AVAILING
2012
Collected Works on Religious and Spiritual Life
A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength.
—John Ruskin
As Davidson students, it is easy to lose ourselves in the daily intellectual grind. We shuffle from Chambers to the library and then back again. We nurse mugs full of steaming caffeine. We daydream about catching up on sleep. However, even when burdened by a heavy workload, the most exhilarating work of a college student is discovering what makes one feel truly alive.

We are excited to publish Availing this year because we believe that these essays and poems, as well as visual art and photography, are truly life-giving. These gifted students have captured the thought-provoking experiences we have in the classroom, around campus, and across the globe in beautiful ways. We are confident that the following explorations of spirituality and faith will free readers from the doldrums of life and inspire discussion among seekers of all ages.

We would like to thank Chaplain Rob Spach and the Religious Life Council for their support throughout this process.

Peace and Love,
Katherine Burd ’14
Corinne Hester ’13
Mary Murphy ’14

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My spring break service trip to New Orleans, led by Jewish Funds for Social Justice and Progressive Jewish Alliance, provided me with numerous valuable learning experiences that strengthened my connection to Judaism. While painting houses, meeting locals, touring the city, and participating in service learning programming, I bonded with peers of my own faith and other faiths, interacted with the Jewish population in New Orleans, and learned more about the most important concept of Judaism for me: Tzedakah.

The bonds I formed on my trip remain with me to this day. I got to know other Jewish students from North Carolina, as well as an interfaith group from Juniata College, consisting of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and atheists. I felt that I got the best possible experience from this trip. I got to know other Jewish students with numerous valuable learning experiences that strengthened my connection to Judaism. While painting houses, meeting locals, touring the city, and participating in service learning programming, I bonded with peers of my own faith and other faiths, interacted with the Jewish population in New Orleans, and learned more about the most important concept of Judaism for me: Tzedakah.

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Baptism
Annalee Kwochka '15

Walk together, children
Together down into that deep deep river
Down in the river to pray
Good Lord, show me the way.

The water is high and wide
And we are sunk down
Chest high in the turgid, swelling pools,
Crying out for a light and a way and a path.

The world is all too beautiful for you to be lost.
Too alive.
It is springtime again and the dogwoods lift their knobby hands
Toward the sun, snowy flowers drifting in the breeze.
And yet every leaf is keening
Every ripple in the wide river runs with tears
For you.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
How do you baptize a child not born?
This is something that cannot be fixed.
You are here now, but soon you will not be
And it cannot be helped
And it is no one’s fault.
What do you do for the ones who are lost?
Good Lord, show me the way.

Wade in the water
God’s gonna trouble the water.
Hurt strains against our ankles,
Pulls us into the breaking rapids and under.
Your absence is cold and murky and you are still
Not there.

Walk on, my children
Don’t you get weary.
Water is all around us and above us
We are so tired, and so scared.
Clinging to each other,
We are down in that deep deep river, praying
Good Lord, show me the way.
The water is cold and swift
The rapids are going to wash us new someday
The rapids are going to carry us through someday
Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin’ for to carry me home.
Of all the puzzling passages in the Bible, I find this one the most baffling. Mankind is far too diverse and has been changing for far too long for there to be anything physical about us that mirrors the likeness of God. God, in that creation parable, must point to something much deeper about humanity that He shares with us. Much of my spiritual journey has been the search for an answer to this passage. I think I have finally uncovered a glimpse of the beginning of the answer.

One night earlier this year, I was talking to a girl on my hall about the tattoos we wanted. She mentioned a date. When I asked her what it meant to her she said, “It’s my salvation day; the day I knew I wasn’t going to Hell anymore.” The idea, though foreign from my Catholic conception of salvation, took hold of my imagination. Was there a time in my faith journey where I knew incontrovertibly that God loves me and wants me to love Him? A moment after which I decided to be Catholic “not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” My mind settled quickly on two. These two moments, though outwardly simple, literally forced me to my knees. And through them, I have begun to understand my likeness to God.

On my first “Salvation Day,” I was on a winter break trip with three friends visiting a ski lodge in Western Maryland. There is something about new places that frees the mind to experience reality more acutely. Physically, I was far from home. Spiritually, I had just started to imagine myself as a Christian and felt far from understanding anything about my faith. These two places intersected on the last night of the trip and found me and my friend dressing for dinner. He was struggling with pressures from his girlfriend to have sex and his religious belief to abstain. For more than an hour he explained this struggle between his faith and his humanity. I tried my best to listen and help, but my mind was paralyzed by his conviction. After James left the room, before following him to dinner, I collapsed to my knees beside the bed. I had never felt so close to a person as I did that night. I thanked God for blessing me with that friendship. I had never felt so close to God as I did that night. I vowed to live my life as strongly convicted as he did.

On my second “Salvation Day,” my paths of place and spirit again collided on the last day of a winter break trip. I was with a few friends from Davidson, visiting a party at George-town in Washington, DC. Though not so far from home as a mountain ski lodge, in this stranger’s apartment I felt a million miles away. I had only been in college for a few months by now, and my time had been spiritually challenging.

Though these friendships have evolved, as friendships tend to and should, I often return to these memories as an intense proof of God. When I reflect, as I often do, on these two times of proximity to God, I am drawn in by one fact: the moments in which my spirit has moved the most are the same moments in which I feel most totally connected to others. If one believes in, as I do, a God in Three Persons, one must also imagine that these Persons interact with one another internally supporting each other and, in earthly terms, loving each other. God is relational. I have come to realize that my spirit thrives on friendship—more generally, on love, on being relational, having relationships. At this time in my life, I can see that humanity’s likeness to God has nothing to do with how we look but everything to do with how our spirits in love in relation to the spirits of others.

I was led by the same girl who set this thought process in motion, to the First Letter of St. John—a beautiful reflection on Christian life and, to me, the most vital summary of how we ought to live. John succinctly says, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” I think John must have felt as I do—perhaps he too had moments similar to mine—because we have come to the same conclusion. God is love. To be in his image is to be in love with humanity.
The typical college spring break consists of cold beer, hot sunshine, and short shorts. My spring break was not typical. It consisted of moments of silence, long walks through the countryside, and philosophical debates about the existence of Jesus Christ. For my spring break, I went to Taizé, France with eleven Davidson students and three chaplains. There, we learned about the Taizé monastery, which was founded after World War II to promote peace and reconciliation in a broken society. Our days consisted of three worship services, three meals, bible study, chores, and some free time.

My afternoon walks in the countryside were my favorite part of the trip. I got to breathe fresh air, explore old churches, and make friends with barnyard animals. This agrarian setting exemplified the theme of simplicity that Taizé portrays. At the monastery, most of the buildings, such as the dorms, bathrooms, and a communal dining room are basic and functional. We slept on bunk beds, took short showers, and ate simple grains for meals. The brothers were humble and unassuming, and admitted that they did not understand everything in theology. All the brothers wore a basic uniform that consisted of a sweater, khaki pants, and casual shoes. The only ornate building on the premises was the sanctuary, which had beautiful stained glass windows and a big candle sculpture at the front of the room. The aesthetics of the monastery reflects its priorities: God and simplicity first.
Although I do not think that I could be a sister and live in a secluded nunnery, I could see myself living on a farm like the farms I saw in the French countryside. I have always experienced God most powerfully in nature. The complexity and magnificence of life never ceases to surprise and overwhelm me. When I look at the level of detail that goes into every leaf or insect, I feel like there must be a higher power at work. On one of my walks, I saw a lamb sprinting from the barn to his mother. He obviously did not have a good concept of directions, because in his attempt to run to his mom, he got too excited and ran right past her. His long, straight legs made me smile, thanking God for new life, spring, and families. Similarly to the brothers, I feel that it is easier to access God when surrounded by fewer material distractions. For example, I feel the presence of God much more easily when watching a lamb run around than watching my favorite television show.

When I came back from Taizé, I had a persistent desire to be alone and to be quiet. I had forgotten how loud Davidson could be at times. My airplane-induced headache followed me everywhere I went. The constant chatter, and non-stop events of Davidson campus were nauseating. I missed the solitude and silence of Taizé, but I did realize that I could recreate some of this peace at Davidson. I have been enjoying spending time outside marveling at the fresh blooms on the trees, the pervasive inchworms, and my pollen-coated bike. I have also been trying to take some time away from my friends to reflect on God in silence. It seems like the more simple a practice is the harder it is to follow. My experience in Taizé helped me realize how hard it is for me to draw myself away from a bustling crowd of Davidson students to relax, reflect, enjoy silence. Yet, I need it. My mind is fed by silence and spirituality.

Taizé was a wonderful time of rest and spiritual questioning, but I realized that I can replicate much of what I enjoyed in Taizé elsewhere. I can go for walks, work in the garden, and meditate at Davidson and at home in California. The power of simplicity is that it is at the core of everything and therefore is always accessible. As I continue this semester I want to be more aware of appreciating this simplicity, and the beauty in God’s creation.
After his death, Alexander the Great’s body was preserved in a giant crock of honey. Bee pollen was considered “life giving dust.” The Hebrew root of the word bee is dabar, which can also mean word, as in the word of God.

Then blood
Then light
Then my word, born.
Then me, buzzing
Then howling, sweet tang of honey, salt tang of blood. Tang of want.
Signals dancing from the moment
Of birth.

Because I was pollinated in the fields
Because the words are murmuring their signal-dance for the heavens
Because I am expecting sunshine

When you brought me home from the hospital in June
The Coreopsis had just opened their petal fingers to the sky,
Bright sunshine flowers waiting for us to arrive.

Then heat
Then your hands
Then mine
Then the witness and the sparrow songs stunning
Then the honeybees flooding like tears
Then you are thirsting for sunflowers.

Because your daylight exudes honey
Because the word is deafening
Because our hands are clutching, pollen hugging our legs.

When I was five, my first concept of death was the honeybee on the sidewalk. The afternoon was hot and wavering and blinding and the bee was waiting, waiting, waiting, its little wings broken.
You said it was not waiting, but rejoicing. My hands did not want to let it go back to the earth.

Then there is no word but the light
Then, swelling into moon or sun—a path
Then the sound subsides
Then the bees are contented
Then we fall back to and beyond the earth, the decaying leaves.

Because the light is consuming the sound and the word
Because the sky is brilliant tonight,
Because the bees are bathing their catacombs with honey.

**Photograph by Julia Watkins ’15**

“This cross outside a church in France reminded me of the community’s simplicity. Those who live the simplest way, I feel, have the richest human experience of all.”
A REFLECTION ON TAIZE

Anonymous

The first thing that struck me about the Taize monastary in southern France was that the barriers that usually exist between people of different faiths did not exist at Taizé. For me, this was liberating, not only because it made talking to people from all over the world very easy, but because it allowed me to feel immediately comfortable with people from different backgrounds. Brother Maxim's interpretations of various Bible passages, however, changed much of what I believed in. The international nature of Taizé also made the small group bible studies fascinating. I was lucky enough to be with a group of people that had very different views and ideas, and we were able to talk in depth about what faith and religion meant to each of us. In this way, Taizé became a real exercise in listening for me: actually listening to others about what and how they believe as well as the ways in which they express that belief was one of the best things about Taizé. I have a lot of different countries or areas of the world, and most of all hearing about the life of Brother Roger and others like him, only that I find meaning in his example. For my entire life, I have always felt motivated by a deep sense of right and wrong. My passion lies in fighting for causes and rights and championing what I understand as "right" or "good," even if I am naive in doing so. When Brother Hector said "dare to live a different life," I suddenly understood that this is exactly what I want to do, and that I need to do it now. Seeing, at Taizé, what faith means to people from all different areas of the world, and most of all hearing about the life of Brother Roger and the words of Brother Hector, has helped me to begin to understand faith in a different way. I do not believe in God, and I do not have faith in a higher power, but I do have faith in people and in a level of right and wrong that defines what it means to be human. I think that having this faith is painful, even brutal, but it is what I need if I am to continue fighting for what I believe is right and good. My experiences at Taizé have helped me to understand that more clearly, and they have also shown me what this means. Taizé in many ways affirmed my faith, but it also helped me to see the complexities of faith and the incredible pain that faith can put you through. I hope that this explanation makes sense, and does not sound too cheesy. It is difficult to talk in a meaningful way about my feelings and beliefs, because there is no definitive way to describe them. I am incredibly thankful for being taken out of my comfort zone, for having experienced some painful and terrible things in my life. I am thankful for my own faith in a real way.
Berlin, Cosmopolitan, international, cultural, populated, beautiful, secular. A mere 36% of Berliners admit religious affiliation, and the city has been described as the "atheist capital of Europe." Whether or not this statistic accurately reflects the truth—a lot of people profess no church affiliation seems like it's a big deal here. Though I didn't have the numbers on church attendance in August when I was packing my bags, this information looked pretty dismal to me as I geared up for my year in Berlin. I was really worried about finding a church when I came to this big city. I had friends, family and pastors praying for me, that I might find some community of faith in this secular place. I did research before I left the States so I could start trying on churches during my first weekend there. I looked at church websites, indifferent to language and location, just hungry for somewhere that I'd be free to worship. And I found a couple of places that looked like they'd be reasonable, even as someone who has a very charismatic church background.

When I got to the city and completed orientation, I was fortunate to find one or two among my peers who were also eager to find a church. One of them, John, was also going to be here for a year, and it made sense to go look for churches together. The first three we tried were disappointing, to say the very least. One was called "Berlin Projekt" and had two Sunday services: the morning one meets at a movie theater and the evening one meets in a café. They have a lot of twenty- and thirtysomethings, contemporary worship music translated into German, and reasonably good messages. But nobody greeted the obviously American visitors when they came in, no one said a word to us at all, except when we took communion. It was all very stiff, with no freedom of movement or worship—when I told my host mom, she wasn't surprised. "All German churches are like that," she told me (in German, of course). "One of my former tenants found a church that he liked while he was living with me. Maybe I can ask him about it."

Okay, great. So I had a vague promise to find out about the church of a former tenant and nowhere to go in the meantime. Super. Fortunately, Duke-Davidson in Berlin sets up its students with language partners, usually German students looking to improve their English skills. I only met with my language partner once, but she told me about an American church in Zehlendorf, the county-equivalent in which I live. She said that the worship was good, with a gospel choir, and that she really enjoyed the atmosphere. John and I, plus a third friend, went there the following Sunday. This church also proved disappointing. Yes, a greeter greeted us at the door, the music was louder and more expressive, and the congregants actually moved during worship, but it didn't feel like we were supposed to participate in the singing; it was as though the choir was performing. The pastor interrupted, kept interrupting one another during the sermon, which made it very hard to get anything out of it, especially as someone who could understand both languages. I knew I couldn't go back.

John's host parents had told him about an international Baptist church not far from where they live. We were planning on going there the following Sunday, but I had my reservations. I still had this feeling of somnambulism, the spirit moving in a somnambulistic way. I didn't think that close encounters over the summer. I didn't want to settle for anything. That weekend, I found out I didn't have to go to the Baptist church with John, my host mom's former tenant, Sam, came by the apartment to pick up his mail. Regine was talking to another friend when he came in, so she sent Sam into the kitchen, where I was cleaning up from supper, to talk to me about his church. We chatted for a bit, and I gave him my email address so he could send me more information and directions, which he did the next day. There are two services on Saturday evenings with supper in between, he wrote, and if you don't trust me on the directions, then check it out on the Internet!

I did trust him, but I figured I'd wait a week before going to Every Nation Kirche Berlin. John and I have already planned what church we'll go to this weekend, I rationalized. I'll try this other church next weekend. But God clearly had something else in mind, because the next morning, Saturday, I was sitting in my room when my host mom came upstairs and knocked on my door.

"Did Sam tell you about his church?" she asked. "Are you going to go?"

"Uh, yeah. Yes, he told me about it. I'm definitely going to check it out!"

"Oh, good. Because I have mail for him. Can you give it to him when you see him?"

And she left the mail on my dresser.

My Saturday night plans abruptly shifted from sitting on my bed, reading, to finding this church to see if it was any kind of appropriate fit.

Photograph by Katherine Burd '14
I got there without any trouble, though I was a little unsure about going in—the whole apartment-doorbell-thing still gives me trouble—and I walked around the block before finally going inside. But when I entered, I realized that my anxiety, born of being painfully shy and also alone, was completely unnecessary. Two women had just finished talking right inside the door, and one of them turned to me and introduced herself, unsure of whether she should speak English or German. This stranger, Samantha, no part of the hospitality team, made me feel more welcome at this church in about thirty seconds than anyone else at any other church has, ever.

After she found out who I knew at the church, Samantha pointed me toward Sam. I walked over to say hello and give him his mail. "What's this?" He was a little surprised to see me so soon after telling me about the church.

"Regine gave this to me this morning when I said I'd be coming here."

"No, I know what it is, but… this is like déjà vu."

"What do you mean?"

"I just… I remember taking this home. Taking it, putting it on the… " Sam made a motion like putting mail on a countertop.

"Uh, okay," he said. "Thanks."

That encounter, along with the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit in that place, told me that I'd found it: the church that either would touch me or would be a place where I could serve. Thus far, it's been both—I’ve connected and grown and changed and am not the person I was when I walked in. I'm on the venue management team, helping with setup and clean-up, part of a small group, and I've helped hand out fliers for an upcoming Alpha course. Yet I've been surprised by words of thanks and encouragement—these people think I'm some kind of blessing to the church.

Two weeks before I left for Germany, I was a mess, terrified that I would not find a place that would encourage and really feed my faith in Berlin, the most secular of secular cities. We're meant to have faith that God wants good things for us. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." I had trusted that God would use this time for something, but I'd also had my doubts about whether He even wanted me to go to Berlin. This experience and the wonderful people I have come to know have shown me yet again the ways in which God provides. According to Oswald Chambers, who wrote My Utmost for His Highest, "Faith based on experience is not faith," but I have found that sometimes it helps to look back and see the ways in which God has made rough, doubtful situations good.

Taylor Thomas '12,
"Chaos in Layers"
O God of movement,  
Creator of feet and legs,  
Of muscles and bones  
Bless my first step  
And my very last  
Bless the steps that get me where I’m going  
And those that wander to nowhere in particular  
Bless the warmth of the sun  
And the soft, cool breeze  
Bless the birds that sing  
And the worms that inch  
Bless the thoughts in my heart  
And the song on my lips  
Bless those I encounter  
And those I never see  
Bless the coffee I gulp  
And the yogurt I eat  
Bless the words I say  
And the looks I give  
Let all these things be of You  
And all these things give life
Availing is a publication of the Davidson College Religious Life Council. For more information, contact Chaplain Rob Spach (rospach@davidson.edu).