, a woman who had worked in La Chureca collecting bottles to save money for a house, became a faint buzzing sound in my ears. I tried to focus on her words, but I could not understand what she was saying.

I stepped off the bus and surveyed the massive heap of garbage that spanned miles into the horizon. Others started walking slowly, following Yamileth towards the houses that were clustered together. I felt rooted in the spot, paralyzed with anger or fear or sadness. I can't do this, I thought wildly, panicked, wanting to be anywhere else in the world.

I started crying and accepted the tissue that was pushed into my hand, wiping my eyes and thinking ironically that I could drop the tissue on the ground and it wouldn't even matter. My efforts to never litter and to recycle every bottle seemed so trivial.

Crushed paper cups.

I watched the people watching us tour their neighborhood. Curious, they crept into their front yards, heads peeking over the top of sheet metal from a Coca-Cola vending machine that served as a front door. A man and a woman came and stood in front of their house the size of my bathroom, smiling gap-toothed smiles and waving.

My face burned as we toured La Chureca, Yamileth pointing out houses of her friends and the health clinic that never had medicine. I felt ashamed, disgusted at our group photographers snapping pictures of laughing children. I forced myself to make eye contact with people, horrified for letting them see me crying at their lives. STOP CRYING, I screamed inwardly to myself. Anger smoldered inside me like the methane fires that burned three feet underneath the trash, smoke seeping up from the ground. What are we doing here? I asked over and over in my head.

Passing the church, I looked up to see an image of Jesus cradling a baby in his arms with the words OASIS DE ESPERANZA written above the picture. Oasis of Hope.

We walked past house after house made from metal scraps and pieces of cardboard. A man lay on the ground, a bottle of glue clutched in one hand, dozing in the sun. A woman hung laundry. A man swept his front porch, trying to rid his home of the endless flecks of trash that floated into his living room.

Later in the shower, I thought about the man sweeping his porch: his desire for cleanliness while he lived in the midst of shit—this distinction he drew between unwanted bits of trash
and his house, composed of the same discarded materials that he sorted through for a living. Under the stream of cool water I washed my hair and face twice, wanting to rid myself of the grit of La Chureca, wanting the dirt out from under my fingernails, the dust off my pant legs, the images out of my head.

In debriefing that night, people called La Chureca a community, joyful because of the laughing children, and hopeful because of people like Yamileth who got out. "Anger is fuel," people encouraged me when I described my disgust with the existence of a place like La Chureca and with us for gawking at such extreme sadness. "I feel grateful for my anger," someone commented, "it means I live in a world that will not allow a place like La Chureca to exist."

Later that night, after we turned off the overhead light, I gazed at the ceiling. I tried to pray for understanding, for something to lessen this pain I felt, this combination of guilt and powerlessness and sheer unapologetic rage. I closed my eyes and begged God to help me feel comforted. I needed to be reminded why I believed in God, why I believed prayer was helpful in times of despair, but all I could think about was that man sweeping his porch, the scratch of the bristles against the packed dirt and trash.

As hard as I try, I cannot find God in the dump, at least not the perfect, loving God I am encouraged to believe in. The God I saw in the dump was a God who failed, who failed Her people and suffers as a result. I am disappointed and angry that a place like La Chureca was created, disappointed and angry with myself for a voyeuristic desire to see it, and I feel no reassurance from the God I once understood. I cannot say to myself that God will liberate the people from La Chureca from their injustices. There is no freedom in sight for them. There is no silver lining and there is no salvation on earth. There is no Oasis of Hope.

I cannot remember the reason why I felt the need to stare at some of the poorest people in the world, and I cannot remember what wisdom I had hoped to find. Maybe someday I'll wake up one night and realize that the joyful God was there all along. Or maybe I will spend the rest of my life using my anger as fuel, fighting for the rights of society's invisible people whom I saw for a few hours one day. Or maybe the images from La Chureca will slowly fade away, the man and his broom blending into the loud trucks and disembodied baby dolls, becoming simply another piece of trash so that I can move on and live a normal guilt-free life. But for now the man emerges in my dreams, in my head as I take notes during class, lurking behind my smile and my laughter. And the smell of La Chureca lingers, caught in my nose hair or my clothes or my skin, burning and raw, reminding me of the place where God failed.
LIFE AND COMPLICATION

JOSHUA STIFF

Movies and novels can afford us a storybook ending because at some point the conflict must resolve and the plot concludes. Real life, though, and those that live within its world hardly possess this same luxury. After the initial climax and resolution of any give episode in our lives, the plot continues on into a world of hurt and pain that affords us more complication and difficulty than the happiness of ever after. We hope and dream of a future that unfolds in fairy-tale splendor, but how often does disappointment ensue, leaving us with the memory of life before expectation and before our current plight.

Thomas fought in ‘Nam and after the conflict moved to upstate New York, where he drove a truck route for thirty years. He had hopes of a peaceful retirement but as a result of company cutbacks was laid off a year before his pension. Clinging to the American dream of a better life in a new land, he decided to pursue retirement anyway, and so sold his possessions and moved to Myrtle Beach. He spent less than a year roaming the beaches and working on his car, though, before he could no longer support himself. Now Thomas must wake up at 4:30 every morning to work a job flipping burgers at a beach-side McDonalds. He has arthritis and can barely tie a trash bag. He endures criticism and condescension constantly from fellow employee and manager alike. He has taken to reading conspiracy theories and takes solace in that fact that his current trouble has nothing to do with his own fault, but is actually the oppressive regime of aliens who control Washington from the far side of the moon.

Darry’s parents divorced one another when he was a tender age of six. He was his father’s favorite but daddy moved away. His mother’s love was scarce, and daddy was too hurt, too confused, and too far away in every sense of the phrase to nurture this boy, his son. Darry learned to cope and grew into an intelligent and independent young man. He went to college but dropped out, dissatisfied with collegiate education. Eventually, he moved from the east coast to the west, where he started several web-service companies that he fortunately sold before the market crash at the end of the nineties. He invested his wealth well which enabled him to live unemployed for seven years, during which he attended carpentry school and traveled the world. He has recently returned to employment where he now programs the annoying advertisements visible on the margins of website search engines. He lives alone and has difficulty maintaining relationships with both family and friends, particularly women.

There is no need to dramatize the lives of either of these men. Though the
events of their lives display tragedy and invoke a despairing sadness, both men possess a story that is not all that different from our own. Their respective narratives began before their birth and persist beyond the events for which I have accounted. They lead from one incident to the next, offering a string of episodes that climax and resolve into further complication. Thomas left unemployment in New York for retirement in Myrtle Beach which only led to the difficulty he now encounters at McDonalds. Darry traversed the world, only to return to the banality of petty, corporate work and the plaguing consequences of a broken childhood. No, these stories are not dramatic, but the realistic ongoings of daily life. Nothing theatrical counterfeits their experience for it is mine own as well as yours. The conclusion of my undergraduate education leads not to peace and prosperity, but to the anxiety of having to make a life for myself in a confused and perplexing world. What do I have to look forward to? My grandparents retired from forty years at the electrical plant to several years of cancer and a heart attack. The complication did not end.

Emmanuel was born on the Mediterranean. His tumultuous childhood witnessed genocide, exile and political asylum. The death of a dictator opened his return to the country of his birth. He had left a babe but returned a man bent on spiritual and social renewal. He voiced a radical message that criticized the social, religious, and political elite, calling people not to leadership but to service, not to violence and hate but to a revolution of forgiveness and love. He refused to neglect the shunned, and instead nurtured the poor and dined with whores and thieves. He told stories and taught lessons, inviting those who were willing to join him in his mission. The mission, though, provided a puzzling paradox. It was a pursuit of life that led those involved to the sacrifice of that very thing. Emmanuel was arrested, imprisoned and executed by the powers that be. He was buried but his body went missing. Some speculate his corpse was stolen, others that he rose from the dead.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the story of God encountering and engaging the world by and in His Son Jesus Christ. It is not a story unlike that of Darry or Thomas, or even you and me. Jesus survived climax that resolved into
further complication. He endured the trials of exile to return to a home fraught with a need to which he attended, only to receive as compensation crucifixion. As we so often experience, his story ends in death. But does it really? Consider the resurrection and ascension of Christ as well as the deeds of the apostles recorded in Acts. Did not the story continue? Do we not witness God’s continued involvement with human life? The resurrection and ascension are often perceived of as the conclusion of the gospel narrative, but in what way does the story end? The climax of the cross resolves into the bodiless tomb and the appearance of a dead man. The story does not end but continues. The character further engages the world, and does so in the complication of further pain and suffering - that of his apostles, his people and his presence.

The gospel does not afford us a story book, fairy tale-like ending. Real life pervades the narrative, for Christ participated in the difficulties of human existence and continues to do so today in both his people and in his personal presence. The story of Jesus is the good news of a God who exists in relationship to his creation. He is a character intimately involved in our struggles and our brokenness. God is not removed or abstract but concrete, one who knows our burdens and unresolved complication for he himself has born our condition as one of us. He has done all this and his story continues alongside ours for our reconciliation and redemption as well as our hope, faith and love.
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