The Book, Texts and the Liberal Arts

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The Proceedings

The Book, Texts, and
The Liberal Arts

Volume 4
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# Table of Contents

**Why “The Book, Texts and the Liberal Arts?”**  
*Ronald A. Wells* ............ ............ ............ 1

**Reading is Good Prayer**  
*John Wilson* .... ............ ............ ............ 5

**Response to Wilson**  
*Sam Overstreet* ............ ............ 19  
*Thomas Kennedy* ............ ............ 25

**From Reading to Revering the Good Book**  
*Susan Trollinger* ............ ............ ............ 29

**Response to Trollinger**  
*Drew Crain* ...... ............ ............ 51  
*Jay Green* ...... ............ ............ 55

**Writing on Cloth, Telling the Truth**  
*Dale Brown* ...... ............ ............ ............ 63

**Response to Brown**  
*Brian Austin* .... ............ ............ 85  
*Jean Eledge* ..... ............ ............ 91

**The Reading Life: Joining the Community**  
*Susan Van Zanten* ............ ............ ............ 97

**Response to Van Zanten**  
*Angela Quick*... ............ ............ 113  
*Mark Peach* ..... ............ ............ 121

**What We have Heard: Final Thoughts**  
*Jud Laughter*... ............ ............ ............ 125
Why “The Book, Texts and the Liberal Arts?”

Ronald A. Wells
Maryville College

Last fall, when thinking ahead about a theme for this year’s symposium, several things converged. First, there was a major article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, “The Fate of the Book.” Then I came across a review of a wonderful little book, which I read the next weekend, The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter is a Distracted Time, by David Ulin, book critic of the Los Angeles Times. Finally a new and exciting issue of Book and Culture came out -- just as I was about to have an appointment with President Tom Bogart to brainstorm about a theme for the coming year. He had read the The Chronicle article, and had seen the new issue of Books and Culture, though not the book by Ulin, which I mentioned to him.

It seemed to us that a theme was presenting itself for the Maryville Symposium on Faith and the Liberal Arts; not so much to ruminate or lament about the fate of the book in the digital age, but to think about what a life of reading might mean for people of faith in a liberal arts setting. An important thing we can instill in our students is that books are their friends, and that they take books with them on the life journey. So we thought it might be good to get some prominent writers who are also people of faith to come to discuss this with us.

We decided to try to get John Wilson -- the distinguished editor of Books and Culture -- to come here to start off the Symposium. Happily, I was able to get John to agree to come, and I turned my attention to who would be good to both follow and extend what John would do. I thought of the outstanding
work of Susan Van Zanten in Seattle, and of Dale Brown, just up the road in Bristol, TN. The only task was to persuade them. As you can see, I did, and we were well on our way. But the fourth major slot needed to be filled. I was musing about that in October when I flew to Oregon to attend the biennial meeting of the Conference on Faith and History. One of my old friends was also there, Dr. Bill Trollinger. I had not before talked with his spouse, Dr. Susan Trollinger, about her own academic interests; but when I did, I thought immediately that her work was right for us. Happily for us, she agreed. The final slot, of the person to do the important job of wrap-up, more or less fell into my lap. A young scholar, Dr. Jud Laughter, newly appointed at the University of Tennessee, joined the men’s group at our church in Knoxville; after talking with Jud about his interests, he was soon on our team too. Then, I was glad to be able to secure the commentators from here at Maryville and other colleges in the area, comprising a group of people I knew, and those recommended to me. I work very hard in getting these conferences together; but sometimes one has to be in the right place, and have a little bit of luck!

So, why does a small liberal arts college bother to host a scholarly conference like this, on “The Book, Texts and the Liberal Arts” under the heading of “Conversations on Faith and the Liberal Arts?” and then to disseminate The Proceedings all over the Southeast? The short answer is this: it springs from the twin pillars of Maryville College’s identity, that is, liberal arts consciousness formed in a church-related context. In American higher education, a majority of liberal arts colleges, despite the religious roots of most of them, have elected to distances themselves from their religious heritages. They say that to strive for academic quality must mean keeping religious viewpoints marginalized, in what one scholar has called “the God box,” i.e., the religion department and the chaplain’s office, and/or in the realm of private belief. We are also note that a minority of liberal arts colleges takes the opposite tack; that is, they believe that faith-based ideas must lead the discussion, and, in some cases, be the essential filter through which all academic work must be done. For them, “God” is not in the box but on the throne of the college. Trying to balance these two imperatives was, for me, put in a classic yet homely formulation by Cotton Mather in 18th century New England, in his sermon “The Two Callings,” by
which he meant a person’s earthly calling and her heavenly calling. Translated into a college context, that’s something like “faith and reason.” For Mather it was like being in a row boat and wanting to get to the other side of pond: you need to use both oars to get there. If you use just one you’ll go around in a circle. As the Vatican recently stated in a wonderful paper, called “Fides et Ratio,” the one needs to inform the other. We cannot let human reason trump faith, or other-worldly faith trump reason.

Maryville College and this Symposium take a determinedly moderate approach in all this. We are not unaware of the tensions and contradictions that this conjunction might leave us with. We embrace the tensions involved, and acknowledge that the seeming paradoxes are hard to resolve. There are many other colleges in North America already committed to this moderate approach – what has been called a third way. It was President Gibson’s hope, and now President Bogart’s hope, that we might catch up with, and join in, that on-going discourse of the third-way scholars, and that our Maryville Symposium might play a modest part in it.

Those making presentations this weekend have agreed to come here to share their ideas with you all. Later this fall, I will receive the revised versions of the papers and of the invited comments. Early in the New Year we will publish The Proceedings, thereby continuing this weekend’s conversations in many other places.
Often, dear sisters, ye ought to pray less, that ye may read more. Reading is good prayer.
—The Ancrene Wisse

We underestimate children’s minds, and the intensity of their thought. When our children were young, there was a period during which I walked to school with them in the morning and then walked home again with them in the afternoon. While we were walking, they often asked questions. For instance, what existed before God created the universe? They were trying to imagine that.

When I was a boy, I often read stretched out on the floor of the living room in the house in Pomona, California which I shared with my mother, my grandmother, and my younger brother. One of the magazines we subscribed to was The Saturday Evening Post. So here I am, roughly ten years old, on a summer day in the late 1950s, turning the pages of the latest issue. And I am fascinated by something I couldn’t have articulated then. Here, in this one magazine (with a brilliant cover by Norman Rockwell leading off), there is a column by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, a condensed version of a Perry Mason novel (maybe The Case of the Long-legged Models), and a spread of grisly black-and-white photos showing the aftermath of a mafia hit, interspersed with seductive ads for refrigerators, airline travel, and pipe tobacco.
Somehow, all of this and more was Creation, which also included me and my loved ones and our house and the orange groves I passed on the way to school and the mountains in the near distance. From this—and here again, I couldn’t have put it into words as I can now—I came to two understandings that have informed my life ever since.

First, reality is miscellaneous. Second, I will never come close to understanding how it all fits together.

This may not impress you. It may remind you of the statement that the meaning of life is 42, except—in contrast to Douglas Adams—I’m evidently serious. Or it may sound rather despairing (apart from its implausibility, which I’ll come to in a moment). But that wasn’t how I experienced it at all. On the contrary, I felt then and still feel complete confidence in the God who utterly transcends my understanding and yet who desires intimacy with us, who are made in his image. Rather than despair, I felt an immense excitement. I felt I had discovered something very important about the world. And in that excitement there was both exhilaration and fear—exhilaration at an inexhaustible multiplicity, evident even in a single issue of The Saturday Evening Post, and fear because (even as I trusted in God) I sensed how messy and unpredictable life would be, to a degree not suggested by what I routinely heard at church or school or home.

Now about the implausibility. You may think I am attributing to my ten-year-old self adult thoughts that are simply foreign to a child’s consciousness. Well, this is oral history, which should always be received with a healthy skepticism. But haven’t you read memoirs by scientists in which they describe their dawning understanding, as children, of the intelligibility of the natural world? I’ve read many such accounts, and they ring true, though it’s only in retrospect that the writer is able to recount and analyze what happened.

We always know more than we can say, and this is especially so when we are children. The jolt I felt while I was reading The Saturday Evening Post wasn’t a onetime eureka moment. It was not a wildly precocious insight. Again and again,
without being able to formulate the thought, I had been struck by the radical difference between the world I entered in one book and the world I entered when I read the one next to it on the shelf. And this difference wasn’t reducible to subject matter or the writers’ diverse opinions—not even simply to “style.”

In my mind’s eye I can see my mom’s books in the low, built-in shelves in the living room: the color of the binding, the lettering on the spines. *Jane Eyre*, Mary Roberts Rinehart and Elizabeth Goudge, a couple of Charlie Chan novels by Earl Derr Biggers, books on the Bible and books on birds, a long row of *Reader’s Digest Condensed Books*, several little red volumes from a cheap set of classic American lit (Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe among them). Whatever was on the shelf, I read.

Meanwhile, my brother and I had accumulated our own modest collection of books, mostly coming to us as gifts: *Robin Hood*, a fat volume of Sherlock Holmes, *Kidnapped, The Black Arrow, Gulliver’s Travels*, a history of the Baseball Hall of Fame and a baseball encyclopedia with the stats of all the players (what might Swift have made of this?), many Landmark books (with subjects ranging from Genghis Khan to Scotland Yard), and so on. Fiction or nonfiction, each book, while I inhabited it, seemed a self-contained world. And yet here they were, all in the same house.

Thanks in part to the rise of the history of the book, the last several decades have brought many studies of the history and phenomenology of reading. *Ancient Literacy, How Russia Learned to Read, The Ethnography of Reading*: these studies cover a wide range. Surprisingly, though, we haven’t had many firsthand book-length accounts of reading as it has shaped a particular life. There are some, and some good ones—Francis Spufford’s *The Child That Books Built* is excellent—but not nearly as many as one would expect, particularly in a period awash in memoirs.

And it’s especially surprising that we don’t have more substantive firsthand accounts of what it is like to read the Bible over the course of a lifetime. We have lots of books telling
people *how* to read the Bible and how *not* to read it. We have plenty that attempt, from one angle or another, to explain how certain kinds of Bible-reading fueled the Cold War and the rise of the Religious Right, and how even today these weird Bible-readers are about to stage a theocratic coup—or would dearly like to try, if sensible, enlightened people like us are ever foolish enough to relax our vigilance. And we have other sorts of books about the impact of the Bible, including a whole shelf published just this year in conjunction with the 400th anniversary of the King James Version.

I was brought up in a Bible-saturated household. My grandparents on my mother’s side were missionaries to China, and my mom lived in China until she was eleven years old. We had Chinese artifacts in our house, and many of the people who came to visit were missionaries on furlough, retired missionaries, and others engaged in one way or another in that enterprise of fulfilling the Great Commission as understood at a particular moment in American history.

My grandma, who helped to raise my brother and me, had a well-worn Scofield Bible. She was a dispensationalist; also a woman with a warm practical faith. She would have loved the freedoms available to women today, since her interests inclined away from traditional female pursuits. She loved to build things, and although she was already sixty-nine years old when she moved in with us after my parents divorced, she was always engaged on a new project. For my brother, who was interested in what she was doing, she made a little toolbelt. I never learned to build anything.

My mother’s Bible was equally well-used. Under her tutelage, we read in the Bible every day. From this I gained my sense of who we are, what has gone wrong with the world and how it can be put right, and what we might hope for in the life to come. Poring over a text, learning chunks of it by heart, arguing over how it should be interpreted: all this became second nature to me.

In my case, without any awareness at the time, these habits influenced my reading across the board. I don’t mean that
I confused *The Taxi That Hurried* or *The Tower Treasure* or, later, Dostoevsky or Emily Dickinson with the Word of God. But nevertheless I read with an openness to revelation. For a period of roughly two years, starting near the end of high school and ending early in college, I put my faith aside. And even after I reclaimed it, there was a long time in which it was hard for me to read the Bible as I always had. I read sporadically, mostly out of a sense of duty, often with a deep sense of alienation. I needed to reconnect.

What gave me entry was the Old Testament. Oddly enough, though the evangelical stream of Christianity in which I was raised is so emphatically centered on Scripture, evangelicals in our time have tended to neglect large chunks of the Old Testament. This hasn’t been consciously intended, but it has happened. When I was a boy, I had been mesmerized by many of the Old Testament stories: so riveting and yet often so enigmatic. The God revealing himself there isn’t easily assimilated. One day in my mid-twenties, I suddenly wanted to read the story of Esther. I read through it quickly, and then read it again, and then pored over it. That was the beginning of my reconnection with the Bible, from which I haven’t been parted since.

In some ways, I read the Bible today quite differently from the way I was first taught to read it, though I still assent to claims that skeptics find preposterous: the notion, for instance, that Jesus was both fully man and fully God. Just as my immersion in Scripture and the interpretation of texts prepared me—little did I know—to read Ezra Pound and James Joyce, Muriel Spark and Beryl Bainbridge, so an immersion in literature helped me to see the Bible with fresh eyes, to be more attentive to the genre of each book and the way it implicitly asks to be read. And yet when all is said and done, I am still the boy I was, beholding mysteries.

Like many others, I have benefitted from the gifts of Richard Feynman, who was not only a world-class physicist and a “curious character” but also an exceptionally good explainer, whether addressing his students at Caltech or a lay audience. Alas, I’m not sure that he would return the compliment. A lecture such as this might irritate him mightily. But one of the
great conveniences of reading is that it allows us to learn from
and take delight in people whose understanding of the world is in
some respects very different from our own, whose temperament
is different, who speak a different language (English, yes, but
there are many Englishes).

In a series of three lectures given at the University of
Washington in April 1963 and published in 1998 as The
Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen-Scientist,1 Feynman
began with a talk on “The Uncertainty of Science.” This is a
theme that many others have taken up—it could even be called a
truism—but Feynman’s treatment of it is illuminating.

“Scientists,” he writes, “are used to dealing with doubt
and uncertainty. All scientific knowledge is uncertain.” A little
later, he says that “what we call scientific knowledge today is a
body of statements of varying degrees of certainty. Some of
them are most unsure; some of them are nearly sure; but none is
absolutely certain. Scientists are used to this. We know that it is
consistent to be able to live and not know.”

Feynman finishes this lecture with a paragraph that sets
up the following two lectures (“The Uncertainty of Values” and
“This Unscientific Age”), anticipating in particular his dance
around religion in the second lecture. “Doubt is clearly a value in
the sciences,” he concludes. “Whether it is in other fields is an
open question and an uncertain matter.” In the account of
religion that follows—and, as he observes, he confines himself
largely to Christianity—Feynman strives to be fair-minded, even
though he makes it quite clear that he is speaking from the
perspective of an atheist. If I could travel back in time for a
conversation with him, I would tell him that faithful believers
(many of them, at least) are also used to living with uncertainty,
although the degree to which they are subject to “doubt” seems
to vary quite a bit. In many respects they resemble scientists as
Feynman describes them. After all, the scientist—insofar as he
remains a scientist—doesn’t doubt the very principles that
Feynman lays out: he doesn’t doubt his commitment to rational
enquiry, tested by experiment, with conclusions always
provisional, subject to change if new evidence demands it.
I’ve been re-reading Feynman in conjunction with a new biography of him by another physicist who is also a skillful writer, Lawrence Krauss. (One difference between Feynman and Krauss is that the latter doesn’t try to be fair-minded when writing about Christianity, for which he has a profound loathing and contempt.) And this reminds me yet again that we live in a Golden Age of science-writing.

Many years ago—decades ago—in what seems like another lifetime, I taught English to college students. There were no classes in science-writing, either as an object of study and reflection or as something akin to an MFA in creative writing. There must be a few places nowadays where such courses are taught, but not many, I gather. I wonder why not. Wouldn’t it be possible for a couple of people from an English department to get together with colleagues from the natural sciences and mathematics and prepare a course? How does a scientist translate his specialized knowledge to the general public? How does such writing work as writing?

Although the third of Feynman’s lectures in that series in 1963 was titled “This Unscientific Age,” in many respects science is the dominant discourse in our culture. But where, for example, is Stephen Jay Gould being studied as a writer? “It is surprising that people do not believe there is imagination in science,” Feynman wrote in the first of those three lectures. “It is a very interesting kind of imagination, unlike that of the artist. The great difficulty is in trying to imagine something that you have never seen, that is consistent in every detail with what has already been seen, and that is different from what has been thought of; furthermore, it must be definite and not a vague proposition. That is indeed difficult.”

Feynman’s aside, “unlike that of the artist,” sounds like deprecation, but perhaps he merely meant to distinguish the scientific imagination from the artistic imagination. In any case, never mind. Listen to this: “Incidentally, the fact that there are rules at all to be checked is a kind of miracle; that it is possible to find a rule, like the inverse square law of gravitation, is some sort of miracle. It is not understood at all, but it leads to the
possibility of prediction—that means it tells you what would happen in an experiment you have not yet done.”

I was the first in my family to graduate from college. My mom had graduated from high school at the age of sixteen, but college wasn’t in the cards for her. After working for a couple of years, she briefly attended Biola, but then she had to quit to take a full-time job. Several years later, she was married; several more years, with two small boys, she was divorced. Like many single mothers then and now, she sacrificed a great deal for her children. While I was an undergraduate, she began to take classes part-time at a nearby community college. Over the years she completed her B.A. and went on to get an M.A. as well. For a short time, she and I were teaching in the same English department.

In the 1980s, in a project inspired by the British branch of L’Abri, my mom began working on an annotated guide to books for children, ranging from picture books to fiction and nonfiction for older kids. *Books Children Love,* as it was called, was published by Crossway in 1987, when my mom was sixty-five. With no bias, I can say that it was a very good book, quite different from most of its kind, and it stayed in print. Eventually, Crossway asked my mom if she would consider a revised edition, to take account of new books published in the interim while omitting some from the first edition. That was an immense labor, but she pitched in and did it. The revised edition was published in 2002, shortly before her eightieth birthday in December of that year. It is still in print (and is now available on Kindle). I often meet people (many of them homeschoolers) who have used the book.

Looking through it myself, as I do now and then, takes me in several directions. Sometimes I’m transported back to the time when reading was new to me. As you know, we can’t recall such memories by brute force—at least I can’t. I can’t, by force of will, remember what it was like to turn the pages of a Golden Book I loved, about the mail and how it was delivered. But by indirection—perhaps while browsing in *Books Children Love,* or by seeing one of the many trains that pass by every day here in Wheaton, Illinois, I am able to relive that experience. And then,
for a few minutes at least, while the memory is fresh, I can rotate it in my mind, speculating on the appeal of this book and the impression it made. For a child, the pleasure of getting mail was strong. Then there was the delight of getting behind the scenes: here’s how you get your mail. I loved the orderliness of the process, and the camaraderie of the workers (quite different, unfortunately, from what my cousin experienced decades later as a sorter for the USPS).

On other occasions, as I turn the pages of my mom’s book, I’ll be reminded of times spent reading with one or more of our children. I had been allergic to Tolkien, in part because fantasy (as opposed to science fiction) was a genre I never readily took to, and in part because I was put off by many Tolkien enthusiasts. But when Wendy began reading The Hobbit with our oldest child, Anna, who was then five years old, I would often join them.

The following year, we moved from Pasadena (to which we would return) to a tiny town in Northern California, at an elevation of five thousand feet. Westwood had been the site of a big lumber operation, and when the mills were still running, the town had a population of ten thousand. But the mills had long been closed, and the population had dwindled to two thousand: one-third retired, one-third working, and one-third unemployed.

For several months of our time there, we lived in a small house on the edge of town, with the woods visible across the street. We had an old wood-burning stove that my uncle had helped us to salvage—someone had discarded it on a lot outside town. That winter, Wendy and I began reading The Lord of the Rings with Anna. Most often, we read in the evening, near the stove, which worked beautifully. For all three of us, that time spent reading together was so magical that we were hesitant to talk about it. How did that change take place? How did I become a rapt reader of and listener to Tolkien? I don’t know, but it began with the first evening when I heard Wendy reading The Hobbit and saw Anna curled up next to her.

You can’t read the same book twice. Even though the words on the pages haven’t been altered, the books have
changed, and we have too. Today, Wendy and I pick up books that we first read with Anna and Andrew and Mary and Katy, our four children, to read with our Texas-based grandchildren. I’m looking forward to the day when we might venture to the Shire with them. And my mom? She has severe dementia. She can’t read anymore, but she still likes to have books around. She’ll hold a book for a while, taking something in, perhaps, however fragmentary, turning the pages.

Hugh Kenner liked to quote an injunction from Ezra Pound, given to Kenner by the poet on a visit to St. Elizabeths, the psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., where Pound was sent to avoid a trial for treason for his radio broadcasts from Italy during World War II. “You have an obligation,” Pound said, “to meet the great men of your time.” Kenner paid attention. He didn’t merely meet Pound and T. S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis and William Carlos Williams and Samuel Beckett and Louis Zukofsky and other eminent writers whose works he shed light on; he got to know them well. My own traffic with the great men and women of my time has been less impressive, but even fleeting encounters, encouraging or discouraging, sparkling or mundane or frankly ridiculous, have always been enlightening.

After my first two years as an undergraduate, at Chico State and (in the summer of 1967, the “Summer of Love”) Berkeley, I transferred to Westmont College, in the foothills above Santa Barbara. I was there for my junior and senior years, and then taught there for a year after graduating. A number of interesting people came to campus during that time, among them Owen Barfield, Francis Schaeffer, Alvin Plantinga (who had only recently published his brilliant first book, God and Other Minds, which we were reading in a Philosophy of Religion class), and William F. Buckley, Jr.

Another visitor was the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, whose name I knew in connection with Wittgenstein. As I recall, she was wearing a leather jacket with a very short skirt and tights (remember, this was the late Sixties); she smoked a foul cheroot. What surprised me was her obvious condescension. She was speaking not in a large hall but in a room with a smallish audience—a good way to encounter a
visiting speaker. She clearly relished her role as a contrarian, but she also conveyed a sense that here, at this evangelical college, she was among people who were both doctrinally suspect (she was herself a devout Catholic) and simply not up to snuff—and on top of all that, they were Americans. It was one of several encounters I had with eminent British academics who positively oozed snobbery, though that was about all they had in common apart from high intelligence and formidable learning.

A couple of times over the years when I talked with someone who actually knew Anscombe, I was told that my recollection of the occasion must be faulty. Perhaps so. We all know how unreliable memory can be. And perhaps what appeared to be condescension was something else entirely, in which case not memory but a false perception would be the problem. Nevertheless the impression lingered.

I have been glad to see the volumes of previously uncollected essays by Anscombe that have been coming from Imprint Academic in the series St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs. The third volume, From Plato to Wittgenstein, has just appeared, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally. Mary Geach, who is one of the daughters of Anscombe and her husband, the philosopher Peter Geach, contributes a very helpful introduction, and something she says about her mother right at the outset was particularly striking to me.

“Elizabeth Anscombe’s interest in the great philosophers of the past,” Mary Geach writes, “was that of a participant in their debate. She learned to take part in their perennial conversation by having a teacher who was himself a great philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. She recorded that before she knew him, the great philosophers of the past had appeared to her like beautiful statues: knowing him had brought them alive for her.”

For Anscombe, Geach says, this engagement with the great philosophers entailed “seriously entering into their concerns and criticizing their thoughts. This did not mean using a philosopher’s work as a text about which to make erudite
observations, nor did it mean taking him as a banner for her cause, nor employing his name as a label for a mindset which she might dislike: it meant interesting herself in the topics that the philosopher discusses, taking his thoughts apart, adopting some and finding deep problems through others, and rejecting what she found silly. She was quite capable of finding a great philosopher silly. She used to say to me that we are all stupid in some ways. I suppose she thought this because she had found in talk with him that even Wittgenstein had his absurd attitudes.”

What an excellent code of ethics, not only for philosophers but also for literary critics and other scholars as well. And this: “we are all stupid in some ways.” So true, and often so needful to remember. The bluntness of it accords with my memory of my only encounter with one of the great women of my time. Whether she was stupid on that occasion or I was, I’m still glad that, however imperfectly, we met.

“Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” This aphorism has the unmistakable air of authority we associate with Simone Weil. It is, in fact, one of her most frequently quoted sayings. Is it true? One feels a bit gauche even asking. What might “absolutely unmixed attention” look like? I don’t think I have ever experienced that. When I tried to make sense of this arresting sentence the first time I encountered it, many years ago, I thought of reading. Is attentive reading prayer? No, not as I understand prayer. And yet Weil’s aphorism lingers in the mind, saying something about reading and something about prayer.

Oxford University Press has recently published a book about reading by my friend Alan Jacobs, a professor of English at Wheaton College, who has also written books about W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis, and Original Sin, among other subjects. Alan’s book, The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction, works its way artfully to these sentences on the next-to-last page: “To pick up a book—to choose to read something, almost anything—is to choose a particular form of attention. That choice creates simultaneously silence and receptiveness to a voice; the reader acts imaginatively, constructing meaning from the experience of finding words on the page, but also, ideally, strives to assume a posture of charity toward what he or she
This is lovely, the teasing out of what a “particular form of attention” demands from us. When we think of prayer, perhaps we tend to think immediately of our own voices, speaking to God, whether asking or thanking or crying out in anguish. What if we think first of “silence and receptiveness to a voice”?

Not all reading makes the same demands; not all reading offers the same rewards. But if the model for reading that Alan gives us here seems remote from our practice, impossible to achieve or silly or both, we are to that extent impoverished. To be receptive, to read with “charity,” is not to read uncritically—on the contrary, as Anscombe’s example suggests: “she was quite capable of finding a great philosopher silly.” Not long ago, someone on Twitter quoted another aphorism from Simone Weil: “Truth is too dangerous to touch. It is an explosive.” My fingers quickly typed a tweet in response: “Yams are too dangerous to touch. They are explosive.” But what bedevils our public discourse today, infecting our reading, is not an unwillingness to criticize, not an excess of generosity. No, what ails us is rather a contagion of willful misreading, rationalized by high-minded appeals to a greater good.

The model of reading that Alan Jacobs proposes is not unachievable. It is practiced in a recent book by one of the speakers at this conference; Susan Van Zanten’s *Mending a Tattered Faith: Devotions with Dickinson*. Van Zanten does not impose her own grid on Dickinson, wrenching the poems to fit, as Helen Vendler does in her commentary on Dickinson, also recently published. Vendler can’t bear to let the poems that hint at faith speak on their own terms. But Van Zanten, attending to Dickinson’s voice, doesn’t try to smooth out the contradictions: “Judging from the evidence of the poems and letters, on some days Emily doubted; on others, she believed.”

At the same time, while she’s a scrupulously fair reader, Van Zanten isn’t simply a curator of this great poet’s work. Rather, as Anscombe engaged the great philosophers whose work compelled her attention, she is a participant in conversation with Dickinson—and Van Zanten invites her readers to join in as well: she describes her book as “a collection of meditative
explorations intended to help you both to enjoy Emily Dickinson’s poetry and to think about spiritual issues.”

Reading is good prayer.

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Devotional Reading, Missional Reading, and Good Prayer:
A Response to John Wilson

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In Ancrene Wisse, a thirteenth-century author writes to three anchoresses, three female hermits who have vowed each to live within a single-room cell a life given to contemplation, prayer, and worship. In that context, they are advised, “Reading is good prayer.” They are an audience very different from most twenty-first century Americans. The anchoresses are not struggling to make time for reading by tearing themselves away from an overload of tweets and e-mails and committee meetings. They must be encouraged to broaden their attention outward from the single, rapt gaze of contemplation to include the ideas and information that can sustain their life of both worship and intercession. We, on the other hand, must often be encouraged to gather in our gaze from the scattered attentions of the active life. To gather it enough to read good books is a feat. To gather it more for prayer and the single, rapt gaze of contemplation is a further accomplishment. That we find it difficult is perhaps why we treasure the advice of one so widely read as John Wilson. When we have so little discretionary time, we value suggestions of what is worth reading, and how to read it, and perhaps most of all, encouragement that the time invested can be richly rewarded.

He has given us good encouragement in a series of finely-painted vignettes that call us back to the richness and rewards of good reading. There is very much here that should
command our enthusiastic agreement. In particular, I would like
to give a hearty “yea and amen” to two of the ideas portrayed:
the unique weight and authority of the Good Book among good
books, and the picture of our reading as a profoundly respectful
conversation with earlier thinkers, a conversation that leaves us
perfectly free to disagree with them. But I would also like to
introduce a twofold distinction of my own about ways that
Christians are likely to relate to good books. Some good books
have for us a devotional purpose; some have a missional
purpose. These two purposes correspond to the two great
commandments, love of God and love of one’s neighbor.
Almost every really good book will fall into at least one of those
two categories for the Christian, and many will serve both
purposes.

This is not a distinction about how we interpret the
meaning of those books so as to resist willful misreading, or how
we let the authors speak for themselves. Rather, it is about how,
after we have carefully tried to let the authors speak for
themselves, we appropriate to our own lives the significance of a
good book. In illustration, let me briefly discuss two examples:
Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, and Stephen Hawking’s science
writing. Tolkien’s books I mention as having a devotional
purpose; Hawking’s, as having both a devotional and a missional
one.

In my own family, we have not yet experienced the
magical moments of reading The Lord of the Rings together. We
have read The Hobbit. But someone gave us a Lord of the Rings
board game, and the mere representation on a black playing
piece of Sauron’s eye, with my vague description of Sauron as
evil, was enough to give nightmares to my younger daughter.
Now both the girls are old enough that we will read it together
soon.

I have heard it said that in Tolkien’s view, any myth has
power and allure for us only insofar as it reflects the great Truth
of the Christian story, of the revelation of God in Christ. That is
probably the reason that The Lord of the Rings is so full of
typology, of figures that resemble and point toward Christ.
Tolkien’s avowal that he detested allegory is quite believable;
and for those who want to find an allegory of World War II and
the quest for the atomic bomb, the publication date of the first edition can quickly and easily disabuse them of that notion. But Tolkien did not at all resist typology, his imitation of the ancient Christian idea that Old Testament people and events might figuratively foreshadow aspects of truth fully revealed only in Christ.

Gandalf is one such figure. The good wizard uses his extraordinary powers to further the cause of good against evil. When he falls into the abyss in a battle with the evil Balrog and later appears alive and clad in radiant white, we easily recognize a type of Christ’s death and resurrection.

There are other types: Earendil; Frodo and Samwise taken together. But my favorite type is Aragorn, or Strider. In him, the crown prince of a kingdom usurped by another wanders throughout Middle-earth disguised as a vagabond. But he is no vagabond; he is a watchman, going here and there with keen perception of the gathering conflict, helping the forces of good to prepare and to prevail. In him we recognize the pattern of Christ’s incarnation: the son of the King goes in the disguise of humble humanity among the people, while an enemy of vastly superior earthly power, failing to recognize the plan, miscalculates. In the end, when Aragorn is crowned king, we see the type of the promised future reign of Christ as King.

Tolkien’s story strengthens and encourages my heart devotionally, in the love of God. On at least one occasion in my life I have, like many others, made a choice that I knew would lead away from public recognition and toward obscurity. I am absolutely convinced of the rightness of that choice. On the occasions when I need encouragement about the subsequent path of my life, it’s not that I look to Aragorn in a fictional world as an example for sustaining encouragement. Rather, I look to what I know about the Christ who freely suffered rejection “outside the camp” in order to serve God’s purposes and humanity’s need (Heb. 13:13). Nonetheless, when I think about Aragorn, the mythic structure of Tolkien’s story encourages my heart precisely because it points to the One who is Truth itself.
Some of our reading will have a devotional effect; some of it, a missional effect. Mr. Wilson mentions good science writing. I read Stephen Hawking’s *Brief History of Time* during the last few hours of a flight home from Korea. My approach to conquering jet lag is to refuse to sleep at all on the plane, so that when I arrive at my destination, I can sleep the sleep of exhaustion no matter what time it is. And I can attest that despite all of Hawking’s immense skill in making world-class astrophysics comprehensible to a lay reader, the final hours of a fourteen-hour flight make it a challenge to comprehend anything about string theory and wormholes.

Hawking makes the observation that a great number of things about the cosmos, like the intensity of the charge on the electron, have to have been finely tuned within a very narrow range in order for the universe to be a place that could support intelligent life. He points out that these facts could support either the claim that there must have been a divine Creator or what he calls the strong anthropic principle. What he means by the strong anthropic principle is this idea: in an infinite succession of universes, one universe is bound to have arisen that would have intelligent life; therefore, the fact that our universe appears to have been finely tuned to support life results merely from the fact that we happen to be here to observe it.

Hawking does not intend at all for his book to be taken devotionally, as strengthening the love of God. In 1988 he attempted to be quite neutral on the God-question. But despite his clear intention, a believer with a heart like mine will find in Hawking’s acknowledgement of the finely-tuned cosmos a reason to worship the all-wise Creator. For it is not difficult to find philosophical shortcomings in the strong anthropic principle.

Scientists usually say that pronouncements about God lie outside the realm of science; nonetheless, when a world-class scientist like Hawking theorizes about God and the origins of the cosmos, everyone listens attentively. From the standpoint of the philosophy of science, the objection to bringing God into the picture is simply this: an omnipotent God could be appealed to
as an explanation for any existing set of data, and an explanation that suffices equally well for every conceivable set of data does not in fact suffice as a scientific explanation for any one particular set of data. A universal solvent solves nothing. It is not a falsifiable hypothesis, because no one can imagine a set of data that would prove it false.

On the other hand, from the standpoint of the philosophy of science, the strong anthropic principle is subject to not one fundamental objection, but at least two. First, Ockham’s razor: science usually prefers the simplest explanation that explains the data, and an infinite succession of universes is perhaps the least simple explanation that can be imagined. But Ockham’s razor is not an absolute principle, for sometimes, with the gathering of further data, the true explanation turns out not to be the simplest one that can be imagined. The bigger problem with the anthropic principle is that it is a fancy tautology. If we say that the universe appears as it does because we happen to be here to observe it, it is as if we rejected the explanation, “Nature is this way because God made it so,” and we preferred instead to say, “Nature is this way because it is this way.” In a contest for which of the two statements has less explanatory power, a fair-minded person should conclude that it is a draw. Some questions asked by science are such ultimate ones that scientific method simply is not adequate for them. In such a circumstance, we need not feel ashamed if we are inclined to bow our heads in wonder and in worship.

In his more recent book, The Grand Design, Hawking apparently has been more dismissive of the idea of God as creator. If the M-theory discussed in the book is in fact the grand unified theory for which scientists have been searching since Einstein, it may take us further toward understanding whether a succession of universes is in fact possible. But the arguments for and against the anthropic principle remain pretty much the same. So one may with fairness wonder whether Hawking’s more recent brief dismissal of God is really required by the science or perhaps proceeds from other causes.
In this, his book may have a missional purpose for a Christian. Hawking the man is a scientist, but the scientist is also a man. What could excite more admiration than the heroic figure of this man with a body so thoroughly debilitated by Lou Gehrig’s disease but with a mind that soars with such peerless brilliance through the most arcane theories of physics and mathematics? On the other hand, the story is well known of his divorce from his first wife Jane Wilde, who by the account in her memoir *Music to Move the Stars* is a devout Christian, to marry his nurse Elaine Mason, and then his subsequent divorce from Mason. It would be a gross transgression for us to speculate closely on the personal trials of Stephen Hawking the man. But it is not difficult to imagine what things outside the realm of scientific data might have influenced the stances he has taken on ultimate questions.

For a Christian who desires to pray with compassion, not only for Hawking himself, but for every human being who ponders ultimate questions, any human being balanced between the heights of human greatness and the painful shame of human weakness, reading Hawking’s books can lead to good prayer. It can help our hearts learn the humble compassion that resonates with all of the human weakness in all of us, but that still pleads with heaven to send down the rain of its mercy into our minds, that we might believe and live. Not all reading is good prayer; we humans are capable of always reading and never praying. But for the Christian intent on the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor, all the really good books will feed a purpose either devotional or missional, or both, and the result will be good prayer.
Response to John Wilson:  
Of God and Other Minds

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I’m delighted to be back at Maryville College and so grateful to Ron Wells for inviting me to respond to John Wilson’s charming paper. John tells a wonderful story of reading, in particular of a life formed and inspired by good reading. And formed by prayer too, no doubt, good prayer, and not only his own prayers.

I have spent a great deal more of my life reading than praying so I certainly have more acquaintance with (though perhaps not more understanding of, as will become clear all too soon) reading than prayer. I suspect that I prayed before I could read and I hope to die with a prayer on my lips whether or not there’s a book in my hands. These days it is a book that sings me to sleep at night, though, as an aging man awoken in the middle of the night, it is not a book I first turn to. I have learned a lot about reading from John Wilson over the sixteen or so years of Books and Culture—about poets unknown to me, about mystery writers. And, now I have also learned about prayer from John.

In “Reading is Good Prayer,” John does not deny that adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication—add lamentation, if you want and, perhaps, exultation—all things we do with our own voices, is prayer. But that is not where prayer begins. Or maybe it is, sometimes. But that does not exhaust Christian prayer. Prayer is engagement with God and that engagement [always? sometimes? I’m not sure] requires silence.
from us and requires from us a receptiveness to the voice of an Other, God. Some prayer, although I would think not all prayer, like some reading, although I would think not all reading, begins with a decision to pay attention to God or, in the case of reading, to the words before one. “That choice [to pay attention],” Alan Jacobs says, “creates simultaneously silence and receptiveness to a voice; the reader acts imaginatively, constructing meaning from the experience of finding words on the page, but also, ideally, strives to assume a posture of charity toward what he or she reads.” I would add that in reading—good reading—the “fat, relentless ego,” as Iris Murdoch put it, is dethroned, silenced by the desire to hear another voice. Reading, good reading at any rate, in its charitable attentiveness to something other than oneself, is good prayer.

But wait. Let us concede that when Susan Van Zanten reads Emily Dickinson she listens for Dickinson’s voice and is receptive to that voice. Let us agree that she and Emily Dickinson converse, and that in Mending a Tattered Faith we readers, too, are invited into the conversation. We readers are silent. We pay attention. We hear. We pray. But to whom? Let us call this the object question: what is the object of our attention in reading? To what is our attention directed? Isn’t there a bit of a rub here? If silence before and receptiveness to the voice of another in the words before us is prayer, can I not be praying to idols in my engagement with Susan Van Zanten and Elizabeth Anscombe? Or if, when I am silent and receptive before Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” I am really silent and receptive before God, haven’t we lost something terribly important here—the author (in this case G.E.M. Anscombe)? Don’t we risk losing either God or the author?

Let me try to clarify this thought. If the object of Christian prayer must be God or it is idolatrous, and if reading is good prayer, then somehow in my reading of Van Zanten and Anscombe I must be encountering God. Now on some level that makes good sense. We, or some of us at any rate, try—or at least think we should try—to see the face of Christ in every person. But even that is not without its worries. For you to see the face of Christ in me may be not to see me in all my knotty particularity, not to see me in whom there is too little of the
Christ and too much of the me. And so with the authors we read. If reading is good prayer, mustn’t we lose the author, the “voice” (with her irritatingly long and confusing sentences—I’m thinking here of Anscombe, not Van Zanten) or lose the one who alone is worthy of our prayer, lose the Voice whose claim upon us never fails? If reading is good prayer, mustn’t that reading be directed to God and God’s voice, and if so, isn’t the author eclipsed by God? If reading is good prayer, doesn’t the author matter too little?

And a second question, not unlike the first. Let us call this the work question. If reading is good prayer, if the act of reading, like prayer, is genuine and authentic engagement of another, if good reading demands of me a silence and receptiveness to a voice of another, then how important, really, is the work presented by an author? Isn’t what really matters, on this account, the other to whom I open myself, the author whom I am encountering?

Imagine this opportunity: Behind door number one sit Susan Van Zanten and Emily Dickinson. You are invited to enter this room and welcomed to join their conversation. Behind door number two is a quiet reading room with a new (but not too new) copy of Susan Van Zanten’s Mending the Faith. Door number one: Dickinson and VanZanten. Door number two: Mending the Faith. Now why, given this understanding of reading as good prayer, and good prayer as openness, a silence and receptiveness to the voice of another, should we care about Door number two? How foolish of us to choose Door number two rather than Door number one? The real conversation, the real voices are there, behind Door number one.

No, you respond, that’s to commit the intentional fallacy. What matters is the voice of the text before you, not the author’s voice and the author’s intentions for the work, ie, the folks behind door number one. But I don’t think this is to commit the intentional fallacy. Let the voice engaging Emily behind Door number one be the voice not of Susan, but of—well, whoever engages Dickinson in Mending the Faith and presents to us that conversation?
Or let me try this, instead, in reading Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat* (and who could be less like Emily Dickinson than Jerome K. Jerome?), mustn’t my openness be to the work itself and not to Jerome K. Jerome? Isn’t my receptivity to the world of the story, in this case, and not to its author? Shouldn’t my receptivity be to the world of the river and the cheese and Montmorency and not to Jerome K Jerome? Even in the splendid story of John Wilson’s life of reading, isn’t it to the story he has presented, and not to John and John’s voice, that we should attend? Isn’t it the work that matters?

Put differently, granted, we read for many different reasons, but when we read isn’t the appropriate posture not that of prayerful kneeling, but rather of attentiveness to the text, to the work before us, just as when we engage one of Henry Moore’s reclining figures the engagement is not with Henry Moore, but with the statue before us (though we may have to engage Henry Moore to get at the statue before us)? Is anything different going on when I engage by reading the poem of Galway Kinnell “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps” than when I engage by listening attentively to an anonymous work of medieval polyphony? Isn’t good reading, like every engagement with a made object, about the artifact itself and, in this, unlike good prayer which is about the one prayed to? Isn’t, in fact, aesthetic engagement with works of art like good prayer in certain respects, but not good prayer?

So, although I am of the mind that almost all reading is good and, in common with other types of attentiveness, that good reading may deliver us, at least for the moment, from our fat relentless egos, and although I am sure that some reading may be good prayer, I am less ready than John to affirm simply that reading is good prayer. But a good life is good prayer. And the good writing of a good story of a good life is a very good thing, indeed. I’m grateful to know of such lives, and I’m glad to have heard just such a story in John Wilson’s telling.

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Writing in the second quarter of the fourth century BCE, just about a half century after papyrus arrived in Greece, Plato has Socrates comment in the *Phaedrus* on the dangers of this new technology of writing that was transforming his world from an oral to a written culture. Socrates says of written words,

> You’d think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.¹

For Plato’s Socrates, writing is a kind of sham speech. It resembles oral speech—it seems to have understanding, to be able to communicate, to defend itself—but because the author is absent it can do none of these. Worse yet, unlike words spoken to an intended listener, written words may go anywhere and address anyone with no regard for whether the reader will get their meaning or completely misunderstand it.² The chief problem with writing, in other words, is that as a technology of
dissemination, it invites unintended readers and, thus, enables mistaken readings. In short, the problem with writing is reading.

Matters only got worse with the arrival of another technology of communication: the book. And once words were separated by spaces and conventions of word order, punctuation, and the like were established, both writing and reading became easier. More books were written and more people wanted to read them. According to Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows*, this technological change effected a profound transformation in human culture:

For centuries, the technology of writing had reflected, and reinforced, the intellectual ethic of the oral culture in which it arose. The writing and reading of tablets, scrolls, and early codices had stressed the communal development and propagation of knowledge. Individual creativity had remained subordinate to the needs of the group. . . . Now, writing began to take on, and to disseminate, a new intellectual ethic: the ethic of the book. The development of knowledge became an increasingly private act, with each reader creating, in his own mind, a personal synthesis of the ideas and information passed down through the writings of other thinkers.³

In the presence of the book and the privacy of her own thoughts, the reader had final say over the meaning of the text. With no one present to control another’s reading, many different interpretations were possible.

The dissemination of written texts (along with the potential for multiplying meanings) accelerated exponentially in 1440, of course, with the invention of the printing press. And the stakes regarding the proliferation of interpretations went through the roof when, in 1455, Gutenberg saw fit to print and, thereby, disseminate more widely than ever before the very word of God. But it was not until Martin Luther called forth “the priesthood of all believers” and then armed them with a Bible they could actually read, that all hell broke loose. We know it as the Reformation.
In his history of “the Protestant revolution,” as he calls it, Alister McGrath captures not only the ecclesial but also the political significance of Luther’s “dangerous idea”:

Following through on his democratizing agenda, Luther insisted that all believers have the right to read the Bible in a language they can understand and to interpret its meaning for themselves. The church is thus held accountable to its members for its interpretation of its sacred text and is open to challenge at every point.4

Whereas once the Medieval church “had declared itself to be above criticism on biblical grounds,” Luther’s translation of the Bible into German empowered all believers to develop their own interpretations and, if they wanted to, to challenge the doctrines and practices of the church on the basis of those alternate interpretations.5 And challenge them they did. In the course of the Reformation and through the centuries that followed, earnest Christians have come up with all manner of Biblical interpretations.

Given the complexity of this sacred text and the intensity with which Protestants have sought to glean its truths from it, it is not surprising that Luther’s “dangerous idea” yielded countless splits, schisms, and sects. Whereas once there was the Church, Protestants dedication to reading the Scripture for themselves has brought an endless variety of theologies, practices, and fellowships with no end in sight. While every one of these groups claims (whether explicitly or implicitly) that they alone have the true word of God, none has been able to arrest the flow of interpretations. With everyone free to read the Bible as they wish, and read it differently they do, no one has been able to control its reading or the proliferation of its meaning. That is, until now.
The Word at the Creation Museum

Built on forty-nine acres of land just thirty minutes south of Cincinnati at the cost of twenty-seven million dollars, the state-of-the-art Creation Museum opened on May 28, 2007. In its first year, four hundred thousand visitors passed through its doors. Just three years later, it welcomed its one-millionth guest.

The Creation Museum is dedicated to discrediting thoroughly the science of evolution and the notion of an old Earth on behalf of the claim the God of Christianity created not only the Earth but the whole universe (including the Earth) just six thousand years ago in six twenty-four-hour days. With a very young Earth at the core of its claim, explanations are offered throughout the Museum for how things that seem old (like fossils, dinosaur bones, and layers of sediment on mountains and canyons) are really young. At the heart of all of these explanations is “flood geology” or the theory that 4,350 years ago a global and catastrophic flood in very short order wiped out all living things (excepting those on Noah’s ark) and then redistributed them as the waters receded in such a manner that fossils and sediment layers and the like were created.

Here, then, is the Creation Museum’s raison d’etre. This is what the Museum is known for. But when we look more closely, we see that the Museum is up to much more than promoting young Earth Creationism. To get that closer look, we need to take a virtual tour.⁶

As we approach the Creation Museum, passing the K-9 unit in the parking lot and the concrete barriers that protect its entrance, we see a large structure that looks a lot like a natural history museum complete with dinosaur statues on display out front. We enter, pay the $24.95 entrance fee, and then are invited to strike a pose of fear in front of a green screen and to purchase (for another ten dollars or so) a 5x7 image of ourselves being attacked by a hungry T-Rex.⁷

From there we enter the Main Hall where we find the Stargazer’s Planetarium and the Dragon Hall Book Store to our
left and the Noah’s Ark Café and the Special Effects Theater to our right. As we move through the Main Hall, we walk beneath a snacking Brontosaurus (that actually moves its head and neck as well as chews on leaves) and pass two small children playing fearlessly near another, albeit smaller, pair of dinosaurs. At the end of the Main Hall we reach the main attraction of the Creation Museum, a two-to-three-hour “walk-through museum experience” that begins at “Grand Canyon National Park” where two figures appear to be digging up fossils. A real man dressed just like them appears on a flat screen overhead and tells us that these men are both paleontologists. Both look at the same kind of evidence but they come to different conclusions because one looks at his discoveries with a science textbook by his side whereas the other does so with the Bible by his side. Different starting points, we are told, bring different conclusions.

In the next room we encounter a powerful elaboration of this point. The whole room is dedicated to the notion that the perspective through which we view the world is determined by our “starting point.” And there are only two possibilities: human reason or God’s Word. And in case we thought that the playing field was even, we are instructed on the very first placard that this is not the case. Yes, we have to make a choice as to which of these will be our starting point. But the choice is clear:

Broadly speaking, “human reason” refers to “autonomous reasoning—the idea that the human mind can determine truth independently from God’s revealed truth, the Bible. Reasoning is God’s gift to humankind, but He has instructed us to use the Bible as our ultimate starting point (Proverbs 1:7) and also to reject speculations that contradict God’s knowledge (2 Corinthians 10:5). Philosophies and world religions that use human guesses rather than God’s Word as a starting point are prone to misinterpret the facts around them because their starting point is arbitrary. Every person must make a choice. Individuals must choose God’s Word as the starting point for all their reasoning, or start with their own arbitrary philosophy as the starting point for evaluating everything around them, including how they view the Bible.
It behooves us to pause here before we leave the second room of the walk-through to notice that so far we have learned that there are only two ways to view the world: through reason or through God’s Word. Moreover, we have been instructed that reason is acceptable, but only if it knows its place, i.e., it must never contest God’s Word. Importantly, at this point in the Museum we do not yet know what God’s Word is. But we do know that whatever it is we are not to apply critical thinking—“Autonomous reasoning”—to it. We are not to question God’s Word. We are to accept it as given.

As we turn the corner into the next room, we see to our left prophets (like Isaiah and Moses) who knew God’s word and delivered it to God’s people as well as apostles who accurately recorded God’s Word in what would become the New Testament. On the adjacent wall we get a history of humanity’s various efforts over the millennia to “Question,” “Destroy,” “Discredit,” “Criticize,” “Poison,” and “Replace” God’s Word. The history ends with “The Latest Attack” which is to “Question Biblical Time.” A placard with a close-up of biblical text focuses on the phrase “in six days the Lord made” with “days” crossed out in red and with “millions of years” added in.

At the center of the room and surrounded by the prophets and apostles who have given us the Word and humanity’s foolish attempts to challenge it is a flat screen mounted on a wall. On that flat screen plays a continuous video loop that perhaps more than any other element in the Museum, visual or otherwise, tells us how to be proper Christians. In the course of the video, individuals (both male and female and of various ages and skin colors) appear by themselves against a dark backdrop. Lit by a very bright and glowing light, each individual speaks a single verse or portion of a verse. They articulate the verse slowly, deliberately, and calmly. They look directly and intently at the camera. After they have spoken the verse, it appears below their image and then both the individual and the text fade to black.

It is important to notice that no context is given for these Biblical excerpts except the identification of chapter and verse.
The viewer has no idea what is going on in the surrounding text. In this way, the verses seem to be held in suspension beyond the Biblical text. That said, the verses are grouped into nine categories: one, perfect, righteous, eternal, unchanging, true, good, beautiful, and powerful. No explicit connection is made between the verses and the categories. We simply see the name of the category on the screen and then see one individual after another speak a particular verse. Thus, for instance, in the category of “Power” a young boy says, “Great is our Lord, and of great power.” Or for “True” an adult Caucasian man says, “Your word is truth.” Or for “Unchanging” a young white woman says, “I am the Lord, I change not.” Excerpted from the Biblical context, the verses seem to reiterate the nine abstract characteristics attributed here to the Christian God. Thus the verses appear to require no analysis, no interpretation, no critical thinking. Presented this way, words taken from the Bible appear merely to reflect in the most straightforward way the seemingly obvious meaning given to them.

Standing before this flat screen, the visitor is invited to observe and mimic the proper relationship that the Christian ought to have with the Word. Like the individuals in the video, our task is to receive the Word—to take it in just as it was given to us by the prophets and apostles. We are not to cogitate on it, or endeavor to figure out what it means given its biblical context (never mind its historical context), or discuss it. On the contrary, when it comes to encountering the Word, we need nothing (neither other text nor other people) to understand it. Because the Word is transparent to meaning, we need not think on it. As Christians, then, we are not asked to engage it but, instead, we are called to hear and speak it worshipfully. Rather than read it, we are to revere it in all its awesome power and simplicity.

Properly instructed that the Christian should approach the Word not through engagement but with reverence, we pass through a small room in which appear Martin Luther, the printing press, and the Scopes trial. We will return to this room later. For now, let’s continue into the next main area of the walk-through, Graffiti Alley.
As soon as we turn the corner into the Alley, we know we are in a very different space. It is dark, and we hear gunshots and sirens all around us. Unlike the pristine walls of the previous rooms, these brick walls are covered with graffiti, decaying vines, cobwebs, and newspaper and magazine clippings that announce what the Creation Museum takes to be the many forms of social disintegration in our culture: abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, gay marriage, Columbine, marijuana, no prayer in school, the ACLU’s attack on the ten commandments, and, of course, evolution. As we continue through the Alley, we discover that these problems are not limited to back alleys. They can be found in our very homes. As we peek into the bedroom and kitchen windows of what looks like a suburban home, we get an intimate view of the white American family: the sons are playing violent video games, looking at Internet porn, and rolling joints; the daughter is talking on the phone about getting an abortion; the father is drinking beer and watching TV; and the mother is gossiping with her friend. Across the way is their mainline Protestant church, wherein another window reveals a pastor preaching that we must trust science over the Bible while the family whose windows we were just peeking into are fidgeting in their pew.

The message here could not be clearer: across America, ministers are instructing their congregants to ignore the plain and simple truth of the Bible and, taking this to heart, church-going families are disintegrating right along with the rest of American culture. Everywhere one looks, according to the Creation Museum, God’s Word is being ignored and, as a result, our whole culture is in crisis.

Fortunately, there is an answer. To access it we need only pass through the “Time Tunnel” and return to the very “Dawn of Creation” where the truth of God’s Word is revealed. Indeed, transported to the origin of the universe, we will then embark on a journey through God’s Word (or, more accurately, the first 11 chapters of Genesis) and discover all that we need to know to set things right.
At the end of the tunnel, we find ourselves at the back of a theater. The opposite wall is curved and upon the length and height of it appears a short animation that depicts, presumably scene-by-scene, exactly how the Creation unfolded according to Genesis 1. The animation is punctuated with text announcing each day: “The First Day,” “The Second Day,” and so forth. Behind these words appears what looks like Hebrew script. As the animation unfolds, a voice speaks fragments from Genesis. Here, of course, the same logic obtains between the Word and meaning that we saw in the room of the prophets and apostles. There, a verse was presented as directly reflecting a characteristic of God. Here, the verse appears to mirror physical phenomena as they are “re-created” through the technologies of video animation.

When the film ends and the screen fades to black, we exit the dark theater and enter a large brightly lit room with white walls and a brown ceramic tile floor. At the center of the room are large (nearly floor to ceiling) placards (with embedded flat screens) as well as fat columns. On both the placards and the columns there is a great deal of text, text that is in both English and Hebrew, looks as if it is written on papyrus, and is often difficult to read. Much of the text consists primarily of biblical excerpts (although not always identified as such.) Some of the text serves as a background for other text.

The perimeter of the room consists of white walls and columns. At eye level on the walls are various framed, illuminated, and unlabeled photographs and digital renderings of plants, animals, Earth, other planets, the solar system, and the double helix. Above these large images are smaller flat screens upon which videos constantly play. These videos include images of all sorts of things like fish, birds, wishbones, plants, and airplanes. For each video there is a male voiceover (reproduced as text below the image) that speaks Bible verses and talks about what the Bible does and does not say about natural phenomena. Backless benches, such as you would expect to see in an art gallery, are positioned at various points inside the perimeter so visitors can sit as they take it all in. And as we move to the far side of the room and turn a corner we are confronted with a very
large flat screen upon which plays an animation of the creation of Adam. He appears to rise above us, blessed with a perfect body, stylish hair, and a nicely trimmed beard.

We are now entering the crowning achievement of the Creation Museum: the “Walk Through Biblical History,” a life-sized and three-dimensional re-creation of scenes from the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We begin our walk in the Garden of Eden, where we are surrounded by synthetic replicas of just the sorts of things we would expect to find there including lots of beautiful trees and countless thriving plants, rocks (with moss growing on them), full-size animals (including the kind we would see at the zoo as well as dinosaurs), pristine ponds (complete with lily pads), and even cascading waterfalls. Adam and Eve are here too. Both are beautiful by today’s standards and seem quite smitten with each other.

Alas, all does not remain perfect. Indeed, once we pass through the Fall, here construed as humanity’s first act of not holding true to God’s Word, we encounter a pregnant Eve, Cain’s murder of Abel, and the introduction of animal sacrifice. Things just get worse and worse, we learn, until God sets upon the idea of destroying every living thing with a worldwide catastrophic flood, sparing only Noah’s family and “two of every kind.” As we move through this section of the walk-through we witness the construction of the ark, meet an animatronic Noah, and even pass through the bowels of the ark, seeing how animals were stored and fed and their waste managed. Notably, the Museum does not spare us God’s wrath. Indeed, we see dioramas depicting the intense suffering of those left to drown atop mountain peaks, as well as film animations of happy families sharing a meal moments before the global tidal wave arrives to drown them.

We should pause to reflect upon this remarkable multisensory experience. We have been prepared for this experience by a huge wall-sized animation of the Creation followed by a room filled with text on placards, text on columns, about twenty large illuminated images, almost as many flat screens, and a constant voiceover talking about double helixes
and all manner of flora and fauna. Then comes the state-of-the-art re-creation of Biblical scenes on a grand scale. Many visitors are clearly “wowed”: they look all around, trying to take it all in—the branches above, the flowers below, the scenes before them. They marvel at an animatronic T-Rex that seems to want to munch on their heads. They pause and gaze intently upon the scene of Adam and Eve as the two figures look longingly at one another while standing naked in a pond filled with lily pads.

This three dimensional environment presents a lot to take in, but there is more, much more. Again there is the male voiceover unceasingly speaking excerpts from the first few chapters of Genesis, excerpts that are spoken without introduction or context or commentary. Moreover, in front of each scene from the Bible is a series of three or more placards. The placard in the center of them repeats a portion of the scripture that we hear from overhead; the placards on either side of that excerpted text give us the Creation Museum’s instructions for understanding these biblical fragments.

My husband and I (with whom I wrote another essay with on the Creation Museum) have visited the Creation Museum five times. Every time we have had the same experience. We come out of it feeling as though someone had hooked our brains up to a blender and hit the frappe button. I hope the foregoing virtual tour provides a clear sense as to why this is the case. To make one’s way through the walk-through is to be subject to textual, visual, aural overload. Text is everywhere—on placards, walls, columns, flat screens. It is excerpted and fragmented. Some text is in the background but you can sort of read it. Other text is put in giant sized font. Your attention is drawn here then there. You try to read this and are interrupted by that. All the while images are moving and changing. Videos are looping. A voice is talking to you. An animatronic dinosaur lunges for your head.

New Technologies and Reading Practices

Writing about the Internet and its impact on our brains, Nicholas Carr argues on the basis of numerous scientific studies
that the new technologies associated with the Internet are reconfiguring our brains. For centuries our brains learned from the technology of print how to read line after line and page after page of text. We learned how to read in the quiet of our own thoughts, to think about what we were reading, even to get lost in it. We would imagine the people talking in the texts, the scenes within which they appeared and acted. We would anticipate the line of argument being developed over many pages. We might argue with it in our own heads. In short, we inhabited those lines and lines of text and the spaces they described and the arguments that they made. This kind of reading Carr calls deep reading.\textsuperscript{11} According to Carr, deep reading has been crucial for the development of human society because it encourages logical, critical, and creative thinking. And the Internet, Carr argues, is bringing deep reading to an end.

The structure of the Internet and its pages, a structure whose logic is permeating our culture, is not linear. It is a web that is all about making as many connections as possible. Thus, within the space of the Internet our minds are invited to hop, skip, and jump around. Even when we stay in one place, embedded videos, moving banners, and pop-up windows demand our attention and interrupt or disrupt our engagement with any text. Unfortunately, Carr argues, our brains are adapting to the logic of the web with all its fragmentation and interruption. As a result we are being transformed from readers to skimmers. On average we spend only twenty seconds on a web page and rather than read it, we skim the first few lines and glance to the bottom of the page. We are easily distracted by hyperlinks and, before we know it, we are pages away from what we were reading. Not surprisingly, when we are done, we have great difficulty remembering where we were or what we read.

Although the Internet may be the technology that best deals in the logics of fragmentation and interruption, other technologies are quickly following suit. Cell phones, televisions, Kindles, and even the printed page (in, for instance, the form of magazine layout) are being reconfigured to mirror the logic of the Internet. Everywhere we turn we are invited to glance here,
notice that, skip to this, jump to that. Rarely anymore are we
invited to slow down, consider, deliberate.

Importantly, the speed and volume of information
coming at us is, Carr argues, a real problem. While our brains
have great capacity to retain long-term memories and develop
connections among them, it takes time for our brains to move
new information to long-term memory. Fortunately, Carr reports,
the rate at which we are able to read printed text on a page is
perfectly suited to this somewhat slow process through which
our brains move information from short-term to long-term
memory. That is why we have the ability to remember well what
we have read in a book. By contrast, when our brains are
bombarded with too much information too fast, and especially
when that information comes to us in bits and fragments, our
brains cannot make sense of it. And we cannot remember what
we have read.

Obviously, the Creation Museum is not the Internet. Yet,
I would argue it deploys technologies of communication
organized according to the same logic as the Internet. It consists
of too much text—text on placards, murals, columns, and screens.
Moreover, throughout the Museum text appears in great variety
of font and size. Text appears as background; text appears in the
foreground. Certain words are emphasized—made larger to stand
out. Thus, we are encouraged to skim—just read the big words,
never mind the context. Look at that big word here and that big
word there. Not just put before our eyes, text also fills our ears
by way of the constant voice over. Everywhere we go in the
Museum we hear words. Sometimes the words come from the
Bible; often they provide a constant flow of information about
birds, and frogs, and plants, and rising flood waters, and
geological transformations, and on and on it goes. And as our
brains try to take all of this in, they are further distracted by flat
screens playing endless video loops. Like pop-up windows, the
screens show up all over the place. Sometimes as many as
twenty of them demand our attention in just one room.

I do not think it is a stretch to say that the walk-through
at the Creation Museum is organized like a web page. And just
like a web page, the space within the Creation Museum demands that our brains flit about the space in a futile attempt to take in more information than they can. No wonder that when we finally emerge from the walk-through our brains feel as though they have been put through a blender.

Why is it important to notice this about the Creation Museum? To get at the answer to that question, recall the second room that we entered in the walk-through. It was the one that presented two starting points: God’s Word or human reason. And it said that what the Christian must do is choose God’s Word and forever subordinate reason to it. What I am arguing here is that the technologies deployed in the walk-through do much to make that so. As we move through these spaces (much the same way we move through a web site), as we encounter all these technologies, as our brains are overloaded, and as we are obliged to skim, reason is indeed subordinated to a word. The strategic deployment of technology and information has made it so.

Whether reason has been subordinated at the Creation Museum to the Word of God or the word of someone else is a question that remains to be answered. But whoever word it is, the point is that by passing through this cacophony of texts, sounds, and images we are little able to engage it thoughtfully never mind critically. Our brains are rendered incapable of critically engaging this word because they have been numbed by this overwhelming, web-site-like experience. This is not an accident. On the contrary. The Creation Museum is strategically deploying the logic and dynamics of the Internet to disable our God-given capacity for critical thinking by making us all but incapable of reading.

All that said, it is not the case that we exit the Museum with no idea of what we should think. That is because along the way, we are given short and simple statements that tell us what we ought to think. Amidst the cacophony of ancient script and biblical fragments and double helixes, we get brief and clear instructions on what we need to remember. Examples of such instructions appear throughout the Museum.
Here is just one example. In front of the scene depicting the creation of Eve (from Adam’s rib, not surprisingly), the center placard provides excerpts from verses 18 and 22 in chapter 2 of Genesis telling bits of that story. To the left of that placard is another that instructs on how to understand gender from this story: “Eve (like Adam) was specially fashioned by God and did not come from an animal. Eve was not made from dust but from the side of Adam. God made male and female fit for different roles from the beginning.” On the other side of the center placard, we get more instruction. Below a text attributed to Jesus Christ that speaks of “one flesh” we learn that “The special creation of Adam and Eve is the foundation for marriage: one man and one woman. The fact that they were one flesh is the basis for the oneness of marriage.” Here we see what is repeated throughout the walk-through—amidst the cacophony we are given a simple instruction to remember.

Notably, the verses that these simple instructions are meant to make clear appear superimposed over a background of Hebrew text. Thus, the suggestion is made that these interpretive instructions are, like the Word itself, transparent to God’s intention since they are based in the first efforts to put God’s Word into human language. Although Hebrew text sometimes appears upside down in the Creation Museum thereby raising questions about whether anyone at the Creation Museum has ever actually read the Bible in its original languages, the appearance is given that these simple instructions are based in the authoritative text. Thus, for those of us who cannot decipher Hebrew and therefore have no hope of ever reading God’s Word in its original languages, we can take comfort that when it comes to God’s creation of woman, all that we need to know is that Eve was created from Adam’s rib and therefore marriage must be between a man and a woman. Simple indeed.

This strategy of simplification amidst confusion can be seen at this level of individual verses. It can also be seen on a larger scale. That is, amidst all of this confusion, the Creation Museum tells a very simple and much-reduced story about what God’s Word is. At the Creation Museum, the Bible is not a collection of several books written by many hands that tells the
incredibly strange and complex story of the people of God over many ages. The Word is very simple here. It is, put briefly, that all of human history may be understood as a series of willful efforts to ignore the obvious and powerful truth of God’s Word. According to the Creation Museum, God has always been clear in His intentions for human kind: we are not to eat of that one tree, we are not to murder another human being, we are to marry only members of the opposite sex, and so forth. Still, human kind insists on doing just the opposite. We therefore should not be surprised that, like any responsible parent, God has from time to time seen fit to punish our disobedience to his simple Word, sometimes nearly wiping us out completely. Fortunately, though, God loves us and so He has given us a second chance in the form of Jesus Christ. If we will just decide once and for all to obey His Word, then we can be saved. But if we refuse this chance, then we will be eternally damned and rightfully so.

Putting an End to That Dangerous Idea

Before bringing this paper to a close, I want to return to a room we passed through almost without remark on our virtual tour. It is to my mind the most disconcerting and revealing room in the whole Museum. It appears just after the prophets and apostles room and just before Graffiti Alley. Thus, it is sandwiched between two starkly contrasting moments in a narrative. In the first moment, God makes His Word available to His people by means of specially designated agents—prophets and apostles. In the second moment, society is in a state of thoroughgoing decay (even white suburban Protestants are lost to all manner of sin). The room that I want to describe now stands between these two moments. It is the pivot that turns the one moment into the other. As such, it reveals the Creation Museum’s rather astonishing view of what lies at the heart of our current depraved state.

As we turn the corner from the room of the prophets and apostles, we see a series of placards (which I mentioned earlier) that recounts some of the especially foolish and sometimes fatal efforts by human beings to “Question,” “Destroy,” “Criticize,” and so forth, God’s Word, including the “Latest Attack,” which
is to “Question Biblical time.” To our immediate right, we see
the figure of Luther standing at the door to the All Saints Church
in Wittenberg and wielding his mallet as he hangs his ninety-five
theses. In the adjacent corner, we see a model of Gutenberg’s
printing press, which is credited with making the Bible “the
biggest seller of all time.” And we also have a couple of Bibles
here—more about that in a moment.

So, what is disconcerting here? So far, the room sounds
like a celebration of Luther, the Reformation, and the broad
dissemination of the Bible. Perhaps. But if that is so, why is it
positioned between the prophets and apostles, on the one hand,
who knew God’s Word well and Graffiti Alley, on the other,
where ignoring God’s Word is the order of the day?

The answer, I submit, can be found on a strange mural
that appears on the wall next to the printing press. Much can be
said about this mural (and, indeed, it is a focus of the essay that
Bill Trollinger and I wrote together on the Museum). For my
purposes here, I want to focus on just four features of it. First,
this mural purports to tell the story of the church’s (rather than
individuals’) turn from God’s Word. Second, it does so by way
of a timeline shaped into an arc that is descending. Third, below
the arc are positioned the usual suspects, like Rene Descartes and
Charles Darwin, who promulgated the ideas that tempted the
church to turn from God’s Word. Above the line of the arc
appear church figures who were so tempted. Some of them are
also ones we would expect, like Galileo and Francis Bacon, who,
according to the captions put with them, put science before
God’s Word. Fourth, also appearing on that arc are surprising
figures like Thomas Chalmers (who developed the gap theory of
Creation) and Hugh Miller (who developed the day-age theory of
Creation). Their appearance here is surprising because these
were stalwart defenders of Creationism, just not of the 6 24-hour
day sort. Perhaps even more surprising is the appearance of the
Scofield Reference Bible, long taken by Fundamentalists to be so
authoritative that even its footnotes were seen as inspired. It
appears near the very bottom of the arc because it too supported
the gap theory and, in so doing, ignored “Biblical time.”
I have said that this room is disconcerting, and we are starting to see why. As Bill and I argue in our essay one big reason this room causes concern is that it blames earnest Christians, even Fundamentalist Creationists, for the church’s supposed fall away from the Word. By making this claim, the Creation Museum states its position clearly—anyone, even a Fundamentalist Creationist, who does not hold to a 6 24-hour day Creation does not belong in the fold.

That said, I want to bring to draw attention to another disconcerting, though much more subtle, feature of this mural: Luther’s location on it. Looked at quickly, we might say he is positioned at the top of the arc, prior to the decline. But if we look again, we see that he is actually positioned after the Gutenberg Press and on the beginning of the downward arc. Can this be so? If it is, what does it mean?

I opened this presentation with Socrates’ lament of writing. I then went on to talk about how all of his fears seemed to be realized in the course of the Protestant Reformation as Luther called the priesthood of all believers to read his translated Bible and make sense of it themselves. Ever since, the meaning of the Bible has proliferated, sometimes beyond recognition. As I survey the scene of this room—Luther at the door, the printing press, and Luther at the top (with the printing press) of that downward arc—I cannot help but infer that the reason this room is sandwiched between the prophets and apostles, on the one hand, and the thoroughgoing corruption of our culture even among white Protestants, on the other, is that at the root of the problem is the dissemination of a Bible that believers can actually read. Indeed, as I survey this room and its place in the narrative of the Creation Museum, I cannot help but wonder if the Creation Museum is much more in sympathy with Socrates’ desire to control Truth than with Luther’s determination to democratize it.

Almost as if to say this is so, there is one more feature of this strange room to which I want to draw attention. In the center of the room, with Luther on one side and the printing press on the other, we see the only Bible that appears in the entire two-to-
three-hour walk-through experience. And it is under lock and key. Though laid open, most of us cannot make out its meaning for the text is in Greek. Thus the Bible appears in the Creation Museum not only beyond our grasp but also inaccessible to our minds.

I should mention that the Bible appears just two more times in the Museum proper. In both instances, the Bible is also under lock and key. Near the end of the walk-through we come to a glass case built into a wall that houses the Bible that belonged to the father of Ken Hamm (the man behind the Creation Museum). Thus, the presentation of this Bible serves as a memorial to Hamm’s father’s love of the Word. A Bible also appears in one other Museum space—a floor-to-ceiling glass case that is home to many fossils. Here, we find it in the hands of a full-size human skeleton. Dangerous idea indeed!

Whatever the creators of the Creation Museum intended to say about the Protestant Reformation, one thing is clear: this is not what Luther had in mind. He did not argue for the priesthood of all believers and translate the Bible into the vernacular so that centuries later a museum purportedly committed to sola scriptura would deploy a wide array of new technologies of confusion along side a grossly oversimplified and ideologically coded interpretation of the Bible. When the Bible is not under lock and key, the Creation Museum means to fix it once and for all, to stop the flow of interpretations and make it speak only one word, and a simple and politically charged word at that.

From the perspective of the liberal arts and, specifically, of reading, the Creation Museum means to arrest deep reading on behalf of indoctrination. And as parents bring their homeschooled children in droves to the Creation Museum, this is cause for deep concern. From the perspective of faith, I wish to remind the reader of the parable of the sower. According to this parable, in which Jesus called for the scattering of God’s Word to all people without concern for their ability or lack thereof to come up with the “right” reading, Jesus had faith in the ability of God’s Word to speak truth despite the limits of readers and the perils of reading. And Luther had faith that people of God,
despite their intellectual and other limits, when gathered together in the presence of the Holy Spirit, could be trusted to find God’s Word amidst his many, complicated, and often strange words. Unlike Jesus and Luther, we should note, the Creation Museum seems to have very little faith in either God’s Word or God’s people.

2 Plato has Socrates contrast the problem of writing with the noble aims and process of philosophical dialectic whereby “The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be.” Ibid 211 (277a). For an insightful reading of Plato’s Phaedrus that contrasts Plato’s “dream of communication” (wherein only the proper vessel ever receives the word) with Jesus’ broadcast word (wherein all are invited to hear it), see John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).
5 Ibid.
6 The forthcoming reading of the Creation Museum is based in the growing body of literature emerging in the disciplines of English Studies and Communication Studies known as visual rhetoric. Briefly put, visual rhetoric is interested in discerning the strategies and impacts of visual communication, broadly conceived. Whereas historically rhetoric has been understood in primarily linguistic terms, increasing numbers of scholars recognize that human beings are persuaded by the visual culture that surrounds them. For a sample of some especially important work in this field, see Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Dianne S. Hope, eds. Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008).
7 As of summer 2011, the fees were as follows: adult at $24.95, senior at $19.95, and $14.95 per child.
Perhaps it is worthwhile to note a slippage in the Creation Museum between God’s Word and the words that appear in the Bible, read literally. The assumption here, a founding assumption of Protestant Fundamentalism, is that the meaning of God’s Word can be read right off the surface of the text. That is to say, a literal (whatever that means exactly) interpretation reflects simply and directly the meaning of God’s Word.

I should note that just after we pass through Adam and Eve’s sin, we move through a short section in which we witness the pain and suffering that is the consequence of the Fall—the pain of childbirth, starvation, drug abuse, mushroom clouds, and so forth. These images appear either as large black-and-white photographs mounted on poured concrete walls or as black-and-white images projected directly onto poured concrete walls. In this way, the import of Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God’s word is made vivid for our time.


Others have written on the topic of deep reading and on the way that the Internet and other technologies are making it very difficult for human beings to read deeply anymore. Carr’s book is a great resource for the many scientific studies that have been published on the topic. Also see Maryanne Wolf, “Our ‘Deep Reading’ Brain: Its Digital Evolution Poses Questions,” Nieman Reports, 64 (2): 7-8.

At the Creation Museum, the Christian God is undoubtedly a male figure.

Bibles do appear on the shelves of the Dragon Hall Book Store, which is located in the Museum building but is not part of the walk-through experience. Amidst many bookcases filled with books on such topics as flood geology, the Christian “heritage” of the founding fathers, and how Obama is responsible for the “Erosion of Christian America,” there are four shelves in one bookcase that holds English Standard Version Bibles, Gift & Award Bibles, and the New Defender’s Study Bible: Understanding Critical Issues of Faith from a Literal Creationist Viewpoint by Henry M. Morris, who developed the theory of flood geology.

For more on the parable of the sower and how its message seems to contrast sharply with Plato’s “dream of human communication” see, John Duram Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).
Balancing Religion and Science: 
A Response to Susan Trollinger

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While at first it might seem that Susan Trollinger has presented a spirited response to one particular museum and its method of communication, there is a more fundamental question that she poses in her paper: “What is the best way to communicate information to promote learning?” Should information be transmitted in a contemplative processed method, or in a rapid frame-shifting method? As educators representing many disciplines, we are certainly interested in this question, because it is at the foundation of our vocation. Today I’ll respond to this question and Trollinger’s critique of the Creation Museum from the perspective of the natural sciences, but it is my hope that at least some of the insights can benefit other disciplines.

First, we must all acknowledge that our education methods need to adapt to rapidly changing technologies. Students, and indeed all citizens, in the developed world today learn very differently from the ways they learned in the past. The 1980s saw computerized animations being utilized extensively, the 1990s saw the internet begin to be utilized as a information repository, the 2000s saw this online information exponentially inflate, and today we have social media as a driving force of not only our student’s social lives, but also their learning. Educational institutions including museums have followed this trend, and responded. The use of Facebook, Twitter, discussion boards, and other social media websites are said to have taken educators from “knowledge transmission to
audience engagement and participation.”\(^1\) Indeed, Russo et al. (2009) state, “social networking is at the heart of new learning.”

Why, then, should we be critical of a particular method of “education,” as is clearly the case of Trollinger\(^1\), where she finds fault with the fast-paced, web-like technical presentation given at the Creation Museum? The answer is that the exclusive use of this method by the Creation Museum prompts only one answer to the question “what is the relationship between science and religion”—conflict.

In his book *When Science Meets Religion*, Ian Barbour outlines a 4-fold typology for the ways that people today can view science and religion: Conflict, Independence, Dialogue, and Integration.\(^2\) The “conflict” typology is held by two different groups: (1) biblical literalists, who assert that scientists are simply wrong and (2) scientific materialists, who assert that believers in God are simply wrong. As Barbour states:

“The two groups agree in asserting that a person cannot believe in both God and evolution, though they disagree as to which they will accept. For both of them, science and religion are enemies. These two opposing groups get most attention from the media, since a conflict makes a more exciting news story than the distinctions made by persons between these two extremes who accept both evolution and some form of theism.”\(^3\)

As a Christian, and as an individual who has published a book with “Evolutionary Perspective” in the title\(^3\), I take issue with the conflict view, and thus support Trollinger’s thesis that the Creation Museum has utilized modern technology to manipulate peoples understanding of truth. In essence, the Creation Museum is using modern technology as a modern-day Wizard, manipulating the thoughts of all who visit their Land of Oz.

It greatly troubles me, but does not surprise me, that in 2011 we are still discussing a conflict between science and religion. Sir John Polkinghorne said it best:

“Science does not have a privileged route of access to knowledge through some superior ‘scientific method’,
uniquely its own possession; theology does not have a privileged route of access to knowledge through some ineffable source of unquestionable ‘revelation’, uniquely its own possession. … In the case of science, the dimension of reality concerned is that of a physical world that we transcend and that can be put to the experimental test. In the case of theology, it is the reality of God who transcends us and who can be met with only in awe and obedience. Once that distinction is understood, we can perceive the two disciplines to be intellectual cousins under the skin, despite the differences arising from their contrasting subject material.”

Thus, the question is not should dialogue be open between science and religions, but how? How do we turn the tide to “Paths from science towards God”? How do we convince a 2011 culture to accept both scientific and theological inquiry? Trollinger’s last section of her paper is entitled, “Putting an End to That Dangerous Idea,” an allusion to how the Creation Museum attempts to reverse the “erosion” that has occurred in Christianity since the Protestant reformation. In the final section of my response, I’ll attempt to answer “How do we put an end to the dangerous idea that science and religions are in conflict?”

I believe that the answer is effective education. First, educators must meet people where they are. This is something that is known among great educators, but is not written about much. What does this mean? It means that our students are coming to us with preconceived ideas and we must accept and not belittle these notions. I would bet that most visitors to the Creation Museum have a history of some kind of conflict with a science teacher. As a person of faith, I often address the conflicts that my theistic students pose (science is, after all, pursuit of knowledge about the natural world, and theology pursuit of knowledge about that which can not be naturally explained). Our education system must turn from “religious sensitivity” (where we encourage all to leave their religious beliefs at the door, learn the information presented, then leave that information in the classroom) to “religious understanding” (where we teach the role of science and the role of religion). It is only through such religious understanding that we can move
from Barbour’s conflict typology to more of a dialogue or integration typology.

Should modern technology be utilized in museums to communicate information? Certainly; but technology cannot be used at the exclusion of other methods of learning. It becomes wrong whenever it leads to proof texting. As Wendell Berry says well “It only becomes wrong when it is though to be the norm of culture and of intellectual life.”\textsuperscript{6} And, at B. J. Mitra and his colleagues conclude, technology should be used, but only when blended with other learning approaches.\textsuperscript{7}

On a recent trip Washington, DC, my family visited the American Museum of Natural History. Toward the end of our day, we went into the new “evolution of humans” exhibit. Yes, the exhibit incorporated an example of modern technology, where one could scan their face, have it computer-morphed into a particular ancestral \textit{Homo}, and the photo emailed anyone of interest in approximately 20 seconds. But the newly completed exhibit also contained traditional learning methods, including much room for contemplation. Such a balanced educational approach is one that all modern educators must take.

\textsuperscript{6}Berry, W., \textit{Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition}, (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 140.
Response to Susan Trollinger

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Professor Susan Trollinger has given us a window into some of contemporary uses of the Bible within American evangelicalism. She leads us on a wonderful and surprisingly vivid virtual tour of The Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky—and it must be called surprisingly vivid because she limits herself to that tired old technology of “words on a page.” Here she explores the dynamic encounter between the museumgoer and the highly motivated “visual rhetoric” of the museum experience, and provides trenchant analysis of what this encounter tells us about reading the Bible within this subculture.

Professor Trollinger’s assessment of the Creation Museum hinges on how emerging technologies have altered the ways we cognitively process texts and contexts. She helpfully chronicles the latest world-historical revolution that is shifting our cultural life from an “ethic of the book” to an “ethic of the webpage,” calling to mind some anxieties that attended the ancient decline of oral culture. She argues that this new ethic is primarily responsible for the disorienting and perceptually stultifying experience of the Creation Museum. By subjecting the visitor to a constant barrage of disorienting sounds and images, the museum advances what she calls “the logics of fragmentation and interruption,” and thereby creates the experiential equivalent of skimming. She contends that, through this experience, visitors are rendered incapable of critically engaging the Bible, and are left with no other choice but to submit to young earth creationism.
We’ve all read about how Google is “making us stupid,” but Trollinger here takes this insight to a new level, positing that the “ethic of the webpage” is transforming, not only our lives as we experience them in front of a screen, but as we live them in the actual world. She explains that her experience of walking through the museum was in every way framed by the terms, technologies, and sensory expectations of the Internet. Rather than encouraging careful, thoughtful Bible reading, the result is confusion and ultimate submission to the museum’s ideology.

I find much of Trollinger’s evaluation insightful and generally compelling. We need to devote more attention to the ways our cognitive experiences are being altered by our increasingly web-mediated lives. And I’m sure she is right that these trends are having profound and largely disturbing implications for classically Western and historically Protestant ways of reading the Bible, and all texts for that matter.

But I wonder if the “webpage ethic” that Trollinger astutely observes is the most important or determinative factor at work in the Creation Museum’s engagement with visitors. I would argue that it’s a mistake to assess the Creation Museum (or to imagine an alternate Creation Museum) as a space in which its visitors might potentially “read deeply,” “engage thoughtfully,” or “think critically” about the Bible or human origins. The reason I believe it’s a mistake is that the Creation Museum was designed and constructed foundationally as a catechetical rather than a critical endeavor. That is to say, museum proprietors understood from the beginning that most of their patrons would visit the museum, not with the anticipation of being challenged to think about the Bible in new, subtle, or critical ways, but with a definite hope of having their already firmly established opinions (and those of their children) strengthened and buffeted through sounds, images, and varied accouterments of scientific certainty. It seems clear that most museum visitors hope to leave the experience with a deeper commitment to young earth creationism than the one they had upon arrival. In short, I believe that the visitor experience of the Creation Museum is better explained by looking at the
catechetical assumptions of evangelicalism and then the “ethic of the webpage” employed by the museum.

As Dr. Trollinger clearly notes, visitors to the museum receive information about the Bible’s account of human origins through a rigidly narrow interpretive grid. With a strong appreciation of its irony, she contrasts the Museum’s central aim of reading the Bible literally with what appears to be a willful suppression of the actual text within the Museum itself. She observes that, in transitioning from oral to book cultures, Medieval Europe was transformed by Luther’s “dangerous idea” of empowering individuals to read the Bible for themselves. Professor Trollinger argues that spaces like the Creation Museum, by using Internet-inspired methods, undermine this “dangerous idea” by returning to a hierarchical hermeneutic that imposes interpretations upon the individual.

However, in discussing the Reformation, one needs to make some distinctions between the long-term implications of “the priesthood of all believers” and the actual practices of theological instruction observed by the Protestant Reformers. Simply because a critical relationship to the Bible developed over time does not mean that the tradition of free-wheeling individual and critical Bible reading was the intent of the Reformers. Far from it! The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a flowering of Protestant confessions (The Augsburg Confession, Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Westminster Confession to name few). Through these, Reformers sought to continue rather than terminate hierarchical practices of catechesis: in other words the Reformers urged believers to read the Scriptures quite narrowly through these confessional frameworks. Biblical instruction by catechesis forms a standard and, for many, an ongoing practice of raising children in the faith.

In the preface to his Genevan Catechism of 1542, the great Reformer John Calvin wrote that,

All citizens and inhabitants must bring or send their youngsters to the catechism as mentioned on Sundays at mid-day. A certain formula shall be devised from which
Rather than indulging in Martin Luther’s so-called “dangerous idea” of individual reading, the Reformer’s were interested in having children imbibe the scriptures according to the historic tenets of Christian orthodoxy as determined by the church.

Rather than representing a shift away from historic practices, I would suggest that the Creation Museum’s approach to the Scriptures continues a long-standing conservative strain of the Protestant tradition. Sociologist Christian Smith has written extensively on the culture of American evangelicalism. In his most recent assessment of evangelical Biblicism, he explains this tendency by appealing to group-identity theory. Evangelicals bolster and reinforce in-group assumptions by amplifying the differences between in- and out-groups, and by discouraging one another from taking seriously the claims of out-groups. “The point,” argues Smith is “not to understand the other’s reasons, perspectives, and beliefs . . . [but rather] to remain on guard from being contaminated by the out-group or allowing them to grow in influence.” While this may not be the only or the best way to conceive of catechesis, such methods of in-group preservation have long been resident within the Protestant tradition—repeating and reinforcing already-existing beliefs. Although the Internet may amplify the more broadly cultural tendency toward homophily—that is a “love for and attraction to what is similar to oneself”—the Internet did not create homophily. Catechesis has long been a basic strategy for perpetuating the faith, and the Creation Museum is merely an electronically charged brand of “new wine” being poured into decidedly “old wineskins.”

Although catechesis is a practice peculiar to Christians, it would be wrong to assume that they are alone in making use of these methods to advance their cause. Crafting museum experiences as a form of catechesis is not the unique province
the highly charged political culture of fundamentalist Christianity or the Religious Right. Although most museums strive to exhibit some manner of scientific disinterest, many now concede that very few of them lack a point of view or fail to engage in some form of ideological buttressing. In their brilliant ethnographic study of Colonial Williamsburg, *The New History in an Old Museum*, anthropologists Richard Handler and Eric Gable evaluate the popular reconstructed 18th century village and tourist destination as a social arena that plainly, though with less overtness than the Creation Museum, produces certain kinds of ideological messages that enable its visitors to leave with certain presuppositions reinforced. While it might appear that visitors to the Williamsburg are being invited to “critically evaluate” or “thoughtfully engage” early American life as they walk down cobblestone streets interacting with blacksmiths and washer women, they are at every turn having old-fashioned myths of American life confirmed and reinforced. Despite concerted efforts made during the 1970s and 1980s to refashion Colonial Williamsburg in light of research drawn from “the new social history,” Handler and Gable conclude that this living history village remains, in their words, “Republican Disneyland.” “New characters and topics have become vehicles for an uncritical retailing of some old American myths and dreams: the Horatio Alger story, the drama of consumer desire, the wisdom of progress, the primitiveness of the past, the universality of middle-class familial emotions.”

It would seem that few if any museum experiences are unencumbered by ideological freight. It’s likely that most of them, whether science or history, art or technology, ultimately engage in some form of conscious or unconscious catechesis, hoping that participants are not merely offered a space for value-free critical reflection, but will be somehow moved to imbibe or recommit to a particular way of seeing the world. The Creation Museum is no different. While many within the professional middle class might display a greater sense of embarrassment and express stronger objections to the particular theories young earth creationism—and I would urge greater attention to the role of class in evaluating endeavors like the Creation Museum—it would be a mistake to assume that its methods and aims are wholly different from other museums.
I share Professor Trollinger’s regret at the heavy-handed ways the Creation Museum diminishes the capacity of its visitors for careful reading of the Scriptures. I also share her misgivings about the particular paradigm it espouses. With keen insight, she observes the ever-greater propensity toward homophily within our culture (especially among evangelicals) that has been amplified by the growing Internet ethic within our everyday embodied experiences. Though I’m not convinced that these emerging technologies are decisive factors or primarily to blame, I acknowledge that they play a powerful role.

But on a different and perhaps more important level, I am unconvinced that critical-thinking approaches to the Bible are so obviously “proper” or more faithful than those of catechesis. Let me be clear that I do not agree with the peculiar content of Creation Museum “catechesis,” nor would I endorse the museum’s methods. However, while I hope my children will become critically minded and are in the process of developing a substantive appetite for nuance, my wife and I are happily training them up in the faith in an unapologetically catechetical way. In other words, we aren’t leaving it up to them. That is a “dangerous idea.” We are teaching them to embrace the faith through a peculiar confessional lens, and we do everything within our power to buttress their faith by reinforcing our already determined beliefs. It’s our hope that they will come to fully embrace the faith in largely the same form as they received it. There are many things about the Creation Museum that I feel compelled to criticize, but its refusal to support an autonomous, individual reading of the Bible is not one of them.


Writing on Cloth: Telling the Truth

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An academic conference probably ought to open with the proverb: “When words are many, sin is not absent.” The ancient notion that words automatically create transgression, of course, anticipates our contemporary confusion about what words can and should do. It makes you want to keep your mouth shut, especially in these days when language takes a beating, when no words will suffice, when most things worth saying are unsayable. Beset by declining vocabularies, texting lingo, the crawl at the bottom of the screen, and bewildering new technologies (3000-5000 marketing messages a day), we know about the uncertainty of words, the challenge to find the right ones.

Back in the day when high-schoolers were expected to read books, entire books, among the novels that were more or less standard were Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*. Orwell predicted a totalitarian future in which books and ideas would be censored. Huxley predicted a future where an explosion of words and ideas would lead, ironically, to illiteracy. Huxley may have gotten it right. We are inundated by so many words in so many venues and forms that some of us have just shut down. Or, if we do read, our reading material has not been strong meat.

I suspect most of us who teach have worried about literacy. We all have heard startling numbers. One in four of us read no books at all. “Reading, where it exists at all, has largely become an unprofitable wing of the diversion industry,”
says Mark Edmundson.\textsuperscript{2} There’s justifiable space for pessimism, but even so, I plan to pass on the white-haired lament here.

My sense is that we are still reading. Indeed, despite all those prognostications about the disappearance of the book, Amazon.com presses on and people still sit with books of one sort or another in airport lobbies. Even though Oprah’s book club has come and gone, we continue to hear of huge first-print runs and breakaway best-sellers. Maybe we get them on Kindle or iPad, but we still get them. We read on. We keep on the lookout for those books which offer expansion of our experience. Earnest people keep looking for earnest books. Bookish folk hold still to Ezra Pound’s fine proposition: “A book is a ball of light you hold in your hand.”\textsuperscript{3} Who knew that Ezra Pound would predict the tablet! Given the veritable explosion of words, the real problem is not if we read but what we read. How do we find the good words in the haystack of verbiage? The serious question today is what and whose wisdom will guide our reading?

In another time and place, I was fortunate enough to have rather out-of-fashion mentors who based their reading encounters on the supposition that the texts we chose shape the lives we live. I realize this notion of literature as morally clarifying, as connected to human virtue and character, has gone underground over the past generation or so. We all know that reading well does not guarantee acting well. The notion that good books make us more ethical is disputed, I know. I simply want to hold to the premise that good books can make us better.

I believe this premise relates to our profession in very practical ways. We are all aware of the general flight from the humanities and the startling decline in the English major in particular that has characterized our profession for two generations. I want to suggest a possible connection between our fuzziness about the essential business of our profession and the slackening interest among new generations of students. I have lived long enough in the academic environment to see the ebb and flow of various emphases. Many of these preoccupations are good ones in one way or another, of course. But at what cost?
Sometimes, for example, I fear that the current market-driven preoccupation with cost-efficiency and assessment may give us less time and space for those longer term philosophical and moral considerations that should rest at the heart of our humanities disciplines. Not everything that matters can be measured, and not everything that can be measured, matters.

Furthermore, I wonder if we have been willing to make sufficient claims for the moral enterprise of literary study. I want to pause here for a moment to think about our reading choices. What is it that we think a book can do? Should we all be reading the difficult James Joyce, or will the more accessible John Steinbeck do? How about the very popular Janet Evanovich or the Christian writer, Karen Kingsbury?

Now complicate those questions by folding in the issue of Christian faith. Literary scholars and English teachers, who also happen to be people of faith, are often marginalized in two directions. First, there’s the usual English-major-as-useless designation (insert pizza delivery jokes here). Like our colleagues everywhere, we have to win students to the wild notion that this literary business might actually have something to do with their lives. But further, we experience intermittent suspicion from our own faith communities. Our constituencies are sometimes wary of the secular books we teach. They’ve heard about those course syllabi: semester after semester of Wharton and Hemingway, Conrad and Crane—heavy doses of pessimism, relativism, and all the other frightening isms. By contrast, we often seem to want to aim students toward encounters with literature that they may come to love and be shaken by, maybe even shaken to their faith foundations. It is easier, perhaps, to approach our syllabi as cultural study, an analysis of political and historical movements, a foray into language play, a survey of ideological movements. Who wants to fool with the moral demands that reading might arouse? We’re not even sure most of the time how to respond to writers who make moral claims. How do we respond when they cross the line into didacticism? And how horrific is didacticism anyway?
And what of the writers who take faith seriously? Jon Hassler, the late Minnesota writer, told me of an episode in his writing hideaway in the far reaches of a wintry Minnesota north. Hassler had to call a plumber because of a frozen pipe explosion at the cabin. He recalled watching the plumber work and responding to the man’s over-the-shoulder question: “What do you do?” To Hassler’s “I’m a writer,” the plumber—on his knees in raw sewage mind you—came back with, “Boy, I wouldn’t have that job for anything.” Therefore, this literary business is not for the faint of heart, especially when seen through the lens of faith. George Herbert’s argument that “a verse may find him whom a sermon flies” still works, I suppose, but only when careful attention has been given to the selection of that “verse.”

It may well be that neither our poems nor our sermons are finding us often enough these days. By the ways we have furnished our minds, have we rendered ourselves vulnerable to television pulpiteers and political demagoguery? Have we teachers of literature (whether pronounced with pinky-finger curled or not) held up our end by our insistence on books that elevate and even ennoble? Do we still buy the idea that good fiction is turning up truth? John Gardner says that “the value of great fiction . . . is not just that it entertains us or distracts us from our troubles, not just that it broadens our knowledge of people and places, but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations.”

I know that’s old school. I like it anyway. The reality, according to folks like Mark Edmundson is that our reading and writing have gravitated toward the lowest common denominator: the latest Glenn Beck on the one bestseller list and Tom Clancy on the other. So, are there good writers out there who write seriously about the lives we lead and with an awareness of the faith struggles that resonate in those lives, books that take us into the dark and into the joy, tales that tell the truth? And the truth I mean is the heft in words like those of Emily Dickinson’s fine formulation: “We believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble.” Now I am not going to try to define truth, even Christ took to silence on that one. But in
using the word, I am drawing on Gardner’s notion of “true art” as that which “clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns.”

I especially appreciate this notion, lifted, I suppose, from Robert Frost’s familiar line, that poetry leads toward “clarification of life.” Can we still say that we are English majors because these stories and poems and the rest teach us something about how to live? Despite the canon battles, most of us carry around a venerable list of literature that clarifies the soul—Shakespeare and the others. But are the truth-tellers still with us? Are there those contemporary writers who, with us, hope for the best while knowing the worst? Are there those writers who admit that everything is not always okay? Are there still some good books to hold in our hands?

Without really noticing, I discover that I have spent most of my career trying to get folks together to talk about how faith dimensions intersect with the literary among living writers. I have trotted around the country interviewing writers with a particular ear for what they have to say about wrestling with the sacred in their writing. From Garrison Keillor to Clyde Edgerton, from Jan Karon to Ernest Gaines, from Lee Smith to Frederick Buechner—few of them admit to preaching, most of them are not comfortable with the phrase “Christian writer,” but most of them, in one way or another, are nonetheless preaching up a tempest. Some of them like David James Duncan or Stephen Dunn start from their problems with the faith. Others, like Doris Betts or Walt Wangerin, admit to being deeply enmeshed in faith, but take very different tacks in their writing about it. Some, like Jan Karon or Phil Gulley, are clearly identified with one faith tradition or another. Others like Silas House, Denise Giardina, or Will Campbell have written out of a faith that cries out on social issues. Some, like Eleanor Taylor Bland, Kaye Gibbons, or Sheri Reynolds, write popular novels. Others, like Ron Hanson or Alice McDermott, lean more toward the so-called literary. (Labels are slippery, of course. “Christian writer,” “Southern writer,” “literary writer,” “popular writer,” and the rest; I’m not sure how well these categories serve us.)
This much we can say for sure: writing on cloth can be tricky. Since Jonathan Swift used the phrase “man of the cloth” to designate those called to the work of the church, we have come to associate taking up the cloth as related to notions of calling and faith. I have been fascinated by the ways in which this remarkably diverse group addresses the issue of faith in their fiction. In fact, perhaps we should abandon the befuddling categories and focus on that reading which boldfaces human vanity, the frailty of hope, the omnipresence of meanness, and the consolation of faith.

Thus when I speak of these contemporary writers who labor in what I have taken to be truthful ways, I must note that their definitions of truth include large spaces for uncertainty. I began the 2002 Festival of Faith & Writing in Grand Rapids with lines from Shelby Foote’s correspondence with Walker Percy: “I seriously think that no good practicing Catholic can ever be a great artist; art is by definition a product of doubt; it has to be pursued,” Foote says.8 Foote goes on and on in those letters about how “faith kills art.” “Most people think mistakenly that writers are people who have something to tell them. Nothing I think could be wronger. If I knew what I wanted to say, I wouldn’t write at all. What for? Why do it, if you already know the answers? Writing is the search for answers,” he concludes.

Despite his Catholic faith, Percy does not dramatically disagree. “The novelist has no business setting up as the Answer Man,” Percy says.9 Most of the writers I have interviewed turn to “I don’t know” as a starting point. Doubt must have its say. “‘Lord I believe; help Thou mine unbelief’ is the best we can do,” Buechner says. (And he adds, “Thank God, it is enough.”)10 I would argue that it is in such a theological space that transformation can occur.

Such questions as how to be faithful to the experience of the dark have driven me to reflect on how I began making my book choices long ago in that Carnegie Public Library where they let you take home six books every Saturday—for free. As a child without TV, I found the library to be a wild and incalculable space, an adventure I have yet to get over. My other of shaping environments were the YMCA and a one-room, over-
heated church building on Madison Avenue in Anderson, Indiana—Midwestern fundamentalism of the late 1950s and 1960s. I grew up there with folks who called themselves “people of the book.” I memorized Bible verses for “short talks” in church. I had help from Zondervan’s *Sourcebook for Speakers* and *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, which has no less than eight poems beginning with the word “‘Twas.”

‘Twas in that church that I learned something of the power of words. We were visited by traveling evangelists, folks who dressed better than most people on my side of the smokestacks in a factory town. They knew lots of words and they possessed a remarkable energy. Some, like Bordon Higginbotham, were pulpit-pounders. I recall one stifling July night when, sitting in the first pew, I saw Brother Higginbotham split open the back of his hand with a misfire on the podium. (He simply wrapped it up with a handkerchief without missing a beat.) My nine-year-old eyes were wide with admiration. My hero. Such giants of my childhood inspired my fascination for words.

And I memorized everything. The songs of the day like “Does your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?” and a wondrous lyric about a guy named Dooley who wore “tan shoes with pink show laces and a big panama with a purple hatband.” I had no idea what a “panama” was, but I memorized it. Of course the best words were those at church. See if you remember Myra Brooks Welch’s “The Touch of the Master’s Hand.”

‘Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile:
“What am I bidden, good folks,” he cried,
“Who’ll start the bidding for me?”

“A dollar, a dollar”; then, “Two!” “Only two?
Two dollars, and who’ll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three—” But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: “What am I bid for the old violin?”
And he held it up with the bow.
“A thousand dollars, and who’ll make it two?
Two thousand! And who’ll make it three?
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,
And going, and gone,” said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
“We do not quite understand
What changed its worth.” Swift came the reply:
“The touch of the master’s hand.”

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A “mess of pottage,” a glass of wine;
A game—and he travels on.
He is “going” once, and “going” twice,
He’s “going” and almost “gone.”

But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that’s wrought
By the touch of the Master’s hand.11

When I recited this poem as a 10-year-old at Madison Avenue, the old folks wept.

Twenty years later, during my first year on the faculty at Calvin College, I was invited to participate in a bad poetry reading contest in honor of a retiring colleague. By some instinct, formed by my few months among these folks, I knew I had the
perfect poem: “‘Twas battered and scarred.” I got a good laugh. The word business had become more complicated. And I was set to wondering. Were those good southern transplants simply naïve in their reaction to the poem? Is this reading thing about the sophistication of an audience; is it sociology? (Some people like the message of the Welch poem, and others see it as too easy sentimentality. Is it just about your education, your fellowship, your theological tradition, your class, your taste?) Is it simply a matter of “You’ve got your preferences and I’ve got mine?” I still puzzle over these questions: Is it the metaphor of Christ as a violin repairman that we find humorous? Is it the notion of sawdust aisle transformation that we have outgrown?

I pursued this puzzle in various ways during my years at Calvin College. For example, I sometimes accompanied a group of students to Concord, Massachusetts to do Thoreau, Emerson, Alcott, Hawthorne, Dickinson, and the rest during our January interim semester. Prowling through the treasure-trove of Emerson’s journals in preparation for one trip, I ran across that scene where he describes his attendance at a country church on a wintry Sunday morning. The preacher’s podium had been placed, rather unfortunately, too close to a large window where Emerson could see the falling snow. Finally, Emerson records, “I decided to watch the snow. The snow at least was real. The preacher was spectral.”

Honesty would be early on my list. We want words from the heart, we say, and we look for evidence of engagement and passion. But sincerity is no guarantee of truth. Furthermore, we look to be taught something, to experience freshness. So often we feel that we’ve heard all this before or that what we encounter is insubstantial. Then, too, we like to be reminded of those verities that we may have forgotten in the pace of our days. There’s the technical dimension, too; we want what Gardner calls “a shining performance.” Shoddy is still shoddy—even in a Christian context. But ultimately, many of our books fail us in the same way that Emerson’s preacher failed him. It is the falseness that rankles. We are creatures of the surface who need to be encouraged, even forced, into the depths. We want sermons and books that have a scent of authenticity, encounters with words that reflect into our own day to day experience. I
don’t know who it was for you—Faulkner or Thoreau, O’Connor or Emerson or Austen. But somewhere back there, I suspect there’s a book or two that began to read you.

When I think of all I would not be had I not been hedged about by shelves of books…. There’s the orange and yellow hardback copy of *The Book of Bebb*, for example. That book cost me four dollars and seventy-six cents at Shirley’s Old Book Shop in Springfield, Missouri. And thus it twas that Frederick Buechner picked up where my little church on Madison Avenue left off on this business of what a book can do. In 1976, Buechner delivered the Beecher lectures at Yale University. Buechner begins with the scene of a reluctant preacher climbing into the pulpit to face the music one more time:

The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his notecards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. The silence in the shabby church is deafening because everybody is listening to it. Everybody is listening including even himself. Everybody knows the kind of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out of the silence, he will tell them?14

And Buechner concludes, “Let the preacher tell them the truth. Before the Gospel is a word, it is silence . . . . Out of the silence let the only real news come, which is sad news before it is glad news and that is fairy tale last of all” (Buechner, 23).

Buechner’s title for these lectures is *Telling the Truth*, and my simple thesis is that we desperately need those stories, poems, plays, and essays that confront us with the complex mixtures of human experience. Find books that speak truth. William Carlos Williams puts it succinctly: “It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there.”15 We desperately need to hear what the poets, the good ones, have to say.
But where to find those voices—are they to be found in the contemporary marketplace? Let’s take a short detour to the bookstore. We’ve got the stalwart holdouts, Books-A-Million and Barnes and Noble. And then there’s that other world, albeit a diminishing one, the Christian or Family Bookstore. This scenario has of course changed a good bit in recent years since Wal-Mart learned of a market for Christian books, and the New York Times decided to include such books among the best-seller listings. Those small, personalized book shops are going the way of tanning parlors and video rental stores. I’m concerned about what we are reading in both the secular and religious venues. Are we getting enough of that complex, challenging, transformative stuff?

In the doorway at Barnes and Noble, you find Stephen King, the best selling writer in English, Danielle Steele, John Grisham, James Paterson, Dan Brown, Patricia Cornwell, and the recent rave, Stieg Larsson. As 401K’s have dwindled, sales of vampire books and werewolf tales have boomed. Romance novels account for the largest share in book publishing. "How-to” books and celebrity profiles account for much of the rest.\(^{16}\)

And there’s Christian Books.com where you still find George McDonald, Janette Oke, Bodie Thoene, and Tim Tebow alongside the still very popular Purpose Driven Life—text and spinoffs since 2007. Just this week we saw the release of Cathleen Falsani’s latest: Belieber: Fame, Faith and the Heart of Justin Bieber. Many of these writers have, of course, crossed over into the secular shops. There’s Lucado’s Outlive Your Life and William Paul Young’s, The Shack, which has been on the list forever. There’s C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. And we mustn’t omit LaHaye and Jenkins: 70 million copies of the 16 books in the Left Behind series.\(^{17}\) There’s Jungle Doctor Pulls A Leg, and The Night of the Living Dead Christian. Neither of those titles can touch my all time favorite: You Can’t Curl Your Hair With Holy Rollers.

But things aren’t really so clearly defined anymore. The globalized publishing world has blurred the lines remarkably over the years that I have been watching this secular versus Christian book tilt. (And Rupert Murdoch owns Zondervan.)
Note, for example, the recent success of Rob Bell’s *Love Wins* or the phenomenal sales of *Heaven is for Real*. And there’s the self-published, *The Shack*, a book rejected by the Christian publishing houses that has made history of a sort with its 20 million in sales. One cannot easily categorize and dismiss the whole business of Christian publishing. Among the names I have connected to the Christian bookstore venues are several writers who do indeed convey the complexity I am commending; therefore, a caustic dismissal of the whole genre no longer flies. But we can do better than “Touched by an Angel” spin-offs.

I want to be clear here. I realize that we have a plethora of journals and programs dedicated to the study of popular culture. And I know that genre novels and formula fiction have been around for a long time. We had airport novels before we had airports. Nonetheless, popular fiction—whether it’s the Christian novels of Janette Oke or Beverly Lewis or your late night detective thriller or spy story from Agatha Christie or John LeCarre—can be entertaining and refreshing. Sometimes, niche novels are well written to boot. We use these as we sometimes use television—a passive retreat. We call them beach reading or page-turners and they may well be tolerable in their place. I have no problem with that. But we must remember that disposable fiction pretty much leaves us where we were. Twinkies and Snickers Bars are okay sometimes.

But I have argued here that indeed what we read matters. What sort of books do we need? Remember Franz Kafka’s notion of books? (“I believe we should read only those books that bite and sting. . . . A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.” 18) Now you may be wondering about my resort to violent metaphors: “shaken to the faith foundations,” “thrown into the deep end,” the” ice-ax,” the biting and the stinging. Among the longest standing metaphors for education in the West has been Plato’s “Figure of the Cave.” You no doubt recall the moment in the allegory when the teacher forces the reluctant prisoners from the darkness of the cave into the temporarily blinding sunshine. Contemporary culture offers some very comfortable caves. Amazon will choose you reading for you, NETFLIX will determine your film preferences, you can choose your worship style at church, and a news channel that fits
your politics. We can avoid those neighborhoods, real and metaphorical, that might disturb. Pursuing only that reading that diverts, confirms, and pleases demonstrates literacy, I suppose; such pursuit will not, however, produce transformation. I wonder sometimes if these caves have contributed to the curious disappearance of the curious. I am suggesting that we need that reading that takes us into alien territory, which calls us to attentiveness to our own lives, which make us more fully conscious. We must continue to find those writers who elevate, push, change, and challenge—the ones who tell us not so much what we want to hear as what we need to hear. Even when that’s painful, or, perhaps, especially when that’s painful.

Sometimes, of course, what we need to hear most is the truth about ourselves. And, I submit, we need some of that—maybe more than we are getting. In our society, Snickers and Twinkies have become a dastardly full time diet. Beach reading, indeed. Life, as we’ve all discovered, is no day at such a place. I am not sure that we still believe in the possibility of transformation, that the books we read and or teach can make us and others better, but the likelihood of such a vision may be influenced by our junk food quotient.

Barbara Kingsolver in *High Tide in Tucson* gets at the dangers of the purely marketing centered context that seems to have won the day. Considering the publishing boom in O.J. Simpson books in the mid 1990s, when more than 50 books relating to the Simpson trial and various spin-offs clogged the front tables of bookstores everywhere, Kingsolver wondered why. She says:

> This is a spooky proposition: an information industry that narrows down what we’ll get to read and know about, mainly on the basis of how eagerly we’ll lap it up. Producers and publishers who make these choices seem inclined, if confronted, to throw up their hands and exclaim, "I can’t help it if that’s what the people want!” A mother could say the same while feeding her baby nothing but jelly beans day after day; so could a physician who administers morphine for head colds. Both would be convicted of
criminal neglect. Why is there no Hippocratic Oath for the professionals who service our intellects?¹⁹

I think that is a pretty good question as it forces us to consider the reading material we might need as opposed to that which merely diverts. If you profess English, I think this must be the beginning place, the apologetic, with which we win our students to the project. And I think we must return to the notion of the “public intellectual,” informing audiences in our churches and communities about the sometimes dangerous, often exhilarating, transformative possibilities of the human arts. This is the ground from which we might reseed the humanities.

I fear that much of our reading fare, like our movies, our music, our religious institutions, is speaking to us not the truths of life but the lies of formulas, a mass produced culture devoted to commercial profit and triviality. Unfortunately, this is true not just in the world of Christian fiction but also in the Christian college, the Christian bookstore, the Christian church. It is not 1959 at my Madison Avenue church anymore. “‘Twas” this or that won’t do the job. The hard and fast eludes us. Auden is right to say that “Poetry is the clear expression of mixed feelings.”²⁰ I suspect that the artist who is Christian has much the same rulebook as any good artist. We owe it to ourselves and to our students to challenge formulaic propositions which emerge from sermonic, not artistic, intentions. We owe our students an acknowledgement of the seeming randomness of events, the fog bound aspect of many of our days. We must speak of faith within the shadow of doubt.

I had the extraordinary experience eight or so years ago of traveling to Mitford. (Actually, Jan Karon lives in an antebellum mansion outside Charlottesville, but I still seemed to be on the way to Mitford after absorbing myself for a month in two readings of each of the Mitford novels in preparation for an interview with Jan Karon.) But on the way to Mitford, I was delayed by a plane cancellation—nine extra hours in a Cincinnati airport terminal. Those hours turned out to be serendipitous, because they gave me time to read Tim Gautreaux’s then just released novel, The Clearing. That book was absorbing. No longer in Mitford, I was in Nimbus, Louisiana. And Nimbus, I
discovered is a long way from Mitford. Now I have argued that I am okay with the existence of both Nimbus and Mitford, but I found myself resonating with the character studies emerging in Gautreaux’s version of things and wondering how I might approach Jan Karon’s rather sunny version of things.

Jan Karon’s novels rest on the supposition that sin doesn’t make the story; she wants to write out the narrative of goodness achieved. I admire the dream. Jan Karon is unabashedly Christian in her aims as a novelist and more willing to say so than most. She is among the few who use the label unapologetically to signal that her stories are about hope and redemption, that darkness doesn’t get the last word.

Friends continue to ask me why I prefer Fred Buechner’s work to William Young’s. Why Lee Smith over Janette Oke? (My own unscientific survey of church libraries puts Janette Oke at number one.) Is it all simply because I am a teacher of literature? I think about these things in my current work with the Buechner Institute. Over the four years, our largest crowd was not for Barbara Brown Taylor or Katherine Paterson but for The Shack’s William Young. And they stayed late.

These writers for whom I have expressed a preference, most of whom would not be available at christianbooks.com, give shading and nuance to the Christian faith, demonstrate fidelity to the complexities of human experience, and lay bare the simplistic formulas that often resonate in the so-called Christian venue. Henry Zylstra in a marvelous little book called Testament of Vision speaks of modern novels that offer readers the chance to encounter the experience of others at a level so deep “that there is more of us that is Christian, that can be Christian, than there was before.”21 (Call it the “strange witness of unbelief.”22) I suppose it is dangerous to recommend reading that improves the reader even as it disturbs, but that seems to me to be an important alternative to the reading that merely reaffirms our prejudices and convictions.

Tonight or tomorrow, most of us will go home to the incessant tangles of our lives: surly colleagues and pouty
children (or vice-versa)—strains and tears and tensions. You’ve toyed with that wonder—the remote control—World Championship Wrestling, The Shopper’s Channel, the “big hair” preacher’s channel, news bites, Food Channels, “Survivor,” ugly accidents caught on video, cage fighting, Jerry Springer, “Real TV,” psychics and shock and dot-com to find out more. I’m guessing that we can all use a little more sanity, a little more truth, usable truth. We want those books and films and TV shows that struggle with the thorny mixtures of good and evil. We want those stories that include honest portraits of the worlds we struggle through.

I wonder if mightn’t do better by turning to those writers who consider faith obliquely in one way or another but begin from “I don’t know.” David Guterson, for example, borrows a line from Harvey Oxenhorn for an epigram in his book *Snow Falling on Cedars*: “Harmony, like a following breeze at sea, is the exception.” That is a truth; most of our lives simply cannot be so easily reduced to these shades of black and white.

And I must say I lean toward writers like Fred Buechner whose books echo with this sense of the complex mixture of darkness and light. “Nothing human’s not a broth of false and true,” Buechner's clay-footed Saint Godric says, and Buechner is frighteningly honest about our lostness, our tragedy, just as he is emphatic about our foundness, our comedy. In the same book, we find the line, “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.” But Buechner refuses to make it easy; the doubt is always present with the faith. He does not pander to our desire for simplicity but challenges that too easy religion which we are sometimes tempted to hide behind.

My schizophrenic trip to Charlottesville has become a useful metaphor for me on this subject. I found companions in Byron and Randolph, Gautreaux’s troubled brothers in *The Clearing*. I do admire Karon’s Father Tim and appreciate his goodness. How can one not be impressed with Jan Karon’s sense of being called by God to write? I am comforted by her premise that “most ordinary lives are extraordinary.” Her
preoccupation with redemption strikes me as worthy. And I think it would be an error to categorize her books as merely popular, a Christian “Peyton Place,”26 page-turners like those of Grisham and Cornwall and the rest. (One critic says her books are “no more pernicious than iced tea.”27) That’s wrong. She’s up to something we ought to consider. In our preoccupation with original sin, perhaps we have forgotten original innocence.

But….you can hear the but coming can’t you?

Byron Aldridge in Gautreaux’s novel is a veteran of the awful war. It is 1923 and Byron has returned from France, disturbed and bewildered. “I was hoping I was through with the war,” he says. And adds, “But this whole damned world’s turned into one.” By the end of the novel, Byron’s “got his grin back,” but there’s hell to pay and then some. Gautreaux’s stories feature folks stuck in the same places doing the same things—sick, sidetracked, displaced—like us some of the time, maybe even a lot of the time. Where Jan Karon’s stories are steeped in happiness, Gautreaux’s are steeped in misconnection and lostness—“the intermittent hopes of defeated people.”28

Maybe we’d rather have lunch with Father Tim and Cynthia—Karon has sold over 30 million copies of the Mitford chronicles—but you only have to look at any newspaper, any day, to see that the sun is not always shining on the streets where we live. I needed to meet Byron Aldridge too. In his woundedness, his bumbling, his crippledness, I saw my own ineptitude and incompleteness. And Gautreaux’s suggestion is somehow that if Byron’s life matters, maybe mine does too. And somewhere in there is a spiritual insight that gives me more to be Christian with, offers truth that leads to new ways of seeing, renewed energy for the business of life. I don’t mean to suggest that this is an either/or question, only that we need both.

We reach a danger point, I believe, when church leaders and academics lose regard for the ancient verities: truth, beauty, and goodness. All of these terms are to some degree indefinable, even relative; Truth aimed at too directly falls apart in our hands. We have to watch for it out of the corner of the eye. Christians, of all people, have no right to make it too easy.
We must not, as Flannery O'Connor warns, reduce our notion of the supernatural to “pious cliché.” Good fiction, she adds, “should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality” (O’Connor, 148). Much can be learned from the darkness. “In this world you will have trouble,” Christ says, and we know about that. We must be honest about that. “But fear not, I have overcome the world,” He adds, and that’s the truth too. But it’s a hard won truth that has looked the trouble in the face.

Of course sometimes we don’t do the best we could have done. Sometimes we don’t do anything at all. Sometimes our lives seem more like chaos than providence. God has not cleaned up all our messes. We live in Nimbus or at least in the near suburbs. (It is lovely to note that nimbus connotes both radiant light, as in the halo around the head of a saint, and grayness as in the hue of a rain cloud.) We live in the tension between faith and doubt, and we need books that acknowledge our dilemmas. Good books require an admission of emptiness, a hard look at the hard stuff, the mixed feelings, the halting pace.

Since I began with the poetry of my evangelical youth, let me close with a poem of later years, a poem that strikes me as honestly capturing the complication of the real days of our lives. This is Stephen Dunn’s “At the Smithville Methodist Church” from his Pulitzer Prize winning Local Time. (I asked Dunn to begin the 2002 Festival of Faith & Writing in Grand Rapids by reading this poem and talking about it, which he did.)

It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week, but when she came home
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends. She likes the songs they sang when they weren’t
twisting and folding paper into dolls.
What could be so bad?
Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith in good men was what we had to do to stay this side of cynicism, that other sadness.

O.K., we said. One week. But when she came home singing "Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk Could we say Jesus doesn’t love you? Could I tell her the Bible is a great book certain people use to make you feel bad? We sent her back without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long since we needed Jesus as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was sufficiently dead, that our children would think of him like Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson. Soon it became clear to us: you can’t teach disbelief to a child, only wonderful stories, and we hadn’t a story nearly as good. On parents’ night there were the Arts & Crafts all spread out like appetizers. Then we took our seats in the church and the children sang a song about the Ark, and Hallelujah and one in which they had to jump up and down for Jesus. I can’t remember ever feeling so uncertain about what’s comic, what’s serious.
Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes. 
You can’t say to your child
"Evolution loves you.” The story stinks
of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn’t have a
wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car
she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus.
There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along
in silence. 31

As Edmund, speaking over the corpses strewn about
the stage in the last Act of Shakespeare's King Lear, observes:
“The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we
feel, not what we ought to say.” 32

The issue, finally, is telling the truth.

1 Proverbs 10:19
2 Mark Edmundson, “Narcissus Regards a Book,” The Chronicle of
3 Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur (New York: New Directions Books,
1970), 55.
4 George Herbert, “The Church Porch.” line 5.
5 John Gardner, The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers
6 The Letters of Emily Dickinson, to Otis Phillips Lord, April 30, 1882,
3:728.
7 Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Complete Poems of Robert
8 Jay Tolson, ed., The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker
9 Walker Percy, “Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy,” Paris Review,
summer, 1987, no. 103.
10 Frederick Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat (New York: Seabury
Press, 1966), 35.
28 Tim Gautreaux, Same Place, Same Things (New York: Picador, 1996), 123.
30 John 16:33
Creatures of the Depths: 
A Response to Dale Brown

D. Brian Austin
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First I’d like to thank Ron Wells for providing this marvelous space in which authentic conversation can flourish. Such spaces are all too rare these days, as Dr. Brown’s most excellent paper has just shown us. Two days to “dig a little deeper” is not much, but is so very refreshing. And thanks to Dale Brown for a most sensitive, thoughtful, articulate, and honest journey into the depths of the relationship between faith and literature. The first time I read through it, about a month ago, it brought tears to my eyes. So for that month, I’ve been trying to understand why it did so. These remarks in response to his paper will attempt to answer that question in a way that might help us just a mite to reinvigorate our quest for deeper truths and truer selves.

Since we are flush with Michigan connections at the symposium, let me begin with a story of an encounter that took place in Grand Rapids a few years back. While at Grand Valley State University for a series of talks and conversations, I had a kind of epiphany while having dinner with a group of students. One of them really wanted to ask me a question about something I had said at a presentation—something that really bothered him. As he puzzled to formulate his question I saw something that had become rather unusual in my recent experience: a college student trying to ask a real question, not one that had been prepackaged and couched in the latest talking points. He was searching for the words with which he could really ask about a statement that had really jostled his conceptions. It struck me then and stays
with me now because I hear more and more students asking fake questions couched in somebody else’s talking points. “Do you really believe that random chance and a big bang can explain life?” “Don’t you think that Obama’s socialist policies are aimed at removing religion from the public conversation?” “Do you agree that tax increases cripple the job-creators?” “Shouldn’t we pass this jobs bill right away so we can put Americans back to work?” Out of the mouths of 18 year-olds, it’s hard to hear much beyond the parroting. And it’s sad—especially when they seem perfectly satisfied with these prepackaged notions and the ideologies that generate them.

The young man at dinner in Michigan was trying to go deeper than that. He was trying to be honest, ask an honest question. He was wrestling with what he believed and something he had heard that had challenged him. Ideologies and the sound-bite talking points that smear them across public discourse do not wrestle—they pontificate. And in so doing spread a poison that sickens and enfeebles the real human souls that seek to engage what is most real about the world. As public vocabulary is truncated so is the ability to ask honest human questions and speak honest human truths. At its very saddest, these ideologies colonize the souls of young people, and they are in danger of becoming no more than the ideology they parrot. And ideologies cannot be honest, because they admit no fault, no doubt, no wrestling, no vulnerability.

Dr. Brown’s analysis of varying literatures favors those that tell some bit of human truth, and that truth always involves a good measure of messiness, uncertainty, paradox, and struggle. The world of political or religious ideological advocacy cannot tolerate these. So it usually buries them beneath an aggressive enthusiasm and pretends they don’t exist. Bob Dylan sings “We Live in a Political World” where “everything is hers or his,” where “love don’t have any place,” where “mercy walks the plank,” where “death disappears.”¹ I think he is lamenting a world where human honesty and vulnerability must be sacrificed to fear-fed ideologies in competition with each other. In a world where “the other” exists for me either as threat or as quarry, the deeper human realities are lost. In literature that is “agenda first, quest last,” the universal human messiness must be glossed over, at best. So I very much affirm Dr. Brown’s affirmation of art

86
that admits doubt, uncertainty, lostness and darkness along with their positive counterparts. Pascal’s *Pensees* are a great witness and testimony to the power of this kind of honesty. Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno recognizes this when he says that reading the *Pensees* “is not an invitation to study a philosophy, but to know a man and enter the sanctuary of a naked soul.” One wonders if Pascal had finished the book, polished it into the defense of Jansenist Catholicism that he had envisioned, would it be the powerful work of literature that it has become? It is great literature, in part, because of its honesty.

One’s potential for honesty in verbal communication is directly tied to the strength of one’s vocabulary, and we enhance our vocabularies, *and those of our students*, by wrestling with Pascal, with Annie Dillard, T. S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, etc. And by wrestling with the uncomfortable revelations, steps and missteps, of the other liberal arts disciplines. This brings me back to the reason why I teared up when I finished the first reading of Prof. Brown’s paper.

Can we take from Dale Brown’s insights about what makes quality (Christian) literature any insights about what makes quality (Christian) liberal arts education? I think we can, and we must.

My career in higher education has mostly been spent amidst warring ideologies, political posturing, and various levels of deception and gamesmanship. The year 1978, my freshman year in college, was the time when two Christian leaders in my denomination devised a plan, as one of them put it, to “go for the jugular.” Since then, very few conversations about Christian higher education in my tradition have been free from politics (in the sense about which Dylan sang). Even within the walls of the outstanding church I attended for 13 years it could not be avoided (once when a colleague was not rehired after 6 years of service, something he had said in Sunday school was included as part of the rationale for that termination). And these political battles continue today, whether in Michigan or in East Tennessee. In the culture wars, macro or micro, one is coerced into taking a side and talking the talk. There are no shades of gray allowed. To admit that your position is not rock-solid is to give aid and comfort to the enemy. Any show of uncertainty or
weakness will be exploited and used against you. Loyalty to the
party must come first, and truth must sit in the back of the bus.
Long habit of fighting these battles hardens the soul and wears
callouses in those places that desperately long to be sensitive to
the moving of the spirit.

I thank God and Carson-Newman College for providing
a sanctuary for an honest quest for truth in our classrooms. We
sign no confession of faith or doctrinal statement in order to
teach. Our president repeatedly enjoins the faculty and students
to “Question Everything” in the faith that if our Christian
convictions are true, then they can withstand the honest
questioner, that they have room for doubt, for paradox, for the “I
don’t know,” for the admission that we’re all stupid sometimes,
and that we really don’t know much about the universe.

But this haven for the honest search and the faithful
response is very much under threat on Christian campuses across
the country today. The culture wars, which demand ideological
purity and a “never let ‘em see you sweat” swagger, continue to
poison our young people and their teachers. Such poison
produces bad literature and bad education. John Stuart Mill said
"Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender
plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere
want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it
speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in
life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown
them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in
exercise." Hostile influences indeed. I would really like to see
the conversation about the nature of Christian higher education
follow a path similar to the one that Dale Brown follows in this
paper. Can we find a way to weave into the philosophy of
Christian higher education, or maybe even into the governing
documents of an institution, a courageous embrace of an
imperfectly grasped truth, a respect for honest doubt? A respect
for the complexity and messiness of all human existence (even
Christian existence)? A respect for the “I don’t know”? A
respect for the unpredictable and dangerous quest for the depths
from which we arise and to which we will return? I think we are
creatures of the depths, but infected with a congenital lassitude
that is only exacerbated by the allergy to truth-seeking that
defines the “political world.”

88
My eyes welled with tears for the damage done to so many “tender plants” by the ideological enforcers who only feed shallow enthusiasm. But that lament was equaled, maybe even surpassed, by tears of joy in the face of the honesty, eloquence, compassion, and wisdom of Professor Brown’s words on the power of words. It is my sincere hope that teachers of literature, teachers in all liberal arts disciplines, leaders of Christian higher education, will take from Dr. Brown’s wise counsel a clue and an inspiration for empowering the liberal arts to do what they are best equipped to do: to help us all identify what is most real in ourselves, and then to align that with what is most real in the universe. We’ll never get there, but if we’re on an honest path, then that is a blessing indeed.

1 From the album *Oh Mercy*, Columbia Records, 1989.
Response to Dale Brown

Jean Eledge
Lee University

‘Twas an engaging, thought-provoking journey on which you have taken us, Dr. Brown. Your reflections, experiences and questions have challenged our integrative, academic desires and found lodging in our pedagogical souls. As a result and response, I have let surface again the question that is the foundational guide to the practical application of my calling: “So, what does all this mean to my students?” Will this reside as a Saturday morning stimulating intellectual discussion among respected colleagues, or will it take wings in Monday’s class discussion or in the semester’s content? More importantly, will it take root to potentially “transform?” As I began formulating my response, I wondered, “Must I surrender to the multitasking, texting, tweeting generational tendencies that decry my ability to encourage reading, raise the questions Dale Brown raises and lead students to dwell in the potential of the questions and the power of “writing on cloth?” I remind myself that I am incapable of “transforming” the general masses, but I am confident that I have been called to a place where I hold the potential to have impact on the attitudes, the thinking, the ways of knowing and believing that define my students and shape their futures. Our students can tackle what we are discussing today, but we must return to our classrooms committed to engage them intentionally in ways that lead to deep thinking about the questions of books, choice and why their engagement in those questions matter.

The questions and reflections raised in Brown’s paper lead me to “hourglass” my responses, funneling them down quickly to the practical implications for teaching to enliven the
classroom, and to engage those with whom we have potential to impact. I will then allow my responses free reign to broaden out once again, balancing the weight of the questions posed at the top of our metaphorical hourglass.

Among the questions posed by Dr. Brown is, “What and whose wisdom will guide our reading?” I would add the implication “and therefore our thinking?” For my students, I enthusiastically accept the challenge that for my part of their lives—one semester, maybe two—my wisdom will guide their reading. Now, that is no small responsibility for me to accept. It means that I have to come to grips with the questions posed to us today before opening the discussion and leading my students to interaction with the authors and their works chosen for my course. This also means that I must require my students to be accountable for their reading and their interactions with the writers. I have discovered in this day of Headline News images and text blasts that I cannot assume that my students know how to read--really read--much less what to read. This may sound completely simplistic, but in the last few years I have started devoting time before the first reading assignment to demonstrate to students how I want them to engage the text, to interact with the author--commenting, questioning; in short, being prepared to bring to the next class their own questions and responses on how their lives/experiences intersect the big storyline/message/point of the text. The results have been quite dramatic, as I moved from the assumption that students would read, would know how to read and would care about the text the way that I did and in a way that would open them up to the questions they need to ask not only of the writer, but more importantly of themselves. In this discussion of books and texts, I would urge us not to overlook the classroom teacher’s responsibility to assist in equipping media-generation students with models of how to read and engage text.

And then, “what do we read?” Brown offers the premise that “good books make us better,” and I concur. To funnel the “what” question down to my response focus, however, I will reframe it as “what do we assign our students to read?” As chair of the English and Modern Foreign Languages Department at a Christian university, I have been questioned occasionally by parents of freshman about specific course content, usually reading assignments. “Why is my son/daughter having to read
(###?) I thought this was a Christian college. We didn’t expect that she would be assigned to read ____.” A particularly unique challenge came in the last few years when a student told one of my English faculty that she could not do the reading and related written assignment, because it was fiction and that she and her family chose not to read fiction. The parent got involved, called my English faculty member to explain and to insist that her child be given an alternate assignment, because their family holds to scripture that says, “Whatever things are true….think on these things.”1 Obviously, then, fiction did not meet this criterion.

So, what do we read? What do we have our students read? And why? It seems essential that not only must we ask ourselves all three questions, but also that students join the conversation, privy to the one that we have with ourselves and the ones we enjoy with our colleagues. Students must understand the “why” I assign those books/texts that I deem well written, models of craft and thought that open minds to ask questions, that encourage comparisons between our experiences and those of others, books that enliven our imaginations and dreams, books that may lead some of them, my students, to want to be a writers/thinkers of excellence. Excellence and Christian faith need not, must not, be mutually exclusive in the realms of good thinking and good art. Talking about this openly with students in our discussions of what to read and why lays the groundwork for providing them models of excellent writing, expressions from a soul-in-search in books and texts from writers who are Christian and from those who are not. I contend that it is only in the pre-reading class discussions and the subsequent engagement of texts from multiple, diverse writers of excellence that our students’ deep questions inhabiting the area between faith and intellect begin to shed the fear of surfacing.

The questions that arise from the reading then ultimately serve to connect rather than divide or threaten to create what Dr. Brown calls the “theological space” where “transformation can occur.” He urges us to choose books that speak truth, writing that “confronts us with the complex mixtures of human experience.” Do our students know that even Madeleine L’Engle admits that her writings reflect her questions, not her answers?2 Perhaps this could be a dialogue opener for students in Christian college classrooms. I believe that we must lead our students to discover that reading the existential
explorations of others, even those written from a faithless position, is not questioning God or being unfaithful to Him. It is rather a call to “become a thousand men and yet remain [themselves].” \(^3\) Students must be part of the “what” and “why” discussions about books and texts.

Creating a classroom environment based upon the certainty that God can handle the questions moves our thoughtfully chosen, assigned readings into the realm of potentially transformational experiences. I watched it happen with Jill, a nontraditional student, wife of a pastor, in my capstone course whose encounter with Camus and *The Stranger* actually served as a catalyst to reconcile her mind and her faith in a powerful, almost “moved-to-tears” kind of way. She entered Professor Brown’s “alien territory,” and left “more fully conscious.” Jill talked to me at length about her “transformation” as she came to understand that God is not threatened by the questions – her questions that had lain just beneath the “hold-it-together” surface for years. Intellectual, emotional and spiritual pressure released as she comprehended and was able to articulate how God did not need for her to try to cover for Him by keeping the questions at bay. I have discovered that my students have a deep need to grasp this before they feel free to question. Dr. Brown states that “much can be learned from the darkness.” Jill is a powerful affirmation of his point in her encounter with Camus. Echoing Dale. Brown’s urging that “we must speak truth in the shadow of doubt,” Richard Hughes says “It is not my job to present my students with pre-digested answers, but it is my job to inspire wonder, to awaken imagination, to stimulate creativity, and to provide an atmosphere that supports them as, together, we ask questions about meaning and good and evil, about God and life and death.” \(^4\) Dr. Brown’s question of what to read must be taken into our classrooms where we hold the potential of influence and the hope of lifelong impact.

Now, the overarching question that occupies the bottom part of my hourglass: *Why* read? To connect that question to the focus of my response: Why require students to read? The answer is “questions” – my questions; their questions; the questions posed by writers “on cloth.” Do we not find comfort, courage and even faith in the community of the questioners asking the questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the 94
meaning of life? What is my purpose in this world? Is there purpose? My students would add these: Are my values, beliefs, politics, faith and calling my own or those of my parents or my church? Have I come to make them my own? Do I have the courage to respond to my own questions before I respond to those of others?

To ignore such questions of life, of existence, even those written in pain or from outrage from those outside our faith is to shield our students from the reality of life and to make them ever more suspect in weak faith moments of the validity of what they profess to believe. We, as teachers, guides, facilitators must not fear the questions. God is truth. He is the creator of language and of minds to employ it. In Him reside the answers to the questions, but He allows us the intellectual and spiritual freedom to grapple with them and then to find Him ever more clearly in the struggle. I agree with Henri Nouwen that “Teaching means the creation of the space in which the validity of the questions does not depend on the availability of answers but on their capacity to open us to new perspectives and horizons.”

In addressing his own questions for us, Dale Brown has done just that. He has engaged us in “new perspectives and horizons.” What I would add to the conversation this morning is that we, the teachers of the unique pieces of God’s “workmanship” sitting before us, are responsible for carrying the challenge to the classroom, preparing students to leave our influence equipped with “new perspectives and horizons” and the confidence to live in the questions presented “on cloth” and elsewhere.

1 Philippians 4:8
When I was four years old, I used to sit on my father’s friendly lap every night while he read the newspaper on a deep red armchair. I’d scan the page for words that I knew, but then I would point to another word, interesting in its length or proximity to a picture, and ask, “What does that one say?” By the time I entered first grade, I could read confidently and quickly, so imagine my dismay when I was asked to sound out the words “See Spot Run. Run Spot Run” in that classic text *Fun with Dick and Jane*. Because I had already learned how to read by a process that I now know is called “whole language” acquisition, the combination of phonetics, simplistic prose, and inane stories completely frustrated me. I fear I was an unpleasant and rebellious child in first grade, but I can’t remember exactly how I acted out, only that my wise mother eventually intervened and obtained permission for me to take chapter books to class and read quietly to myself when the rest of the class was having a reading lesson. And that was the beginning of my reading life.

When I was in the sixth grade, my mother went back to college to study for a library science degree, and she enrolled in a course in Children’s Literature. My reading up to this point had included both the classics and the multi-volume franchises of the day: *The Count of Monte Cristo* and Sherry Ames, *Treasure Island* and Nancy Drew, *Little Women* and the Bobbsey Twins. My mother’s course focused on contemporary children’s literature, especially Newberry Medal-winning novels. I became
the class guinea pig, reading everything my mother brought home, reporting on my reactions, answering specific questions that my mother or other members of the class posed. Thus I was ushered into the assorted worlds of Lois Lensky’s *Strawberry Girl*, Elizabeth Yates’ *Amos Fortune: Free Man*, Meindart DeJong’s *The Wheel on the School*, and Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (which haunted me for months).

I was an insatiable and ubiquitous reader: I walked down the state highway once a month to plunder the county bookmobile, read dusty books about farm boys in the Midwest that were recommended by our small-town librarian, and dutifully plowed through the mawkish Elsie Dinsmore series that the church librarian pressed upon me. I was the classic kid with her nose in a book, ignoring parental calls for dinner, demands that I watch my younger sisters, or orders to turn off my bed-side light. I wanted to read “just one more chapter” of *Black Beauty*, *The Boxcar Children* or *Half Magic*. I read with a flashlight under the covers after lights out—ruining my eyes, according to my mother. I read in a secret cedar-tree hideaway, in the bathtub immersed in Mr. Bubble, and on the grass under the weeping willows down by the creek.

Reading provided me with new worlds, worlds that were radically different from my boring life in a small farming community, textual worlds—whether fictional or historical—that I was often reluctant to leave for the reality of washing the dishes, picking up my room, or feeding the cats. To this day, some books can so seize me that I lose track of time, place, people, and sorrows. I shake my head like a damp dog as I emerge from the textual sea, shocked to discover that the afternoon is gone or that my plane is landing, feeling as if I have lived another life, taken role in another drama, been a different person.

In some ways this account of my reading life portrays reading as an escape: a solitary, individualistic act in which I leave behind my first-grade community, my family responsibilities, and my routine small town life in order to withdraw into a textual world. Yet my reading life also was embedded in community—learning to read with my father,
soliciting and acting upon a variety of recommendations (some better than others) about what to read, talking about my thoughts and feelings about what I had read with others. My childhood reading also led to action: after meeting the Boxcar Children, I found an old piece of abandoned farming equipment and turned it into “the gypsy wagon,” a place in which my sister and I had a series of imaginative adventures. And Edward Eager’s *Half Magic* gave birth to “Mandrake, the Magician,” an act in which I wore an old white shirt of my father’s, a bow tie, and—I can’t imagine why—a black eye patch in order to do magical tricks. My poor younger sister served as the glamorous assistant, complete with a feather boa and our mother’s high heels.

In the reading life, I will argue, the individual and the communal are inextricably intertwined, each reliant upon and working upon the other. One important aspect of that connection, which I will explore later, involves the relationship of reading and action. But the image of the solitary reader has long dominated western consciousness, and a brief consideration of a few highlights of that history will be useful in refocusing our attention on the communal nature of reading. We will begin with St. Augustine, the great 4th century philosopher and theologian, whose story depicts the power of reading on the solitary reader; Augustine’s experiences as recounted in the *Confessions* are often used to exemplify the move from an oral culture, in which people told stories and chanted poems in communal settings, to a written culture made up of a society of one, a solitary person holding a book. In this account, Augustine is often depicted as an archetypal solitary reader.

In the late Roman era, reading was an oral rather than silent practice. Students were taught to read aloud, dramatically projecting and using suitable expressions, tones, and emphases. Reading was also a public practice, conducted by the educated few in order to grant the illiterate access to the texts of scripture and the church fathers. Books were rare and needed to be shared, even among scholars. But when the youthful Augustine arrived in the imperial capital of Milan, he was astonished to discover that Bishop Ambrose, one of the most prominent Western Christian leaders of the time, read in a different fashion: "When he read, his eyes traveled across the page and his heart
sought into the sense, but voice and tongue were silent. . . when we came into him we often saw him reading and always to himself; and after we had sat long in silence, unwilling to interrupt a work on which he was so intent, we would depart again.” Ambrose read in silence and in private, his thoughts about what he was reading unspoken, inaccessible to others.

Captivated by this new practice, Augustine also began to read silently and privately, finding that such reading of the psalms and epistles affected the very core of his identity, prompting fresh emotions and revelations, new relationships and interactions with God. Reading played a central role in the story of Augustine’s conversion: burdened with guilt about the sinful life he had been living, he was bitterly weeping under a fig tree, when “suddenly I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy’s voice or a girl’s voice, I do not know: but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again, ‘Take and read, take and read.’ . . . Damming back the flood of my tears I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open.” That passage was Romans 3, in which he read, “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts and desires” (Rom. 3:13-14). Augustine continues, "I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainly vanished away.” For Augustine, solitary reading led to salvation.

Augustine’s own great book, the Confessions, was intended for individual personal reading, not the communal public reading for which texts such as Paul’s epistles were composed. Margaret Miles notes, “[Augustine] always addresses the individual, alone with his [or her] private thoughts and memories. He expected his reader to practice silent reading—reading addressed to that interior place, the same place in which he first experienced profound anxiety and later sweetness and joy. . . . We 20th-century readers, deeply familiar with a private reading practice that . . . developed in the Christian West from devotional reading, need to remind
ourselves of the oddity of private reading in Augustine’s time. In writing his confessions, Augustine adopted and adapted an esoteric reading practice and provided one of the texts that would demonstrate and perpetuate this practice.”

In embracing private, silent reading, however, both in his own practices and in the rhetoric of the Confessions, Augustine did not withdraw into a private world. Augustine’s communal reading experience is evident in the instigating role of the unseen child, as well as in the presence of another figure often left out of retellings of this crucial turning point. When Augustine is first agonizing over his attraction to sin, he is accompanied by a student named Alypius. Beginning to sob uncontrollably, Augustine is afraid that he will embarrass Alypius by such a show of emotions, so he moves to another part of the garden, throwing himself under the famous fig tree where he hears the child’s voice. But Augustine has left his book behind, so he must return to his friend in order to “take and read.” Alypius is by his side as he reads “in silence” the passage from Romans: “Then leaving my finger in the place or marking it by some other sign, I closed the book and in complete calm told the whole thing to Alypius and he similarly told me what had been going on in himself, of which I knew nothing. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked further than I had read. I had not known what followed. And this is what followed: “Now him that is weak in faith, take unto you.” He applied this to himself and told me so. . . . Then we went in to my mother and told her, to her great joy” (Book VIII).

This legendary act of reading is deeply embedded in community as Augustine first shares his reading experience with Alypius, discusses the text with his friend, on his friend’s recommendation returns to the text, and then brings his mother into the conversational circle. And we have not even considered yet the community of readers that Augustine forms by writing the Confessions. His account of his inner life, this most personal of revelations, becomes corporate through its production. In composing and distributing the text, Augustine confesses not only to God but also to the community of readers, whether they read the text together corporately or one by one.
In the eighteenth century, the trope of a solitary reader withdrawing into a private realm became even more pronounced. Greater literacy, wider public access to books, and the development of the novel were important currents in this sea change. Although retiring into a private space for reading scripture or a devotional was a common practice for the privileged, until the mid-eighteenth century, only a few people owned books, which were often read aloud to small audiences of family or friends, serving as a means of both communal instruction and entertainment. But with the greater availability of reading material, especially the enthralling new genre of the novel, it became much easier for an individual to vacate society and pursue the delights of solitary reading. The tendency of young women, in particular, to enter fictional worlds by themselves was often seen as dangerous. Reading a devotional alone was one thing; reading a novel was entirely another. Eighteenth-century conduct manuals warned women against the perils of private reading, which was feared to separate them from the values of the community, destroying social relations and moral discipline. Jane Austen delighted in satirizing the flights of fancy provoked by her heroines’ consumption of novels, their embrace of sensibility rather than sense, of personal impulses over corporate wisdom. In response to such fears about the dangers of private reading, early novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* often presented themselves as 1) historically true as opposed to fictional fantasies, and 2) cautionary moral tales. The solitary reader was thus morally validated because she was diligently pursuing a form of self-improvement, rather than frivolous entertainment.

Emphasizing reading as a solitary undertaking remains a common theme in depictions of reading today, although the idea that reading will lead to spiritual or moral improvement has fared less well. But thinking about reading exclusively as a private act leads to some skewed ideas about the value, uses, and practices of reading. Take, for example, Harold Bloom, an outspoken literary critic who is an ardent defender of reading. Bloom claims that literature’s most important function is to teach us to be alone with ourselves. The act of reading, he says, is essentially an individualistic activity. We read because it is in our own best interest; reading helps us learn who we are, how to
form opinions and judgments, how to prepare ourselves for change, especially the ultimate change that we will all face: death. Listen to this passage from Bloom’s *How to Read and Why*:

Ultimately we read . . . in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. We experience such augmentations as pleasure, which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists . . . . The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else’s life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good. . . . If there is a function of criticism at the present time, it must be to address itself to the solitary reader, who reads for herself, and not for the interests that supposedly transcend the self.

In Bloom’s account, reading is a solitary almost therapeutic act that promotes self-understanding, but does not lead either to Augustine’s spiritual wisdom or to the moral improvement endorsed by the eighteenth-century, a moral improvement with social and political impact. Bloom does not even embrace the nineteenth-century romantic belief that the growth of the individual imagination will have beneficial social affects. According to Bloom, any changes that occur in the self because of reading will have no relationship to the public good. Why read? Because it gives you pleasure and helps you understand yourself. This is the logical conclusion of western individualism and an excessive focus on the solitary nature of reading.

Bloom’s position is not typical of literary critics today, but it does represent some popular ideas about reading. It seems to me that because Bloom is wrong both about human nature and about the reading experience, he provides a poor answer to the question “why read?” It is possible to read the way Bloom describes: privately, individualistically, solipsistically, egotistically. And it can be enjoyable to read the way Bloom
describes. But I do not think that this represents the ideal or best reading life.

Nonetheless, there are elements of truth in his analysis: “You cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply.” Of course the word “directly” is an important hedge. Might it possible, however, that we can improve someone else’s life indirectly by reading better or more deeply? I think it is entirely possible that the international distribution of and reaction to Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country played a significant role, along with other political, social, economic, and artistic acts, in ridding South Africa of apartheid. And I know several people whose position on Middle Eastern politics has been completely transformed because they read Sandy Tolan’s The Lemon Tree.

Bloom’s skepticism about “the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination” also has a ring of truth. The specter of highly educated Nazi officers reading Goethe at concentration camps continues to haunt Western humanism, and no doubt we all know people who read extensively but are not nice human beings. Reading all fifty-four volumes of the Great Books of the Western World does not make you into Mother Teresa. However, while reading does not automatically make us more humane, loving, and empathetic, if done in a certain spirit, it can expand our sense of and care for others. Some intriguing research led by Raymond A. Mar of York University demonstrates that reading fiction (but not non-fiction) typically increases empathy and the ability to understand the emotions of others: “comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehensions of peers in the actual world.” Mar’s research also shows that adults who read less fiction self-report having less empathy and that “the tendency to become absorbed in a story . . . predicted empathy scores.”

Reading thus has a potential impact on our ability to live with others in community. To further understand the connections of reading and community, we need to acknowledge that all readers engage with the world, even those young girls in a tree ignoring their chores. Reading is a form of engagement.
How literature comes into being, how the reading process works, and the nature of human identity all ensure such engagement. In exploring this claim, I will rely on the Christian understanding that all reality, including human beings, is God-created and sustained.

The world of any text is an “imaginary” world, assembled by the action of human minds, but it is inherently connected with the physical, historical, social, and cultural world, in both its production and its reception. The textual world is formed in community—by both an author and a reader, who do not create \textit{ex nihilo}, from nothing, but by interacting with the world given to us by God. An author creatively employs language and form, metaphor and narrative, Macs and PCs to form this textual world out of God-given potentials. But a text is just ink on a page, or words on a screen, until the act of reading. The world of the poem or story does not phenomenologically exist, does not come to life, until the reader’s encounter with and reaction to the words. In the act of reading, the reader intellectually and emotionally and spiritually re-constitutes a world made possible by the author’s imaginative re-construction of God’s world. Each reading breathes life into a textual world, like Aslan breathing on the animals and people turned to stone in \textit{The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe}. Different readers, and the same readers at different times, will vivify the same words in a variety of ways. Our place in the world—our age, gender, and culture, and family, and historical situation—will inform our engagement with the text. That’s why we can re-read with profit. That’s why Chinua Achebe’s reading of \textit{The Heart of Darkness} is so different from Ian Watt’s. That’s why Homer and Shakespeare and Dickinson and SunZi can be read across time and culture, with differing interpretations and applications. Each text and each reading initiate the process of a new encounter with God’s world—and those encounters can be positive or negative, good or evil, and—most often—are a confusing and ambiguous blend of both.

A Christian definition of human identity also leads to viewing reading as a form of engagement. No one reads in complete isolation, for we are always more than our individual selves. Above all else, we exist in relationship with God, created
in God’s image with unique responsibilities and gifts—to love and worship God, to enjoy God forever, and to contribute to the growth and celebration of shalom. A second fundamental aspect of human identity is the fact that we are created to dwell in relationship with other human beings. We are not isolatos, to use a word from *Moby-Dick*, but communal, like our triune maker. Human identity is premised on relationship both with God and with other human beings. While the Western tradition emphasizes one’s identity as an individual and many non-Western traditions understand identity primarily in communal terms, the Christian story includes both components.

But the world formed by an author, text, and reader is an imaginative or creative world; it is not life, even those texts that are histories and biographies. Texts, James Wood says, go beyond “merely lifelikeness, or lifesameness,” to have what he calls “lifeness.” The nineteenth-century novelist George Eliot calls art “the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” The form that texts take is a crucial component of this amplification, with the particular selection, juxtaposition, or placement of words in a poem creating its meaning; with the point of view, details, and characterizations of fiction essential aspects of its “lifeness.” Our engagement with the world in the act of reading thus illuminates our own experience; extends our contact with human beings beyond the limits of our own experience; provides fresh new ways of being in, savoring, and acting in the world as communal beings.

Let’s consider another devoted reader whose story demonstrates how reading potentially can change not only an individual life but the lives of many: Frederick Douglass, the great African-American orator, writer, and abolitionist, published *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* in 1845 when he was in his early 20s. One of the many impressive elements of the *Narrative* is the story of how Douglass learned to read. It is a story of determination and tenacity, and it has much to teach us about the reading life. In the following passage, Douglass is about seven or eight years old, living in Baltimore with the Auld family after having spent his first years on a plantation:
Mrs. Auld . . . very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her . . . that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words . . . he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. . . . Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. . . . I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. 10

After her husband’s admonitions, Mrs. Auld wages a fierce campaign against Douglass’ learning to read, grabbing newspapers from his hands and carefully watching him lest he take up a book. Nonetheless, Douglass contrives to continue his reading lessons:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me,
and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. . . . I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;--not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country.\[11\]

The South’s stringent anti-literacy laws were instituted out of fear that literacy would give slaves a means of organizing uprisings. And eventually Douglass’ own escape was made possible by his ability to read and write and so forge the papers he needed to travel north. But Mr. Auld’s opposition is based less on the external uses of reading than on its internal impact. Reading opened up new worlds of ideas and information; caused Douglass to dream and question; stirred up dissatisfaction and aspirations; gave expression and language to deep previously unarticulated emotions. Prohibiting literacy also served to justify slavery: Enlightenment thought held that the most essential human quality was reason, and without reason, there could be no reading, writing, or art. Those without reason, without literacy, were thus sub-human, perhaps even animal—as the numerous animal metaphors used through the Narrative convey. By learning to read and eventually composing the articulate and elegant Narrative, Douglass declares both in words and actions, “I am a man.” And that declaration had a powerful impact on readers from many different walks of life: oppressed African Americans looked to Douglass as an inspirational example; slave-holders faced a powerful rebuttal of their assumptions and arguments about the human nature of slaves; northerners were moved to embrace the abolitionist cause; twentieth-century African American writers were encouraged to write about their heritage and experiences, and a new literary tradition was established.

Douglass’s story is one of incredible personal achievement; he appears to be the exceptional individual reader. But a central part of his story lies in the fact that he learned to read because of other people, because he was in community. Mrs. Auld, Mr. Auld, and the poor street boys of Baltimore all
are crucial parts of the story, both in terms of positive and negative reinforcement. Reading is not solely an individual act but a communal one. Douglass’ story also shows the different kinds of engagement with the world that reading prompts. We read, like Douglass, for information and enlightenment, to give words to our emotions and direction for our actions. We read for aesthetic pleasure and enlargement of ourselves. We read for comfort and consolation, but we also read to hear the cries of the suffering, to mourn with them, and to take action against oppression and injustice. We read as those who are embedded in community.

Some fear that the reading life today is imperiled, besieged by new forms of media: videogames, text-messaging, U-Tube, Twitter, and blogs. In 2004 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a widely publicized report with the doom-laden title *Reading at Risk*, which showed alarming declines in the number of Americans reading. But a subsequent NEA report was more encouraging. Entitled *Reading on the Rise*, it shows that in 2008 for the first time in over a quarter-century, literary reading had risen among adult Americans. After decades of declining trends, there was a decisive increase in reading among virtually every group measured (whites, African Americans, Hispanics). The most significant growth has been among young adults. Among 18-24 year olds, there has been a 21 percent increase in 2008, compared to a 20 percent decline in 2002. The impact of online reading represents the unknown horizon for the reading life. How will the various forms of online reading affect the reading of books? The NEA reports that 84 percent of adults who read literature (poems, plays, drama) online also read books. And among those adults who read online articles, essays, or blogs, the book-reading rate is 77 percent.¹²

We may have sounded the death knell of the reading life prematurely. I am especially intrigued by new communal elements of reading, some made possible by electronic media. One interesting phenomena, for example, has been the development in Japan of cell-phone novels, novels written to be read in brief installments on a cell-phone screen, which provoke lively social exchanges, also via the cell phone.¹³ Oprah-inspired
book clubs have proliferated, as witnessed by the growth of the publication of special Book-Club editions. The popular One City One Book program begun in my home town of Seattle in 1998 under the title of "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book" has now spread to over 400 cities. Book festivals abound, and library use is increasing, according to research done by the Pew Internet and American Life project. In 2007, 62 percent of those surveyed between the ages of 18 and 30 say they've been to a library in the last year, along with 59 percent of the 31-42 bracket, and 57 percent of the 43-52 crowd.\textsuperscript{14}

A prime example of the new complexities of communal reading was the extensively literate and ethically provocative television series \textit{Lost}. Acclaimed by social critics as the Dickens novel of our times: \textit{Lost} was serialized weekly from 2004-2010, and then made available for more leisurely consumption, reflection, and discussion in DVD format. One of the many remarkable phenomena associated with \textit{Lost} is the way that it prompted more people to read. The show is full of literary allusions and references; numerous websites tracked the books depicted in the hands of characters, displayed on shelves and tables, or subtly or overtly referenced. This prompted avid viewers to read these books, and heated on-line discussions of the books were common. The range of reading material was enormous: Dicken’s \textit{Our Mutual Friend}, \textit{The Odyssey}, \textit{Watership Down}, \textit{A Wrinkle in Time}, \textit{The Turn of the Screw}, C.S. Lewis, Stephen King, and \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}. After a character was seen reading Flannery O’Connor’s \textit{Everything That Rises Must Converge} in the Season 5 finale, one online posting read: “I looked for this at my local library (Plano, TX). There were like 7 copies in the Plano library system and they were all checked out. I guarantee before the season finale, all 7 would have been in stock.”

The reading life is not dead. The reading life can have a tremendously positive affect on those who pursue it, affecting both individuals and communities. But those of us who are fortunate enough to participate in the reading life have, I believe, a responsibility to make the reading life accessible to more people, to extend and build our reading communities. Every privileged leisure-time book club and anyone who can afford to
buy books or indulge in a Nook or Kindle, should be doing something to assist others to enter the reading life. We should contribute to and volunteer in literacy programs—making it possible for more people to be able to read in the first place. We should read to children and senior citizens, donate funds to public libraries through their foundations, click daily on The Literacy Site, and send our used books to overseas libraries, to list only a few of the ways we can help.15

Long live the communal reading life.

2 Ibid., 159.
3 Ibid., 160.
11 Ibid., 82-83.
To donate to literacy causes with a simple daily click, go to http://www.theliteracysite.com/clickToGive/home.faces?siteId=6. The American Library Association has also compiled an extensive list of opportunities to help others read at http://www.delicious.com/alalibrary/bookdonations.
Response to Susan Van Zanten

Angela Quick
Maryville College

When I tell people I’m a librarian, I often hear the response, “Oh, how wonderful! You must have so much time to read.” Oh, that it were true! While I don’t spend much of my work day reading, it is true that there is nothing (in my experience) like working in a library to open one to the possibilities – the endless, varied, rich, wonderful possibilities – of what to read next. In the course of helping others find the information they seek, I find texts I would never think to look for. Fiction, nonfiction, book, article, review, literature, history, religion, science, anthropology, education, psychology, romance, science fiction, library science – I am an omnivorous reader because I see the smorgasbord of possibilities spread out before me like a celebratory feast, daily, in the library. While there are many things I enjoy about being a librarian, primary among them is the way my vocation engages me in the reading life and the community of readers.

Dr. Susan Van Zanten ably defends the merits of reading and the reading life. Her main points are well argued, and I would like to summarize them briefly to distill them in our minds. “The individual and the communal are inextricably intertwined, each reliant upon and working upon the other.” All readers engage with the world. That is the nature of reading – even when we read silently and privately, we are at least reader, text, and author. “The world formed by an author, text and reader is an imaginative or creative world” that “illuminates our
own experience, extends our contact with human beings beyond the limits of our own experience; provides fresh new ways of being in, savoring, and acting in the world as communal beings.”

“The reading life can have a tremendously positive affect on those who pursue it, affecting both individuals and communities.” I found a few ideas from her analysis of the reading life especially resonant.

First, reading evokes shared experience, and becoming absorbed in narrative encourages empathy. I know this from my own experience preparing these comments. As I read Dr. Van Zanten’s account of her own reading life, I recalled the narrative of my reading life, and was struck by similarities – learning to read early and via whole language; being disenchanted with developmental readers (my characters were Bill, Ann, and Ted, not Dick, Jane, and Spot, but I still recall them vividly and they are still, in my opinion, insipid characters in boring stories); reading chapter books quietly while the rest of the class had a reading lesson; ignoring calls to dinner and being caught “ruining my eyes” by reading in bed with a flashlight; reading in special, secret places in the embrace of nature (everyone needs a reading tree); venturing to worlds outside small, rural farming communities via the portal of a book; accepting the recommendations of school, public, and church librarians (at least one of whom I shocked with my first interlibrary loan of a lurid romance novel, recommended by a worldly friend); being so caught up in a book that I lose all connection with the physical world around me; feeling “as if I have lived another life, taken role in another drama, been a different person.” Even though I have just met Dr. Van Zanten in person, I feel I know her already. This perception may be illusory – I really know very little about Dr. Van Zanten, and nothing that she has not chosen to tell me – but nevertheless, there is the perception of community, commonality, and intimacy created by the author-text-reader trinity. That is an extraordinary thing.

Second, reading can provide an alternative, and potentially more supportive, community for individuals than the communities to which they already belong. Reading provides connection with the other who is not visible in “real” community, but who exists in the narrative of a book. I believe this accounts for the success of much adolescent literature, genre
literature, self-help literature, and devotional literature as well as the success of bibliotherapy. Reading is a way to affirm the self when the self is not readily affirmed in the native environment.

Third, reading opens up possibilities of how things might be different – for better or worse – than they are. I am a fan of utopian/dystopian writings, of science fiction, and of alternative history because I find these genres particularly evocative of possibility, but any text that tells a story of a different time, a different place, a different reality encourages reflection on our current time, place and reality. Reading such narratives stimulate us to ask the questions, “What if?” “Why not?” “What ought I do?” and “What ought we do?” Reading serves as a preamble to both social thought and social action.

Since Dr. Van Zanten has so ably affirmed the reading life and reading in community, I would like to expand on her last paragraph.

The reading life is not dead. The reading life can have a tremendously positive affect on those who pursue it, affecting both individuals and communities. But those of us who are fortunate enough to participate in the reading life have, I believe, a responsibility to make the reading life accessible to more people, to extend and build our reading communities. Every privileged leisure-time book club and anyone who can afford to buy books or indulge in a Nook or Kindle should be doing something to assist others to enter the reading life.

My friends, this surely describes each of us. So, what can we do?

First, we can make sure everyone knows how to read. Reading can be seen as a privilege and a luxury, but I would like to suggest that reading is a basic human right. I think we must acknowledge that life is difficult if you do not know how to read, especially in modern industrial societies where it is assumed that the primary means of delivering information is through written text. In such a society, not being able to read makes it harder to drive, shop, order at a restaurant, conduct personal business, receive medical care, and vote. Not being able to read constrains
possibilities for employment and reduces the likelihood of economic stability and prosperity. Not being able to read reduces the opportunity for engagement and involvement in the civic community. Not being able to read denies people full participation.¹

I also believe that when reading is seen as a privilege and a luxury, when some read and others do not, there is a greater opportunity for inequality and oppression. Dr. Van Zanten’s observations on *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* vividly illustrate the power of literacy to maintain an oppressive status quo, and also the power of literacy to aid in escaping and ending oppression. Let us not forget that the strictures she notes governing the reading of well-off young ladies in eighteenth century Europe persist for young women around the world today. Their reading is often closely monitored and proscribed, when they are allowed to read – or allowed to learn to read. Literacy rates of women in the developing world are often half the literacy rates for men in the same country.² Denying women the opportunity to learn to read or to engage in reading certainly does not benefit the women themselves, and begs us to ask whom it does benefit. Interestingly, case studies from many parts of the developing world show that teaching women to read not only benefits individual women, but benefits the entire community in which these women reside. Why? Because while educated young men frequently go off to seek their fortunes, educated young women *stay in their communities* and improve the quality of life of their children, their families, and the community at large.³

If reading is a basic human right, literacy programs become a basic priority. Literacy programs pair those who know how to read and are willing to teach with those who don’t know how to read and are willing to learn. They also provide reading materials, instructor training, and financial resources to support learning to read.⁴ Literacy programs are targeted to a multiplicity of recipients and take myriad forms, but their common goal is encouraging and teaching people of all sorts to read. Literacy programs benefit all members of the community, fostering interconnectedness among members of a community as well as literacy. An example of this is Maryville College’s Bradford Scholarship Program.⁵ The Bradford Scholarship
Program teaches people to read. It also provides opportunities for service learning and supports educational opportunity for scholarship recipients. In addition, it links Maryville College to the surrounding community and affirms the College’s mission statement and statement of purpose.

Second, we can make sure everyone has something to read. In the world of internet, kindle, smartphones, and iPads, mass market paperbacks and checkout line newsstands, it is hard to envision a scarcity of reading materials, and easy to forget that there is a very real information divide among countries and between individuals in our communities. Those of us who have abundant access to reading material, in both print and electronic forms, don’t stop often enough to consider that we have neighbors who rely primarily or solely on public institutions — schools and libraries — for access to both print and electronic reading materials. For how many children is a walk to the bookmobile or a weekly visit to the school library the only way they have to get something to read? For how many people is a public library computer their only internet access, and a public library collection their only access to printed text and media recordings?

Make sure everyone has something to read. Support public libraries. Use them, praise them, advocate for them, fight for the funding to keep them open, give them some of your money. Donate your used books to organizations that redistribute or resell them and donate at least part of their profits to supporting libraries and literacy. My favorite example is Better World Books. Through the Better World Books library discount program, the Maryville College library sends withdrawn texts and donated texts it does not add to the collection, free of charge, to Better World Books. Better world Books resells our donations. For all sold books, the library receives 15% of the sale price as a credit toward our own book purchases or as a check. An additional 5% of the sale price goes to support one of five literacy initiatives chosen by the library staff. All books that cannot be resold are donated to communities needing English language books around the world or recycled.
Support foundations and organizations that distribute reading materials broadly in the community at no cost to the recipient. A great example of this is Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. In communities that have committed to the Imagination Library program, all children in the community receive a book in the mail every month from birth through age five. My son Miles just received his final imagination library book. He is sad to know that no more books will be coming to him in the mail, but happy to be the proud owner of a small personal library of delightful titles, and he is both an avid listener and an avid reader.

Third, we can read to and for others. There will always be those who do not read, or do not yet read, or who have difficulty reading. Do not let that be a barrier denying them access to information and ideas, to the community of reading. Continue the rich tradition of including reading aloud in the concept of reading. Read to the blind, record texts for dyslexic students. Read aloud to children – countless studies confirm the value of this simple practice. (For suggestions on what to read aloud and how to read aloud to children, I recommend the classic Read Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease.) Encourage people of all abilities and ages to listen to spoken text. Let us not forget the power that lies in the spoken text, or the joy that comes from hearing it, or the community reading aloud and listening builds. Think of the reading aloud of the Scripture, and the central and essential role it plays in Christian worship. (Thanks be to God.)

Fourth, we can encourage communal and community reading. There are many ways to read in community. Dr. Van Zanten mentions the one city, one book program. Similar to this program is the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read, in which the NEA sponsors reading and exploration of books on its master list. Maryville College has joined with the Knoxville YWCA, Blount County Public Library, and Blount County, Alcoa, and Maryville schools to read Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima, and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes were Watching God. Each of these Big Reads has featured not only the common reading of a text, but public discussion of the text as well as lectures, art exhibits, music concerts, and other cultural events meant to inform readers about and celebrate the text. Join a book club. Share devotional
reading. Consider building common texts into curricula, so that everyone at a college reads the same thing at the same time. All these forms of communal reading foster connectedness, engagement in community – and hopefully a discussion and affirmation of what a community values. Common readings create relationship and respect even when they do not create unity.

Fifth, we can encourage and teach reading critically. We do not interact with a text in isolation. As Dr. Van Zanten notes, “our place in the world – our age, gender and culture, and family, and historical situation – will inform our engagement with the text.” In spite of this, most readers are not trained readers. All know the mechanics of reading. Many are conversant with the basic elements of characterization and narrative, and are able to articulate how the text moved them, spoke to them, or related to their experience. Relatively few are able to analyze a text in a rigorous, structured, methodical, and informed fashion. Critical reading is the special province of the academy. Friends, whatever else we may be, we are sophisticated, disciplined, well-trained readers. We have been taught the art of textual analysis and criticism. We can share this skill, whether by teaching or modeling, to the great benefit of others.

We can teach others how to decide what to read. We can introduce them to tools that guide them to, and through, the texts they choose to read. We can share the particular perspectives of our individual disciplines, so that they see there are multiple ways to break down and scrutinize knowledge. We can demonstrate the art of argument, of respectful disagreement based in interpretation and ideas that, while it may refute a concept, maintains respect for the individual behind the disputed idea. This is what the Liberal Arts are all about. When we ground our students and our communities in the Liberal Arts, we work to make reading an instrument of affirmation, liberation, and empowerment.
Response to Susan Van Zanten

Mark Peach
Southern Adventist University

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to read Susan Van Zanten’s evocative and thoughtful paper “The Reading Life: Joining the Community” and to reflect on my reading life and how reading affects my relationships with others. It was a helpful reminder that much of my reading has perhaps too much been a form of escapism, too often leaving behind the much richer mutual reading relationships with other human beings. It also made me realize, somewhat poignantly, of a milestone my thirteen-year old son passed some time ago, when he preferred reading to himself rather than being read to.

I suppose we all know that reading is not always pleasurable. Susan’s discussion of the pleasures of reading reminded me of less pleasant episodes in my development as a reader. I have never quite gotten over the trauma of being instructed by a well-meaning graduate school professor and mentor on the finer techniques of “gutting” a book and later anxiously signing up for a speed reading course as if being able to skim Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason would somehow rescue a graduate school career that seemed threatened with shipwreck. This association of reading and anxiety was jarring in that it undermined my assumptions of what the reading experience should be.

Dr. Van Zanten’s discussion of Harold Bloom’s advocacy of reading for individual edification reminded me of
Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (which inspired a satirical response titled *How to Read Two Books*, including such techniques as how to read in bed and how to read standing up). On the one hand, Adler’s original 1939 edition insisted that only a liberal education through reading the great books prepares citizens for responsible freedom, thus stressing the importance of reading to a successful democratic society. On the other hand, at the end of the 1972 revised edition (co-authored with Charles van Doren) the authors commend us to reflect on what ten books we would choose to bring along if we knew we were to be stranded alone indefinitely on a desert island as a way of encouraging us to think about what makes some books deserving of rereading. The absence of anyone with which to share exciting passages seems not to occur to them.¹ They seem somehow to have missed that the dialectic in shared reading can serve more than just civics. I sometimes half-jokingly tell students that I get paid to read books, though I obviously have an obligation to profess that acquired knowledge to students, which I also enjoy greatly. But one of the best parts of a life in academe is working with colleagues who also read books and share their learning with me.

It was encouraging to learn that the reading life is not dead, as evidenced by book clubs and other new forms of reading media and occasions for discussion. If nothing else, Starbucks coffee shops have provided an excuse for meeting to talk over the *New York Times*. The history of collective reading and discussion is long and distinguished. Indeed, recently the book clubs phenomenon has become something of an industry. The Oprah Book Club joined together with the Oprah Winfrey Show to become a kind of media hybrid with a significant marketing impact. It has been argued that Winfrey “made an almost subversive use of television, a categorically ‘low’ medium, to bridge the high-low cultural chasm that cleaves the American literary landscape”.² The book club phenomenon has even begun to influence what books get published and how they are marketed. Because the majority of book club members are women (94%, by one estimate³), the majority of books published specifically with book clubs in mind are either about women and/or by women authors.
One would think that the book club environment would necessarily contribute to a reading dialectic, but studies suggest that club participants often tend to pass over differences of race and economic opportunity. Feminist critics of the book club phenomenon have argued that book club selections, particularly after 9/11, often promote clash of civilizations stereotypes, suggest that solidarity among women (the “global sisterhood”) overrides questions about race, class, imperialism, and power, and promise reassuring similarity and enticing exotic difference. The discursive environment in which reading and discussion take place sometimes has the tendency to produce “the ‘Third World woman’ as a singular, monolithic subject, without agency and complexity”.  

The challenge of achieving literacy evoked by Frederick Douglass’ moving story reminded me of my participation some years ago in READ Chattanooga, a United Way sponsored adult literacy program. Having been assigned to teach adults how to swim while in college, I had some idea of how maturity complicates certain kinds of learning. I discovered that aspiring adult swimmers and adult reading students had two things in common. Adults were somehow less resilient than children and were motivated less by the attraction of achievement and enjoyment than by a stark fear of failure. Also, both, because they were adults and not children, could not be motivated by browbeating or threats of physical mayhem.

The example of Frederick Douglass shows that the reading dialectic need not be exclusively among literate participants. Douglass met his future wife, Anna Murray Douglass, who was an active member of the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society, where, Elizabeth McHenry tells us, he was a slave who could read while she was free but would remain essentially illiterate her entire life. That this did not prevent her from participating in literary societies and sharing in the discussions of important books demonstrates Susan Van Zanten’s emphasis on the importance of social context of reading.

We are all members of multiple communities and citizens, still based largely on written transmission of information. Dr. Van Zanten provides a salient call for us to not
only maintain and defend the cooperative aspect of reading, but to also explore new avenues for sharing the written word both as means of enriching ourselves as individuals and as ways of enhancing our respective communities.

5 Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (Kindle edition).
What We Heard: An Attempt at Synthesis

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In reading and hearing these papers, I found myself drawn into three distinct but overlapping approaches to synthesizing what we’ve heard, and was unable to choose one over the others. These papers, as a collected body of work, spoke to me interpersonally, transactionally, and multimedia-ly (to coin a word).

Interpersonally, I was captured by the notion of the reader identifying as an individual in community. Transactionally, I was struck by the need to move beyond Reader Response theory. Multimedia-ly, I was inspired by Dale Brown’s many couched instructions:

- We need to “win students to the wild notion that this literary business might actually have something to do with their lives”;
- That “a verse may find whom a sermon flies”;
- To “offer a jig or a tale of bawdry” lest Polonius fall asleep.

All three of these themes carried across each scholar’s wrestling with this notion of “The Book, Texts, and the Liberal Arts.”

In seeking some advice from Dr. Ron Wells on the matter, he informed me that recounting the history of the world could take ten minutes or ten years. In seeking to fill a time frame somewhere between those extremes but leaning toward the
former, I will address all three. The temporal location of these remarks on an early fall afternoon directly following lunch, leads me to think that I might spend a little less time on the interpersonal and transactional and a little more time on the more entertaining multimedia. So here is what I think we’ve heard, in three parts:

**Interpersonal: The Individual in Community**

On the Sunday after I received all of these papers to synthesize (the 10th Sunday after Pentecost), the Revised Common Lectionary hit upon a point with every single reading that for me synthesized this symposium: In Chapter 51, Isaiah tells us, “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug”; In Romans 12, Paul tells us, “We who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are members of one another”; In Matthew 16, Jesus asks two related questions: “Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?” and “But who do you say that I am?”

Identity is about an individual in community, something we have continued to get wrong since the Enlightenment. We are not self-reliant individuals but instantiations of parole in the infinite langue of community. In synthesizing these papers interpersonally, identity is not just what we believe about ourselves but also who we are in community. To answer the question Who am I?, Beverly Tatum reminds us that “The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am.”

The desire to become an individual in community was why Susan Van Zanten sought new worlds, “worlds that were radically different from my boring life in a small farming community, textual worlds that I was often reluctant to leave for the reality of washing the dishes, picking up my room, or feeding the cats.” Dr. Van Zanten describes the escape possible in reading but it’s more than that. Each book is an opportunity to hear something else about ourselves, to have the world tell us we are something more than what we might hear from a small farm community. In examining her essay as a Wordle™, we see the
connection among the words reading, read, world, communal, and life.

“The individual and the communal are inextricably intertwined,” Dr. Van Zanten told us, which is why Augustine found Bishop Ambrose’s practice of solitary reading so astonishing. And while Augustine might have found salvation in solitary reading, he could not deny the influence of the communal and had to include his mother and Alypius as his community of readers. Perhaps this is why John Wilson became a “rapt reader of and listener to Tolkien.” The text was incomplete when he read it to himself but sharing that text in the community of wife and child brought it to life in way previously impossible. In fact, that entire text is about community: the creating of fellowships, the breaking of fellowships, the need for community to complete the most dangerous tasks. Tolkien even provides this lesson in reverse: Sauron came to power via Morgoth whose original sin was to sing a discordant harmony during the creation of Arda. In Wilson’s Wordle™ we again find read and reading but now they are associated with communal concepts like philosophy, prayer, and people.
Of course, as Professor Trollinger recounted, this can be taken to an extreme. In her engaging account of the Creation Museum (on which, by my calculation, she has now spent at least $249.50 plus tax, pictures, and videos) we see what can happen when one community attempts to define identity fully for the individual; in this case, the Wordle™ equates Creation with God’s Word as indisputable text. Through the practice of reading the Bible, multiple interpretations and identities become possible, an end very much condemned by the intelligent designers of the Creation Museum. As Dr. Trollinger told us (and I really want to experience this for myself), at its heart, the Creation Museum is about reining in multiple understandings and concretizing what they hold to be Truth.
Ironically, they engage the power of a communal word over the individual to do so, overwhelming the museum visitor with visual and printed text magnified to epic proportions. From Dr. Trollinger’s description, I do not imagine the Museum allows for dialogue, some space where visitors might contemplate together what they are reading. And this is purposively done. Should the visitor have space and time to consider in community what is being proposed, perhaps someone might begin to see the Wizard behind the curtain, or pick out the small words Luther, interpretation, and truth.

In this instance, surely the importance of a reader as a communal identity becomes apparent. And yet, Dr. Van Zanten explained how during the 18th century, “the trope of a solitary reader withdrawing into a private realm became even more pronounced” and the possibility of finding a good book, as per Dr. Brown’s quest, became harder.
Dale Brown quoted John Gardner in saying, “the value of great fiction is not just that it entertains or distracts us… but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations.” That is, a book tells us who we are as an agent in the community forming our identities. A synopsis of Dr. Brown’s paper might be “You are what you read, so you better read something worthwhile.” His Wordle™ suggests books on Christian faith or Buechner to be appropriate (and I do not mean to insinuate that those topics are mutually exclusive).

In searching for both a definition and an example of a good book that can make us better, Brown told us we need reading “that takes us into alien territory, which calls us to attentiveness to our own lives, which makes us more fully conscious.” To that end, we need community and cannot rely on the identity of a reader as an individual. We must be readers in reading communities, which brings me to my second strand of synthesis, the transactional.

Transactional: Quantum Reading

In all of this interpersonal talk of the individual in community, there is a particular type of community alluded to in
all four of these papers and thus deserves some specific attention: the community formed by a reader and an author. I’d like to begin this section with a bit of a magic trick. In this magic trick, I’m going to make something out of almost nothing. Not only that, but this something will be the foundation of every paper we’ve heard this weekend. Not only that, but this something will be a foundation of all human endeavors. Not only that, but this something might even be the fullest expression of God on earth.

![Aspect Conceptuel: le signifié](image)

Simply by adding the most arbitrary sound to the merest thought we have presented language. That simple circle tying together a signified with a signifier is what created the infinite textual worlds Van Zanten began to explore in first grade. That simple circle unnerved Socrates, as we heard tell by Trollinger. That circle represents the potential for Wilson’s good prayer. That circle allows for the possibility that Brown will find a good book. This simple circle brought the signified of God down to earth in the signifier of Jesus Christ, *logos*, the Word made flesh.
Embedded in this semiology is the radical notion that language is relational and not referential. That is, “no sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs.” Later critics of Saussure, primarily Bakhtin and Voloshinov, built on this work to show how “The meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language system but rather in the social context of its use.” This returns us to the interpersonal point above about the importance of an individual living in community, but I want to take it somewhere else: How does a reader negotiate the signifieds hiding behind a collection of signifiers?

Explicit and implicit references are made in all of these papers to the most current reader-response theories, which in my own college of education we trace back to Louise Rosenblatt but also includes C. S. Lewis and Roland Barthes as adherents. Perhaps John Wilson offered the most detailed description in his recounting of Elizabeth Anscombe’s interest in great philosophers, as recounted by her daughter Mary Geach:

This did not mean using a philosopher’s work as a text about which to make erudite observations, nor did it mean taking him as a banner for her cause, nor employing his name as a label for a mindset which she might dislike: it meant interesting herself in the topics that the philosopher discusses, taking his thoughts apart, adopting some and finding deep problems through others, and rejecting what she found silly.

In that one sentence, we find at least eight potential responses a reader might have to a text, eight different ways to comprehend the relationship between signifiers and signifieds.

In connecting this transactional strand to the previous interpersonal strand, Susan Van Zanten discussed the formation of textual worlds in community,

by both an author and a reader, who do not create ex nihilo… but by interacting with the world given to us… The world of the poem or story does not phenomenologically
exist, does not come to life, until the reader’s encounter with and reaction to the worlds.

Dr. Van Zanten recognized the potential of the reading life in the form of new media and offered hope in recent increases in adult literacy. However we might celebrate the fact of more adults, and young adults, reading, we must also ask about what they are reading.

This is the warning implied throughout Dr. Brown’s paper. He told us how he learned the power of words in church from traveling evangelists who “knew lots of words and… possessed a remarkable energy.” The breadth of signifiers available to them gave these evangelists access to deep and arcane signifieds. They commanded a response from their listeners that communicated power and knowledge. And we are seeing that power slip away from us as individual readers:

Contemporary culture offers some very comfortable caves. Amazon will choose your reading for you, NETFLIX will determine your film preferences, you can choose your worship style at church, and a news channel that fits your politics.

Even before we reach the point of initiating a response to an author, our choices have been whittled down by unseen forces. We are attacked by what Wilson called “a contagion of willful misreading, rationalized by high-minded appeals to a greater good.”

Likewise, Susan Trollinger offered a warning parable of this contagion as spread via the Creation Museum. She began by reminding us how Socrates foreshadowed Rosenblatt’s theory in his concerns about writing as “a kind of sham speech… because the author is absent… it invited unintended readers and, thus, enables mistaken readings.” She continued through her detailing of the myriad ways the Creation Museum attempts to retake control of a reader’s response to Scripture, to wrest away from readers the potential for “our God-given capacity for critical thinking.”
So what do we do to combat these contagions? In our professional lives, how do we develop critical thinking skills in our students despite the limitations being placed on their responses as readers?

One person I’ve found combating this contagion by imagining new ways of examining the transactional practice of reading is Alison Heron Hruby, whose paper presentation I was fortunate to see during a recent annual convention of the Literacy Research Association. By drawing on the work of literary critic Michael Gillespie, Hruby sought to connect chaos theory to transactional literary analysis so as to offer a paradigm for opening multiple possibilities within a single text, that is, a method for exploring the potential for infinite signifieds behind a singular signifier.

According to Hruby, the issue with a transactional theory of reading is that it’s too linear for today’s literacies. Rosenblatt had a vision of a reader, seated at a desk before a book, turning pages and moving left to right, top to bottom. This reader begins as somehow naïve or uninformed and moves toward what Rosenblatt called “an undistorted vision of the work” (109). Now, as English majors and teachers, we expect diverse responses to any one work, but what happens when our linearity is too old-fashioned?

That is, if a reading is supported by evidence, is it always valid? This is where chaos theory comes in. Gillespie describes how a text has some internal coherency but, as a chaotic system, we cannot expect the pieces of the text to behave in predictable ways. Thus, Hruby turns to the example of a fractal. As a fractal continues to replicate, we still see the initial design. However, the chaos is held in check only by attractors, these mechanisms that keep us from spiraling into infinity. In literacy, these attractors might include things like motifs, themes, and genres.
As an example, Hruby discussed the world of film interpretation. We have a film, a linear text. However, swirling around that text we have movie reviews from respected critics, movie reviews from amateur critics, and the potential for online comments responding to each brand of criticism. And that’s where the fractal begins. Internet reviews allow comments on a critic but also comments on the comments and then comments on those comments.

Suddenly, watching a movie (or reading a book) is no longer a linear process but a replicating one bound by the coherency of the text but potentially infinite in transaction. Should we ever consider re-watching the movie after having read some number of these critiques and comments, we begin a new
iteration; zoom in on some new area previously thought to be empty.

To return us somewhat to the theme of this Symposium, I wonder how this chaotic Transactional theory might impact our understanding of The Book. In that case, we return to some single text made up of multiple Hebrew and Greek writings, overlay the multiple translations driven by seemingly infinite agendas, and then multiply by the number of people trying so hard to tell us how they know exactly what The Book is supposed to mean in our present context.

**Multimedia: Music Video as Text as Music Video**

Are our brains really changing in response to this multilinear transactional reading? Susan Trollinger referenced Nicholas Carr’s work on how new technologies are reconfiguring our brains vis-à-vis reading. In short, we no longer remember information to which we have ready extracranial access but we do remember how to find that information. Perhaps our brains have always been this way but recent advances in technology have so radically increased the amount of information immediately available that we’re only now beginning to take notice.

A quick aside: It’s interesting to consider the adverb in the phrase “information immediately available” because, when you break the word down we see how it hides the exact opposite meaning. There is no “immediately” available because we all rely on Google or some similar spirit to act as mediator between us and the information. Perhaps this model of access may lead us to reimagine the Holy Spirit as our intercessor as Google offers to fill in our search terms before we can even finish typing.

In any event, I return us to the question Dr. Ronald Wells posed at the beginning of our time together: Why should a small liberal arts college host a scholarly meeting on “The Book, Texts, and the Liberal Arts” under the header of “Conversations on Faith and the Liberal Arts”? Why indeed?
Is The Book, or any book, in the form of a physical, linear text becoming obsolete and, if so, do we mourn that passing? In closing, I would like to present where I find some hope in the digital age of new media: music videos I found on YouTube. Just as every paper got its own Wordle™, I have found music videos that I think reflect each one of the papers we have heard this weekend and through them I find hope that artists working in 21st century media are wrestling with the same questions as all of us.

Now, it must be stated clearly here, the views expressed in these music videos are not those of Maryville College or of the speakers during this Symposium. In fact, I think we might all agree that several of the expressed views could stand some critical feedback. However, this is music that our students are listening to and represents an important way of getting to know them.

Aside from being a very catchy love song with the best use of a ukulele in recent memory, *Hey Soul Sister* by Train\(^8\) makes almost no sense:

> Your lipstick stains on the front lobe of my left side brains;  
> I knew I wouldn’t forget you and so I went and let you blow my mind.

The lyrics aside, I take this video as a sign that some structural linguist somewhere got a job outside the academy. This video is an audio-visual representation of Saussure’s signs in the symbolic mode. Instead of just a video of a band playing and a singer singing, the textual signifiers are included and even highlight the signifieds embedded in the song.

I imagine this video somewhat recalls Dr. Trollinger’s experiences at the Creation Museum as the combination of visual text in varying sizes is combined with a multimedia presentation designed to overwhelm us. Just as the museum doesn’t really want us to ask questions, Train might not really want us to look for meaning in the lyrics and instead just absorb the overall feeling of the complete presentation.
Our students watching this video are subconsciously seeing the importance of text and how a poet might send his words out to the object of his affection. In my mind, *Hey Soul Sister* represents an invitation to be wary of the ways in which 21st century media employ the written word to their own ends, a wariness expressed throughout Dr. Trollinger’s paper.

Another love song but this time a little more comprehensible. This is Bruno Mars with *Just the Way You Are.* This time, I believe an art historian got a job in the creation of this video, the musical version of Magritte’s pipe. We see the artist’s muse (in this case, Euterpe or Erato) listening to her song on a cassette tape (a word just this year removed from the *Oxford English Dictionary*). However, Bruno Mars comes in and offers a “truer” version of the song but it is still not the artist himself. *Ceci n’est pas Bruno Mars.* This is a music video explicitly pointing out the created nature of a music video.

Using the magnetic tape of the cassette to recreate himself, Bruno Mars is representing a fundamental understanding of surrealism, a question posed by Dr. Brown as he considered what happens “when no words will suffice.” Bruno Mars uses this video to enhance the song, to demonstrate how, as Dale Brown mentioned, “So often we feel that we’ve heard all this before or that what we encounter is insubstantial.” How does Bruno Mars communicate a deeper emotion through a genre that has grown trite? Here is the music, in the form of a magnetic tape, giving substance to the music, a discourse on the nature of music as semiology through the iconic mode.

Perhaps Mars is also echoing a warning from Magritte and from Dr. Brown: even a videotaped performance of a song is not reality. Our students may be under the impression that a video can recreate an entire experience, that Facebook is a collection of real interpersonal relationships, that Netflix is a repository of all cinema, and that if Google can’t index it it doesn’t really exist. Here’s the project where we might enlist Bruno Mars (and I think his other music and videos bear out interest in the surreal) along with our students toward what Dr. Brown called a “return to the notion of the ‘public intellectual’… This is the ground from which we might reseed the humanities.”
A different kind of love song focused on a place rather than a person but still representing a Critical approach to the mythologies surrounding New York City as presented in the indexical mode (thus, we’ve now covered all three semiotic modes for those keeping score). This is Jay Z and Alicia Keys with *Empire State of Mind.* In the first verse we hear the accepted mythology of the city: “I’m the new Sinatra and since I made it here I can make it anywhere (Yeah, they love me everywhere).” This is how we’re supposed to think all of New York City fits together. But I think Jay Z is uncomfortable with merely replicating that mythology as Reality, just as John Wilson described how “faithful believers are also used to living with uncertainty.”

Here I remind us of Wilson’s two understandings, which I believe appear in this video: “First, reality is miscellaneous. Second, I will never come close to understanding how it all fits together.” In the second verse, Jay Z tells us, “Eight million stories out there and they’re naked, city it’s a pity half of y’all won’t make it.” Then in the third verse, “The city of sin is a pity on a whim. Good girls gone bad, the city’s filled with them.” I think Barthes would be impressed. The mythology of New York (and of the United States, for that matter) is that anyone can make it and here we have someone who has made it telling us that that is not true for everyone, that the city is made of eight million miscellaneous stories and only half of them might begin to fit it all together. This miscellany, presented in layers of photographs and videos, is profound for several reasons:

- Why does Jay Z have to be the one to tell these stories?
- Why can’t the people tell their own stories?
- Why do we persist in our myths of meritocracy?
- Why do we wonder how it all fits together while ignoring our own homophily?
- Why do we deny the miscellany of large portions of our population?

This is the power and need for narrative, for texts that share the myriad stories out there, for us to teach our students how to be open to hearing the miscellany of the Other. I think this is a
trend that will increase as the rap stars of the 1980s and 1990s grow older and become increasingly uncomfortable with their success at the potential detriment of others from their community. Perhaps in Jay Z’s mind, alongside John Wilson’s, this type of introspective and retrospective rap is good prayer (this from verse three): “Hail Mary to the city. You’re a Virgin and Jesus can’t save you. Life starts when the church ends.”

The last video I share this afternoon is unlike the previous three and yet exactly like them. This video embodies in both content and method the desire for us to recognize ourselves as individuals existing in community. This is *Don’t Stop the Pop*, a mash up by DJ Earworm. Every year, DJ Earworm takes the top 25 songs of the year according to *Billboard Magazine*, looks at them as a complete body, and then synthesizes them into a single text. His presence here at the end of the Symposium resembles my own as we are both attempting the same task, although I admit his work is much more artistic and more entertaining than my own.

For me, DJ Earworm represents something that we may be losing in society but that all of the papers presented this weekend in this Symposium desire: a commitment to a real and honest dialogic community. Dr. Van Zanten described this as our “responsibility to make the reading life accessible to more people, to extend and build our reading communities.” Here’s DJ Earworm building dialogue, demonstrating for us how twenty-five seemingly disparate voices can talk to each other and create something beautiful and new from synthesis. To be clear, DJ Earworm’s mash ups from past years are all very different texts, representing the differing realities of the past years. The artist’s statement accompanying this year’s mash up makes this point explicit:

In 2010, pop has gone into serious all-out party mode. In 2009, the music was encouraging us to pick ourselves back up after being knocked down… This year’s music tells us to keep going now that we’re up and having fun. In fact, the fun seems to be in such overdrive that it borders on recklessness. Usher urges us to “dance like it’s the last night of your life,” and Katy Perry wants us to “run away
and don’t ever look back.” Even the songs that aren’t about parties have parties in their videos, like this year’s entries from Mike Posner and Lady Antebellum.\textsuperscript{12}

In experiencing these mash ups, I echo Van Zanten: “I suspect that we may have sounded the death knell of the reading life prematurely. I am especially intrigued by new communal elements of reading, some made possible by electronic media.”

This might be a model for us as human beings seeking to make our world a better place. We do not live in a world that encourages or celebrates dialogue; instead, we celebrate the individual at the expense of the community. We read on our own. We go to museums that tell us what to think. We watch news channels that share our politics. We dismiss the search for Truth and instead make do with what is expedient. I think DJ Earworm is an ally to the liberal arts, both in content and in method. Perhaps we can employ him to communicate the importance of dialogue and community to those who might not regularly turn to a good book.

In closing, I return to DJ Earworm’s artist’s statement: “It’s a great thing about music that you can leave your worries and lose yourself in the moment.”\textsuperscript{13} You can leave your worries and lose yourself in the moment, the very notion at the heart of the papers we read this weekend, the place where we often locate the power of the written word when we first begin to explore our own reader identities. If we can lose ourselves in the created realities of music and we can lose ourselves in the created realities of the written word, then perhaps our students are more on board than we think. Perhaps there is a new generation of audiences engaging conversations on faith and the liberal arts.

2 www.wordle.net


5 Alison Heron Hruby, “Popular Film Critique as Chaos: Interpretation beyond Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory” (presentation, Literacy Research Association Annual Conference, Austin, TX, 2-5 December 2009).


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
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Founded by leaders of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, Maryville College is related to the Presbyterian Church USA in a voluntary covenant. In an atmosphere of freedom and sensitivity, Maryville College bears witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ who challenges all human beings to search for truth, to work for justice, to develop wisdom, and to become loving persons. Continuing in this vital faith, the College believes that it must listen attentively and humbly to all human voices so that it may hear the call of God no matter how God may speak.

—from the College’s Statement of Purpose

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