

the  
Porch



A  
PORCH  
MANIFESTO

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*“At the root of our activism is a very simple notion that you’re not on your own. You belong to other people, and they belong to you. And we have to be mindful of each other.”*

Indigo Girls Amy Ray & Emily Saliers know something about reclaiming the purpose of art. They've been making music together for 35 years, so there's a lot to catch up on. We chatted with them recently, and think they're ideal conversation partners for *The Porch*. Are you?

If You're...

# Hungry

for a hopeful vision of the world that has something to offer everyday life

# Tired

of the social media grind and want to connect more deeply with ideas and community

# Sensing

the authenticity of spirituality and the possibility of friendship across diversity

...then welcome to  
**The Porch**



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# Welcome to The Porch

**The world is not getting worse**, but the story we're telling about it could use a little help. There are better stories to tell, that's what *The Porch* is for; and we're delighted you're here. We recognize that the power of the internet to open minds and liberate communities brings with it a challenge. We need to learn to discern between distorted visions of reality, between propaganda and wisdom, between manipulation and inspiration. The tendency of human beings to look on the bleak side of life is exponentially replicated by our brand new capacity to repeatedly ping each other with stories of pain and distress, inducing a sense of a constant crisis in the background of everything we do. It is good to know where there really is suffering, especially when we can do something about it. But our phones are not Yoda. They present "information," but do not tell us how to understand the world. Social media algorithms are not trained spiritual directors. They bombard us with images and words that may have no authority except that which we grant them. At *The Porch*, we want to step into what Charles Eisenstein calls "the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible," not by avoiding the pain that does exist, but by being attentive to a way of talking about it that has the potential to heal rather than merely leave us depressed and disempowered.

Many of us involved in the *Porch* community have experienced our own wounding in the context of repressive politics or religion. Listening to our

friend Richard Rohr, we believe that the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better, so we haven't rejected the gifts of activist organizing nor the consolations of spirituality. And challenged by Rebecca Solnit we seek litanies of hope, re-tellings of stories of how humans have overcome violence, fear, and hatred with imagination, courage, and love.. We are here to look at beauty without embarrassment, at suffering without melodrama, at ourselves with love and laughter.

In this first issue of *The Porch*, we're exploring the question of re-enchantment. How do we make magic amid the cultural noise that seems to suggest mostly snark, despair, and division? We're wondering aloud about a third way between the twin errors of "making America great again" and merely asserting that it is already great; we're asking iconic musicians about the purpose of art; we're hearing about contemporary creative nonviolence; and living our questions out loud. Recognizing the power of art to help us live better is one dimension of stepping into a conversation about beautiful and difficult things, we're talking about music, movies, and books too. Because art is influenced, for better or worse, by momentary tastes and arbitrary commercial whims, causing us to miss much of the most wonderful stuff out there, we're not just focused on new releases. The availability of near-infinite content means that there's always something new (whether elevating or trivial) to get in the way of

watching something old and sustaining. So we decided that each issue would feature conversation about recent movies, music, and literature, as well as reconsiderations of cinema, sounds, and words from at least a decade ago. We're looking for wisdom, and having fun on the way there.

*The Porch* is made up of people who...

...hunger for a hopeful vision of the world that also has something to offer everyday life...

...are tired of the social media grind, and want to connect at a deeper level with ideas and like-minded people...

...sense the difference between authentic spirituality or community and religious or political institutions, the unity of "sacred" and "secular," the duty of privilege, and the possibility of friendship between "high" and "popular" culture...

...like to read, to share conversation about meaningful things, to laugh, dance, and celebrate...

...understand and enjoy the fact that a healthy person can love the Muppets and abstract novels, classical music and hip hop, political activism and gift exchange economies, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Beyoncé, backpacking, sustainable agriculture, jigsaw puzzles, Rumi, and Twister, all at the same time...

We're looking forward to the conversation (come talk together with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—and in person at our festival, about which we'll announce more details soon), and hope you'll invite others to join in as well. Life is sometimes hard. Life is beautiful. Life can be easy. At *The Porch*, we want to help each other live better. We're glad you're with us too.





**ARE WE TELLING THE STORY  
OR  
IS THE STORY TELLING US?**

*A Manifesto For The Porch*

**GARETH HIGGINS**

When I was growing up, we didn't know who to trust. Living in Belfast, the civil conflict in and about northern Ireland dominated our lives, or at least the story we told about them. Simple, everyday actions like opening doors or turning on car ignitions, or going to the movies or getting a taxi, or having a conversation with a stranger became fraught with suspicion. Silence when you expected someone to arrive home from work could leave you wondering if they were dead. Would there be someone lurking behind the door, or a bomb under the car? Would the cinema be evacuated because of a bomb under a car outside? Would the taxi driver be willing to take you where you wanted to go, or would the risk that they might be murdered outweigh the incentive of a fare? Would the stranger be one of those lovely friends you just hadn't met yet, or would they tell other strangers things about you that could get you killed? Was your loved one dead, or just stuck in traffic?



This was the story we told: that we were living in hell, and nobody knew how to fix it. This was the story we told: that "we" were right and "they" were wrong. This was the story we told: that if only we could defeat our enemies, we could enjoy the spectacular natural beauty of our landscape, the exquisite imaginations of our poets and artists, the warm hospitality for which we were reputed by tourist guides. We didn't know it, but amid the horror of the violence used on behalf (though not always with the consent) of all sides of our divided community, there was another story underway.

Quiet, immense strength was manifesting among people willing to forgo divisive ideology in favor of the common good. People willing to let go of the old certainties about "winning" and instead embody communities led by beautiful, life-giving ambiguity and not the superficial gratification of "being right." People who allowed their imagination to be funded by heart, mind, and experimentation, and not dogma. For the first half of my life, we continued to harm each other in northern Ireland. For the second half, and continuing now, we've been learning to talk instead, although we sometimes still face the violence and sorrow that some people feel will advance their cause. Many of us look back on our history of violent conflict with a mix of grief, regret, and shame. We may still want to be right, but we're learning that being *imaginative* is better. My personal pain is less than many, greater than some, but there are few consolations to competitive suffering. What unites some survivors of violence, no matter what the shape of our wounds may be, is the desire to prevent what happened to us from happening to others. What is uniting some of us even more is the notion that weaving a pathway through suffering must coexist with the experience of beauty. Nothing is ever perfect. So, at the same time as witnessing the wounds of atrocity, and working to end them, we

want to notice the rainbows in the distance, the aroma of fresh cut grass, the butterflies by the side of the road. We are not naive. We are warriors who believe that peace is the way to itself and that every story we tell can heal us or kill us.

\*

I live in the US now, which grants me the opportunity to compare the strife of my youth and the peace process of my early adult life with the political climate in what my mentor John O'Donohue often called "the land of the free and the home of the exceptionally brave." It's a beautiful country, and it's a broken country. The recent political convention season revealed a truth by accident when a well known national figure responded to a journalist's affirmation that, contrary to his promise of increasing danger, violence is actually reducing. "Theoretically [you] may be right," he said, "but it's not where human beings are...As a political candidate I'll go with how people feel, and I'll let you go with the theoreticians." Even if that's what he really believes, how sad to reject the possibility that "human beings" might actually be more capable of recognizing a lie when we see it. He doesn't know it, but he's replicating a well-worn myth, one that keeps human beings afraid and controlled. He and his colleagues could help lead people out of this prison. But he's trapped in it, too. Maybe we can help...

**The stories we tell** shape how we experience everything. When we tell a diminished story, we make a diminished life. The culture many of us have been born into embodies a number of such stories. Some of the elements of these stories include:

- ♦ We are born into darkness and have to fight our way out of it.

- ❖ Winning is everything. Get as much as you can, keep as much as you can, and give some away for the sake of your conscience.
- ❖ The past is a list of honorable military victories in which ultimate force was used to overthrow ultimate evil.
- ❖ There's nothing most of us can do to change things.
- ❖ People engaged in peacemaking are either naive and unrealistic, or so heroic and unusual that their actions can't be emulated. The expression of anger is antithetical to peacemaking.
- ❖ Religion and politics are about moral purity, community boundaries, and being right.
- ❖ Violence brings order out of chaos, and can literally redeem things.
- ❖ This is one of the most violent times in history to be alive.

These stories are widely believed, but they are not true. In his magnificent poem *The Skylight*, Seamus Heaney illustrates the notion that sometimes the most valuable gifts come from allowing another perspective to tell a new story. He begins by challenging his wife's desire for a skylight in their house. He preferred "it low and closed...the perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling." A skylight would destroy the comfort of a contained space. But when the roof was cut open, and the skylight placed, Heaney was transformed. So profound was the change that he reached for a miraculous analogy: that of witnessing healing from paralysis. The skylight to which he had stood opposed, which he believed could only diminish, turned out

to contain the very seeds of life. It opened him to a new story, and nothing was ever the same. Something like this can happen here too. Wisdom tells us about better stories than the dominant ones in our culture, and *The Porch* will be a space to explore them, such as:

The **foundational stories of Western culture** are rooted in the notion that we define ourselves, and resolve conflicts through scapegoating the other. Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Walter Wink and Alice Walker, Harriet Tubman and Jim Henson, and millions of others, famous and quiet alike, have illuminated the path of how to nonviolently subvert that myth, inviting human beings to consider the possibilities of tactics that result in beloved community. It's hard work, it takes courage, but it's also fun.

**We need to know where we have come from.** If we are to understand where we are, then listening to the voices of indigenous and immigrant people is vital. Our lives are confused without the practice of initiation into mature adulthood, the experience of people in community bearing each other's burdens, and respect for the circle of life.

**Spirituality is our lived relationship with mystery.**<sup>1</sup> Religion at its best knows how to lament wounds, educate for life, celebrate the good, and inspire change. It can help us nurture communities in which we discover how to live from the inside out, rather than for external reward; in which we encourage each other to more whole lives; and from which we can serve not sectarian or party interest, but the common good.<sup>2</sup>

**Talking with our opponents is both less lethal and more effective at establishing peaceable arrangements than the use of force.** This is as true

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sundborg.

<sup>2</sup> See Byron Katie on the inner life, Antony de Mello, Meister Eckhart, Rob Breszney, and the work of the Center for Action and Contemplation.

for nations at war as it is for individuals who merely don't agree with each other. And somebody always has to go first.<sup>3</sup>

**Violence does not redeem anything; in fact it more likely creates further destabilization and long term need.** Two wrongs have never made a right, and the 'just war' theory has more often been used as an excuse rather than actually practiced.<sup>4</sup>

**We may actually be living in one of the most peaceable times in human history.**<sup>5</sup> "There is still violence, of course, and some places and people are suffering terribly. But violence appears to have generally reduced, and we know more about how to reduce it further and repair the wounds it causes." Our cultural myopia makes us **afraid** for danger lurking everywhere; but the **expanding circle of empathy**<sup>6</sup> sensitizes us to pain we might otherwise ignore (and in the past may actually have been complicit in).

**Rates of violence are likely linked to social inequality and lack of community bonds.** Nonviolent revolutions and peace processes alike have created more whole societies and resolved profound conflicts through bringing enemies to the table, addressing legitimate needs, sharing power, and making amends for past injustices. Bombing instead of talking to our enemies is the worst strategy for making peace.

**The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.**<sup>7</sup> Showering the people we hate with love is not just a nice bit of poetry. It's one of the things

that will save humanity. And neither "liberals" nor "conservatives" need to violate their conscience to do it. People responsible for violence and other violations can be held to account in way that restores dignity to survivors without dehumanizing those responsible; policing, protective, and legal remedies based on restorative justice principles can be good for everyone.

\*

The artist Laurie Anderson paid tribute to her late husband, Lou Reed, by outlining the shared rules for living that they had discerned together.

"Don't be afraid of anybody."

"Get a really good bullshit detector."

"Be really really tender."

These rules might constitute a trinity of invitation to a space in which we take life seriously, but don't take *ourselves* too seriously. They could serve us well, especially in a space and time where the loudest voices seem to identify more with division, despair, destruction or defeating the other.

I want to live, unafraid, with wisdom, tender toward myself and everyone else.

It seems easier to say these things from a desk in a quiet neighborhood, surrounded by the trappings of middle class life. I am not unaware of the pitfalls of speaking from this place. But **the duty**

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<sup>3</sup> See Marshall Rosenberg on non-violent communication, & Mark Kurlansky on the history of non-violence.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter Wink's *The Powers that Be*.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Pinker *The Better Angels of our Nature*.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rohr.

of privilege is absolute integrity,<sup>8</sup> and I also speak from the experience of surviving violence in northern Ireland, and participating in a peace process that has proven the value of talking to enemies instead of killing them.

As a survivor of violence, I have come to believe that what I need is simple:

I need a **close circle** of about half a dozen people, each of whom is emotionally mature in ways that the rest of us isn't, to support, nurture, celebrate, learn from, mourn with, and dance.

I need **initiation by elders**, and continued mentoring into balancing the kaleidoscopic parts of my being: the decider, the artist, the lover, and the peaceful warrior.

I need to **discern a sense of purpose** grounded in being authentic to my true self, and opening to serving the common good<sup>9</sup>.

I need to **devote my attention to beauty more often than suffering**. For it is beauty that will lead us to step into a world of abundance, acceptance, and ease. Would you like to join me?

Yes? Then read on...

## WHAT IS THE PORCH?

We have the opportunity to help nurture **everyday storytellers** to **heal ourselves and the world** through telling a **better story** about both. *The Porch* is a magazine and online community nurturing people captivated by the idea that there is a better story, that **love and beauty and joy and peace are best best simmered on the stove rather than nuked in the microwave**, and that **each of us can reduce violence** in the world right now, beginning

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<sup>8</sup> John O'Donohue.

<sup>9</sup> Parker Palmer: A Hidden Wholeness.

by **reimagining the story** we choose to tell and live into...

*The Porch* is a magazine and community born of the experience of hearing a better story. Instead of rapid-fire trending topics, judgmental denunciation, or "analysis" unmoored from wisdom, it will have contributions ranging from a "slow news" section reflecting on important recent events from the perspective of the better story, a substantial interview with a wisdom figure, diverse columnists, musicians, artists, writers, and dreamers. We'll recommend movies, television, books and music that make our lives better - new ones and old ones, because elder wisdom is necessary to a whole life. We'll try to do this with grace and a sense of humor. And our range of writers will be diverse, with the clear intention of over-representing historically marginalized people, especially women, "people of color and indigenous people, and openly LGBTQ+ folks. In an uncertain political era, we will resist oppression by embodying a better story. There's a [Facebook page](#) ([Twitter](#) & [Instagram](#) too) with daily brief updates..." to help build momentum and a sense of community. We think we could make a positive dent, a real contribution, stir up a bit of magic.

The heart of the magazine: telling a better story together, to make a better world.

We don't know if we're right. But we are open. And you're invited.



Gareth Higgins, Publisher / editor, *The Porch*

mona haydar  
TALK TO ME

Just about a year ago, in the weeks following the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino I felt completely paralyzed by fear and depression. As a Syrian-American Muslim woman, committed to the way of peace, and striving to keep my heart open amid stories of fear and threat, I automatically asked *what could I do?* The hurt felt too deep, too psychologically complex. My husband and I decided the least we could do was talk to people. We needed icebreakers to get those conversations going so we started giving away donuts and coffee to strangers on the streets of Cambridge. With hand-painted signs reading, “Ask a Muslim,” “Free Coffee and Donuts,” “Take a flower,” and “Talk to a Muslim,” we stood in front of the Cambridge Public Library and invited people to break bread (donuts) and chat.

The first people who approached our little Lucy-esque lemonade stand were moved to tears by our effort to replace some of the hurt and trauma with a show of love for our community.

We wanted to offer people an opportunity to process and heal some of the trauma which permeates our world. For some of us, it looks as if Muslims are suffering from intense collective trauma. In colonization, our countries were occupied by outside forces which told our people too often that their ancient way of doing things, was wrong. That it needed “westernizing.” Often if they didn’t accept this westernization, the

current moment, and some people still feel the pain and loss of these stolen identities, cultures and collective memories. A small minority lash out, stealing the narrative, harming others with pretend justification. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the two billion Muslims worldwide try to go on with their normal, often boring lives, usually unnoticed by the mainstream media.

After setting up our little stand—initially as much performance art as it was political activism—my Facebook post about it went, as they say, crazy viral. We were inundated with requests to talk about our experience as ordinary Muslims. We took a chance, stepping out of our comfort zones to say, let’s talk, let’s process, let’s heal what’s hurting us. Let’s replace those wounds with honest connection and love if we can manage it. Let’s have conversations, sometimes sweet, sometimes very difficult, and hope that something beautiful emerges.

This experience led me to believe our beautiful world certainly needs more face-to-face open, honest, and intentional conversations. So many of us go through our day without truly connecting with another human being, rarely even making eye contact or having more than a

consequences were terminal. Flash forward to the



superficial interaction. The remedy was so simple it might even seem silly; we didn't quite believe it would work. But perhaps because it was silly, or at least simple, people joined us. We connected. It worked. People wanted to play a part in the scene where Muslims were offering themselves as listeners, not as authorities on anything, just human beings who have had human experiences like everyone else. We told people directly that we were not religious scholars. Even if we were, no one can speak on behalf of all Muslims. We wanted to answer from our human experience. That was our authority—one that makes us equal to everyone else. One curious and witty person who stopped by for a chat offered up different verbiage to put on our signs, "Ask A Human Being (who happens to be Muslim)." We laughed together, wondering aloud why we hadn't thought of that ourselves. Of course our laughter and joy attracted more people to receive the communion of donuts and coffee (and flowers for those who didn't want caffeine or sugar!). More joyous conversation commenced.

Of course, there were difficult moments. There were moments filled with anger for those who saw us a guilty by association. Among the conversations were shared tears, sorrows, fears and heartbreak—but nearly every single one of these conversations ended in a good hug, handshake, mutual affection and an expanded and more ethereal space for greater understanding of one another. Setting the intention, opening ourselves to possible discomfort, taking that risk ended up being one of the sweetest endeavors of my life so far.

# PEACE is a STORY

STEVE DAUGHERTY

A human life is a complex braid. A tangle even. For as long as anyone can remember, the intuition of thoughtful people and the basis for therapy fees alike have derived from this tangle: What you see is not necessarily what you get.

And the tangle may be even more snarled than we thought.

A research team at Mount Sinai Hospital recently concluded that the children of Jews who'd been exposed to the trauma of torture during internment in Nazi concentration camps showed a high likelihood for stress disorders. Higher than other Jewish children whose parents lived outside Europe during the war. The study's results were "the first demonstration of an association of preconception parental trauma... evident in both exposed parent and offspring."<sup>1</sup>

Lab mice at Emory University who were simultaneously exposed to the smell of cherry blossoms and a small electric shock began, in unwitting homage to Pavlov, trembling at the smell of cherry blossoms alone. Later, researchers observed the same fearful response to the smell—

*without the shock*—in two subsequent generations of offspring. As though the trauma was inherited in the children and grandchildren despite a lack of direct experience of the original event.<sup>2</sup>

So John Watson may have been more right than he could know when he said, "Be kind, everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." What battle could be harder to fight than one which has maimed you before you were born? What suffering could be less manageable than suffering which comes from injuries not inflicted on you? Ghosts of old wars and tensions and violences and injustices of every kind, tricking us into thinking our own life has had more suffering than it has. Be kind indeed. We're all fighting battles upon battles.

Rebecca sat down in my office and began complaining about her husband. Then her mother. Then her kids. A coworker. It seemed everyone, in concentric circles, was a jerk, or in the very least not all Rebecca wanted them to be.

There was a brief lull, in which she asked what the little rock on my office shelf was about. I put it in her hand and asked her to describe it to me.



“It’s grey. Uh, I dunno, has different marks on it?”

“Anything else?” I asked. She shrugged.

I explained to her that it was a piece of the World Trade Center’s rubble, plucked from a New York sidewalk September 20th of 2001 and given to me. I watched as it grew heavy in her hand, despite it being all the same molecules from a moment before. Her eyes widened. The shrug-inducing little rock was now somehow sacred to her. A vessel of stories. Yet the only change that had occurred was the addition of her careful consideration.

It’s easy to blame religious traditions and politicians and journalists for keeping us afraid. And perhaps they deserve some of that critique. But perhaps also they’re just telling us what we want them to. A symbiosis. If we do in fact inherit trauma like we do face shape and hairlines, being at peace might feel like a naive liability. We would therefore want to be told our fears are valid, that we’re smart to pick sides. Eternal vigilance, after all, is the price of liberty.<sup>3</sup>

But what if, despite our ears still ringing from centuries-old explosions, conflict and fear *aren’t* the truest thing about any of us? It would take a new kind of effort to believe something this risky. A kind of effort which resists the desperate belief that we must end up being right, even when being right means being unhappy. A kind of effort which stays open when it feels safer to shut down, refusing cheap, shrugging, unseeing verdicts on the other.

It would require of us the effort of telling another subtle story, one also passed down within us.

The story of compassion. Of seeing. Of peace. A slow, vulnerable effort that our inner and outer world has been instructed, in the face of evidence to the contrary (Nelson Mandela’s and Aung San

Suu Kyi’s refusal to avenge, the northern Ireland and Colombian peace processes, the untold millions of occurrences—today—of holding the door open for someone to step in front, me getting out of bed in the morning) to fight against.

## “The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.”

—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

No doubt, the way of vigilance and anxiety have been persuasive. Generations of pain have left us thinking

we need to move through life with our shields up. Such a posture has certainly dulled the view. For all fear has done to get our species through the Pleistocene and civil war, it’s overstayed its welcome. We see fear running contrary to what we want most among us fellow humans, sniffing at peace and love and warning us that Murphy’s Law is going to make a fool of us, perhaps even get us killed. Yet, somehow, we know in our bones that the fears which dog us resist the good ahead.

In order to retrain our ghosts to stop rattling their chains every time we smell cherry blossoms, we’re going to have to surround ourselves with stories and art and music and poetry and people who contradict our own instincts. We’re going to have to slow down and see one another with our careful consideration; human containers of mysterious torment and beauty and mystery, who deserve to know love and peace as deeply as we’ve known hardship. Surely we can pass to each other, and to the next generation, the story of peace at least as much as we’ve passed on the pain of not knowing where to find it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation*, Rachel Yehudi et al

<sup>2</sup> *Fearful Memories Haunt Mouse Descendants*, Ewan Galloway, *nature.com* December 2013

<sup>3</sup> *Wendell Phillips, 19th century abolitionist*



# RE- ENCHANTING CONFLICT

michelle  
LEBARON

Conflict is energy. Like a dance, it injects vitality and dynamism into our lives. Even the most tragic conflict manifestation - war - confers meaning on those involved. Conflict is also an engine of social change,

essential to progress. Given its potential to disrupt and destroy, we are right to summon creative resources to engage it. Litigation—inviting judges to decide who is more right and who gets what—may seem the most obvious way to proceed when conflict arises, particularly in the U.S. But that's only because it's the most visible one. Look behind the headlines of celebrity divorces or terror trials, and you'll find a growing consciousness that adversarial ways of dealing with deep-seated conflicts are very limited and often counter-productive. Even people whose livelihoods and public distinction depend on it have recognized this.

In 1984, U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger predicted that litigation would “go the way of ancient trial by battle and blood [because it is] too costly, ...painful, ...destructive [and] ...inefficient for a truly civilized people.” Indeed, in many places, trials have become the exception, while conflict resolution and mediation programs have proliferated around the world. Yet mediation—a consensus-oriented process with an impartial facilitator—is too often a compulsory exercise that constrains deeper spiritual possibilities through time limits or settlement-focused pressure. While the impulse of many who popularized conflict resolution was to empower people, invite the otherwise voiceless to speak, increase space for compassion and develop awareness of interdependence, it has often fallen short of these dreams.

Re-enchanting conflict resolution is thus an act of memory; it involves bringing our best stories of self and other forward even—and especially—in the midst of trouble. Just as a singer seeks to evoke the original impulse that gave a song life in the heart of its composer, re-enchanting conflict resolution requires remembering the inspiration of its founders, as well as moments from our lives when we befriended conflict. In the process of remembering, we connect to the shimmering qualities of curiosity, wonder and generosity—all essential to re-enchantment.

Conflict is about more than positions (what each of us wants) and interests (hopes, fears and concerns that inform our positions). It is—at its most intense—threatening to our very identities. It rearranges who we are, who we think we are, and the sacred self-perceptions and meanings we hold close. This we strongly resist, whether we are Croats struggling for recognition and security in the fragmented spoils of Yugoslavia, or a divorcing spouse whose erstwhile partner wants an unfair share of joint assets.

Conflict is mysterious. It winds its way into our beings and lodges there, resolute. It turns us into fire-breathing dragons, transmuting gold into leaden resistance in perverse reverse alchemy. Who in the throes of an intractable problem would not want to be freed of its shackles? Yet in the face of the prospect of “the other” gaining ground, hold on we often do, passing the enmity on to others. Apparently rational explanations do little to shift it. What we need instead are the eyes of an artist, for artists see outside limitations and notice possibilities when others miss them.

We can bring the eyes of an artist to family, organizational, religious or community conflicts whether or not we have an official designation as an intermediary. Here are three ways to cultivate artistry and re-enchant conflict:

**Put conflict on a bigger grid.** Ask what matters in the vast scheme of things. Will this conflict survive you? If so, is the state of relations something you want your children to continue? If not, what can you do now to melt the stone? Jimmy Carter memorably helped Egypt's President Sadat and Israel's Prime Minister Begin put their prospects for peace on a bigger grid by inscribing photos of the three leaders by name to each of their grandchildren. By framing the legacy of their talks in terms of their descendants' futures, Carter was able to re-start their moribund talks and achieve a peace agreement.

**Change the dance.** Seek out “the other.” Go to their neighborhoods, their religious services. Read their favorite writers. Find out what they consider beautiful. It is easiest to hate someone you don’t know well. South Belfast Presbyterian minister Dr. Ken Newell tells the story of befriending West Belfast Catholic Fr. Gerry Reynolds with whom he built an enduring friendship that included their congregations during and after “The Troubles.” They lived and worked ten minutes’ drive away from each other, yet a world apart; but for thirty years they refused to dance the old conflict two-step, to sing only the old songs or speak only the old story. Instead, they changed the choreography, learned each other’s music, and wrote a new script.

**How could this be different?** Whatever is leaden in your relations, transmute it with imagination. Start with your picture of the conflict. I once saw a supervisor in my workplace as a fierce tiger and found engaging with him painful. In a series of imagined interactions, I came to see him instead as Winnie-the-Pooh’s friend Tigger. I remembered that Pooh once said of this amicable tiger, “He always seems bigger because of his bounces;” so I began to see that what I had interpreted as threatening behavior was really my co-worker’s tendency to unbounded expression. As my perceptions

changed, communication between us became easier. I never told my colleague about this imaginative work, but he became more open as he sensed less defensiveness and less armoring from me. Conflict remained between us; only the way we inhabited it had changed.

Re-enchanting conflict does not mean eradicating it, for conflict will always be with us. As the poet and potter M.C. Richards observed, “[i]n the intricate mesh of our mutual involvement, we befall each other constantly.” Conflicts are uncannily accurate in spotlighting what matters most to us. My experience of this spotlight is that it can feel like an unwelcome glare, a light I’d rather simply turn off. Yet, in the times when I have befriended the spotlight as an opportunity to change an aspect of my life, it has left me less weighed down with negative emotions, feeling literally lighter. Now, I try every day to hone the habit of welcoming the spotlight rather than first turning away from it. As we learn and appreciate the sparks of conflict as ways of illuminating places where we need to shift personally, interpersonally and in relation to societal fault lines—we will come to inhabit conflict in life-giving ways and move toward the kinder world that re-enchantment makes possible.

mike  
riddell

## SOUL OF A POET, HEART OF AN ACTIVIST

**“A dead peace breeds wars like a dead sheep breeds maggots.” Thus spake James K. Baxter, New Zealand poet and mystic. He wrote this in the context of protests against the Vietnam War, to remind us that a cessation of armed conflict is not the end of the struggle for peace. No doubt Baxter has his own issues with maggots now, given that he died in 1972.**

I met him in the year of his death. He was a long-haired, bare-footed bohemian. Jim, who preferred the Māori version of his name—Hemi—spoke on campus. I joined the scruffy throng of students gathered in the upstairs common room to hear him. He was weary, but his voice was deeply resonant and engaging. He was, after all, a poet.

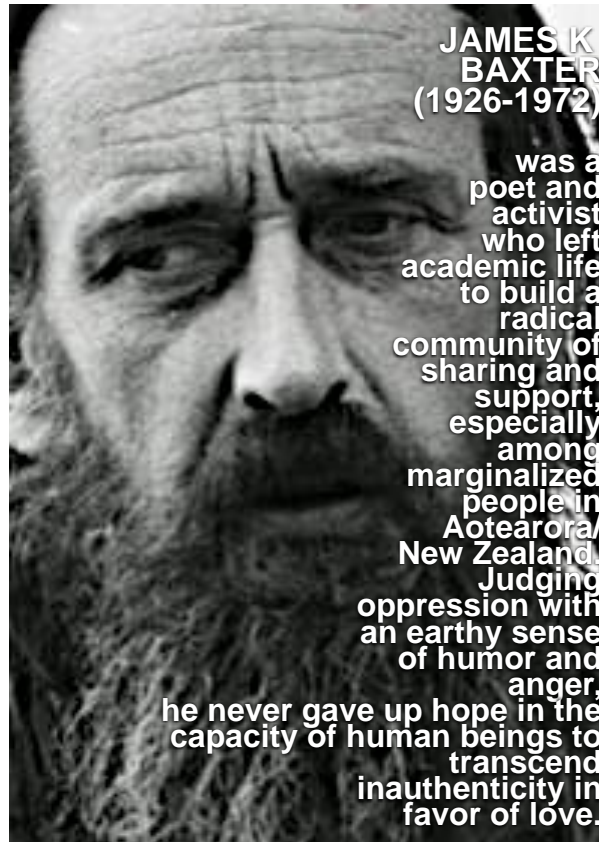
In a tiny village in the North Island of the country, he'd established a makeshift community alongside the river. A small collection of houses attracted misfits of every kind—hippies, drug addicts, survivors of psychiatric wards, gang members, and ship girls. There they sought a simpler life, based around the idea of an open community. Hemi was here to tell us some of the things he was learning from the experience.

His journey had turned inward. A convert to Catholicism, Hemi took the call of the Gospels literally. He imagined that a summons to poverty meant exactly that—the relinquishment of worldly possessions in order to strip the soul clean and make it receptive. As a recovering alcoholic, he

understood how a connection with the divine could be a matter of life and death. Because of that, he would kneel in the middle of the street and pray the Rosary.

In our lunchtime audience, as shafts of sunlight illuminated the dust in the air, Hemi spoke to us of communal love—the lost treasure of Western society. He made the outlandish statement that if a Māori boy passed his last packet of cigarettes around a circle of strangers, that box of smokes would become charged with sacramental holiness. It would be a vessel of divine love, no less than any chalice offered by a priest.

He called us to resist the grooming of the university to make us “normal.” It would mean letting go of the idols of career, money, and respectability. This made us feel uncomfortable. While it was clear from his appearance that he'd already given up on those aspirations, we were in no mood to throw away our own futures on the call of some stranger. He was an embodiment of what that might mean.



There was, however, something about the quality of his words that got past my defenses. Baxter was unaware that he had heart problems, and that he would be dead in a matter of months. I'm not sure that it would have changed anything. He'd made his peace with God and the world, and was using his remaining breath to delight us with how simple were the qualities required to keep us human. Love, light, and mercy.

I'm sure what he wanted us to learn was that peace is never the *absence* of anything, but rather the *presence* of a quality that might change the way we live. Peace is a lifestyle and a relinquishment, in which ordinary people can embody a calm confidence in the goodness of life when all around them seems to be chaos. They know that all is well because they have made a contemplative journey to the centre, and found it to be safe.

As many have pointed out, the polar opposite of love is not hatred, but fear. It is our fear of losing control, of losing possessions, of losing certainty—this is what drives us to see others as enemies. And if we are completely honest, it is fear of ourselves—the act of transference in which we project our shadow onto others so that we can condemn it in them.

Because of this, we must come to accept and love ourselves in order to be at peace. That, of course, is a long and dark journey, and one that is easily turned away from. I prefer to exhibit to others what I think they will admire, rather than the complex inadequacies that churn in the depths. But I do know that while the path may be long, it leads to light and peace.

In a season of dread, it is a good thing for those of us who can, to share peace in the world.

# SYM POS IUM | What's so Great About America

The present national fantasy political football league contains a frustrating paradox: one team wants to make America great again, and the other thinks it's already great. We're not sure about either. We suspect there might be a third way. Maybe America could be great *when* it is good. Maybe one of the steps could be paying attention to the wisdom of people who suggest that authentic "greatness" doesn't talk about itself. Maybe another would be to listen to folk nearby who would invite the recognition that Mexico, El Salvador, and Canada, among many others might feel more respected if the nation that likes to call itself the most powerful in the world affirmed that it isn't the only one "in" America. At *The Porch*, we try to use "US America" most of the time, in a good faith effort to remember we're not the only ones.

But our main task here is to ask, what is actually great about this nation, so easily criticized yet so aspired to by so many? Or what *could* be great, if you could influence it to retrieve the best of the principles to which it says it aspires? In keeping with our consideration of the re-enchantment of everyday life, we asked a diverse group of writers to imagine goodness rather than critique; to write about something in the realm of their personal experience that resonates with the idea that the US is neither purely sacred nor the Great Satan. It's a nation of human beings, which sometimes claims authority it may not have earned, sometimes experiences the burden of unreachable expectations, and sometimes embodies a beauty unique and breathtaking. It's broken, but still makeable.

# mark CHARLES

In September 2015, during a trip to Alaska, President Obama announced that the highest peak in North America would be officially restored to the Koyukon Athabascan name of Denali which means “the tall one.” This is the name the Athabascan people have used for the mountain for centuries. In 1896, a prospector emerged from exploring the mountains of central Alaska and received news that William McKinley had been nominated as a candidate for President of the United States. In a show of support, the prospector declared the tallest peak of the Alaska Range as “Mt. McKinley”—and the name stuck.

McKinley became our 25th President, and was tragically assassinated just six months into his second term. But he never set foot in Alaska—and for centuries, the mountain that rises some 20,000 feet above sea level, had been known by another name—Denali. Generally believed to be central to the Athabascan creation story, Denali is a site of significant cultural importance to many Alaska Natives.

Many articles have been written about the significance restoring the name Denali has had for the Athabascan people. But in this piece I would like to acknowledge that this name change has been a passionate issue for the natives of Alaska for a long time and therefore reflect on the significance their efforts have had for the rest of the country.

“They’ll leave.”

Those were the words of a Native elder when asked for his thoughts regarding the millions of European immigrants who had flooded Turtle Island to establish a new nation.

“Eventually, after they have used up all the resources and the land is no longer profitable for them, they’ll leave. They’ll move on to someplace different. And then we, the indigenous people, will nurse our land back to health.”

That is an incredible perspective from a very observant man who has seen the lands of his ancestors senselessly exploited by generations of foreigners. I have long said that the United

States of America is a nation that desperately needs to be adopted. It is a country of over 300 million undocumented immigrants. People from all over the world who have left their lands, their homes and their families, everything they knew and loved. And they have flocked to this “new world” largely in pursuit of a financial dream of prosperity. But they never asked for, nor have they been given permission to be here. They have no clue why the mountains lie where they lie, or why the rivers flow where they flow. And as a result they feel lost, and live here like one lives in a hotel room.

But for the indigenous peoples of this continent, our creation stories take place in this land. They tell us why that mountain sets where it does, and why those rivers flow where they do. These stories connect us to this land. They ground us. And they motivate us to live here sustainably.

Our uninvited guests desperately want to feel connected to this land as well, but they have no stories, no understanding. So instead they carve their faces into sacred

landmarks, and they name mountains that are eons old after mere men who have never even seen them.

My Athabascan relatives in Alaska have given the United States of America an incredible

gift. They have fought to share the name of their sacred mountain, and are giving this nation of immigrants permission to use it. This is an amazing gesture of both hospitality and mercy. And it is possibly a sign of hope. Hope

that instead of waiting for their uninvited guests to leave, they might instead be willing to welcome them in, share their stories with them, and train them how to live well within this land.





# jasmin MORRELL

In 1989, *Life Goes On* became the first American primetime television show to feature a character with Down syndrome: Corky Thatcher, portrayed by Chris Burke. Although perhaps not unlike any other family drama on air at the time, it was a groundbreaking show for that reason. For a melting-pot country that claims to value the diversity of its residents, prides itself in offering the pursuit of happiness to all its citizens, and was founded on the notion of equality for all, people with developmental disabilities—like many others from marginalized communities—have had a distressing history here. Everything—ranging from institutionalization, where conditions were often subhuman, to even the implicit idea that a child born with Down syndrome will be nothing but a societal and economic drain—carries the message that some lives, are in fact, less equal than others. That some lives should be separate from the majority.

But it seems to me that when underrepresented people are seen and humanized through popular culture, there begins some kind of magical alchemy. A desegregation of sorts. If it weren't for Corky, Becky from *Glee*, and Addie from the first season of *American Horror Story*, I would have had no external reference point, however superficial it may have been, when my own daughter, Nova, was born with Down syndrome.

Shortly after Nova's birth and diagnosis, Dr. Tan gently explained the cause and some of the potential risks for my newborn with DS, none of which I absorbed, or even really heard. The experience was reminiscent of how all the adults sound in *Charlie Brown*, garbled and trumpet-like. The doctor must have been used to dealing with shell-shocked parents, and attempted to lighten the mood by noting, "People with Down syndrome can even be movie stars these days!"

*As if stardom is the highest goal we could have for our child*, I wanted to yell. Having enough presence of mind to recognize I was bathed in a sea of post-birth emotion, I held my tongue. And then, I remembered the only people I'd ever "known" with developmental disabilities were people I knew through a screen, and begrudgingly acknowledged that maybe Dr. Tan was on to something.

The ritual of the trip from my hospital room, down the hallway, and to the special infant care unit always began with my body lying dormant in the hospital bed. Every three hours, roused by her hunger cues or my own hunger to memorize her face, I swung my legs out of bed, and put my feet into slippers. A few deep breaths, air in and out. And then I stood. Hoping for balance.

Sometimes balance was hard to come by. There is still rampant misinformation floating around out there about Down syndrome. After the diagnosis, the first thing I read online about the disorder was the “fact” that on average, the life expectancy of people with Down syndrome was somewhere between 25–30 years of age. I felt as though someone had knocked the wind out of me until I learned that though this may have been the case in the past, thanks to the combination of advancements in medical understanding and technology as well as advocacy for specific early intervention treatments, life expectancy has more than doubled. Many individuals go on to lead meaningful and healthy lives, able to be active, valued members of their communities. Most importantly, they get to live in a world where they can love and be loved.

There are plenty of perfectly valid and useful critiques of representations of minorities in popular culture. However, there’s almost nothing more wonderful to me now than *Glee*’s Becky, snarky and precocious, at high school with her

peers, decked out in a cheerleading uniform, showing the world that she is more alike than she is different. As a country we have at times blatantly and subtly created systems that do not honor our foundational ideals. Regardless, I am still supremely grateful for them.

According to Georgia State university, a supernova is “an explosion of a massive supergiant star. It may shine with the brightness of 10 billion suns! The total energy output may be  $10^{44}$  joules, as much as the total output of the sun during its 10 billion year lifetime.” When we pay meaningful attention to our foundational ideals guide us like a North Star, shining a bright light on those places of darkness we could choose to ignore. Sometimes these ideals- such as equality, liberty, and justice for all—shine even brighter. Like supernovas.

I think Novas have something to show us. So let’s do more research into genetic disorders, more advocacy work for people with special needs, and please, more Beckys on primetime TV.



# micky scottbey JONES

**“There is a group of women, they are women, and they are also spirits...Pachamamas...they are a part of that circle of protection. That circle of grace that has been here since the beginning of the world, since the beginning of people.”**

*—From Remnants, by Rosemarie Freeney Harding with Rachel Elizabeth Harding.*

One day I was walking to a coffee shop and outside was this sandwich board:

“No joke.” I thought to myself.

It’s a coffee shop. They sell coffee. I’m sure they meant to appeal to those awake and in need of said coffee. But I ironically chuckled to myself and hustled in to my meeting as I thought about the awakening in my soul in the past few years. Maybe you’ve experienced what you’d call an awakening too. This awakening, due to a series of “unfortunate circumstances”—from the heartbreaking murder of teenager Trayvon Martin to the unnecessary arrest and senseless death of Sandra Bland—happened in a way that I had not experienced before. I have awakened from a sweet, comfortable stand-for-the-flag nationalism to a clear-eyed understanding of America as a complex imperialistic empire with oppressive systems and parallel histories. I have awakened from the fantasy that “Martin’s Dream” was realized before I was born to the reality that despite the victories of the last wave of massive social justice movements, the dream is yet deferred. WOKE.



Each generation has its own wake up call. I think that is because each generation has its own work to do. Awakening to injustice and participating in dismantling its power is hidden goodness in the midst of empire. Despite the evil and oppression that seems to fill an ocean with our tears, there is a whispered breeze on the water that could become a tidal wave of hope. We can listen to it saying there are wounds to be healed, there are babies to be fed, there are prisoners to be freed, there are songs to be sung - and all this is key to the struggle. People who have heard that secret whisper - those who do little things with great love—the Pachamamas—have always been there. Sometimes they are us. Known and unknown—these women (and men) keep goodness alive.

I may never make speeches that inspire millions like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or organize and mobilize thousands like Ella Baker or put my body on the line for multitudes of people like Harriet Tubman. But for every Ella, Harriet and Martin there are many more whose names we will never know, who help one refugee family settle, who bring water one night to the protest, who drive one carload of voters to the polls. Those are the “others” that form this group of helpers, warriors, healers and freedom-bringers who invite you and me to the circle too— who give me new hope for tomorrow, and restore old hope when it fades.

Rosemarie Freeney Harding told something wonderful to her daughter Rachel; and they were both kind enough to write it down: “You know, my mother told me there were many Harriets. Harriet Tubmans...Grandma Rye said she had met Harriet; said she knew of other women, too, who

stole into the swamps, into the night perils, with one, two, three... seven people behind them, following their leading out of slavery.”

Sometimes waking up to the alarm of injustice makes me cranky. When the problems seem so large and I seem so small, this crankiness feels more like helplessness, anger, and rage. Coffee doesn't make it go away. But the unknown Harriets do. Attending to stories about so-and-so who showed up, helped out, cleaned up and cooked, and imagining the many more I will never know, remind me that I am joining this secret circle of connected spirits rising up to help where we are needed.

The truth is, those who “run the country,” or any country don't make it great. They can help, or hinder, mostly by what they are willing to name as the limits of our own possibilities. Understandably, in times of anxiety and uncertainty, placing ourselves in the hands of a powerful leader who offers protection can seem like the answer to rising fear. The dominant story is that a heavy hand and the willingness to apply it—whether to the backside of a child or to protestors shutting down the highway— will make the conflict go away. Yet, it is hands lifted in protest— sometimes a hug and sometimes a fist—craft the change we wish to see. Those who commit small acts of bravery and movements toward goodness have always saved the US from a single story of conformity, oppression and evil. Greatness accumulates when small acts of consistent goodness provide the undercurrents for massive movements of justice... circle widening... Harriets rising....

# mira RAHILI

**I**t was noisy in the packed cafeteria when my friend asked, “Did you hear that we were attacked today?” Since I was then a sophomore in high school I assumed she was referencing the rival school and our history of pranks before the football games I rarely attended. She said, “No, the terrorists.” I immediately went to find my mom, who taught Spanish in the building. She and my favorite English teacher were sitting in my English classroom watching TV. I kept seeing the replay of the towers falling. The towers toppling to the ground. The tears started streaming down my cheeks. I didn’t yet understand why; I just knew I was seeing evil. We all wept in that room.

When we went home that afternoon we watched it on a loop. Twenty-four-hour news coverage already existed, but that was the day it really began. At the same time, the crawl bar at the bottom of the TV screens had its true initiation; a place to display names of survivors being pulled from the destruction, a place for other potential attacks to be displayed.

Once the news broke about those responsible, where they were from, and their religious beliefs, the bright hope of the “United Together” slogan, adopted in immediate aftermath of horror, began to dim. Arab Americans, Muslims, or anyone who looked like they may be from “that part of the world” were maligned, physically attacked, emotionally harassed, forced to relocate, and practice their faith quietly or in secret.

My dad is from Algeria in North Africa. He is Berber (close to, but not quite, an Arab), is Muslim, likes soccer, and became a citizen in 1985. He met my mom in Paris and they were married shortly after. He is a hard worker, loves his family, and still likes soccer. A week after the terror attacks my dad shared that he had been called a “sand nigger,” a “camel jockey,” and heard coworkers wondering aloud where his turban was. My “friends” at school began wondering if my dad knew the terrorists that flew into the World Trade Center. If he made bombs. If his family had terrorists in it.

Our house was egged.

I did not see a lot of goodness in America during that time. I saw hate; poison leeching out over the fabric of our nation. I saw a vile nation. I saw a nation regressing.

But not all hope was lost. I made better, more understanding friends. Friends willing to learn. Friends willing to embrace a half Berber, Catholic, literature-consuming nerd.

It’s been professed that America needs to be made great again. Well I disagree. To what time period are we referring? When systemic racism permeated our nation? When women couldn’t vote? When hate groups terrorized their brothers and sisters living next door?

I do believe that America is inherently good. That beyond prideful nationalism, there are good things happening each day in America, every single minute. I know that the scrolling crawl bar at the bottom of TV screens does not show them, but they are there. I see them every day.

Teaching in America is not the most rewarding job. Dealing with over 90 students and all their hormonal personalities each day is tough. Watching education become a talking point in politics is dehumanizing. Getting paid in good feelings forces me to decide if I'm going to purchase gas or apples the last week of the month. Defunding education in North Carolina has become so politicized and economically fruitless that new teachers are leaving in droves and veteran teachers are picking up second or third jobs.

But I get to help high school juniors raise their reading levels from second grade to fifth grade. I see our Latino student club run a soccer tournament with a bigger turnout than most of our school sponsored sporting events. I get to watch the popular senior validate the shy girl's

opinion. I get to see students dialoguing about racism in a healthy, hate-free environment. I get to observe groups of students bringing their various talents to their Edgar Allan Poe projects and watching their peers marvel at the results, right in front of me. Often, I witness students of all faiths sitting together at the same table in the cafeteria and talk about Drake and just be friends. If high school students can transcend prejudices then why can't America? I want America to rise above the idea that everyone from the Middle East is a threat and see that "these people" are just like us: loving, hard working, and full of hope. And that because someone looks different or prays differently or speaks a different language does not mean that their difference is of ill intent. Goodness is here. To see it, you may have to look beyond the bluster and noise and focus on simple, every day moments: at a neighbor's kindness, the joy in an email, or a student simply holding the door open for a student in a wheelchair.

Goodness is all around you.

It's all around you.

# keisha e. MCKENZIE

I might never have found Oakley Cabin, but after work one winter evening, I took a wrong turn and got lost.

As I headed west through the woods of central Maryland, I passed the last in a row of three roadside cabins where enslaved Black farm and domestic workers had once lived.

Today, the ceilings of Oakley Cabin are low enough for me to hit my head on crossbeams. The nails are exposed. The wood is rough and arson-scarred, and it doesn't seem like there could ever have been enough breathing room for 32 people. But in 1879, on this side of the big house, 32 people—farm laborers, blacksmiths, cleaners, and cooks—gathered wood, clay, and stone, and made shelters for themselves and their children. Theirs are the stories of the cabin. Theirs are the stories of this state. Had I not

been lost, I might never have known about their lives.

In 1997, while I was finishing up high school in London, someone in Brookeville, MD, celebrated the Fourth of July by setting Oakley Cabin on fire. As the county authorities proceeded to restore it, archaeologists dug around the cabin's edges and unearthed a nub of white quartz and a George Washington coin. The quartz and the coin, docents later told me, were a cache that the cabin's West African residents had buried to protect their home from malevolent spirits.

I don't know if the rite worked, but their home is still standing, and the cache sits overground now. Lit from above in a display box, it is permanently safe.

Benjamin Barber, author of the political classic *Strong Democracy*, once said: "Independence used to be the

ticket for liberty... But today, security and freedom, whether it's in the Arab Spring, whether it's in Iraq or whether it's right here in the United States, means working cooperatively and interdependently with others." Success in this country has *always* meant working cooperatively and interdependently with others. There's not been a time when people have built success all on their own, and attempts to feign independence have been as toxic to us as that Independence Day arson attack was for the people of Oakley Cabin.

Yet throughout US history, our interdependence has often been obscured. Slaveholding landowners didn't much care whether the Others on whom their farms depended had fuel for heat or a clean stream for water. After slavery, they didn't care whether domestic workers had even a fraction of the liberty that professionals

and businessmen did. A doctor and plantation farmer could sit in silent worship with Quakers every Sunday unconcerned by the conflict between his slaveholding and the Friends' commitment to abolition and equality. Our interdependence has not always been equitable, and some families' multi-generational riches have rested on the labor of thirty-two or more.

So taking refuge in the mythology of independent U.S. greatness is nothing new. Me? I look at the historical markers erected around Brookeville, Ashton, and Sandy Spring—attempts to ward off the spirits of forgetfulness and denial—and I think, no, it's not great that we've denied our oneness in so many ways. But it *is* great that we're leaving tracks in the dirt, signposts for new generations, information boards and guides to help us remember what we've made of our time together. They're testaments to our capacity to change.

Last fall, my partner and I spend some too-short days in the woods of central Maine. It's an area where the chief export for more than a century has been wood pulp, paper, and tissue from a river-powered mill. I'm a rare sight in town, the darkest human for at least 30 miles. Not so

much lost as exhausted, we take a day to sit by the lake's edge, watch the wind toy with turbines in the distance, and rest.

We eventually wind up on Indian Island, the section of town that the indigenous Penobscot Nation has retained through centuries of aggressive White settlement around the river. The Nation's museum is open, and its resident historian is home and happy to talk.

"Are you visiting?," James asks me. I tell him that I'm on vacation, yes; that we flew up from Maryland, but I'm not from there. He's never been to Maryland, but has just returned from a few weeks touring ancestral lands.

"How long have your people been here?" I ask.

"About 12,000 years," he says.

James spills over with the story of his town and the Wabanaki peoples. He takes us from European contact to the construction of the dam that carved up the Penobscot River, fueled the paper mill, and destroyed the Penobscot way of life. He tells me about the Wabanaki's cultural reclamation and renewal project, and I promise to remember his stories and imagine with him a future where our common survival

means more than any of us "not being us."

In a nation built on the bones and bodies of Native and Black people, it's irrational to claim superiority or greatness. But we could become great, perhaps, as we build communities where prosperity isn't predicated on any people's subjugation, the violation of our rivers, or the disregard of cultural traditions that have made us who we are.

The spiritual cache in central Maryland and the testimonies of central Maine are tokens of a greatness that's still future for the United States. One day, we'll honor all of our ancestors and not just those who appeared to win; one day we will treasure our water as we do the fuels we extract from the Earth; and one day, we'll all be free to express the unique contributions that we bring to the community table.

In the meantime, I'm walking the nation's parks and local trails, touching the cabins and the bloody soil, and listening as carefully as I can to Native and Western Hemisphere Black people who'll share with me their histories, our histories, their hopes, our hopes. We are one, and the only way we'll move forward is together.



# frank Schaeffer

In the context of the fraught 2016 election, to interrupt my dark and sometimes ugly blogging I click on favorite photographs in my picture files. This might be what it feels like to look out through the bars in a cage fight and glimpse a loving face, then returning to try my best to kick the crap out of an opponent.

The photographs are of my five grandchildren. I look up from blogging about lies and the white evangelicals who are voting for them. I look at a picture of planting narcissus bulbs last fall with Jack (then five) and Lucy (then seven). I imagine another life where I turn off all the tech shit, cancel Facebook, Twitter and blogging links and just call it a day.

Escape? I don't, because I need to earn a living as a writer. I don't, because I care about my grandchildren more than about myself. This isn't altruism - it's genetics.

Therein lies a mystery. I know biology rules, but that in no way detracts from the truth of the feelings of love and passion my relationship with my grandchildren evoke. It's a passion so intense that when weighed in the scales of life my fear-that America has made less progress than I sincerely had thought is far outweighed by the love I viscerally experience. I mean this quite literally. What I care about most is that the

America my grandchildren will navigate won't destroy their chance to experience the joy I feel caring for them, loving them, cooking for them and warming myself by their glow.

My dear pal Gareth Higgins asked me to write this article. In his email to me he said I was to write something about "The re-enchantment of everyday life, which is one of the reasons we're taking the perhaps counterintuitive tack of imagining goodness rather than critique." That's another way to say (at least for me) that the power of the presence of my grandchildren outweighs the burden of the nightmare that our current national crisis has opened in my head.

Genie and I have been married for 46 years. By now our distinction between what seriously matters and everything else has been rendered in sharply focused detail. After our son John went to war as a Marine in 2002, the preciousness of time with our family became painfully clear. Following three wartime deployments and an honorable discharge from the Marine Corps in 2004, John went to the University of Chicago, married Becky halfway through school, graduated with a degree in modern European history, and moved back in with Genie and me until they got on their feet. Fortunately, we could accommodate them.

Then Lucy was born.

Lucy lived in our house until she was two years old. Then she moved across the street. To say that Lucy and I bonded is an understatement. By the time Lucy arrived I had dispensed with enough of the striving-for-success clutter in my life to really *see* the child in my arms. I was no longer distracted, like people at a Hollywood party who are always looking past whomever they're talking to, for someone more important in the room that they should connect with. I gave this person my wholehearted attention. When Lucy's little brother Jack was born the happy pattern of daily involvement with our youngest grandchildren was set. A year or two later Nora joined our tribe and turned it into the joyous exhausting riotous throng in whose midst I live today.

Instead of the overwhelming fear we'd suffered from contemplating the possible loss of our John while he was embroiled in a misbegotten war, Genie and I were offered another chance at life. Since we are both self-employed (or perhaps more accurately "self-unemployed," as we experience the traditionally shaky finances of writers and artists between projects) we were able to rearrange our lives to accommodate being our youngest grandchildren's daytime caregivers while John and Becky went out to work. Certain things became non-negotiable, like watching Lucy's newborn face as she slept in my arms. I'd hold her while walking in circles around the kitchen table. I'd miss "important" meetings and leave "crucial" calls unreturned, and instead play music as she slept. This lulled Lucy into a trancelike state where her breathing would slow and her body relax. My arms would ache from holding her in one position for so long. As she grew, I discovered you can get

tennis elbow by holding a sleeping toddler in one position across your chest, her head cupped in one hand, for an hour at a time, day after day. But the tennis elbow was worth it: I was exultant when Becky called me her hero, simply because Lucy slept in my arms after she refused naps in her crib.

Besides this ego-boosting appreciation from a young mother (always a good thing), my reward for enduring these stress-position torture naps was beyond price. Lucy's translucent, delicately mauve-tinted eyelids would flutter in her sleep, and I was there to see this gorgeousness! I knew she could hear my heartbeat! I've never cried for joy over a good review of a novel of mine, or when I've been invited to be interviewed by Oprah or by Terry Gross and sales of some of my books have (blessedly!) spiked, let alone over a royalty check. But the sheer *beauty* of my undistracted closeness to this lovely child, side-by-side with me in our very own gene pool, made me tear up out of sheer gratitude.

That gratitude is where genetics and spirituality meet. It is where, for a moment, I'm part of something timeless that will survive and outlast what the US is or isn't becoming. I won't be around long enough to see how anything turns out. I am here now.

When I take a look at pictures of my grandchildren and then return to whatever the blog is I'm pounding out it's with a sense of perspective restored. My hope for the future isn't something intellectual or far-distant, but that a half hour from now I'll be picking Lucy and Jack up and taking them to school. I can't fix America, but I can put a favorite snack in the car and play Mozart for them. Come to think of it, maybe that is fixing America.



# “WE WILL NOT BE ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL”

*Indigo Girls,  
EMILY SALIERS & AMY RAY  
in conversation*

Amy Ray and Emily Saliers have been writing and performing together as Indigo Girls for over 35 years. With a devoted following of listeners all of whom seem to want to live out the truth of their signature song “Closer to Fine,” Amy and Emily are that rare thing: internationally famous performers closely connected to grassroots activism and community.

Courageous in their early public affirmation of LGBTQ people, Native American rights, ecological concerns, and especially creative feminism, they are a unique and beautiful expression of engaged artistry. This conversation took place in between Amy and Emily, with *The Porch’s* Brian Ammons and Gareth Higgins at the Wild Goose Festival in Hot Springs, NC.

**Brian Ammons:** Like a lot of folks here you've been the soundtrack for my life since I was sixteen. It's just a real honor and I have followed you closely and am grateful for the extensive body of work and for your voice in our community and culture—particularly as a southerner and a queer person who has also wrestled with spirituality and social justice. Really I just want to say thank you for being a public voice in that for so long. Let me start there. Our conversation here is about making meaning and how we step into that sense of call of living more fully into who we are. I thought we might start, I know that you all knew each other first in elementary school. I'm wondering who were you as children?

**Emily:** Gosh I don't think anyone has ever asked that before. For me I was playing guitar when I met Amy and that was really my main focus as a kid. I wanted to write songs and I just wanted to play guitar all the time. There was that but we grew up going to church and my dad is a Methodist theologian, and my mom [who has] passed now was Presbyterian. Anyway I was used to being around the church, but it was a liberal church. We were taught to think and question and all those things as young kids. I would say I was a very sensitive kid.

I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and we moved down to Georgia when I was nine or so ten maybe. I was born in '63, and the Vietnam war was going on and the rise of the Black Panther Movement. I grew up in a predominantly African-American neighborhood which was a formative experience for me in terms of culture and music and social reality. I got exposed to a lot of things as a young kid. I was sensitive and wanted to play music. Then when I met Amy she was like that other girl who played guitar.

**Gareth Higgins:** What was it like to be the other girl who played guitar?

**Amy Ray:** Well I didn't practice as much as Emily did, she was well ahead of me. A year ahead in

age but I remember thinking that she really knew how to play and was already writing songs and had a gaggle of people around her listening to her play the songs. I wanted to learn to play the guitar just because I just liked music so much. In my family we were all learning how to play piano but I just felt it was too disciplined to me.

I just took guitar lessons so I could play easy to play Neil Young Guitar Book songs and that kind of things. I grew up outside of Atlanta, in Decatur, a pretty sheltered suburb. I knew somewhat what was going on. Politically if you think about being born in '64, all the stuff that was going down between then and 1973 especially in the Civil Rights Movement. I'm pretty blown away that I was too young to really be completely cognizant of it because I wouldn't say that [my family] were ahead. There wasn't a lot of racism around me but there wasn't a lot of talk about political things. We were very southern and we didn't really talk about that kind of stuff. But I had some awareness of the idea of the underdog and listened to a lot of music from Woodstock because of my older sister and immediately drew peace signs on everything that I could get my hands on. I was a hippie as a young kid. That's where some stuff came from but I was brought up Methodist as well, my mom also was Presbyterian oddly enough and switched to being a Methodist when she married my dad.

My granddad and my great-uncle were Methodist ministers. I grew up going to my great uncle's church down in Florida. Every summer we'd go down there and go to church a lot and he was a cool minister. I grew up in a more conservative church environment that was way more conservative and way more pro-life and anti-gay and a lot of things that I didn't even understand. It was around me; but I went to church all the time and I loved it. I just picked what I wanted out of all that stuff.

**Gareth:** Was there a part of you that felt like you were rebelling against that? At what point did you

realize there's stuff in here that doesn't work for me?

**Amy:** It took me a long time to realize it to be honest with you, because I went ahead and took on the idea of the pro-life movement when I was a young teenager. I got very self-righteous about abortion for instance, because I was listening to people that were writing songs about the unborn child and things like that. For me, [now], it's a matter of everybody has an individual perspective of that in their faith but for me as soon I realized the whole issue [differently]. Probably at the end of high school I was like, "Oh a light bulb went off."

When I was really immersed in youth group I wasn't picking and choosing yet. I was just really immersed. But what I found is that I came away from that when I went to college and started to be more politicized. I discovered that the good things could still be there and I didn't really wrestle with religion and my sexuality maybe until a little bit later. It was more of an internalized homophobia wrestling. It wasn't like, "The church says this is wrong, so it must be terrible." It was more like, "Something inside feels like I'm really bad all the time," and then I got right with it and then my parents eventually got right with it. They have three gay daughters and we all came out at different times in my family's history. There was a big need to reconcile and then in the end everybody did, it just took a long time.

**Gareth:** I want to ask you both a question about that internalized homophobia thing. I'm no stranger to that myself. What do you say to someone who you observe to be right in the thick of that? The story for me was the [internalized homophobia] stuff was there when I was a teenager and in my early twenties; but today in my forties, there's still the seed of it there. But the stuff that felt like rebellion, the stuff that felt like sin actually turned out to be the sacred stuff. It took a long, long time for me to realize that the dissonance inside me was in my view the spirit of

God saying, "This is who you are, this is good, the system doesn't understand that." What would you say to people who are right in the thick of it?

**Emily:** It's going to be okay. I'm still battling self-homophobia, it's much better than it was but for whatever reason maybe because I was a second child or because I grew up in my first formative years in a chaotic environment, I just wanted everything to be okay and everybody to like each other ... Now I'm starting to really embrace the dissonance of which you speak because now I see it as a blessing.

I can remember moments in my life for instance, easily over twenty years ago, sitting next to a man on a plane, having him say to me, we were just chatting and having him say, "Yeah my wife went dyke on me." That memory is so vividly clear to me and little things like that. Of course I wasn't going to say, "Well my girlfriend went dyke on me too." I was scared. I didn't have the fortitude [to challenge him] because I had self-homophobia and the first time I saw a gay parade in Atlanta I was like, "Why are they being like that, they're going to upset the mainstream and nobody is going to like gays." These are the fears I went through, I would say to anybody it's an evolution and for me I was just too sensitive to validate myself.

I was very affected by the oppressive force from culture and organized religion. Even though I had a loving, accepting family, I just for whatever reason in my journey was not able to get there until fairly recently. [So what] I would just say to someone is, "You're going to be okay, it is an evolution." I'm a firm believer in you don't get there until you get there.

**Gareth:** Do you draw a connection between this and the work you do in the world which has been such an astonishing gift to queer identified people and to people who are questioning to feel safety in community? You've been giving that very safety

to people that you seem to indicate you're still evolving into the journey for finding for yourself.

**Amy:** These are great questions. When I sit down to write a song I'm not like, "I'm practicing my gift to the world." These are really personal songs, they're my way of getting through and making sense of the world and just what's going on around me and it's through my lens. It's just my lens but I seek the community that we draw as much as the people who are drawn to us for the perpetuation of the community.

**Gareth:** Thank you for doing that because I would guess that it mirrors both ways.

**Emily:** That's the beauty of it because we started playing in 1980 and we started putting records out in '85, [but] we didn't really come to terms with coming out about our sexuality till probably '90 or '91. The trajectory of that is very similar to a lot of our peers and a lot of what was going on in the movement; the articulation of gender, the articulation of the trans movement. All of that has been going on around us and we've been informed with that in our own lives. For me I couldn't have gotten even close to where I am now if it hadn't been for the community around me, the audience we've had, the people that have come up and said, "I want to tell you about this group that's doing this cool work," and me investigating it and finding out it really brought something to me. [And] the other bands that we might have played with, that maybe were trans bands, and really brought this when we were younger and it was like, "Wow that's a whole other world opening." Because we were very sheltered in the '80s, we didn't even know what [some things] meant.

When I fell in love with a girl I was like ... I didn't even know what it [meant], it just felt okay to me but I didn't associate it with all the bad things people were saying. We really don't feel at all like we've been a mentor for the movement or anything. We came up in that window of time

where we all had to evolve together and come out together and get brave together and all that stuff.

**Brian:** It's interesting to hear you say that because you've been the soundtrack to my life. It felt like through that period of the late '80s and early '90s, that we were watching you as these incredible songwriters and musicians that were also going through a process of becoming more politicized, as we were all more politicized and then becoming more out. It felt like you were very much of that movement and became voices in that movement. I think it's that you were part of the deep connection for so many of us because it felt like we were in it with you or you were in it with us. That we were doing this as something together. I'm curious because you named your late teens and early twenties becoming more politicized and you were already playing together by then. I wonder what it would have been like to have had a conversation partner and collaborator in that and how you influenced each other during that time?

**Emily:** We were both wired to be community members! Amy came from a conservative background, she was taught to be a community member in life and I was too. At the root of our activism is a very simple notion that you're not on your own and you belong to other people and they belong to you and we have to be mindful of each other. When we first started organizing benefits in Atlanta it was awesome because we realized that it wasn't that difficult to do and that it brought everybody together. Music is such a galvanizing force for change and lifts your spirits in tough times.

So, those benefits were a way for us to easily see how we could be part of community and connect community and raise not only money but awareness about issues. We're firm believers in grassroots activism because it comes out of the community. Groups with super high overhead things like that and fancy affairs are not really our kind of activism. Our first forays into activism were very community based and simple in their

approach. As we networked and got older and more politicized, we met more people [and learned so much. Take] a woman like Winona LaDuke who lives in the wider reservation as a Native American activist, a brilliant brilliant woman. She and others taught us about activism and we couldn't see environmentalism anymore except through an indigenous lens. They were pivotal figures who influenced our activism. But Amy taught me a lot about activism because even though my beginning years were in all that social and political stuff, as I said for whatever reason I didn't understand a lot of conflicting things and I was afraid of conflict. Early on when Amy would be like "Support a needle exchange program." I would be like, "I don't know about that." She really helped me because Amy has always been more, well back then we called it "alternative." She's got a punk rock spirit that was a little more like a folk singer. I feel very indebted and grateful to Amy for the way that she helped shape my activism and helped politicize me.

**Amy:** That's very nice. One of the things about wrestling with being queer when we first started to figure out how to be who we are, was that everything was always framed within the context of a gig for us because that's all we did. Our demons came out in that framework and it was like, "We don't want to play this all-women event because that's going to pigeonhole us as this mediocre lesbian duo that only plays for women and none of our college friends that are boys will be able to be there." It was just so fearful. I made all the big mistakes like that early on and pissed off the women's bookstore and things like that. I really had to learn first of all not to be so self-righteous but second of all what feminism really is, I had no idea. Because [as] I grew up my dad was very feminist - we mowed the lawn, we did everything together.

I just thought, "Well I don't need to have that ..." I was one of those people that was scared of the word and scared of separatist events and scared of things that were lesbian and thought it would

make our music less accessible. I wanted to play only punk rock clubs. I was very narrow minded in some ways and Emily and I really had to go through those experiences. We had some older women that were mentors who really were patient with us, I realize that now. Because we were real jerks probably about some of that stuff; and [there were also] some women that were teaching us not to be separatist too who I don't totally agree with now. It's like during that period we were really going through it in the framework of what gigs we picked and where we played and all that.

What happened is we just went through every experience and all of a sudden woke up one day and went, "Wow, we can't not talk about who we are and we can't not play to people that are being supportive of us. This is our community and they've come out and they've come to shows and they've worked and raised money with us for causes. How can we possibly say we're singing about liberation and self-expression and not just be like yeah we're gay?"

It takes a long time to get to that place sometimes. When you're wrestling with it at home and in the public and in your church and every aspect. I mean everybody does it because everybody has jobs.

**Brian:** I'm wondering how at this point, because you continued to have to discern those kinds of questions and playing in North Carolina this summer doesn't come without controversy in a time when many artists have chosen to pull out of gigs here. You chose to come and be with us. Thank you. I also honor particular Bruce Springsteen's decision because it helped draw international attention to what was happening in North Carolina. I understand the tension in that. How do you discern those questions now?

**Amy:** I'll just say that Bruce probably would have played *this* gig. You know there was a little bit of a struggle around it, we just wanted to make sure it would be addressed at the festival at all and of

course it's going to be. I think we felt like this was an environment where people were coming to. These are all the people that are working to change that and of course we need a meeting space and of course there needs to be engagement.

**Brian:** As someone deeply rooted in North Carolina and who has loved the unique space that North Carolina has played as a state that is decidedly southern and has had these multiple threads of conservatism and progressivism wrestling for a long time, it's been a tough time to be here. Some of the most exciting organization that's happening in the nation is happening in North Carolina in this moment as coalitions are building.

For the first time in my life I've seen LGBT people standing with the environmentalists, standing with the women's health folk, standing with folks for immigration, standing with NAACP, really under the leadership of the NAACP: sending a message, saying if you come for any of us you come for all of us and we're going to stand together. Thank you for coming and being a part of that by being a part of this. Glad to have you here.

**Emily:** When we were invited to come to Wild Goose we did think about it, we did think about whether or not we should play. We talked about it, we searched out our wise friends and asked their opinions. It's always good to respect and talk to our elders because they've been around for a lot longer than we have, trying to figure these things out. We just sought wisdom but this is not like a normal gig, we're not here to take a check and go on down the road. We're here to congregate and learn and wrestle in the spirit so to speak. It was after we did some research and some talking with trusted people it was pretty easy to come to the decision that this wasn't a normal gig. It's a little bit different from an issue with Michigan Womyn's Festival that was painful because there's no way to describe what Michigan Womyn's Festival has done for our lives and for thousands

of women. It was very painful to not play anymore at festival because of the no trans, not a policy, "intention." But this wasn't painful this is very clear.

**Brian:** Thank you again. I've noticed there was a lot of direct allusion to your religious upbringing and to your religious context in your early work, and then I've noticed in your more recent work that seems to be re-emerging. You named it last night as your second coming out piece. It seems like it's coming out more explicitly and in a different place. I wonder what's going on at this point in your lives; why that shift and what's calling you into claiming that now?

**Emily:** For me just like I was saying I couldn't have gotten into it when I wasn't there but now I'm here and I feel clearer about what I believe and what's important to me. It's just growing up and evolving and learning. Specifically, with coming out and talking about my belief in God because the hurt that [been] caused queer people and other people by the church, and not just the church but any organized faith if it's Jewish or Muslim or whatever it is. I was very trepidatious about talking about my relationship with faith. Now it's like I believe that this great benevolent spirit has really guided me though some very difficult times and has brought me to some understanding and some peace. There's no way I'm going to apologize for it anymore. It's like, "We will not be ashamed of the gospel. It took me fifty-two years but so what?"

**Gareth:** That's a headline.

**Emily:** I stole that from the Bible.

**Brian:** How about you Amy do you want to speak to that?

**Amy:** In Indigo Girls work I don't know if I've used as much overtly religious language in the last few handful of records, maybe a few more political songs that are informed by the movement



I witnessed in the South. In some ways it's always very spiritualized in a good way. I used my punk rock to explore queer and gender stuff and I don't know why and to be outspoken about certain issues. Then on my country stuff naturally I'm drawn to the gospel side of myself when I write country music.

Those songs I call "non-secular" because they just come out and I let them just come out, some of the gospel songs. A lot of that started happening because twenty something years ago I moved up to North Georgia and couldn't help but be influenced by all the bluegrass players around me and mountain music people and people that were playing traditional music. It really seeped into what I was doing to live in a rural place for so long. There it is: the glory of God in nature for me. That's just what happens, the early early Indigo stuff we were in college and we were writing songs that just had a lot of religious metaphors in them, because it's such a beautiful creative tool to use. The Bible and every religious text [has] so much beautiful language. It's like, "Oh wow this is incredible." It gets into your songwriting.

**Gareth:** I want to ask you both to go further back. I remember the first time I heard a song and realized there's more going on here than just nice songs, there's more than just wanting to tap my feet, there's a story here. It was Van Morrison's song *Whenever God Shines His Light*. I was thirteen years old. I remember there was a verse in it that stretched me beyond the knowledge I already had. I'm wondering for you, who were the artists that woke you up? Do you remember those first times when you were like, "Oh." Because I was listening to the *Jungle Book* soundtrack before then but it wasn't teaching me great existential truths. I see those in it now actually. It doesn't have to be a specific moment but who were the artists who you were thinking, "There's something more here," or maybe even, "This is what I want to do."

**Emily:** So many. Ferron, a Canadian singer songwriter - just unbelievably gifted, turn of

phrase and depth of lyrics and her voice was craggy or whatever the word is for it and it's so engaging. Then Joni Mitchell, she's a renaissance artist but when I went to college at Tulane in 1981 I listened to that song *Hejira*. I put it up my LP and lifted the needle again and again and again and memorized all the words. Just the expanse of that song blew my mind and debilitated me a bit because I thought, "I'm never going to write like that," and I haven't. She was key, Stevie Wonder was ...

**Brian:** You said, "The expanse of that song blew my mind," can you go a layer down from that?

**Emily:** For instance, she's talking about the cosmos and planets orbiting around the sun but how can I have that point of view and I'm always bound and tied to someone. She's taking huge concepts and images and then tying them to the very human experience. In the church the light the candles and the wax rolls down like tears, there's the hope in the hopeless I've witnessed thirty years. Holy shit.

**Brian:** That's a prayer.

**Emily:** That's really the song that blew open my mind as far as, from my experience, the expanse of it. Then Stevie Wonder because of his musicality and each song was awesome. I'm very tied to African-American music and he taught me about what was going on with some urban communities that I had no idea about. I could go on all day, I'll stop with [the band] Heart because *Magic Man* came out, I was about thirteen and it scared me. I realized that it was like it was about sexuality and the power of rock music and it was a woman's voice. It gripped me and frightened me and then after I got over my fear it was all I could listen to. It was very formative.

**Amy:** I can never answer this question. I always have a hard time with this question for some reason. When I was really young I was listening to a lot of the Woodstock era kind of stuff that was in

my sister's record collection. I can't remember specifically - I just remember knowing more about the context of when they were singing and why they were singing than the lyrics specifically in that era. Jimi Hendrix is a pivotal person in that era; and then for me I was listening to Elton John and Carole King and James Taylor and all those people that were writing songs. I was always very engaged in the story. If it was a story about someone going through hard times I really attached to myself that too or like James Taylor's *Millworker*. He takes on the role as a woman that works in a mill and I don't know why but I was always very drawn to people that were going through oppression.

I don't know where it came from necessarily, but later when everything just clicked for me was probably in the realm of Patti Smith and The Clash and hearing Rage Against the Machine. That's later but it all came together for reason with some of those bands where I was like, "Oh okay this is what I want to do, I want to write about

stuff," and those songs are hard to write. Songs that are political, informative without being a drag or self-righteous or didactic, they're so hard to write. I was really just looking up to these people as mentors and Steve Earle, Lucinda. Someone like Dolly Parton - what a brilliant song writer and what a strong woman. Everything for me was always contextualized not as much in my head, more in the idea of community and where it's taking place and what it means and how these people in the DIY movement achieve what they

achieve and things like that...

**Gareth:** I have an architect friend who says that the purpose of architecture is to help us live better. I think that's brilliant because you know what a bad building is because it doesn't help you live better and you know what a good building is because you want to stay there. I would extend that and say I think that's the purpose of all art, and the purpose of music is to help us live better. Do you think that's true?

**Emily:** I don't know if it's the purpose, [but] I think it's the result of good art. I shouldn't have even use that word (good), it's subjective, it's whatever really moves you. Art is us trying to make sense of the world and just trying to figure it out. I couldn't paint a painting to save my life or do other forms of art and I'm just amazed as if it's miraculous that someone could do that. That helps me, it broadens my perceptions of what's [possible] in life and especially

provocative art. As part of my evolution I've really come to embrace the benefits of provocative art that makes people uncomfortable and makes them think and so on. I'm a sucker for the masters too. I could look at a Dutch Master's painting all day long. And then songs help me live better, they definitely do. It doesn't even have to be the message of the song to live better, it's just the experience of having your heart opened a little more by it. The band Dawes - I love that band - they've got a song about the moon and the water it's just ... I don't know why and how if you're



sad you can listen to a sad singer over and over and over and it makes you feel better. It's kind of weird. In that sense art helps you to live better because it opens you up.

**Brian:** What sustains you both as individuals and a collaboration that's lasted for decades?

**Amy:** In our collaboration what sustains us is a respect for each other and a lot of space. I don't want to say it's like a good marriage we don't hang out together, but we're like siblings. We really don't spend a lot of time together, we come together to play music and to arrange songs and work on records and we have very different lives. That gives us a real chance to just be who we are. We're very different from each other and then we're very happy when we come together and play and we've always respected each other's music and are fans of each other's music. We also know that what we do together ... for me personally it's greater than what I could ever do alone and I know it and I don't ever question that. I just I know it and that's the centerpiece. I try to respect that all the time and I've always felt that way, and that's one of the things that helps sustain the collaboration. Then the other things are we're very careful about how much we tour and we make a different set list every night. We are constantly rotating who we're playing with and who's supporting us on the road as far as opening bands. It's always friends of ours and people we play with. Just keep the environment, nurture that ecosystem constantly and make it really rich and something that we can evolve in and that everyone else could evolve in as well. It's not supposed to be just built around us, it's supposed to be a team.

Then for me individually, I live in the North Georgia Mountains and that sustains me because I'm not a city person. I go home from tour and I can just be by the river and go hiking and just immerse myself in that. It's a blessing to have it and to be able to do that because it's where my heart is. That and books and other people's music

and activism. My mentors that are activists inform a lot of what I do, and they sustain me and they energize me and they kick my butt and they make me get out there and do things when I'm scared to do them and say things when I'm scared to say them and they don't let me back down. I count on them for that challenge and that sustains me.

**Emily:** Everything Amy said about our experience together is absolutely true and I have such gratitude for working with Amy and for our music together. Even though I may have written a song ... sometimes I sing a solo show without Amy and I just miss her parts, it's kind of like, "Sorry all, sorry Amy is not here sing her parts." She makes my songs better and that's really, we have fallen into an awesome trajectory together. Who knows why but I'm grateful for it.

I get sustained, I like to take naps, I like to read, I like to spend time on my own. I thought I was an extrovert until I quit drinking and realized I wasn't. Now I know that I'm an introvert and I have to retreat in order to sustain. It's absolutely clear to me and I've got a three and half year old and that sometimes pushes the limits of that. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I like to see live music like listening to Dar Williams, I almost died of happiness yesterday, listening to Dar. I haven't heard that song *Iowa* in so long and she's so true and good songwriter. Just being here at Wild Goose and hearing Dar was an ecstatic experience for me. Listening to music means as much to me as a fan, I know why you all like to come and see shows because I like to come see shows too.

**Gareth:** I have my last question. The point of this conversation is partly to get to know you a bit better and because you have deep and beautiful experiences. Also because everybody here has exactly the same level of significance in our lives and exactly the same gravity of purpose and possibility for joy and meaning. The question is what's the best advice anyone has ever given you? And if you don't know or don't remember what

the best advice anyone has ever given you, what would it be if you did know what it was?

**Emily:** Wow, holy cow... I just know I want to keep working on being as least judgmental as I can possibly be. To not underestimate the capacity of people because of what I might think of them before I really get to know them. That's just a personal challenge. It's so funny because I'm just me, always afraid of conflict as a kid and now I've gone through this and I accept conflict. The best advice I ever got was "It's going to be okay," which is kind of weird because it's not okay in Syria for the children, you know what I mean? There's so much that I don't understand about the way things work, but I have to stop feeling guilty for the blessings that have been given to me and enjoy them and just use whatever I can that's been given to me to spread goodness. Not to go, "Oh I can't enjoy this football because of what's going on in the world." Those are the things I wrestle with.

**Amy:** That's such a hard question, I don't like to give ... I know I probably give a lot of advice and

inside of me I'm saying, "Don't do that, don't do that," because the thing I have a problem with is always saying, "You should, you should, you should." My dad always said that to me and we always become someone in our family. Half the

stuff he said was true or probably ninety percent of it was true. I don't like to give advice and I like to just take advice as much as ... That's what I'm trying to practice in my life, is to listen to other people because I'm such a loud mouth.

[But] I could think of two things that have been very important to me. One of them was our friend Winona LaDuke early on when we started doing activism [with] Native American [people]. Winona and I had a contentious relationship sometimes and in a good way we would just argue with each other and she said to me one time, "You know this isn't always about you," and I was like, "Whoa okay."

She meant in a broader sense of me as a white person and I really took it to heart and tried to really keep that always in a political activist kind of way and as a white person.

Then the other thing is [something] my daughter who's two and half said to me about six months ago. I'm OCD and I was basically rearranging all of her toys to go exactly where they're supposed to be after she was playing with them and she looked at me and she said,

"Baba be still," and I'll never forget it because that's what I need to do.



# MOVIES

# BOOKS

# MUSIC



We want to talk about movies, music, and literature that embody what we think *The Porch* is: in the English writer Martin Wroe's phrase, "a liminal space between home and the world," where the threshold of possibility seems more real. Or maybe it's just a comfy place to sit. Sometimes a porch is just a porch, and that's more than enough. We're intrigued by the notion that the purpose of art is to help us live better. So we happily present Tyler McCabe's reflections on a classic novel that helps him "see," Clare Bryden's engagement with a manifesto for hope in the dark, Gareth Higgins' exploration of the most cinematic city as a kind of psychic blueprint, Cathleen Falsani's tribute to the band that helped her define a tribe, and Barry Taylor's embrace of an album and documentary born out of unimaginable grief, yet offering a way to live. Let's talk about all of this together soon....

# CINEMA AND THE CITY OF DREAMS: WHAT MOVIE IS THE PORCH?

GARETH HIGGINS

## **New York is important.**

This is what the movies tell us. For one thing, extraterrestrials always know to attack it when they're invading; for another, the only recognizable thing that survives nuclear holocaust in the original *Planet of the Apes* is the statue that welcomes strangers to live the American Dream. In the cinematic imagination, New York might as well *be* America, an island surrounded by the Grand Canyon with the Hollywood sign atop. Sure, some tumbleweed may blow through, there's a comedy golf course, and Chicago gangsters run the bars, but New York, New York is the center of the movie universe (at least for the part of movies that comes from the US: if your dream consciousness is nurtured by cinema, then you'll have a lot of New York dreams). There's a lot more to see in the movie world than just Manhattan (Mumbai and Manchester and Rio and Tokyo stories abound, and we'll get to those in future issues I'm sure), but while

we're here, let's consider Movie New York as a kind of map of the soul, an outline of the things that are contained within us that we want to integrate or repair or resolve. Perhaps it's true—if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

It's a helluva town, declare Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly in *On the Town*, their pristine white sailor suits amazingly unblemished by 24 hours in the city. They are awestruck, and who can blame them? Movie New York transforms the mundane hassle of hot streets and stop lights and police sirens into the imaginative gold of *Manhattan's* mystical bridge, *Moonstruck's* love conquering all, *The Apartment's* ability to heal the depression of its characters, and *Superman's* belief in magic. New York nightmares also occupy more than their share of its celluloid projections—maybe you can make it there, but you can also be broken by it. You might fall in love (*Sleepless in Seattle*), but

also into hell (*Taxi Driver*). But you could also walk a tightrope above the most famous skyline on Earth (*Man on Wire*), jog round a magnificent urban park (*Marathon Man*), protest (*Network*), dance, get a slice of pizza, become a multiethnic community, and be fully alive amid concrete and steel.

\*

**The New York state of mind** is unthinkable without the spire from which a large misunderstood monkey fell to his doom. *King Kong*, in some senses, *created* the New York skyline, and skyscrapers are quintessentially cinematic: towering creations that could only emerge from almost absurd self-confidence. From a distance, the city looks like a series of majestic organ pipes. Up close, viewed from below and between the buildings, it's like that hall where the hobbits get chased by giant trolls, so huge that it can only diminish the people within. Behind the sheer glass walls of

skyscrapers and brownstones alike, the places where some movie New Yorkers live are enormous and impossibly expensive. *Rosemary's Baby* made the elegant facade of the Dakota Building seem threatening, and *Vanilla Sky* turned it into a place from which spiritual transformation could occur among the rich; but most people in movie New York seem to live in apartments just about big enough to fit a bed and sink in. New York's architectural irony is that it could be a lovely place to live, if you were rich enough. But if you were, you would probably choose to live somewhere else.

\*

Everyone in Movie New York is trying to do something new. Snake Plissken hopes to *Escape from New York*; Dustin Hoffman in *Midnight Cowboy* is trying to get rich, and in *Tootsie* aims to make it by playing a woman; the *Ghostbusters* are trying to turn dodgy paranormal research into fame and fortune; in *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer wants to shake off the embarrassment of growing up under a Coney Island rollercoaster; *The Royal Tenenbaums* are trying to redeem the legacy of "two decades of betrayal, failure and disaster." They, like *Funny Girl* and the kids from *Fame*,

succeed. But Llewyn Davis learns nothing; *Margaret* is on her own, Pacino ends *Dog Day Afternoon* in a prison cell, the *Man Push Cart* loses everything because cities are so often so very good at dehumanizing people, Bob Fosse's alter ego in *All That Jazz* doesn't even make it out of New York alive. Death is often near in Movie New York—every step Vito Corleone takes on the ladder of the American Dream leaves somebody bleeding. Robert Shaw's cruel subway thief in *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (the best movie about New York's greatest engineering marvel) would rather die than be captured, the childhood friends in *Once Upon a Time in America* are destroyed by greed and pride. Abel Ferrara's Irish gangsters in *The Funeral* and vampire in *The Addiction* present opposing views of death—live from selfishness and it'll kill ya, die to your ego and you might live.

\*

Our worst fears about America are in Movie New York. But our best hopes of America live there too. The greatest New York films are honest about both. Scorsese's New York is sweat and violence and nation-building, Woody's is romance and existential angst, Spike Lee's is a map of how people live

together (or don't), and in *Rear Window*, Hitchcock imagines Greenwich Village as a cage.

*Make Way for Tomorrow*, which Orson Welles called "the saddest film ever made," holds up a mirror to love. *West Side Story* colorfully explodes into Shakespearean truth about prejudice. *Broadway Danny Rose* opens his door, and celebrates an inclusive Thanksgiving dinner. Henry Fonda persuades eleven other of the *12 Angry Men* to open their minds and show some compassion. *The Immigrant* even redeems its villain at the gentle hands of an outsider who refuses to enact retribution. The nation's hopes are New York hopes. Of course, the nation's lament is, most recently, New York lament. *Gangs of New York*, made so soon after 9/11, struggled to face the wound, leaving the Twin Towers intact in its time lapse skyline montage. But in ending *Munich* with its protagonists arguing about revenge in a Manhattan park looking at the World Trade Center, Spielberg had the courage to state that violence begets violence. *Do the Right Thing* considers the same theme, with even more operatic edge. And just up the road in another part of Brooklyn, *Smoke* evokes what we may most want to believe about New York: a



community hinged on the corner store, with lines of race and gender and class blurred amid the haze of friends puffing cigars, telling stories, hearing each other, becoming human. *Smoke* is an imperfect movie, which of course is not saying much—there aren't too many perfect ones, let's face it. But its imperfections are part of what make it so welcoming—it presents a world whose goodness we can learn from and whose blind spots we can also imagine transcending. Made in 1995, it imagines a diverse community, but isn't as aware of white privilege as it might have been had it been produced today. Just as *Tootsie* tries to respect women, but nudges up against making trans\* people figures of fun. But *Smoke* is still portraying, and creating, a world in which part of the process by which people bear each other's burdens is being open to challenge, making amends for past impacts, learning more of what it is to live in a rainbow-encircled beloved community. *Smoke's* world is still makeable, not fixed, open to change, open to others. I'd like to live there. In *Smoke*, what I'll risk suggesting is the best New York film, it's a heavenly town.

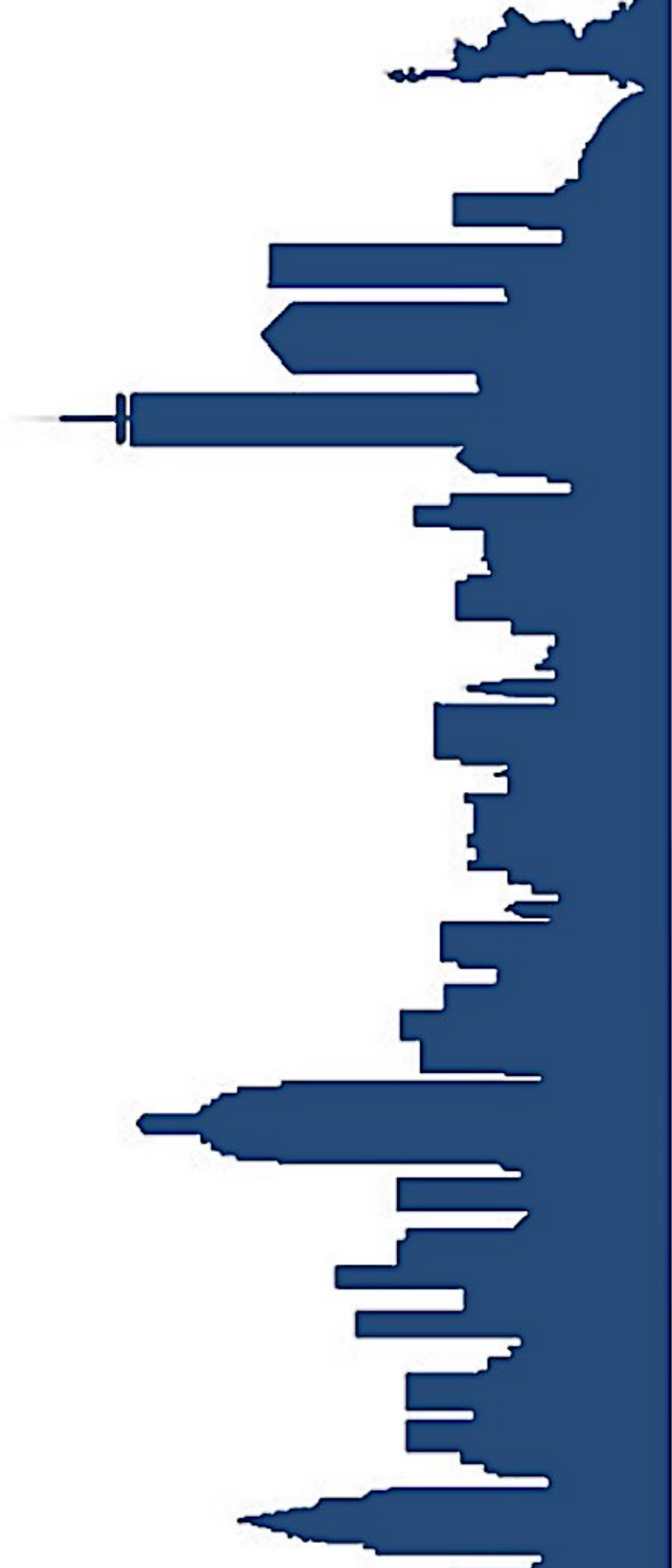




Photo collage/illustration of U2 performing in Vancouver, Canada, May 2015 by Cathleen Falsani.

# LET ME IN THE SOUND

cathleen falsani

*“How do you spend this little dance with destiny? That’s up to you. But when you find your band, you find your band.”*

Phil, King of the Road from Showtime’s *Roadies*

**Thirty-four years ago this autumn, I found my band.**

Or they found me. Or we found each other.

Perhaps, more accurately, the universe conspired to introduce us to each other one afternoon in the fall of 1982 in the living room of my friend Rob’s house in suburban Connecticut.

I was in seventh grade and already an outlier, just beginning to discern the confines of the identity I’d been invited (to put it generously) to inhabit.

The one that said good girls behave and don’t ask too many questions (about God or man, particularly the latter). The shadow box into

which I stepped at puberty was a cage, and I kicked at its borders, searching for signs of light.

For me, membership in what quickly became a lifelong tribe, began not with words, but with sound. A bass guitar and drum kit thumping, a keening guitar, and a young man’s tenor singing—shouting at me—an auricular invitation unlike any I’d heard from anyone, anywhere.

While I didn’t know it at the time, the sound I heard was Bono pronouncing the first word of the song “Gloria” from U2’s 1981 album, *October*. The then-21-year-old Irish lead vocalist continued to shout, singing:

*I try to sing this song  
I, I try to stand up  
But I can't find my feet  
I, I try to speak up  
But only in you I'm complete.*

*Gloria*

**In te domine**

*Gloria*

**Exultate**

*Gloria*

*Gloria*

*Oh, Lord, loosen my lips.*

In retrospect, I recognize it as a prayer and the Latin bits as having been lifted directly from the Roman Catholic mass—another invitation and another tribe to which I'd been invited a dozen years earlier when a priest sprinkled water on my forehead, anointed my heart, mouth and ears with oil, and claimed me for Christ. As an infant, the words spoken over me at my baptism were merely sounds. Any meaning came much later.

Often I've described hearing U2 for the first time as an epiphany where my "soul did a backflip," and surely it was that. It was also a second baptism—an initiation neither by fire nor water, but by a third element: Air.

Breath. What the Greeks called *pneuma*. What some of us name as spirit.

In the four minutes and 21 seconds it took U2 to perform "Gloria," Bono breathed new life into my still-young heart and introduced me to a better version of a story I thought I already knew, but that only was beginning to unfold.

"I think it expresses the thing of language... of speaking in tongues, looking for a way out of language," Bono recalled while describing his song "Gloria" in the book *Race of Angels*. "I try to sing this song... I try to stand up but I can't

find my feet.' And taking this Latin thing, this hymn thing. It's so outrageous at the end going to the full Latin whack. That still makes me smile. It's so wonderfully mad and epic and operatic.

"And of course Gloria is about a woman in the Van Morrison sense. Being an Irish band, you're conscious of that. And I think that what happened at that moment was very interesting: people saw that you could actually write about a woman in the spiritual sense and that you could write about God in the sexual sense. And that was a moment," Bono said.

U2 has just celebrated 40 years together as a band. Bono, the Edge, Larry Mullen Jr., and Adam Clayton were just teenagers themselves when they began making music together on Sept. 25, 1976 (which happened to have been my sixth birthday). Just a few years later and an ocean away, their music reached my ears, forever changing my heart and mind.

It's hard to imagine "the lads," as many of us still refer to the bandmates even as they've reached their mid-50s, passing a milestone that is more often the province of "legacy" acts and reunion tours than perennially prophetic, innovative artists who continue to reinvent themselves and invite their audience to do the same. Theirs is a gift far more precious than rubies—the wisdom that comes from four decades of hard-won friendship, a living faith (in themselves and Something Greater), and a seemingly boundless curiosity about the world that is, if anything, *more* dynamic and engaged in 2016 than it was in 1976.

*Let me in the sound*

*Let me in the sound*

*Let me in the sound, sound*

*Let me in the sound, sound*

*Let me in the sound*

So goes the plaintive chant that opens one of U2's more under-celebrated songs, "Fez—Being Born," from the band's *No Line on the Horizon* album. It's a simple lyric that might best express the complex relationship I have with them and their music.

"It's about this character who is going a bit AWOL...He takes off to rediscover who he is and to re-find his first love," Bono said of the song. "The real important thing to know about this song is the sense of speed and this kind of primeval drive to get back to your essence."

U2's sound, stories, poetry, and prayers recalibrated the way I saw things—my place in the world and how I might change the world and the world in me—when I was a child and still now with every new song, the band, *my band*, continues to widen the aperture of my perception.

In the summer of 1985, watching their passionate, and now iconic performance at Live Aid in London on the TV set in my parents' New England living room, I saw U2 draw a line connecting my very US American life to the lives of starving Africans in Ethiopia. They planted the seed of an idea—that we're all connected and each of us can make a difference in the life of the other—that blossomed into a lifetime of seeking those connections. Each time I look at my teenage son—my precious, only child who was born and orphaned in Malawi, and almost died an early death because he was poor and African—I think of teenage me listening to the sound that changed my life. And, decades later, his.

When I met the boy who would become my son on the side of a dusty African road in 2007, the words of "Crumbs from Your Table," from U2's

2004 album *How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb*, played in my mind:

*Where you live should not decide  
Whether you live or whether you die...*

Last year, my son came with me to Vancouver for the first two nights of the "Innocence + Experience" tour. The U2 catalog has been the soundtrack for most of his childhood, so I knew many of the songs would be familiar to him, some even favorites (although, much to his disappointment, the band never has played its brilliant "Salome"—a B-side from the *Achtung Baby* era—live in concert).

Still, I wondered whether U2's new material would resonate with this 21<sup>st</sup>-century teenager.

That night in Vancouver, I watched him watching them. And I saw him enter the sound, transfixed and electrified as the lads on stage launched into "The Miracle (of Joey Ramone)," a song Bono wrote about finding *his* band, the Ramones, when he was just a kid:

*I woke up at the moment when the miracle occurred  
Heard a song that made some sense out of the world  
Everything I ever lost, now has been returned  
In the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.*

As I write this, I'm preparing to leave to hear U2 play in San Francisco. It's my umpteenth show. I've stopped counting.

I know all the songs and the words and the postures and the choreography by heart. Yet, the sound beckons. The tribe gathers. And *pneuma* will have something new to say. She always does.

Let me in the sound....

# ONE MORE TIME WITH FEELING



## ONE MORE TIME WITH FEELING/SKELETON TREE

- reviewed by BARRY TAYLOR

“They said our gods would outlive us/They said our dreams would outlive us/They said our gods would outlive us/But they lied.”

**“Life is not a story, it’s often one event piled on top of another event,”** declares Nick Cave in the lovely and poignant documentary *One More Time With Feeling*, released to promote *Skeleton Tree*, Cave’s new album with The Bad Seeds. In the wake of the tragic death of his fifteen year-old son Arthur, the documentary was Cave’s idea, intended as a buffer, a way of promoting new work without having to face the press and the public.

To make an album and a documentary in the wake of immense grief and loss is, of course, an extraordinary accomplishment, although Cave wonders out loud very early on in the film as to whether or not the whole venture was a really bad idea. Thankfully it’s a truly extraordinary work—the accidental death of a child, cannot be seen as anything other than pain of a monumental sort that we hope might never come our way. But the film and the album are more than just admirable

efforts at confronting life's tragic curveballs. They are perhaps the most honest and beautiful confrontations with grief to have come along in a long long while. Along with David Bowie's final album, *Black Star*, released days before, and loaded with meditations on, what turned out to be the singer's own death, pop music in 2016 has given us some rich materials with which to face mortality. These works resonate with deep honesty, offering no easy answers to life's challenges.

You might think that a film shot in the wake of such an immense tragedy might be voyeuristically morbid, but nothing could be further from the truth. *One More Time With Feeling* isn't heavy-handed or leaden, it just breathes and aches and you breathe and ache with it. The film hints at Arthur's death from the beginning, but we are drawn deeper and deeper into the film before the tragedy is named. Filming in 3-D might seem to be a rather redundant choice for a documentary about recording some songs, but the camera spirals through everything, gently drawing us into the heart of things. The special effect here is the very life of this community, working through a torment difficult to imagine, and making something come to life in its wake.

In these days of platitudes and sloganeered answers to all of life's complexities, what the film really does, and this might just be it's greatest gift to us all, is to offer something rare: it faces grief in all of its rawness and doesn't "fix" it. Much like Christopher Hitchens challenging the notion of "fighting cancer," Cave faces the loss of his son, not by crying out to God, or overcoming the demon of loss and emerging triumphantly as the conqueror of grief. Instead, with candor, honesty and deep pain, Cave acknowledges that there are

events in life that change you, perhaps forever, changes from which you will never recover. "Time has become elastic," he says. You stretch away from the event but you are always snapped back to that moment when your life changed. The challenge then, and the gift Cave offers, is to remind us that surviving such loss is about figuring out, again and again, how to live with the unknown person the event has turned you into. Apparently seven of the eight songs featured in the film and which comprise *Skeleton Tree* were recorded before the death of his son, but they are not named. What we are left with is a work of art that is sublime meditation against the tragic unfairness of life. Toward the end of the documentary each person featured in the film is shown portrait-like against a gray wall—the film crew, the band, Nick's wife, his surviving twin son Earl, and then an empty frame—the portrait of a missing son, and then we hear Cave's voice explaining that he and his wife have decided to be happy as an act of revenge.

Tragedy strikes and we then must find a way to live again... without answers because there are none, and Cave's path of revenge might just be the way to go.

# HOPE IN THE DARK

By REBECCA SOLNIT

Haymarket Books  
2016

Reviewed by  
**Clare Bryden**

Activists come in all shapes and sizes...

My particular interest is in sustainability, especially in economics and climate change, and until 2009 I was an insider working in consultancy and government science. But more recently, my tendency has been toward what might be called the outlying practices of contemplative prayer, living the change, conceptual art, and writing.

Rebecca Solnit has been an outlier since the 1980s - a social justice activist who is committed to direct action; and a writer compelled to weave beauty into the conversation about the things that compassion demands we change. She first wrote *Hope in the Dark* in 2003-04 for activists, to "make the case for hope... against the tremendous despair at the height of the Bush administration's powers and the outset of the war in Iraq." This third edition includes a new foreword and afterwords, reflecting on the intervening twelve years. It is a timely publication, during a bizarre US presidential election in which it seems the stakes couldn't be higher, and at a moment which demands urgent and significant action on climate change.

For Solnit, *Hope in the Dark* "is one part of a vast, ongoing conversation about who we are, what powers we have, and what we can do with them." It is now part of the conversation in my head, with other books and ideas that have inspired me; another piece in my mental jigsaw puzzle of how I can be what the world needs.

When she locates hope in "the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act," I am reminded of how much wiggle room there is in the universe. Not just in the uncertainty inherent in quantum physics, but also in our minds: the wisdom available to us through what Jung called our unconscious, which, at its best, dances with linear Cartesian thinking.

Solnit quotes Paul Goodman: "Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society that you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!" My linear logical mind is uncertain whether my small attempts to live that way now or my contemplative prayer practice are really making a difference. But my unconscious, in its dark unknowing, convinces me that I must continue in that uncertainty.

Donald Rumsfeld recognized the existence of uncertainty in his "unknown unknowns," but he left out or never saw the unknown knowns, those things we don't like to admit. Walter Brueggemann wrote in *The Prophetic Imagination* of the need for prophetic grief in the face of how the Powers that Be deny change and death, and their wrong-headed insistence on perpetual business-as-usual. Solnit agrees that hope "is not the belief that everything was, is or will be fine... Grief and hope can coexist."

She invites us to imagine how things could have happened differently and better if 9/11 had not been followed by lies and propaganda that served the Bush government. Such imagination is a powerful tool. She also invites us to imagine (as in *It's a Wonderful Life*) how things could have happened differently and worse if we had not acted. It is important to acknowledge those victories that look like nothing has happened: the environmentally destructive road that wasn't built, or the fracking that was banned.

There are so many stories of victories, and individual and collective histories of change: but we are somehow trained to downplay or even erase them in the face of today's struggles. For Solnit, hope is the branches that grow out of the roots of recovering such memory. Much of *Hope in the Dark* is story and memory—"examples of positive change, of popular power, evidence that we can do it and have done it"—and this is primarily what will continue to resonate for me in my own activist ups and downs.

Alongside Solnit's stories of the Zapatistas, *Silent Spring*, Nunavut, and many others, we can set still more. I recently re-read Alastair McIntosh's *Soil and Soul*, an account of two successful campaigns in Scotland against a proposed super quarry on the Isle of Harris, and for land reform on the Isle of Eigg. Like many, these victories were incomplete. Land ownership is still concentrated in the hands of very few. Quarries will still be opened until we stop building unnecessary roads and use only recycled sources for crushed rock.

This is the essence of what Solnit calls a "seventy-

seven cent victory." Such a victory doesn't shut activism down either in the mistaken belief that we have won and our work is finished, or because a perfect victory is not immediately possible. Instead, it celebrates winning an increase in women's pay from sixty-six cents relative to the male dollar, vowing not to stop until parity is attained.

McIntosh is inspired by the writing of theologian Walter Wink on naming, unmasking and engaging the powers. Solnit doesn't directly draw on Wink, but often nods to his approach, for example: "Making an injury visible and public is usually the first step in remedying it." In the case of climate change, we should celebrate the investigative journalism which revealed how Exxon suppressed information about the impact of climate change, and the achievement of the Paris Agreement despite struggles<sup>10</sup>—while recognising how much further we still need to go and how rapidly the room to act offered by uncertainty is shrinking.

In one of the new additions to this edition, Solnit issues a challenge: "This is the time to find your place in [the climate movement]." I first found my place there in the early 1990s, and have to agree. The quotation (slightly out of context) that for me sums up *Hope in the Dark* is: "Here are some stories about other things BUT CLIMATE IS BIGGER THAN THIS." Thankfully, each story has also inspired me to recall my own; and to reaffirm the knowledge that others have achieved what they also once believed impossible. It can happen again.

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<sup>10</sup> See Christiana Figueres' [TED Talk](#)





## EYES TO SEE: Thoughts on John Crowley's *Little, Big: or, The Fairies' Parliament*

(Bantam Books, 1981)

Tyler McCabe

*Should I tear my eyes out now?*—I think to myself these days climbing into bed, sinking into the bathtub, pouring myself into a chair to watch television. I can't get these lyrics by Sufjan Stevens out of my mind: *Should I tear my eyes out now, before I see too much?*

It has been a difficult year. I have seen so much I had never seen before: black men and women and children gunned down, LGBTQ citizens gunned down, disabled citizens gunned down, justice steamrolled while trifles made headlines.

As a white man, I am beginning to see a wound non-white friends tell me has been present all their lives. As a young queer man, I am beginning to see an anger toward me that I don't understand, but I fear. The sight of violence is its own form of pain.

Like Gloucester in *King Lear*, whose eyes are gouged out before he gains inner sight, Stevens' lyric draws sight and truth into a paradox. What you see isn't always the truth; true sight is often marked by blindness and pain. Or as Rainer Maria Rilke writes, *Extinguish my eyes*. I want to see the truth - if I can - even if it pains me.

I recently began re-reading the novel *Little, Big* by John Crowley because it embodies this paradox in a way that allows me to get my hands around it, the way I imagine a blind person feels for Braille. First published in 1981 and continuously in print ever since, *Little, Big* is considered by many to be one of the greatest works of magical realism ever written by a U.S. American. The story follows the Drinkwater family borne of the mysterious patriarch who built their family home, Edgewood, just over or outside a portal to *another realm* - like a plug in a drain or a padlock on a door. Edgewood is an impossible structure of crisscrossing architectural styles that seems perpetually overstuffed and hauntingly empty, both cramped and cavernous, in a way that defies explanation. Much of what goes on in the Drinkwater family defies explanation. Old-world magic—the kind with fairies as fickle as nature, infant changelings, astrological interference, tarot decks, and tea leaves—seems to crackle at the edges of the story, rarely revealing itself outright.

The book is a fantasy but not the popular kind; while pure fantasy (*Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter*) dwells entirely within its own world, magical realism takes the world we know and literalizes aspects of it, enlarging them for inspection—the same way Georgia O'Keeffe paints a flower out of scale: "I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking the time to look at it."

It makes me sad that this kind of exercise is necessary; what is the nature of our blindness that we'd miss a flower? I want to believe that tragic events can clear our vision, that they present us

with an opportunity to repent. Our recent police shootings of black citizens stand in for a culture of racism that leads to (and defends) such things. I am sorry I was surprised. I cannot waste the moment that follows this surprise; I cannot go back. When a truth confronts you, it presents a moral contract. How will you respond? Will you break from human duty or roll up your sleeves?

The truth that binds the Drinkwater family—that presents a duty—is referred to as the Tale, a grand narrative that began ages before the Drinkwater family existed and will far outlast them. I live my life relative to meta-narratives not so different. The Tale involves the fate of the family, Edgewood, and the entire world on both sides of the portal. You could call it faith. But just as in our lives, not every character realizes the Tale is advancing around them, nor how their actions move the world ever closer to its culmination. Even the characters that know the Tale frequently lose sight of it darting in and out of their daily lives.

Central to the Tale's unfolding is Auberon Drinkwater. The Tale tries to reveal itself to him in so many ways, dependent upon his reaction, needing his faith for its culmination. But he flees. He runs away from the Tale and Edgewood for a huge portion of the novel, and I relate to him. It is easy to say you want the painful truth, you want to fulfill your duty, you want to be blind in love, you want all of God—but it is difficult to be pained, be bound, be blind, be holy.

In a city far from the epicenter of the story, Auberon falls in love with a woman named Sylvie, and together they settle into a life. Too soon, he experiences a tragedy that threatens his sanity: Sylvie disappears. She vanishes so quickly he wonders if he has lost his mind. His grief locks him in a literal garden of memories:

**“The Earth rolled its rotundity around, tilting the little park where Auberon sat one, two, three days more face-upwards to the changeless sun. The warm days were growing more frequent, and though never matching quite the earth’s regular progress, the warmth was already more constant, less skittish, soon not ever to be withdrawn. Auberon, hard at work there, hardly noticed; he kept on his overcoat; he had ceased to believe in spring, and a little warmth couldn’t convince him. Press on, press on.”**

Auberon mourns Sylvie and interrogates the meaning of losing her—just as we do with the events that threaten to crush us. They are real. In grieving, we sit still and press on. As Auberon discovers, it’s possible that contemplating suffering aligns us with a larger truth. Or, as it may be, our *belief* that it does—and our dedicated actions to make a better world rooted in this belief—manifest our truth. In this sense, awakening to pain, seeing it face-to-face for what it is, is the same as foreshadowing its demise.

Despite the difficulty of the year, despite our blindness, despite our crimes, it is possible we will discover we have a monumental role to play in the culmination of joy. It is possible. My pain is like a blindness through which I see a new world.

Auberon sits in the garden for a season, until he gains inner sight: “‘Now where do we go?’ He drew out the key the old woman had given him. It was necessary to unlock the wrought-iron gate in order to leave, just as it was in order to enter. ‘Home, I guess,’ Auberon said. Little girls playing jacks and plucking dandelions along the path looked up to watch him talk to himself. ‘I guess, home.’”

A night sky over a lake with a meteor streaking across it. The sky is dark blue with many stars. A bright white streak with a blue tail is visible in the upper right quadrant. The lake is in the lower left, and the silhouettes of trees are on the right.

Dear Friends -

The meteors that sailed into our planet's atmosphere last night traveled billions of miles and began their journey in the tailings of a comet thousands of years ago. Amazing! I enjoyed witnessing this meteor fly over Lake Wheeler a few hours ago. May we all have the energy and perseverance to be lights of hope and peace for one another.

Peace and all good things -

Michael P Citrini

August, 2016

# *The Tenderness of Now*

TERESA  
PASQUALE  
MATEUS

I just moved to Chicago from Florida, after six and a half years living in tropical climates where the coldest winter day could get as low as 60 degrees. It is funny how quickly your body disconnects from the changing of seasons, something that was rhythmic and predictable for me as a child in Northern New Jersey. I am settling into this new city, in this foreign territory they call the Midwest, and Fall is creeping in.

Well, probably creeping is too subtle a word—the bluster of wind, chill and rain appeared two days ago and never left. Blasting sun and heat changed to falling leaves and layers of clothes in not much more than 24 hours. My sense memory was transported back to an experiential place my mind had temporarily forgotten.

What I have learned is that when our senses discern the presence of the past there can be an overflow of experiences and memories, some tucked far away, like gifts, or curses, from history.

Fall is the smell of leaf piles and Hallowe'en candy, of caked mud on my boots after walks through the park with my parents and my graciously elegant yellow labrador, Sandy. It is the beginnings of fireplace fires and reading books in the living room. It is back when I read novels and dreamed more. It is the memory of things that were easier than they seemed and harder than they should have been, at the time: the fights with my parents, replete with slammed doors and red pouting faces; the

struggle to understand the "who-ness" of myself—that one could have been saved for a decade or two; scaring myself with my own horror stories, made up to freak out my baby brother; and always feeling more melancholy than any given situation ever actually warranted.

The onset of bluster and chill regenerates those places and spaces in my mind—and reminds me of both how much things change, but how much the core of me holds the same.

Fall is the time where things die away, to be buried by drifts of snow, and be uncovered again with the new life of Spring. It is a time of preparation and laying dormant, where the night skies begin to seep into spaces of daylight, lengthening darkness in daytime. It is where we must let go of things we don't need and cloak ourselves in what we do—to survive until the sunshine of springtime.

As a therapist, I spend a lot of my life's work in Fall and winter. I'm working with clients to help remember the imminence of spring. Fall is where much of the work gets done, and it is where we are called to the hard task of remembering that things must die away, so that newness can begin to be born—under the earth and the cold and the impending snow, before we can even see it, nourished by the death that precedes it.

Fall is a reminder to let go. It is also a reminder of the beauty of that process—



and the call to us not to be afraid of the dying, because it is the place of gestation for new life and beauty and flowering. It is also a sacred place. It is where all ends begin and all beginnings are given their possibility—it is where grace and love and courage shows up, even when we thought those things were myths before they arrived. Bluster and chill have a particular scent, and with that comes the inclination towards hot tea, warm scarves, and the nurturing hug of a warm blanket. There is comfort in that, if we let ourselves be ensconced in, rather than drowned by, the phenomenon of Fall. It asks us to let the old fall away, so the new can begin to seed—in the spaces we cannot yet see, but wait for us, patiently, until the next spring.

# PETERSON TOSCANO

## Grief is a funny thing.

**I** remember my dad's funeral in 2006, the first American funeral my South African husband witnessed. "It's just like in the movies," he said when he heard there was going to be an open casket. In South Africa they either have a closed casket or opt for cremation. A month later he asked me what funeral arrangements I wanted when my time rolled around. "I want it all!" I said, feeling cheeky for the first time in awhile. "I want to be cremated, AND I want an open casket. Obviously it will need to be a small casket. Put a little rake in it too, and turn my remains into a zen garden."

Morbid, I know. But I'm from a funny family, especially when it comes to death. When my dad's own mother, my Grandma Toscano died, he initiated an odd practice. Dad brought discount bread, doughnuts, and bagels to his mother's grave and dumped the baked goods over her buried remains. In his Bronx accent he explained, "When the animals come to eat the bread, they visit Ma - the squirrels, the raccoons, the deer. And the deer leave droppings, like little rosary beads for grandma."

My mom was funny about death too. Back in 2004, she discovered she had terminal lung cancer, eight years before my dad died from it too. My sisters and I were devastated. In complete denial. This woman was indestructible; too big to fail. Sure she smoked for decades, but our mom couldn't be *that* sick.

She gathered us all for a family meeting, and in a gravelly, New York voice that sounded a lot like the unmistakable rasp of Harvey Fierstein, she said, "Alright, I talked to the funeral director..."

We protested, it was too soon; *do we have to talk about this now?*

She waved her hand to silence us, "When it comes my time, I

don't want a funeral. I don't want a wake. I don't want you to lay me out, and I don't want a Catholic mass. I just want to be cremated." Then she paused as we took a collective deep breath. She continued, "Now if you want a memorial service because you need that sort of thing, that's fine; just leave me out of it!"

How do you wrap your head and heart around something as huge as a terminally ill parent or partner or friend? We all have different ways of coping, some so common that experts list them as stages. When something of this magnitude rolls into our lives, our relationship to time changes. Everything becomes precious and takes on a new shine. At least it does for me.

During the two years my mother was dying, hanging on mostly so that we could spend more time together, little things filled our world. I remember the days when she was strong enough to cook. Each mouthful felt sacred. I still can see us at the table, when she had enough strength to eat the food we prepared for her. She would take ceremonial bites and then retreat, exhausted, to the couch. For hours we sat on the front porch saying nothing, knowing that time was a priceless commodity not to be traded. During those weeks

social media, the news, vacations, work, and all that rush outside of us took a backseat or dissolved completely. Normally mundane moments sharpened, clarified, became more real.

We can run from grief, drown it out with pleasures and comforts. Sometimes we must. But grief and loss acknowledged and embraced can ground us and help us understand where we are in history. The significance of a moment. I am fortunate in that I have art to help me come closer to grief. During my parents' illnesses I turned to poetry. After their deaths, I embraced my grief on stage, using comedy and storytelling to bring my parents near to me and others.

These days we are all witnesses to a dying. The air we breathe has been compromised with toxins from decades of pollution damaging it much like my dad's lungs were wrecked from working with asbestos during his twenties, and my mom's compromised from cigarettes. Shame, blame, and fear threaten to smother us. No wonder some people doubt and maintain denial. The diagnosis is dire.

Much like I wondered, "How can I live as my parents grow



weak and die," today I consider, "How do we live in a time of climate change?" There are still interventions and solutions to pursue; there is still hope and there are actions for us to take, but as the earth and the atmosphere I knew in my youth alters dramatically and a new reality emerges, how do I proceed emotionally and spiritually? As a family of earthlings, how do we embrace this moment? Although it feels feeble compared to the severity of the challenges we face, I once again turn to art and storytelling. Much like my

sisters and I spent hours flipping through photo albums as mom slept on the couch, I now dive into history to discover mysteries from ancestors who faced seemingly impossible odds, and miraculously banded together and remained human.

I find too that I am more aware of the world around me, and simple pleasures - a cup of coffee, the rare winter day when ice forms on the window pane like in my childhood, a picnic lunch on a temperate afternoon. I feel the

preciousness in moments that remind me of what I once assumed would always be there.

There is a time to mourn. But mourning does not have to be an end. It can be action. It alters us and the world around us. Mourning, in revealing what is truly valuable, can engage us and make us more alive. In that way too grief is a funny thing.



*Kevin insisted that all parties suck.*

# the facts of life

*Pádraig O'Tuama*

That you were born  
and you will die.

That you will sometimes  
love enough  
and sometimes not.

That you will lie  
if only to yourself.

That you will get tired.

That you will learn most  
from the situations  
you did not choose.

That there will be some  
things that move you  
more than you can say.

That you will live  
that you must be loved.

That you will avoid  
questions most urgently  
in need of  
your attention.

That you began as the  
fusion of a sperm and an  
egg  
of two people who once  
were strangers  
and may well still be.

That life isn't fair.

That life is sometimes good  
and sometimes even better  
than good.

That life is often not so  
good.

That life is real  
and if you can survive it,  
well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art  
and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce.

That you will learn to live  
with regret.  
That you will learn to live  
with respect.

That the structures that  
constrict you  
may not be permanently  
constricting.

That you will probably be  
okay.

That you must accept  
change  
before you die  
but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live  
and you might as well love.  
You might as well love.  
You might as well love.



**“Yes, I hate that she did that.  
But I also know things at her home  
have been really hard.  
Her parents have been fighting a lot. I  
know it’s not really who she is.”**

*–Anna, eleven years old, in response  
to a classmate bullying her  
repeatedly.*



BRIAN AMMONS



CLARE BRYDEN



MARK CHARLES



STEVE DAUGHERTY



CATHLEEN FALSANI



MONA HAYDAR



GARETH HIGGINS



MICKY SCOTTBEY JONES



MICHELLE LEBARON



TERESA PASQUALE MATEUS



TYLER McCABE



KEISHA E MCKENZIE



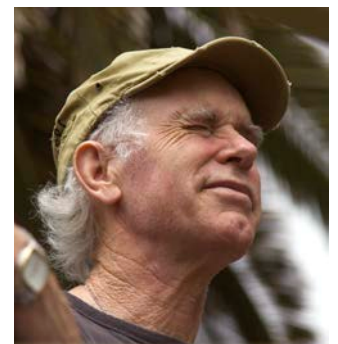
JASMIN MORRELL



PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA



MIRA RAHILI



MIKE RIDDELL



FRANK SCHAEFFER



BARRY TAYLOR



PETERSON TOSCANO



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