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CLARITAS

A Journal of Christian Thought



FEATURING
The Power of Narrative
Faculty Interview: How the Story Played Out
The Myths that Make Us



CLARITAS is the Latin word for “clarity,” “vividness,” or “renown.” For us, *Claritas* represents a life-giving truth that can only be found through God.

WHO ARE WE?

The *Cornell Claritas* is a journal of Christian thought that reviews ideas and cultural commentary. Launched in the spring semester of 2015, it is written and produced by students attending Cornell University. The *Cornell Claritas* is ecumenical, drawing writers and editors from all denominations around a common creedal vision. Its vision is to articulate and connect the truth of Christ to every person and every study, and it strives to begin conversations that involve faith, reason, and vocation.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Growing up, there was always something very special about the last few moments of each day: right before my brothers and I were tucked in, we were read a story. And after the back cover was closed, the lights were clicked off, and my head was nestled in my pillow, I would lay and think of the events that had occurred and the events of the chapters yet to come. Although my bedtime rituals at present are not as explicitly narrative-focused, I still find myself dwelling upon stories in my last seconds before sleep. Now, in lieu of dragons and whimsy, my “bedtime stories” rehash the events of the day and construct tales for the days to come.

The stories that we tell ourselves are sometimes true (“I ate such-and-such for lunch”), sometimes false (“They only invited me out of pity”), and sometimes somewhere in-between (“I’ll surely get that essay done tomorrow”). Yet, regardless of their truth value, stories remain powerful. What’s more, modern communication theory supports story’s broad power. In recent research, participants who received information presented narratively—instead of through graphs or lists of facts—were shown to have better information retention and were more likely to act upon the information they received.¹ Aside from increasing memory retention, narratives have also been shown in communication research to rouse great emotion, play with senses of time, and create new ways of thinking.²

Communication theory plays perfectly into what I believe to be true through my Christian faith, a religion that validates the importance of story. Not only is the primary text of Christianity one giant narrative—the Bible follows the meta-narrative arc of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration—but the Christian God is a God who is heavily concerned with our stories. One such story-honoring passage comes from the book of Genesis and centers around the experiences of Hagar, an Egyptian slave-woman. Despite her lowly status, God appears to her in a moment of extreme need, asking, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”³ Although God is omniscient, He inclines His ear, knowing how important it is for us to share our comings and goings through story.

Seeing as we are a people steeped in—and heavily influenced by—story, the Claritas staff has taken a semester to reflect upon the theme of “Narrative.” In the following pages, we dissect and inspect many stories, from those visually expressed through architecture, to those told by Jesus via parable, to those constructed to encourage corporate responsibility. Our work is but a small snapshot of the infinite narratives we come into contact with. Through this tiny glimpse, we hope to encourage you, our reader, to turn a critical eye to the stories in which you are submerged.

Peace of Christ,

Carley Eschliman ‘20
Editor in Chief

¹Emily Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion: Explaining the Persuasive Effects of Entertainment-Education Messages,” *Communication Theory* 18, no. 3 (2008): 407–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00328.x>. ²Simon Bushell et al., “Strategic Narratives in Climate Change: Towards a Unifying Narrative to Address the Action Gap on Climate Change,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 28 (June 1, 2017): 39–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.04.001>; Sarah Bollinger and Matthew W. Kreuter, “Real-Time Moment-to-Moment Emotional Responses to Narrative and Informational Breast Cancer Videos in African American Women,” *Health Education Research* 27, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 537–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cys047>; Suely Fragoso, “Immersion in Narrative Games,” *Galaxia* 14, no. 28 (December 1, 2014): 58–69. ³Genesis 16:8 (NIV)



THE MYTHS THAT MAKE US

by Sara Gorske and Brooke Lindsey

Myth, legends, folk stories, and fairy tales: perhaps it is these earliest human narratives which remain the most enduring. From Greek heroes to the tales of Grimm, certain recurring motifs found in these stories from across the world can tell us something about our deepest fears and questions. And in exploring those questions, they often seek to explain them. Although many oral traditions found their way into the religion and fundamental belief systems of the cultures from which they originated, the way we use the English word “myth” today tells a different story. Myths are, by definition, untrue tales.¹

Yet, even the origins of the word “myth” itself tell us something different about what these stories mean. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, myths are “stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred.”² So how has this word, which once referred to that which is “true and sacred,” come to mean something opposite—a story that is false?

It seems that the notion of story itself is placed in contrast with truth—it is the juxtaposition

of fiction with fact. Yet even the way we convey knowledge based on empirical evidence is rooted in narrative. In a 2014 article published by the National Academy of Sciences, Professor Michael F. Dahlstrom argues that narrative communication can actually be used to strengthen scientific communication, writing that “narrative cognition is thought to represent the default mode of human thought, providing structure to reality and serving as the underlying foundation for memory.”³ The rich narrative tradition of the past serves not as the primitive precursor to today’s science-based explanations; rather, storytelling is the fundamental means by which we convey human thought—including our assertions and explanations of the objective truths grounding the world in which we live.

When we examine recurring motifs in classic stories, therefore, perhaps we can search them for the universal truths they often convey, rather than merely the creative means through which they are expressed. Myths, folktales, and fairytales seek to answer fundamental questions about mankind’s place in a world which often asks more than can be answered solely by reason. The evil stepmother. The quest for immortality.

“ “ If immortality
cannot be obtained
by humans in anyone’s stories,
then, *why* does it
remain such an
essential goal? ” ”

Man’s descent into a basal and bestial nature. What does the enduring nature of these motifs say about the human condition?

Take, for example, the classic struggle between “good” and “evil” which is used as the central underlying conflict in countless stories. This battle may be represented as a literal one, but more often, it is a subtle positioning of a protagonist, endowed with the qualities of innocence or chivalry, against his or her antithesis, with both pursuing the same goal.

In the simplest terms, the conflict between characters representing good and evil can represent humanity’s endless faith that each person is his or her own protagonist, pursuing desires which are fundamentally good but always seem to be thwarted, either by circumstances or others. However, this battle is more fully described by the basic idea of many religions: humanity is at war with that which we cannot see, leading the world to be categorized in a state of essential wrongness—what we call evil.

An example of this type of battle is the motif of the evil step-mother. Occurring in fairy tales such as “Snow White,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Rapunzel,” the protagonists must come to understand that authority figures may not always deserve trust; they might want the worst, not the best, for those under their authority. This parent-child relationship is recurrently disturbing, because we have preconceived notions of good and evil, an ordering of how this relationship should ideally be. By removing the direct relationship of mother to child and extending the familial separation, these stories reflect a deep-set yearning that there is a true parent somewhere who would have desired good for the protagonist, but, through some tragic circumstance, can no longer care for their child.

In the book of Genesis in the Christian Bible

and the Hebrew Torah, a creation story is told in which man rebels against God, his father-figure, leading to his ultimate expulsion from paradise and fall into the world of sin.⁴ By representing man’s quest to obtain essential goodness by breaking free of evil tormentors, myths and folk tales hearken back to a religious concept of reclamation: mankind must reclaim the right authority figure—God—and put false authorities to death.

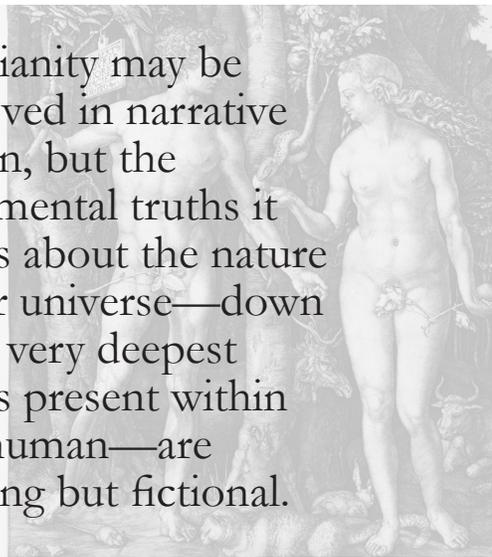
One does not have to believe in an organized religion to feel that something is off-kilter about the way the world works, but without hope that there is indeed a universal good, the struggle between the two extremes becomes meaningless. The endurance of this motif suggests that mankind wants to believe that good and evil exist, and even that the manifestation of that force of good may be found in a parental figure with direct ties to the suffering protagonist.

A corollary to the loss of paradise in the Genesis story is the loss of immortality. Many religions prepare their practitioners to obtain some form of eternal life, whether this occurs after one life or multiple lives. Furthermore, the quest for immortality is a central feature of many cultures’ origin stories; from Gilgamesh’s travels around the Mesopotamian world to the folk in Ireland who wander into faerie country and live without a sense of time’s passage, people have never abandoned the idea that eternal life exists. Often, this eternal life is simply in a realm we cannot yet access. Unsurprisingly, each tale includes the element of failure, which is always due to the searchers’ essential humanness. Gilgamesh fails because he cannot deny his need for sleep, while those Irish wanderers retain a desire for the companionship of their friends and family. In the Genesis account, as well, man is literally cut off from the tree of life and its promise of life everlasting when he is overcome by the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit.⁵

If immortality cannot be obtained by humans in anyone's stories, then, why does it remain such an essential goal? An answer once again lies in the Bible. Here on earth, people continue to require and desire. Yet, in the New Testament, Jesus promises that upon entering heaven, human wants and needs will be eliminated, satisfied fully in God's presence, as they once were in the Garden of Eden.⁶ Though immortality remains an appealing concept, it is unfathomable given the limitations of our human minds; incidentally, these limitations were instilled when mankind's communion with God was severed.

Despite all the lost benefits associated with life before sin, however, that initial impetus to "eat of the forbidden fruit" undergirds today's still-fallen world. If sin and its consequences were simply a thing to be experienced once,

Christianity may be preserved in narrative fashion, but the fundamental truths it reveals about the nature of our universe—down to the very deepest desires present within each human—are anything but fictional.



disliked, and abandoned, people would not still be straining to reach immortality and a triumph over one's oppressors. Sin is thus revealed to have been, and to be still, a desirable thing.

All of today's desires, then, will only be eliminated when reunion with God is achieved—and eternal life happens to be a side effect. Yet in the typical human fashion of oversimplifying a convoluted world, that side effect is what is most often sought; consequently, the true benefits of immortality are rarely considered. Such go the stories of those Irish travelers, who achieve what they believed was their desire but ultimately wish it away because something greater—an end to the brokenness of humanity—has not yet been satisfied.

While the desire for the triumph of good over evil, or for blissful and eternal life, can represent

forthcoming gifts from God, folk stories can also represent the inherent corruption of humankind—specifically, its insatiable desire for power—in its depiction of certain human struggles. While a direct power struggle may not always be evident—although kings and queens are often cast down, usurped, or restored—these stories have adopted various ways of veiling the human desire for power in specific metaphors. One such motif is the transformation (and reversal) of people into animal forms.

In fairy tales like "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Wild Swans," life as an animal, even partially, becomes a curse and a condition to be avoided at all costs. In "The Wild Swans," for example, the transformation of twelve princes into swans, a state which can be escaped only at nightfall, becomes a way for rivals to legitimize their taking over of the kingdom, since an animal is unfit to rule. Additionally, in "Beauty and the Beast," the longer the cursed prince stays partially animal, the greater his descent into a bestial nature. Eventually, his condition will appear irreversible, and his human faculties, including the ability to love, will be nearly irrevocably impaired.

Man-to-beast stories emphasize the lack of control that many people feel over their lives, even as they search to consolidate and increase control over nature and others. In Greek mythology, Zeus often converts his erstwhile lovers into animals without their consent; since the Greek gods are themselves personifications of nature, these stories seem to represent the cruel twists of fate that plague humans who try to subdue nature, only to find the tables reversed. In a sinful world, attempts to regain mankind's place as stewards of the earth are ultimately futile, since the ground itself has been turned against its master.⁷

When God placed humans in the Garden of Eden, He gave them the command to have dominion over the other creatures and things of the world, with a harmony between man (as an earthly steward) and his subjects existing in Eden.⁸ However, they still resented the fact that God maintained ultimate authority, leading them toward a prideful desire to be "like God" themselves. This attitude has persisted, with struggles over authority and power lying at the basis of some of the greatest conflicts in history. After the fall, the word "rule" is introduced, and people began to corrupt the original meaning of dominion into one of pure power, even as that power became harder to grasp.⁹

As much as the transformations in these stories reflect a subjugation to a perceived inferior form, the reversals ultimately illustrate a motif that runs past the origins of the Genesis myths and throughout the Bible as a whole. When the transformations in these stories are reversed, not only are the bestial characteristics eliminated, but the princes are restored to a state of superhuman beauty.

While this could be read as reiterating the superiority of the human form over all other creatures, each of the characters returns to a human state having learned valuable lessons about the errors of sinful pride or complacency. In addition, the reversed transformations are almost always affected by the power of love. In a sense, there is no greater metaphor for the Christian life: Jesus promises his followers that through faith in God and His love for them, they will be restored to an existence in the glorious presence of the Father, freed from sin forever, and in possession of life everlasting.¹⁰

Renowned fantasy author—and Christian writer—C.S. Lewis once described Christianity as a unique “true myth.”¹¹ Certainly, Biblical stories like those in Genesis reflect many of the same tropes and motifs found in the wealth of myths, legends, and fairytales celebrated throughout human history. But the thing that makes the Christian myth special is that it is no mere tale. Rather, it is the kind of “true and sacred” story originally intended by the word “myth.” Christianity may be preserved in narrative fashion, but the fundamental truths it reveals about the nature of our universe—down to the very deepest desires present within each human—are anything but fictional.

The Genesis story details the descent of man into sin, and explicates the longings that mankind has for being the protagonists of their own stories, conquering the trials put before them, and achieving incomparable rewards; but, while folktales can capture those hungers, both they and the stories in Genesis are ultimately incomplete pictures of humanity in its fallen state. Looking beyond, to the restoration of God’s people by His love, however, satisfies the questions put forth in these tales and asked by every person who has heard them. The enduring motifs of many cultural tales are not likely to disappear any time soon, as evidenced by the resurgent popularity of fairy tale retellings and stories about mythology, but the longer they are asked, perhaps the more likely that people will seek answers, and may just find them in faith. ☞

¹*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “myth (n.),” 8 April 2019, <<http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=myth&searchBtn=Search>>.

²*Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “myth (n.),” 8 April 2019, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/myth>>.

³Michael F. Dahlstrom, “Using Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science with Nonexpert Audiences,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. Supplement 4 (September 16, 2014): 13614–20, <<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1320645111>>.

⁴Genesis 3:6 (ESV); Genesis 3:23 (ESV)

⁵Genesis 3:22 (ESV)

⁶Isaiah 49:10 (ESV); Revelation 7:16 (ESV)

⁷Genesis 3:17-19 (ESV)

⁸Genesis 1:26-30 (ESV)

⁹Genesis 3:16 (ESV)

¹⁰II Corinthians 13:11 (ESV); Amos 9:14 (ESV)

¹¹Michael Ward, “C.S. Lewis on Christianity as the True Myth,” *Patheos*, March 9, 2016, <<https://www.patheos.com/topics/religion-and-myth/cs-lewis-on-christianity-as-the-true-myth-michael-ward-03-09-2016>>.



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Brooke Lindsey is a sophomore from Phoenix, Arizona majoring in Philosophy and minoring in Spanish. She is passionate about ethics, espresso, and her family dog named Mr. Pettibone.



Dialo

Dearest

Lapis lights
by whose gaze you see or seek (see, I think)
some distant shore too sublime for me:
Weep not—but do, for awash in the tide
Elysium’s beacon blurs and fades away.
In that deluge you’ll seek a nearer port
which I, lonely and forgotten island,
would gladly supply: founder for a while.
And be it briefly that you harbor here
'til the storm shall pass, my arid earth to flood
and murky gloom to blaze: then I were glad.
But should upon the coming calm you lead
me on with you unto that distant shore:
then were I unforgotten and at rest.

Figures

by Matthew J. Hall

Fr. Raphael

Who's the shabby, unsteady man tottering up the chapel stoop?
A vagrant or the gardener?
No; he's the friar, just unhabited.

“Who's the shabby man,” I'd thought; but now it's him asking me,
“Who're you and what're you doing in this sanctuary?”

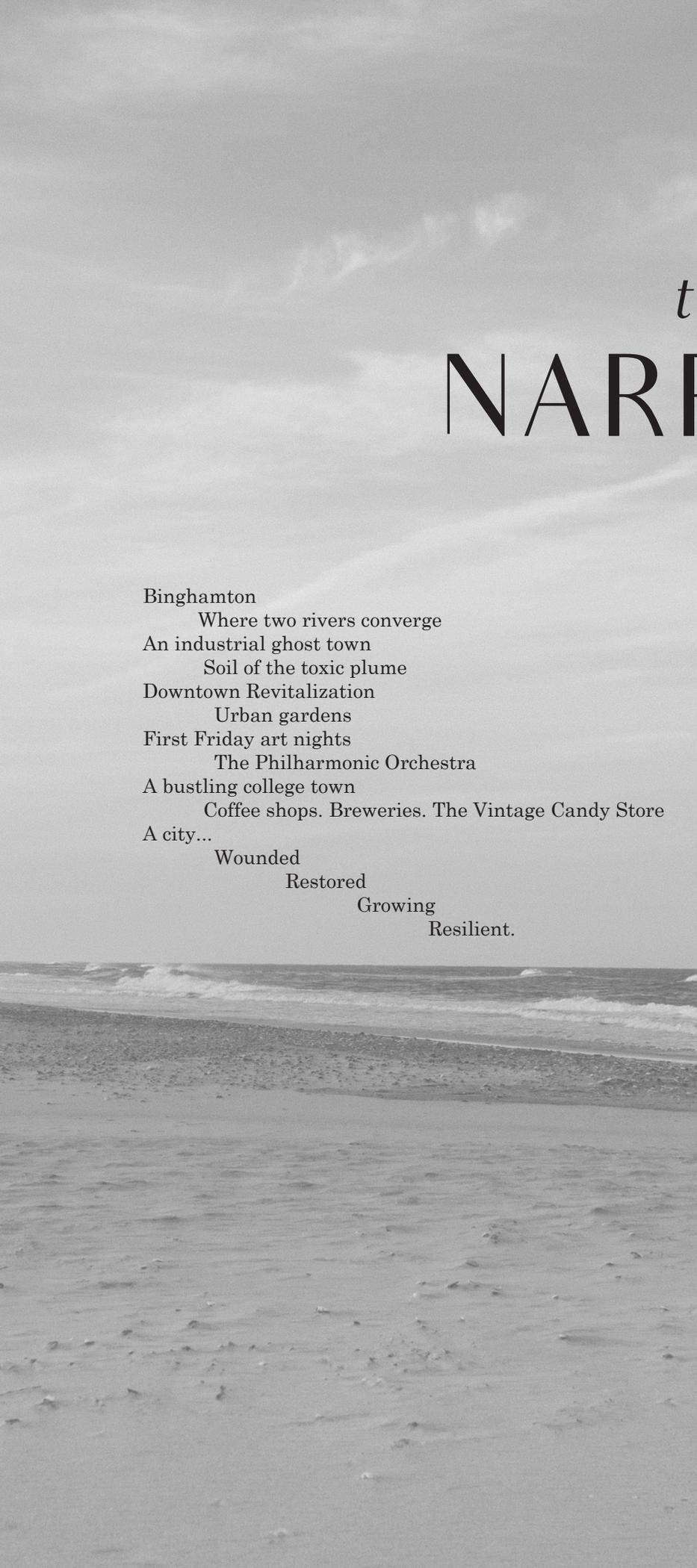
In confession he crouches in his chair like he walks bent over:
there his hands floated groping for balance; here they're clutched as he listens
(who can say whether hearing intently or straining deafly)—
it's the crouch under the yoke of others' offloaded troubles,
and the wobble's their weight.

In conversation he's at mass:
his arms outstretched, his eyes upturned to heaven or just to you—
he's an El Greco.

Those cerulean eyes water and burn and crown this mound of gray and brown.
I'd wanted sacraments and ministrations; but help was all that was on offer. *g*

Matthew J. Hall is PhD candidate in musicology.





the power of
NARRATIVE

by Amanda Curtis

Binghamton
 Where two rivers converge
An industrial ghost town
 Soil of the toxic plume
Downtown Revitalization
 Urban gardens
First Friday art nights
 The Philharmonic Orchestra
A bustling college town
 Coffee shops. Breweries. The Vintage Candy Store
A city...
 Wounded
 Restored
 Growing
 Resilient.

Our perceptions and values are molded through the collective impact of every moment in our lives. And, at some point in our journeys, a moment or season will bring these values into conflict. For me, this dissonance was brought to light throughout my transition from a rust-belt-raised high schooler to living on my own as a Cornell student. Within my first few days on Cornell's campus, I remember feeling struck by the sheer diversity of thought and experiences among my peers. I quickly began to feel exposed as my coursework and friendships confronted my ignorance. College has challenged my understanding of myself, the world, and my home, as I believe it does for all enrolled, as it has forced us to engage with narratives in opposition.

As many of the broken narratives I had been clinging to—about my past, my family, my body, my politics, and the God I claimed to serve—were brought to light, I began to feel relieved. Recognizing my worldviews and the reasons behind them, as well as listening to others’ perspectives, revealed to me not only the breadth of ways of thinking about the world but also my own ability to discern between these perspectives. This revelation empowered me to choose which narratives to follow. Having grown up in an emotionally abusive household, this was the first time in my life when I felt the freedom to fully think for myself. This freedom strengthened me to press into the wounded places in my heart, incrementally being restored in the process. My confidence grew, I found my voice again, and, most importantly, I learned to call out abuse for what it is—abuse—regardless of its source.

To come to this expansion of heart and mind, we must first enter into these moments of confrontation—both with externally and internally. We must recognize the daily narratives surrounding us as well as those upon which we found our identities and bind ourselves—sometimes consciously, sometimes not. The narratives we follow mold our perspectives on how the world functions and our own capacity to change that world. Therefore, if we seek to be actors in shaping our communities and advocating for a healthy, just society, we must each find the courage to confront this pool of narratives for ourselves.

*Like a steady
rhythm in the background
of a song, we all match
our pace to the beat of
subconscious narratives.*

Nothing at Cornell has challenged my ideas of community organizing, professionalism, and the character of my home community more than my position as a Civic Research Fellow with Rust 2 Green. Rust 2 Green is a collaborative network of Cornell faculty, students, and Binghamton community leaders striving to achieve Binghamton’s economic and community goals, particularly in a way that recognizes the city’s two rivers (the Chenango and the Susquehanna) as integral assets in these endeavors.



Growing up, I perceived my hometown of Endicott, NY and the neighboring city of Binghamton as broken, polluted, and abandoned towns. However, my experiences under the mentorship of this organization and its incredible partners exposed me to a side of my community I had naïvely overlooked—or even had been blind to completely. I believe that the presence of multiple narratives in Binghamton, the resiliency of its community and the intentional efforts of many to foster restoration throughout the city depicts the power of narratives in our communities, personal lives, and walks of faith.

A particularly difficult challenge is before Rust 2 Green: there are multiple narratives surrounding the Chenango and Susquehanna rivers. Like many other rust belt cities, Binghamton suffered from serious industrial pollution from the dumping of toxic waste. Some toxins are still found in the soil of nearby neighborhoods, including my own hometown. This pollution, paired with recent major flooding in 2006 and 2011, gives these rivers a bad reputation. I grew up hearing these narratives of pollution, desertion, and deterioration among many of my peers and teachers. Even strangers would make sarcastic jokes in passing about our “gray, depressing city.”

However, recent water quality research shows that after years of stricter regulations, the rivers are actually healthy enough to swim in.¹ Given this new data, why do these negative narratives persist?

Like a steady rhythm in the background of a song, we all match our pace to the beat of subconscious narratives. We are surrounded by stories and theories of change; “this action will lead to another and ultimately result in this

outcome.” These narratives construct the lenses through which we view every element of our lives. Often, when we reflect on past seasons of

Hopeful narratives inspire individuals to not only see their own capacity to make change, but also encourages them to utilize that agency.

life, we will forget the specific details of what we did, but we remember the feelings we felt most. We remember the thoughts that filled our minds and the desires in our hearts. However, many of us struggle to recognize the factors influencing our narratives and the ripple effects these factors have upon our motivations and experiences.

For example, when I was 6, I longed for a close best friend, was angered by habitat destruction of wild panda populations, and was delighted by any chance to create, draw or paint. These emotions grew from something. At this point in my life, I watched TV shows where lead characters had close, best friends; I was reading books about endangered species (usually about pandas); and I spent time with my mom daily making art projects. As is true at every stage in life, these passions were stimulated both internally and externally. Our experiences can evoke strong feelings of grief, frustration, compassion, and joy. And, subsequently, our emotions are heavily molded by the narratives we either consciously or subconsciously adhere to.

The narratives present in the Binghamton community are likewise influenced by lived experiences; these influence receptiveness to new narratives and loyalty to old narratives. As is the case for each of us, the narratives community members follow affect how they interact with the world. As discussed previously, the difficult circumstances within the Binghamton community can lead to anxiety, frustration, sadness, and even hopelessness. However, through these trials, community members can be encouraged to create innovative solutions to foster recovery and growth. This social support can inspire and strengthen hope, even when faced with messages of loss and despair.

To better understand residents’ experiences with the 2006 and 2011 floods, Rust 2 Green conducted a series of six story circles in the summer of 2016, which inspected how residents’ experiences shaped their narratives. These story circles established safe dialogue spaces in which participants each took turns telling stories of their individual flooding experiences. My coworkers and I investigated these interviews’ transcripts, paying special attention to each interviewee’s social connections and their emotional reactions to the recent floods. This research has fostered a better understanding of how the Binghamton community perceives these disasters, to what extent individuals feel connected to their community, and their feelings about potential future flooding events.

Some participants seem very hopeful about the way community members will support one another. Some are fearful about the amount of grief they may feel in the face of losses from another flood. Some participants still harbor anger and frustrations over their experiences dealing with FEMA, flood insurance, and contractors. All of these stories and emotions continue to shape the way the Binghamton community views itself, both now and moving forward.

To highlight some of these experiences and the diversity of narratives present in the city, an Ithaca-based theatre company, Civic Ensemble, worked with our organization to create a play called “Living with Water.” Building a greater

As the work of Rust 2 Green demonstrates, narratives are dynamic, diverse threads of connection between community members and powerful tools of influence.

voice for alternative narratives—especially when faced with prevailing negative ones—and highlighting some of these community connections can amplify a voice of hope an identity within the community. Hopeful narratives inspire individuals to not only see their own capacity to make change, but also encourage them to utilize that agency.



And, these narratives of hope are already translating into action. As urban garden projects and discussions about how to redesign some of Binghamton's green spaces progress, community members and researchers are working to amplify local voices.² I believe the relationship between Binghamton residents and their environment will grow to be one that is both realized and perceived as symbiotic and sustainable, grounded in a narrative of hope.

Throughout my time at Cornell, many of the narratives I held true have been challenged and reshaped through dialogue with my peers, the provocation of my studies, experiences abroad, and growing in my identity in Christ. As the work of Rust 2 Green demonstrates, narratives are dynamic, diverse threads of connection between community members and powerful tools of influence. Narratives shape how we perceive the characters of ourselves, the characters of our communities, the nature of our environments, and the character of God. We are all constantly molded by these narratives, as they influence how our hearts respond to stress, pain, and desire.

We all have sore places that need restoration. We all have dreams and aspirations, and I believe there is a part of each of us that longs for hope. Hope is an emotion founded in faith and endurance through trials and hardship. It is something that if we desire it, we must cling to with full intention and awareness. Yet to consciously grasp something new, we must look down to our hands and slowly unfurl each finger, revealing what we've already been carrying for some time—the good and the bad.

To see the light, we must recognize the dark it seeks to illuminate. To encourage hope in others and in our communities, we must first seek to create platforms in which multiple narratives

can co-exist and be heard. This variety of thought reveals that change is possible and that alternatives exist to the reality we know. We were created with free will and the abilities of thinking and processing intentionally. I believe that God created us with these abilities in order to encourage us to discern between the many narratives we are exposed to and to engage with His Word and Truth personally. Given many narratives, we are given the power of examination and choice. Because our narratives affect our perceptions and actions, this is an important decision. It is therefore critical that each individual, regardless of background or creed, aspire to open their hearts and minds to the diversity of narratives in which we are embedded. 

¹"Susquehanna River Watershed," *New York State Department of Environmental Conservation*, 8 April 2019, <<https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/48020.html>>.

²"Urban Farm," *Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments (V.I.N.E.)*, 8 April 2019, <<https://vinesgardens.org/programs/urban-farm>>; "Binghamton River Park Plan," *Design Connect Cornell*, 8 April 2019, <<https://blogs.cornell.edu/designconnectcornell/current-projects/inghamton-river-park-plan/#.XKpv7etKgWp>>.



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WHAT IS HIDDEN

how paradoxes in parables reveal greater truths

by Abigail Bezrutczyk

There aren't enough words in the English language. I say this not as a linguist or a polyglot, but as a reader and writer. If there were more words, perhaps we could get to the point a little faster instead of dancing around what we mean.

But, alas, this is the reality of our language; we do not have the right word for every thought, feeling, and concept. How do you describe that pain in your leg? What, precisely, does that wine taste like? How do you express the feeling of love? Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

In response, we make up some new words (take a look at a botany textbook). Or, more artistically, we string together the words we already have to make them mean something new. Poetry certainly has this power, stringing words together in a unique way to convey meaning. And stories, in particular, overcome our inefficiency of words. Using metaphors,

characters, and plot, stories use words to create another world—something much greater than the letters on a page.

Stories are quite good at getting stuck in our heads, carrying their meaning with them whenever they are recalled. They stay with us because they take us on a journey to help us learn something. Other stories stay with us because they surprise us. They shock us by claiming contradictory statements about reality, yet these contradictions do not cancel each other out. This unexpected element is key in a parable, and also in a paradox.

If you are anything like me, the word 'paradox' only comes up in the realm of time-travel and science fiction. However, a simple search on paradoxes shows that they exist in many areas of study; from medicine, to statistics, to politics. It's not hard to find two things that seem to conflict but are both held true. Take, for example, the omnipotence paradox: Can an omnipotent being create a rock too heavy for itself to lift?¹ If the being is omnipotent, it is true that it has the power to do anything. If it can do anything, then it is true that it should be able to create the rock. But creating a rock too heavy to lift obviously undermines its ability—so it is not truly omnipotent. I will not provide an answer to this paradox except to say this: the contradiction grabs your attention.

Parables share some of these elements, but they are more than paradoxes. For one, they

are not just a list of confusing puzzles but are embedded in the Christian Gospel as stories and sayings. Jesus used parables to talk to the common people, giving moral lessons, warnings, and descriptions of the kingdom of God. The problem is, we know that parables are meant to teach something. But we, like the people of the time, often find them confusing. There is some mystery in parables that is worth investigating. Why teach with parables? And if the goal is to teach, then why teach in a cryptic way?

Perhaps confusion has a purpose; perhaps simple words were not enough to convey the message. Parables, like paradoxes, force us to try to reconcile seemingly contradictory ideas. They present us with contradictions so that we can think about them and understand the parable's truth. This is not simply done by confusing statements, but by story—making the message more immediate to the hearer, making them hear so that they might listen.

The well-known parable of The Good Samaritan relies on this power of story. In the parable, a man collapses on the road and two men—a Jewish man and a priest—walk by without helping him. Finally, a Samaritan walks by. Recognizing the victim's need, he tends to his wounds, brings him to safety, and pays for his stay in an inn. Jesus could have simply said, "Love your neighbor," and left it at that, but making it a story brings the idea to life.

This story also has elements of a paradox; at the heart of the parable is the meeting of two contradictions. The phrase "Good Samaritan" would have been met with scoffs and disapproval from the audience because of the attitudes of the day. Samaritans were social and religious outcasts, not "good" people like the priests and Levites. Instead, what we see in this parable is a Samaritan who is truly *good*. And, not only is he good, but he is also the hero of the story. It is a contradiction that surprises, even offends, the audience. Yet, it is true.

Other parables are less based in a story but are just as jarring. Later on, Jesus uses a series of parables to describe something that no human has seen: the kingdom of God. In one, He compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. It starts out as the smallest of seeds but then grows so great that birds can nest in it. Again,

there is power in this imagery, because it claims that a seed is both tiny and larger than life—as if the seeds that farmers scatter contain secrets of the universe.

How can you describe something that no human can comprehend? Again, we are limited by words. But the parable overcomes that limitation by comparing it to a familiar image, infused with a little surprise. This surprise is not that your dad's favorite condiment is made from a seed, as I initially thought as a kid, but rather that the seed—the kingdom—grows to its great size even from meager beginnings.

If you ask, "What does that mean?" I think that the confusion is precisely what the speaker intended. Jesus is trying to convey something abstract, much like poets who search for the right words to bring the abstract to life. Instead of poetry, we are met with paradox, and contradictions must be reconciled: the seed is small *and* great. The hero is a Samaritan *and* good. It makes you stop and rethink what you know. And in that rethinking, the truth can be revealed.

The re-thinking of our conceptions makes us grapple with the story.

In a later passage, Jesus describes why he talks to the people in parables. He says,

"This is why I speak to them in parables: though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."²

Here, we have another cryptic message that inspires more questions than answers. What is the difference between seeing and *seeing*? Why do these things need to be hidden? And how do we see what is revealed?

I think we can agree that there is a difference between learning and understanding. When playing the piano, you can easily learn a piece by memorization. But a master pianist would understand much more deeply than the memorizer; they know how the harmonies work together to make a pleasing sound, how intricacies of rhythm and volume work to create the piece. The memorizer knows the notes but does not understand the music.

Likewise, a listener may know but not understand the meaning of a story; some additional effort is required. A listener might hear the story but not understand its relevance, or be resistant to its meaning in his or her life. The message is only

really received when it is internalized, known, on the inside. This is where the paradox in parables is key; the re-thinking of our conceptions makes us grapple with the story. It gives the curious something to puzzle over, with the ultimate result being gained understanding.

Couldn't Jesus have been a little more obvious in his messages and gotten to the point quickly instead of dancing around what He meant? I'm sure He could have laid out the blueprints of Heaven or made an annotated list of who our neighbors are. But concealing the truth in a parable adds something important: our search, our questioning, our arrival at His conclusion.

So, what about that mustard seed? The conflict lies in our ideas of greatness and power. Jesus, a fan of mustard, uses the seed in another analogy, saying "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."³ This is like the parable, showing the impact of something small doing something inconceivably great. And it is not just that the seed grows; it is not just that its power comes from the end result of a fully grown mustard plant (which can be 9 feet tall!). Instead, the seed's power comes from

But concealing the truth in a parable adds something important: our search, our questioning, our arrival at His conclusion.

the potential inside it. In re-thinking our ideas of power, we come to a new understanding: there is great value in the smallest of seeds, in the smallest of faiths, because of its potential and because it grows.

Likewise, the paradox of the Good Samaritan forces us to confront our preconceptions; having a Samaritan be *good* forces the listener to reconceive what goodness means. It is not their cultural idea of goodness, in which the Jewish audience was good and the Samaritans bad. When the Samaritan arrives on the scene and acts lovingly to his neighbor, acts with true goodness where others failed, a reversal is created. Are you truly better than a Samaritan? And by what measure? If the measure is love, then perhaps we need to rethink our levels of charity and humility.

The goal is not to out-compete our rivals in compassion. Instead, it is a story that asks us to reflect on and internalize our responsibility to the injured, our humanity in the outcast, and our own humility. From that humility comes compassion, not the other way around.

Was Jesus lacking the right words? I don't think so; He was fully man, but also fully God. He knew his audience, us, a people of limited attention, understanding, and vocabulary. He used that knowledge to create stories with which you need to engage to understand the message. But parables differ from paradoxes in one key way: they are not impossible to reconcile. The truth is there, just farther beneath the surface.

Jesus said, "I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."⁴

So, I ask, are we listening? ☺

¹Pearce, Kenneth. "Omnipotence," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 11 March 2019, <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/omnipote/#SH1a>>.

²Matthew 13:13 (NIV)

³Matthew 17:20 (NIV)

⁴Matthew 13:35 (ESV)



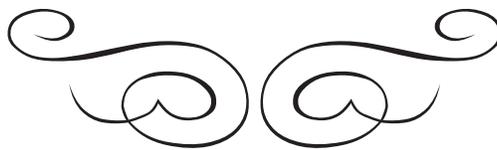
Abigail Bezrutzcyk is a Junior from Long Island, and is studying Environmental Science. She loves being outdoors, especially when it involves writing, tea, or goldfish crackers.



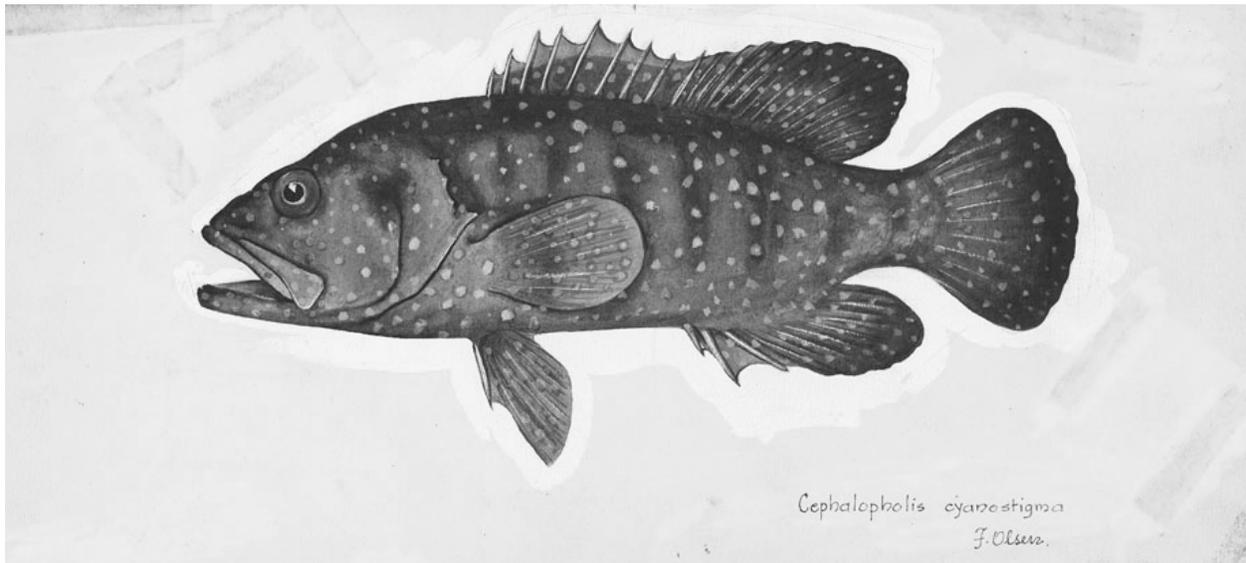
Esther

by Brooke Lindsey

In riches she is well-adorned:
on Persian rugs and marble floors,
in velvet robes and golden gowns—
first subject, now a queen is formed
to bear the image of the crown
From thorns that once would pierce her feet
on paths of dust, reckless and free,
she learns to kneel only to kings
and kneels to beg, as servants do,
in bondage to what he could choose
Privilege is a passing thing:
the moment comes, the moment goes,
the wax is molten, now she moves
to seal a promise with a ring
With naught to win and all to lose,
may favor see her well-bestowed
to voice the words held in her throat
If made to perish, may it be—
a time to fast, a time to feast
a time for silence, time to speak. 



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something FISHY

by Zachary Lee

“Come on!” Joseph muttered. He rapped his knuckles against the black wooden door before jamming his hand back into his pocket. Mechanically, it extended out, hovering over the doorbell for a moment, until he remembered the dumb thing had not been fixed for the past three years. Every time he came home for break, he tried to convince his parents to do repairs, but to no avail. Not that a replacement would make a difference; his mother's hearing was getting progressively worse and despite Joseph's insistence that she get a hearing aid, she reiterated that more "natural" medicines in the form of raw ginseng and a strange liquid concoction made of deer antlers would keep her body's atrophy at bay. In passing, she would also mention the expense of the whole ordeal as though it was merely one of and not the sole reason for her refusal.

He sighed, his breath a smoky white cloud. It was freezing weather like this that made him feel blessed and cursed that his pursuit of higher

And he needed
all the good will
he could get.

education led him out to the West Coast. On the one hand, he only had to endure the Chicago chill when he came home for breaks. On the other, he felt like a fish out of water whenever he returned; the resilience to the cold that he built up in his youth was but a fond memory. His left hand gripped a bag of groceries; he peeked through for the umpteenth time to make sure the components were safe. The rock cod fillets were still wrapped tightly in newspaper, thanks in no small part to Joseph's vehement reminders to the shop owner. He couldn't be too careful; these red fish were his parents' favorite. And he needed all the good will he could get.

The door suddenly screeched open. An elderly woman brandishing a large kitchen knife stood at its opening. A few rebellious pockets of black hair protruded from the otherwise gray mass that nestled on her head. Her skeletal body was a mere coat hanger for the oversized apron she wore which was covered with crimson stains.

“You're early!” she said with a restrained effervescence. “Come in. It's cold.” Complying, Joseph entered and closed the door behind him. He was careful not to slam it. He took off his shoes, set his suitcase down by the stairway, and walked towards the kitchen, bag still in hand.

“It's so great to see you too, Mom,” he finally uttered.

“What? Speak up, I can't hear you,” she said, as she resumed her cooking, cutting carrots and tossing them into a blender. The machine sputtered briefly before roaring to life.

“Never mind,” Joseph uttered, and he surveyed the kitchen, which looked more like a surgeon’s operating table. For any other cook, the sheer presence of such powerful aromas and vivid sights would be overwhelming, but for Joseph’s mother, it was routine. The Park family always added a Korean element to their Thanksgiving. While the American portions could be made the day of, due to the sheer number of spices and marinades, the Korean augments needed to be done a day earlier. His mother always likened them to guests that arrive late to a party but once there, their presence brightens the room.

He was about to put away the kimchi before he realized: the fish!

“Hey, Mom, I got you some rock cod!” Joseph said, carefully holding up the newspaper wrapped fillets. “I can start preparing them!” He rolled up his sleeves and went to the sink, where a pile of dirty dishes had become a mountain.

“What? Why did you get this? This is just another thing to cook!” Joseph’s mother said exasperatedly, gesturing to all the unprepared meat in the kitchen. “You don’t even like fish anyways! Go upstairs and unpack, and then you can come down and help me with this.”

Without saying a word, Joseph grabbed his suitcase and walked up to his room. Never mind the fact that he took an hour-long detour from his usual route to get the fish. Never mind that he personally didn’t like rock cod that much. He could never please her. He glanced at one of the photos that adorned the white walls: he and his younger brother William were dressed up as doctors for a Halloween party in elementary school. Joseph’s stethoscope was a yo-yo with toothbrushes attached with strings while William was not quite able to hide the chocolate milk stain on his three-sizes-too-big white coat. The two of them stood smiling as if they knew this was exactly who they wanted to be. They had committed from a young age to end up working in the same hospital. His mother would tell her friends that her two boys were going to become doctors. At this, he felt the blood rush to his face and all of a sudden, the frigid winds from only a few minutes prior were enticing. He

wondered when he would tell her the news.

After unpacking his belongings, Joseph went back downstairs and began to wash the dishes.

For a while, he and his mother remained silent, the only accompanying soundtrack being the warm water running.

“School is good. Learning a lot,” she said, as if to notice his presence. Her back still turned to him.

“Yeah! It’s going well...

I’m enjoying the classes I’m taking... getting more involved with my church and fellowship.” Joseph placed the last dish on the drying rack and turned off the faucet.

“Have you been studying for the MCAT?”

“Actually... no, I haven’t,” he said, pausing.

“So you’re going to take it next year? Just make sure you don’t take too long with it. Your dad might have to teach a few more extra classes to help pay for everything.”

“... No...” Joseph mouthed.

“No?...” Joseph’s mom stopped scaling.

“Actually... I’ve been meaning to tell you this, but I don’t want to be a doctor anymore. I want to become a pastor.”

“I want to please you...
but I also want to please
God... and it’s been hard
for me to accept that
maybe doing the latter
doesn’t align with the
former.”





“What!” A thundering snap rebounded throughout the kitchen. Joseph’s mother turned, staring Joseph in the eye, gripping the scaled fish, its head nowhere to be found. “What? That was always your dream.”

“I didn’t go through all this sacrifice just so you would become a pastor!”

Joseph took a deep breath. “Ever since I got back from Japan I’ve wanted to help heal not only physically but spiritually. I want to please you... but I also want to please God... and it’s been hard for me to accept that maybe doing the latter doesn’t align with the former.”

“Being an English major was bad enough. Now you want to become a pastor? Why can’t you be a medical missionary? I didn’t go through all this sacrifice just so you would become a pastor!” Her mouth was agape as if to recapture the words that had since left her mouth.

Suddenly there was a loud rapping at the door. Joseph and his mother stared into each other’s eyes, neither one willing to move, each standing in silence. A few moments later, after a louder knock, Joseph walked over to the door and opened it. His dad and William were there, hands full of groceries.

“Ay good to see you bro... sorry I’m late. Dad and

I picked up some more last-minute groceries for the big dinner tomorrow. Can you help us get them?”

Max nodded and raced towards the car, ignoring his father’s salutations. The winds howled and frigid air hit his exposed arms with increasing alacrity. He opened the trunk and began grabbing grocery bag after grocery bag before he had strewn five consecutively in each hand, shuddering. Why was the world so cold? 



Zachary Lee is a junior in the college of arts and sciences studying English, creative writing, and Spanish. When he is not writing poetry and performing it, he can be found analyzing Summer blockbusters, reading Dostoevsky, and listening to Christian hip-hop. This past year he studied abroad at Oxford where he discovered his love for clotted cream and libraries that are secretly castles.

how the STORY PLAYED OUT



A CHRISTIAN'S LIVED EXPERIENCE IN ACADEMIA, WITH DR. PRAVEEN SETHUPATHY

by Carley Eschliman

Sometimes spheres of our lives have little to no intersection. My french horn playing for Cornell's orchestra may be robust during rehearsals, but I refrain from blasting Brahms during a prelim study session. Likewise, I may don close-toed shoes and safety glasses for a lab class, but I wouldn't wear a lab coat for a night out with friends. While these areas of disconnect are understandable—a certain level of noise is acceptable during study and shin-length, white coats have yet to be recognized as an “on-trend” look—there are other portions of our lives where division is less helpful.

Today's social scripts and norms call for the separation of religious faith, particularly Christian faith, and scientific research. Members of both camps have participated in the creation of these narratives; Christians have denied the validity of scientific discoveries and scientists have scoffed at the value of faith without conventional “proof.” Although each sphere is concerned with the pursuit of truth, their methods of pursuit are believed absurd by the other. In turn, these narratives dictate a necessary separation; those with religious faith are discouraged from engaging in scientific pursuits, and researchers in scientific fields are quick to dismiss the benefits and truth-claims of religion. However, despite this perceived feud between science and faith, there are men and women who unashamedly inhabit both spheres.

Dr. Praveen Sethupathy, the head of a Cornell genomics lab and an associate professor of biomedical sciences, is one of the few found in this combative intersection; he is both a well-regarded researcher on the forefront of scientific inquiry and a Christian. Through his craft and religious affiliation, Dr. Sethupathy hopes to be a small part of changing the stories surrounding science and faith. Day-to-day, his lived

experiences have allowed him to wrestle with these narratives—both external and internal—and create new visions of what reconciliation could look like.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Sethupathy in order to hear more about his life as a Christian academic. During our conversation, Dr. Sethupathy hashed out the narratives he faces, their consequences, and, most notably, that this seeming conflict between science and faith is not actually conflicting; to him, it deepens the meaning of his work.

To begin our interview, I asked him to share his views of the division between those in science-related fields and those of religious faith. In his opinion, this feud between science and faith is deepening, aided by a lack of shared experiences between groups.

“There are many, many people who live in one or the other of those worlds that really almost never interact on a regular basis with people from the other group,” says Sethupathy. “With that lack of interaction, and maybe even lack of genuine respect for one another, I think there’s this growing feeling from the general public of scientists as elitist, as pursuant of agendas that undermine their faith, maybe even atheistic in fundamental nature... which is of course, not true.”

“ People assumed that because I was an evolutionary biologist, that my faith must have diluted, but my faith actually became much stronger as a result of growing and wrestling in a very real way. ”

Sethupathy also points out the narratives perpetrated by researchers themselves; academics often believe themselves to be misunderstood and undervalued, especially by people of faith. This ill-will decreases empathy from members on both sides “to the point where we’re not even really respecting the humanity of the other.”

Sethupathy explains that this misunderstanding between science and faith is not only aided by this lack of communication, but that this

misunderstanding is also self-reinforcing. As current narratives are propagated and perceived division increases, young people interested in both science and faith can feel like their interests are incompatible.

“ ...this misunderstanding between science and faith is not only aided by this lack of communication, but... is also self-reinforcing. ”

“I feel like [this division] makes it harder for Christian youth to get into the sciences,” notes Sethupathy. “They’re either discouraged from doing it, because they’re like, ‘Why would you want to be like them? That’s the atheist cabal.’ Or, it’s an unhelpful attitude of, ‘Why don’t you get in there and then undermine the entire enterprise from within.’ Neither of those are good motivations to get into science.”

But, this narrative doesn’t have to remain unchallenged. Science and faith have a long history of compatibility, as both spheres are rooted in the pursuit of truth. Instead of approaching science as an enemy, Sethupathy encourages Christian communities to reclaim the goodness of science; to him, scientific inquiry is a part of our lives that offers “an opportunity to worship and draw near to God.”

While many negative norms may still surround interactions between science and faith, some Christians enter scientific fields nonetheless. (Dr. Sethupathy being a prime example!) These trailblazers, however, face additional challenges. Since they are exposed to narratives that provide them with ample cognitive

dissonance, it’s easy for Christians in scientific fields to feel like they must make a choice between their faith or their intellectual pursuits.

The choice of “science or Jesus,” to Sethupathy, is “complete nonsense.” And, he explains, “they [Christians in science] haven’t been encouraged to appreciate the nuances in wrestling with this choice. It becomes very binary and a huge detriment.”

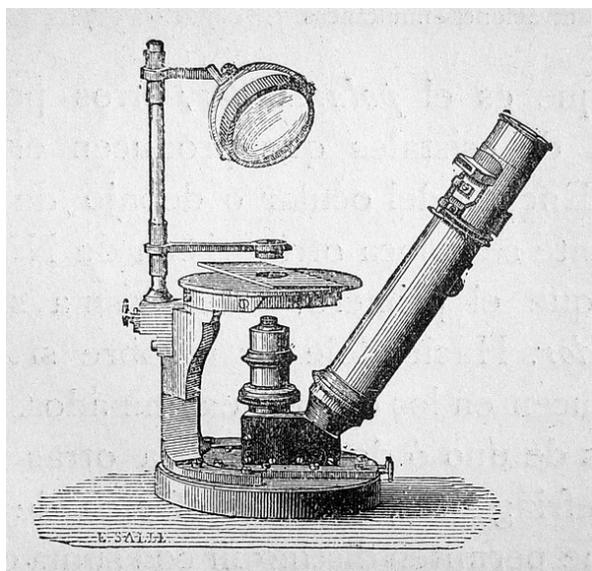
Now, Dr. Sethupathy’s vocation requires him

“ I think that God is much less interested in what we are doing and much more interested in how we’re doing it and why we’re doing it. What is our heart motivation and what is our posture toward other people as we pursue this vocation? ”

to face this binary narrative in his day-to-day life. Thankfully, Dr. Sethupathy relates that his experience as a Christian faculty member at a scientifically-rigorous institution has had few moments of professional conflict.

“I’ve always had the idea that if you do well in your chosen craft and you pursue excellence in what you are being called and asked to do, everything else falls into place,” states Sethupathy. “There are always going to be some people around who are extremely antagonistic, and you’ll find them anywhere, but when I think about the faculty that I’ve interacted with here [at Cornell], I haven’t really experienced any kind of special challenges.”

After discussing the role of external narratives on Christians in the sciences, Dr. Sethupathy also spoke about his personal experiences. After becoming a Christian during his undergraduate studies at Cornell, Dr. Sethupathy found himself needing to learn how to approach his future career while still nurturing his new-found faith. In his work, he had to learn how to interpret the combative narratives surrounding faith and science.



The pitting of science and faith against each other “really warped my approach to life and my work and to science, because I took the spoon-fed talking points that I was being given,” Sethupathy explained. “And, I did not do the work that God asks me to, to love him with my mind. That means a call to wrestle with the things that I hear and to be honest with myself and with God, to give a reason for the hope that is in my heart.”

Led by the call to love God with his mind, Sethupathy spent his years in graduate school learning how to reconcile his work with his faith.

“People assumed that because I was an evolutionary biologist, that my faith must have diluted, but my faith actually became much stronger as a result of growing and wrestling in a very real way,” shares Sethupathy. “By doing what Jacob did with the angel, instead of just trying to talk my way out of it, I think I found enormous value.”

But despite the struggles that Dr. Sethupathy went through to better understand his academic purpose, he expresses gratitude for the opportunity to grow. Today he serves on the board of the BioLogos Foundation, which aims to convey the harmony between science and faith with an evolutionary understanding of creation. And, Sethupathy aptly notes that going through seasons of reckoning—ones of introspection and asking tough questions—are not just for those facing the narratives surrounding science and faith.

“I think also, this translates to the other stances that I take. I’d better be prepared to give reasons,” Sethupathy points out. “I have a responsibility, and collectively, we have a responsibility before God to be thoughtful. That’s part of what loving Him with our mind entails.”

Now that he has determined the basis of goodness in his work, Dr. Sethupathy is able



to view research in a unique way. Instead of simply seeing his role as one solely concerned with answering research questions, Sethupathy frames his studies as an opportunity for worship.

“The more I learn, the more I am just scratching at the surface of knowledge, and I could spend my whole life on this and really not make that much of a dent. But that’s not discouraging to me. It’s actually very humbling and awe-inspiring.”

To end our interview, I asked Dr. Sethupathy to share some advice for Christian students thinking about life after graduation. His suggestion? Think about how and why you will pursue your career more than what your career should be.

“More and more, I see among undergrads that there is this crippling, paralyzing process toward the end of your undergraduate career about, ‘What is God calling me to do?’ It’s this question that everybody’s asking and thinking about,” says Sethupathy.

“It’s like waiting for the Holy Spirit to move you in some direction, because you just want to be confident that that’s what God’s calling you to do. There may be some people who are really specifically called to thing X and it’s clear in their lives, but I don’t think that is the general M.O. of the Christian life,” he continued. “I think that God is much less interested in what we are doing and much more interested in how we’re doing it and why we’re doing it. What is

our heart motivation and what is our posture toward other people as we pursue this vocation?”

“We all have a shared calling on the ‘how’ and the ‘why’. And each of us are going to find different things that we’re passionate about or that we think are fun or that we think are really interesting, so let’s go do those things!” he says.

“And maybe it changes and seven years later we’re doing something else. That’s okay. We can still make a difference in that setting in ways that matter more to God.”

The God that we as Christians serve is not disinterested in our gifts and talents; to the contrary, God gave us our strengths and delights in seeing us use them well. A passion for scientific research, one that fuels us to learn more about our world, is not a desire that must be followed at the expense of our religious faith. Whatever skills that we have—even skills outside of the scientific arena—can be employed to the betterment of the world. 



Carley Eschliman is a junior majoring in both Atmospheric Science and Communication. Her majors guide her love of beautiful sunsets and intelligently designed infographics. You can find her most days in Bradfield, arguably the most beautiful campus building.



Love Lost?

Seeing Goodness in God's Moral Standard

by James Seaton

In American society, social justice and corporate social responsibility are of utmost importance to citizens and consumers. From our political voting decisions to our buying habits, we see and experience the power that beliefs and morals have in this country. Just recently, Gucci and Prada have come under fire for their racist “blackface fashion,” which mirrors the dark black makeup and big red lips 20th-century white performers used in minstrel shows to stereotype and demean black people.¹

Many, including director Spike Lee and rapper T.I., have called for a boycott of the two high-end brands.

This is one of many situations that reflects statistical evidence of increasing consumer concern about brand morality and social views. According to Forbes, 87% of Americans will buy a product simply because a company embraced an issue they cared about.² Individuals and brands are impacted by their own views and

actions, especially if they are reprehensible in society's eyes. Through the #MeToo movement, survivors of sexual harassment and assault were able to bring to light their stories of pain and resilience. By finding strength in the #MeToo community, thousands have been empowered and their voices amplified. As a result, giants of entertainment, media, business, and politics—with names including Louis C.K., Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and Roy Moore—have seen their past sins exposed and their careers enter downward spirals.³

These instances represent something about morality in our culture. For one, American society has a standard for conduct and beliefs that goes beyond the exact letter of the law. It has prevalent beliefs on police accountability and the preservation of black lives, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental conservation, and support for refugees, among other issues. Secondly, American society holds company brands and individuals to this standard, commenting and analyzing them at public gatherings and on social media platforms. Lastly, when an individual or brand does not adhere to these standards, American society often, but not always, punishes them legally, economically, or politically. In a nutshell, American society adheres to its own version of justice as well as its own standard of morality.

In comes the concept of "God." It is not entirely uncommon for a person to associate the concept of God, or the justice of God, with hatred, anger, and hellfire. People ask the questions, "How can a loving God allow people to go to hell?" or "How could He punish people for doing natural things like having sex?" They may even ask, "How could God allow bad things to happen to good people?" These are all legitimate, complex questions that can lead us into a subliminal narrative: that God's moral standard is not good. But is it possible that God's inherent morality is not formulaic castigation, but, rather, love and goodness?

First, it is essential to note that a belief in God necessitates a belief in an objective standard of truth. This truth is critical to the idea of love. The truth of the Christian faith is inextricably linked to love. Christians are called to obey Jesus' commandments and hence, show their love for him.⁴ The greatest law is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

strength" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁵ In essence, the Christian "law," or standard, calls us to cherish our relationship with our Creator and also cultivate loving relationships with those around us.

However, within the subjective truth standard of our modern society, many dangers exist. What do we believe in? In whom do we trust? If we put our trust in government, we will soon find what

Though we turn to brands for correct moral views, we quickly realize that brands join governments in their imperfection.

a broken and fickle system it is. Governments allowed chattel slavery; governments allowed the Holocaust; governments murdered and displaced Native Americans. Some may argue that these atrocities occurred in the past and that governments have since improved their ethics. Still, governments' stances on important moral issues have ritually proven inadequate. According to Peggy Simcic Brønn, professor of communication and culture at BI Norwegian Business School, trust in institutions is declining as "people are looking for somebody to step up to the plate."⁶ In today's society, this "somebody" is often brands. She continues, "NGOs and governmental institutions, which we depend on to address bad things, they're not doing it. So who's left to do it? That's business."⁷ Though we turn to brands for correct moral views, we quickly realize that brands join governments in their imperfection. We need to look no further than Pepsi's Kendall Jenner ad which trivialized the black community's fight for equal rights amidst police brutality.⁸ Brands mess up too, so we cannot truly trust them either.

How about societal standards? We know that norms are always changing; if we trust in them,



we will once again be disappointed. Some norms dictate that you are only beautiful if you carry a certain body figure. Some norms dictate that women are less valuable than men. Other past cultural norms have deemed cannibalism and human sacrifice acceptable. When approached about his “fear” of subjective truth, theologian and scholar Ravi Zacharias responded with the question, “Do you lock your doors at night?”⁹ Essentially, he is saying that, when left to our own devices as a society, we are sinful, violent, and destructive. We know this because we do not even trust people enough to keep our doors unlocked. In a land where everyone can decide for themselves what is right and wrong, nothing stops someone from stealing from you. Objective standards are non-existent. In turn, we institute laws that impose a soft morality on citizens. And now, we look to businesses and consumption to uphold our even “firmer” ideas of morality. The

With God, we see a similar system in which our mistakes necessitate punishment except, in this case, our mistakes have eternal consequences, not just everyday consequences.

bottom line is that we are a people desperate for the knowledge of good and evil—grasping for things outside of us to affirm the sense of morality we have subjectively formed within. By choosing to hold to a God-given standard that neither changes nor is vulnerable to the capriciousness of societal trends, we, as human beings, are given definite guidelines for how to live. From this foundation, we are able to love others.

In the Christian tradition, we hold that all fall short of the standard God has set for us. And, more often than not, we even fall short of the standards we set for ourselves. We say stuff like, “I’m on a diet. I’m not going to eat that cake.” Yet, we still end up sneaking downstairs and opening up the fridge nonetheless. We say, “I’m going to study and not scroll through social media.” However, Facebook still ends up popping up on our web browser. We say we long for equal treatment for those who are marginalized and oppressed in society, but we are unwilling to do our part in treating those around us with respect. Many times, by our own standards, we are not “good.”

But God’s standard is even higher.

In order to be perfect, the Christian tradition demands perfect obedience to the law. We must always love Him and those around us. By doing a quick internal reflection, we can come to realize that, at some point in our lives, we have hated or hurt someone. We are powerless to perfectly observe the objective standard God has set for us. This tendency to miss the mark is called sin. With sin and mistakes comes punishment and consequences. On some level we understand this; simply look at a parent-child relationship or a government-citizen relationship. If our parent tells us to do something and we do not do it, we open ourselves up to having our privileges restricted. We may not be able to hang out with friends or do other fun things. If we break the law, the police have the right to arrest us.

With God, we see a similar system: our mistakes necessitate punishment and are of eternal consequence. As we compare God’s morality to our practical, everyday morality, we see that God’s system is not far-fetched or in opposition to love. Just as a good parent’s purpose for creating rules and potential punishments is to protect and mature us,

God’s standard is meant to make us aware of our weaknesses and cling to Him for security and wisdom to grow.

If God’s objective moral standard is good but impossible to perfectly follow, we should be discouraged. I want to affirm that it would be reasonable to retreat into sadness and doubt *if* the story ended there. Often when we look at society’s standards and our personal standards, the story ends there. We do not always have opportunities for redemption. When we set out to be more disciplined for our personal reasons and then fail, we may beat ourselves up and see no opportunity to get back up again. From a broader perspective, one mistake can ruin our public image and opportunities to advance in society. If we are incarcerated for a crime, it can be extremely difficult to find a job or clean up our image upon release.¹⁰ Even in a less severe sense, if we make a mistake during a game, we can be known forever as a “choke artist” who cost the team a win in the most critical moment.¹¹ We, along with our society, can be unforgiving. However, in the Christian tradition, God offers hope in the person of Jesus, who is God incarnate. He came to Earth to live alongside us, and His earthly existence is a

historical fact accepted by both Christian and non-Christian historians.¹² The Scriptures of Christianity indicate that Jesus understands all of humanity's deepest issues: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has

It is so liberating and inherently loving to those around us to have a set ethic to follow and in the Christian worldview, that powerful ethic is this: to love your creator and to love your neighbor.

been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin."¹³ So, Christians look to Jesus as the perfect example of rightly lived morality. Furthermore, Christianity proposes that a life lived with Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can train human convictions toward the moral standard of God. In confession and repentance, forgiveness is offered as we are restored to a state that more accurately mirrors God. In this, the Christian faith claims God as both Advocate and Advisor in matters of morality.

In our everyday lives, we recognize that there are a myriad of standards being thrown at us by society, government, and businesses. It can be difficult to decide what to choose and whom to follow. I propose that the subjective standards of the world which, many times, dictate how we think about important social and moral issues, are ever-changing and unreliable. We must have one constant on which to base our beliefs. Without consistency, we will be lost and confused as the next inevitable wave of societal change ensues. It is so liberating and inherently loving to those around us to have a set ethic to follow. In the Christian worldview, that powerful ethic is this: to love your Creator and to love your neighbor. It does not matter how they look or what they believe. There is no asterisk beside this ethic. There is no exception. Though the phrases are simple, the act of love put into practice is difficult. God provides us with a guide in the Holy Spirit and an example in Jesus Christ who came down to Earth and persevered through the temptations we all face today without failure. Through God's morality and grace, we are empowered with a foundation on which to love. ☺

¹Griffith, Janelle. "Spike Lee, T.I. Boycott Gucci, Prada over 'blackface' Fashion." *NBCNews.com*. February 10, 2019. Accessed March 27, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/spike-lee-t-i-boycott-gucci-prada-over-blackface-fashion-n969821>.

²Peretz, Marissa. "Want To Engage Millennials? Try Corporate Social Responsibility." *Forbes*. October 25, 2017. Accessed March 27, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marissaperetz/2017/09/27/want-to-engage-millennials-try-corporate-social-responsibility/#740a66f6e4e4>.

³North, A. (2019, January 09). *Les Moonves, former CBS CEO, sexual misconduct allegations*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/a/sexual-harassment-assault-allegations-list/les-moonves>

⁴John 14:15 (NIV)

⁵Mark 12:30-31 (NIV)

⁶Mull, A. (2019, January 18). *Millennials Stare Into the Void, and Gillette Stares Back*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/01/gillette-ad-controversy/580666/>

⁷Mull, A.

⁸Jenner, K. (2017, April 04). *Kendall Jenner for PEPSI Commercial*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA5Yq1DLSmQ>

⁹Zacharias, R. (2014, February 15). *Why are you so afraid of subjective moral reasoning?* Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0218GkAGbnU>

¹⁰Holodny, E. (2017, July 30). *'It still haunts me': What it's like to get a job after prison in America*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/finding-job-after-prison-2017-7>

¹¹*The biggest chokes in sports history*. (2019, January 08). Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-biggest-chokes-in-sports-history/16/>

¹²Gathercole, S. (2017, April 14). *What is the historical evidence that Jesus Christ lived and died?* Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/what-is-the-historical-evidence-that-jesus-christ-lived-and-died>

¹³Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)



James Seaton is a senior from Long Island studying communication in CALS. If he's not studying, writing poetry, or leaping into a sand pit, he's probably terrorizing his friends with awkward facial expressions.

Parallels

by Joseph Reigle

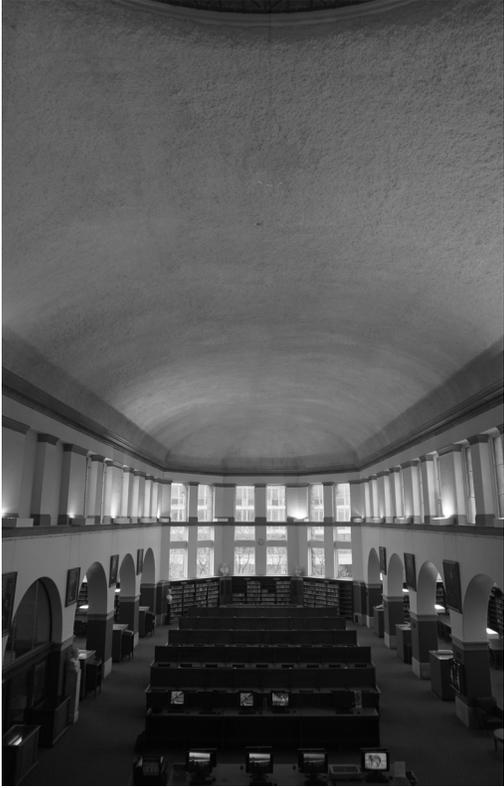
When we sit to study in the halls of a library or kneel to pray in the sanctuary of a church, the design of the buildings affects us. Environments circumscribe our focus. The architecture of the structure you are reading in right now communicates what should be valued, and what should be ignored.

In this photo essay, I explore the narratives contained in two buildings on Cornell's campus, Sage Chapel and Uris Library. Their architecture reflects the ideals of their era. A.D. White considered Uris Library a sanctuary for study, his "secular cathedral."¹ And Henry W. Sage conceived Sage Chapel as a welcoming and distinctly non-sectarian space of worship.²

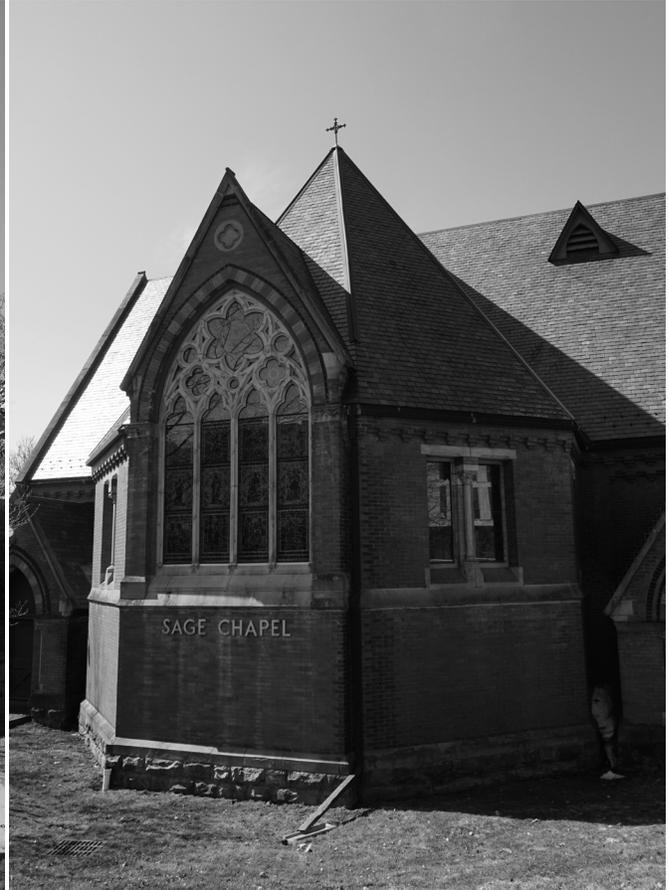
The designers of these spaces implicitly answer the question: how do you live a life of study and a life of spirituality? Architectural similarities in Sage and Uris suggest that the values and disciplines of the studious life and the spiritual life are not far from each other. Like the pews of the chapel and the carrel desks of the library, they are parallel. 









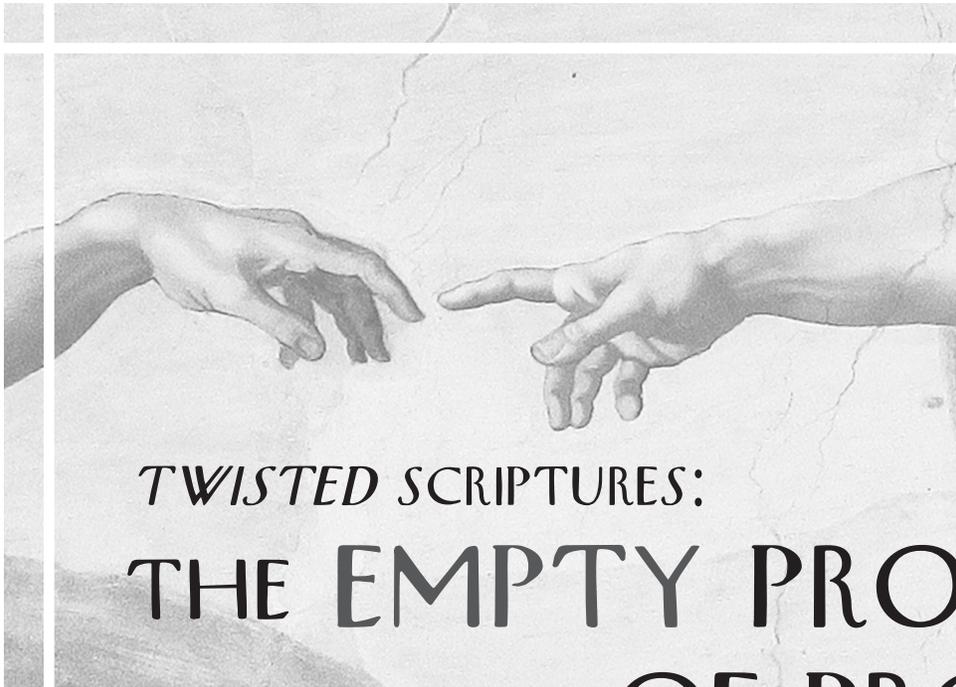


¹“Uris Library Historical Tour: Introduction,” Cornell University Library, 26 March 2019, <https://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/uris-history>.

²Ronald Ostman (2003). *Cornell then & now: Historic and contemporary views of Cornell University*. (Ithaca, New York: McBooks Press, 2003), 38–41.



Joseph Reigle is a junior from Binghamton, New York. He majors in Urban and Regional Studies. You can usually find him reading Søren Kierkegaard or talking with a friend about the latest filmmaker he’s just obsessed with.



TWISTED SCRIPTURES:

THE EMPTY PROMISES OF PROSPERITY

by Paola Mendez-Garcia

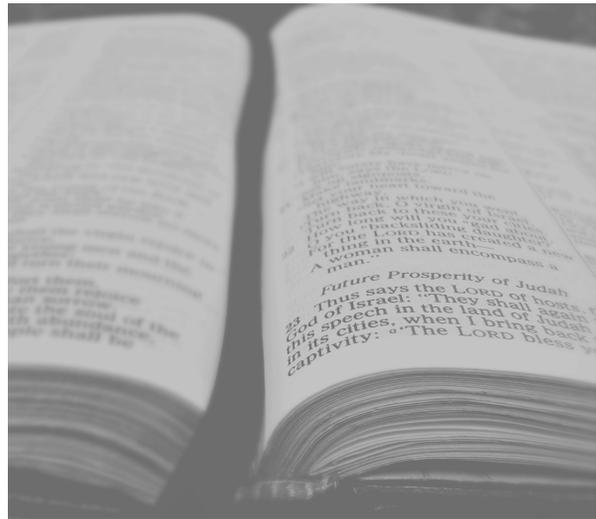
*the difference
between the
Prosperity Gospel
and the true Gospel*

A little boy sits in front of a battered television, attempting to roll up the sleeves of a sweatshirt almost three sizes too big. A tall, well-groomed man is pacing back and forth on the screen, his face red and a little black book held tightly in his hand. “Have faith; have faith and God will do exactly what you want. He doesn’t want His children to look like peasants; He wants them to look like royalty! Have faith and He’ll heap wealth upon you, because He wants, above all else, your happiness! If you’re sick, have more faith! You’re only sick because you don’t have enough faith! Tell you what, call the number on this screen here, and search deep in your heart for what you should give, for Scripture calls us to give. If you call this number, we’ll pray for you! The more you give, the more we pray!”

Mesmerized, the little boy rushes into his parents' room, begging them to call the nice man on television who promised so many good things. Having few options, the family calls and gives as much as they can afford, desperately hoping for monetary aid and physical healing. The money is taken, "prayers" are quickly uttered, and no one thinks about the little boy or his family again. But they certainly remember the "faith" that disappointed them when they most needed it. They turn their backs on the "God" of Christianity who promised wealth and happiness, yet failed to deliver it.

This story of disillusionment, like many others, is a repercussion of a "Christian" phenomenon known as the Prosperity Gospel, which has been perpetuated worldwide for decades. Growing up in Houston, Texas, home of the largest megachurch in the United States, I often encountered the Prosperity Gospel in conversations within Christian circles. I remember going to Joel Osteen's infamous Lakewood Church when I was about eight years old. I can still vividly see the thousands of people shuffling to find seats, compelled by Osteen's exuberant smile. His voice and demeanor made you feel warm inside, but by my parents' frowning faces, I knew something was wrong. Osteen was a nice man who said a lot of nice words, but those nice words made vulnerable people believe in ideas that contradicted God's Word, the Bible—and that made him a duplicitous source of Christian doctrine.¹

The Prosperity Gospel narrative boils down to one idea: God always wants us to be happy, and therefore, if we have enough faith, good things such as health, wealth, and prosperity (HWP) are guaranteed.² However, this also means that a lack of HWP is a sign of not having enough faith, which, according to Prosperity Gospel teachers, is a state that directly dishonors and shames God. This so-called Gospel narrative is based upon the "Word of Faith Movement," a spiritual perspective combining Mind Science, which is a branch of New Age Mysticism, and Pentecostalism, a branch of evangelical Protestantism that accentuates divine intervention and the power of spiritual gifts.³ By promoting concepts such as radical faith (i.e., "if I believe it, I can achieve it"), an absence of suffering (i.e., "God wants me to be physically happy"), and the sovereignty of human beings over God (i.e., "I ask and He delivers") as biblically sound, the Prosperity Gospel narrative openly contradicts the true Gospel narrative.⁴



Because the Prosperity Gospel is supposedly founded on Christian principles, it is crucial to evaluate the biblical texts that have been taken out of context, manipulated, or even altered to support its claims. One verse in particular, Psalm 82:6, is often used as evidence for humankind's sovereignty. In it, God says to the rulers of the earth, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you."⁵ Word of Faith teachers will deliberately ignore this verse's context, in which God is actually condemning immoral rulers, not proclaiming their sovereignty. Although the verse metaphorically asserts that the rulers are like "gods" in that they are the "sons of the Most High," the next verse tells them that they will die like mortals for their sinful and unjust actions. This metaphorical explanation is supported by the prior verse, where the word "gods" is in single quotations, signifying that there is a different intended meaning behind the word than its traditional definition.⁶ If the verse was meant to be taken literally, as Word of Faith teachers believe, the rulers would never have been identified as immoral.

Another example would be Hebrews 11:1, which is commonly used to affirm the power of faith, for it says, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."⁷ Word of Faith teachers interpret this to mean that the focus of faith is on material things since "substance" is translated literally, referring to faith in matter, rather than to "assurance," a foundation in faith, which is its true meaning. As American minister Walter Martin contends, "True biblical faith is faith in God as opposed to faith in substance," otherwise known as "faith in faith," a term coined by the father of the Word of Faith movement, Kenneth Hagin. Word of Faith teachers will also employ Mark 11:22 to affirm the power of "positive confession." However, they

morph the standard text interpretation of “Have faith in God” to an incorrect “Have the faith of God.”⁸ The first phrase calls for humankind to place complete trust in God, while the second wrongly instructs them to be like God, having His power to speak things into being.

Furthermore, there are multiple Bible stories that challenge the fundamental tenets of the

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him—in the midst of both suffering and opulence.

Prosperity Gospel. In these stories, followers of God, despite their great faith, suffer terribly, fall into poverty, lose loved ones, and even die. The Old Testament accounts of Job’s suffering in the Book of Job and the Israelites’ desert wandering in the Book of Numbers are key examples of how those with great faith undergo physical trials and tribulations. The suffering and persecution of the apostles, such as Paul’s imprisonments and Peter’s execution, also indicate that the physical comfort and happiness of believers are not always guaranteed.⁹ While this opposes the Prosperity Gospel’s belief about the dishonor in suffering, it doesn’t entail that the God of the true Gospel does not care about the physical state of His children. God might not guarantee immediate healing or contentment, but He is faithful, promising to support His children through times of suffering, and ensuring hope in a future filled with joy and significance.¹⁰

By ensnaring believers into ideologies that blatantly oppose the teachings of the Bible, the Prosperity Gospel poses a great threat to the Christian faith.¹¹ It even prompts Christians to violate God’s greatest commandment—to hold nothing above Him—by valuing both material wealth and humankind more than God.¹² The Word of Faith movement’s fixation on material possessions and success actually stems from an American mindset, which focuses on the pursuit of happiness and physical prosperity. In 2018, papal confidantes Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro and Presbyterian pastor Marcelo Figueroa, criticized the “Prosperity Gospel” as a manifestation of pursuing “the American Dream.” In their essay, they argued that the concept of migrants obtaining riches and happiness from a plentiful land was erroneously

translated into the concept that “Believers” attain wealth and contentment from “faith.”¹³

When proselytized in lower socioeconomic areas, the Prosperity Gospel’s ties to the “American Dream” become the sole focus of conversion. Rather than sharing the true Gospel message of eternal salvation, a promise of temporary physical flourishing takes its place.¹⁴ Furthermore, by displaying values opposite of those presented in the true Gospel, the Prosperity Gospel creates a false image of Christianity. This heavily affects non-Christians, for many who fall into the snare of the Word of Faith movement are at greater risk of rejecting the true Christian faith when their misconception of it fails them, such as in unanswered prayers.¹⁵ The Prosperity Gospel cannot actually guarantee any good fortune—physical or otherwise. And, unfortunately, preachers who promise these good fortunes rarely offer any funding, medicinal aid, or further spiritual guidance to those in need—in fact, they often ask for monetary donations under the pretense of “doing God’s work.”

In actuality, the Biblical Gospel calls Christians to always be willing to give and help others as they share God’s promise.¹⁶ It also posits that God’s actions and gifts are not dependent on our faith or state of being. Being a “good person” or “having enough faith” cannot produce HWP; rather, God calls for His creation to come unto Him in any condition, since it is His promise to redeem all those who come to Him. The true Gospel does not say that human beings are maligning God when they are poor, sick, or unsuccessful.¹⁷ Nor has He ever expected His children to fix or depend on themselves for salvation or fulfilment.¹⁸ God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him—in the midst of both suffering and opulence.

A narrative of faith like the Prosperity Gospel, created by humans for humans, is void of godly wisdom, which perverts the narrative of the true Christian Gospel and results in false ideologies.

By posing as the true Gospel, the Prosperity Gospel cheats many out of the wonderful gifts offered by true Christianity.

By believing in this false narrative, humans rely on themselves rather than on God, something that will continuously fail because of our fallen nature and inability to save ourselves. But if we believe in the true Gospel narrative—one that is not about mankind, but about Jesus, the Son of God—salvation and fulfilment are imminent, for He can actually save us and restore our lives. The great hope of mankind is to escape this fallen world and be able to commune, face to face, with the Creator, something that can only be achieved through believing and trusting in Jesus.¹⁹ When it comes to the Gospel narrative for our lives, it is about having faith in Jesus and what He can do, not what we can do with that faith. While the material and finite things promised by the Prosperity Gospel will one day fade away, Jesus and His promise will forever remain—Jesus is enough.

By posing as the true Gospel, the Prosperity Gospel cheats many out of the wonderful gifts offered by true Christianity. In times of suffering—be it poverty, sickness, or the obstacles of life—the God of the Gospel promises to be a pillar of support and comfort. While He does not always guarantee physical aid, He is always present, using these difficult experiences as tools for spiritual growth and development of character. However, this does not mean that there should be less physical aid from Christians: the Bible calls believers to go beyond expressing love through prayer and spiritual guidance, and be willing to physically help all those in need, believers or not.²⁰ In this command, too, the genuine Gospel narrative is one of sound truths, unconditional love, and everlasting hope that exists regardless of circumstance or material possessions—a promise which the Prosperity Gospel narrative utterly fails to fulfill. ☹️

⁴Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*. Fort Worth, TX: Harrison House Publishers, 2012.

⁵Psalm 82:6 (ESV)

⁶Albert Mohler, “The Osteen Predicament—Mere Happiness Cannot Bear the Weight of the Gospel,” September 3, 2014, <<https://albertmohler.com/2014/09/03/the-osteen-predicament-mere-happiness-cannot-bear-the-weight-of-the-gospel/>>.

⁷Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)

⁸Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Ravi Zacharias. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003.

⁹Philippians 1:1-26 (ESV); John 21:18-19 (ESV)

¹⁰Hebrews 13:5 (ESV); Matthew 11:28-29 (ESV); II Corinthians 1:3-4 (ESV); Jeremiah 29:11 (ESV)

¹¹Hanegraaff

¹²“Unmasking the Prosperity Gospel,” *Grace to You*, October 27, 1991, <<https://www.gty.org/library/topical-series-library/33/>>.

¹³“Papal Confidantes Rue Prosperity Gospel, Distorted ‘American Dream,’” *Crux* (blog), July 18, 2018, <<https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/07/18/papal-confidantes-rue-prosperity-gospel-distorted-american-dream/>>.

¹⁴Josephine Olatomi Soboyejo, “Prosperity Gospel and Its Religious Impact on Sustainable Economic Development of African Nations,” *Open Access Library Journal* 03 (November 2, 2016): 1, <<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1103153>>.

¹⁵Mohler

¹⁶Matthew 12:30-3 (ESV); I John 3:17 (ESV); Isaiah 1:17 (ESV); Proverbs 31:8-9 (ESV); Proverbs 14:31 (ESV); Matthew 25:44-45 (ESV)

¹⁷Luke 6:20-21 (ESV)

¹⁸II Corinthians 12:9-10 (ESV)

¹⁹John 14:6 (ESV)

²⁰James 1:27 (ESV)

¹Rick Henderson, “The False Promise Of The Prosperity Gospel: Why I Called Out Joel Osteen And Joyce Meyer,” *HuffPost*, 38:26 400AD, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/osteen-meyer-prosperity-gospel_b_3790384>.

²Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis: 21st Century*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2012.

³“White Paper: Word of Faith,” *Berean Research* (blog), accessed April 10, 2019, <<https://bereanresearch.org/white-paper-word-of-faith/>>.



Paola Mendez-Garcia is a sophomore from Houston, Texas (originally from Puerto Rico) studying English Literature. When she isn't writing prose or admiring art, she can be found under a tree or in the nook of a library, coffee by her side and nose in a book.

NOT A NORMAL FAIRY TALE

by Karl E. Johnson

A friend of mine once claimed that every movie entailed an echo of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Really?” I said. “*Caddyshack? Terminator?* Almost every film I recall from the 1980s seems to refute the claim.”

“Okay,” he conceded, “every good movie.”

Although overstated, the claim is worthy of reflection.

In a recent and beautiful novel entitled *The Awakening of Miss Prim*, first-time author Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera captures nicely the notion that we are deeply story-formed creatures.

Miss Prim is a librarian, but when it comes to understanding stories, she has the disadvantage of being a grown-up. The children in her life, by nature of being children, understand stories better because they inhabit and enjoy them rather than (primarily) study them.

The wisdom of youth is on full display in a passage dealing with fairy tales.

*“What about fairy tales? [Miss Prim asked.] Don’t you like fairy tales?”
‘We like them,’ said Eksi shyly. ‘We like them a lot.’
‘What’s your favorite?’
‘The story of the Redemption,’ replied her older sister simply. Astounded, Miss Prim couldn’t think how to respond. The child’s strange statement showed that despite his efforts, despite his insistence and his arrogance, [their uncle] hadn’t succeeded in instilling even the most basic rudiments of the faith that was so important to him. He hadn’t managed to explain the historical background of his religion. How could this be? All those morning walks to the abbey, all that reading of theology, all that ancient liturgy, all that playing at medieval jousting and what had he achieved? Four children convinced that the texts he so loved were just fairy tales.
‘But Tes, it’s not exactly a fairy tale. Fairy tales are stories full of fantasy and adventure; they’re meant to entertain. They’re not set at any specific time and aren’t about real people or places.’
‘Oh, we know that,’ said the little girl. ‘We know it’s not a normal fairy tale; it’s a real fairy tale.’
Miss Prim, pensive, adjusted her position on the old iron bench.
‘What you mean is it’s like a fairy tale, is that it?’ she asked, intrigued.
‘No, of course not. The Redemption is nothing like a fairy tale, Miss Prim. Fairy tales and ancient legends are like the Redemption. Haven’t you ever noticed? It’s like when you copy a tree from the garden on a piece of paper. The tree from the garden doesn’t look like the drawing, does it? It’s the drawing that’s a bit, just a little bit, like the real tree.’”*

Astute readers will recognize this dialogue as itself more than a mere fairy tale in Miss Prim's sense of "not real." The time and place and persons are all quite clear. It was Sunday morning, September 20th, 1931. The place was Addison's Walk, Magdalen College, Oxford University. The characters were two Oxford professors, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and their friend Hugo Dyson.

Lewis recalled the conversation:

*"Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself. . . I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened."*²

Lewis, like Miss Prim, entered the conversation with the handicap of being a grown-up. He had been taught that stories are things to study. Tolkien, by contrast, retained the more childlike perspective that stories are first and foremost a way of inhabiting the world—of weaving our stories into the Story of the World.

That fairy tales and ancient legends are like the Redemption was for Lewis much more than merely new knowledge. One week after that fateful stroll, he reported believing for the first time "*that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*" This was his awakening.

As for film, we might say that movies are also like the Redemption. Like fairy tales, they invite us to be awakened. At least the good ones. ☺



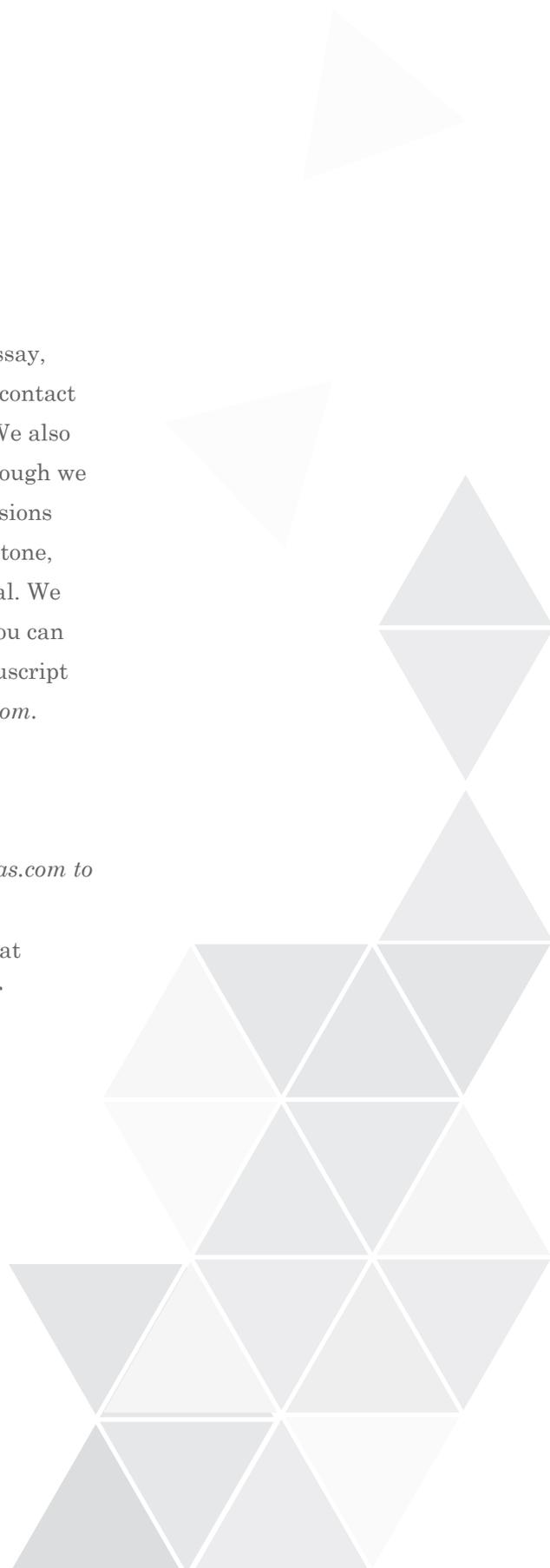
Karl E. Johnson
Founder, Chesterton House

¹Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera, *The Awakening of Miss Prim* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2014), 78-79.

²C.S. Lewis, *Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, Collected Letters, Vol. I: Family Letters 1905 - 1931* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2004) 976-977.

On the story-formed nature of the world, see especially Stanley Hauerwas, "A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down," in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1991); and Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* (October, 1993).

My thanks to the anonymous person who recently introduced me to Miss Prim by sending the volume in the mail.



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