

Realistic Living

A Journal on Religion and Ethics

Contents of this Issue

July 2022

Issue 77

LIVING IN THE LAND OF MYSTERY
religious philosophy by Gene Marshall

ECOTHEATER
Ecozoic-era theater by Joyce Marshall

FELINE FAMILIARS
a cat obituary by Joyce Marshall

GRIEF, MOURING, & FREEDOM
a witness by Alan Richard

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE
movie reviews by Joyce Marshall

REALISTIC LIVING
statement of purpose
resources & finances

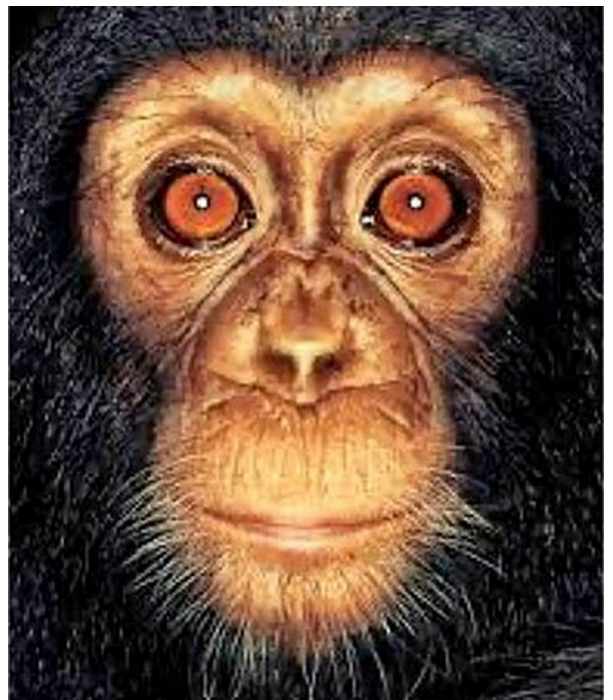
We have never seen this before.
We will never see it again.
This moment is fresh,
Unexpected,
Surprising.
As this moment moves into the past,
It cannot be fully remembered.
All memory is a creation of our minds.
And our minds cannot fathom the Land of Mystery,
much less remember it.
We experience Mystery Now
And only Now.
Any previous Now is gone forever.
Any yet-to-be Now is not yet born.
We live Now,
only Now,
in a Land of Mystery.

Living in the Land of Mystery

Innovative Religious Philosophy
by Gene Marshall

“Approximate Knowing” is short for “Living in the Land of Mystery.” Here is a poem about this Land of Mystery that surrounds us, interpenetrates us, and provides us with all our content for knowing:

We live in a Land of Mystery.
We know nothing about it.
We don't know where we have come from.
We don't know where we are going.
We don't know where we are.
We are newborn babes.
We have never been here before.



This Land of Mystery is an enduring presence that can be felt in every moment if we are sensitive enough. And this Land of Mystery is an active agency rushing towards us as the Profound Reality that we meet in the unstoppable flow of time.

The enlightenment of the Buddha can be described as leaving the karma of the acculturated mind for an experience of the bliss of equanimity within this profoundly real, always existing Land of Mystery. The new birth in Christianity can be described as healing the strife between our many devotions by a reconciling loyalty to the Land of Mystery. The Exodus from the caste systems of Egyptian slavery into a journey through the wilderness of continual re-socializing can also be viewed as an exploration of the blessing of living in that Land of Mystery that envelops us all.

Temporal Anthropology in the Land of Mystery

The vision of a depth anthropology adequate for 2022 and beyond will be rooted in the *evolution of life* on planet Earth. The narrative of evolution begins about 3.5 billion years ago. The evolution story is relatively brief compared to the scope of the *physical emergence* of the entire cosmos. The start of that immense process is currently dated at 13.8 billion years ago. Compared with these two vast scopes of time, the narrative of the human being is quite short. Only a few million years ago do we find in the archeological record the brain size and throat structures in an upright-walking primate species that would make possible the development of oral language. Art may have evolved before language and mathematics somewhat later. These three symbol-using features have made possible a human consciousness that can reflect upon our own consciousness and thereby become aware of being conscious. With this additional awareness and resulting freedom, the human species became able to shape the structures of its own social commonality. This commonality included cultural forms for our consciousness, structures of political order, and patterns for living our common economic lives.

Many species that evolved prior to humans have had specific cultures of communication, common political fabrics, and common economic lives, but our human form of consciousness has made possible both taking in more awareness of our natural and social environments and taking on more responsibility for the future of our societies. It is this unique “more” in the human form of consciousness that constitutes a major turn in the evolution of life on planet Earth.

After some vast and careful thinking, Thomas Berry claimed that the following three major phases constitute our context for an adequate anthropology: the *inanimate emergence*, the *evolution of life*, and the *history of humanity*. Berry called these three processes of emergence “cosmogogenesis.” Berry preferred this *process* word to the more *static* word “cosmos.” In fact, Berry asked us to view the nature of all temporal “things” as a “process”—an ongoing-ness, if you like, rather than a static-ness. It may still seem strange to think of every atom, every galaxy, every item in our house, and every aspect of our own bodies as a process rather than a static object. The very words “object” and “substance” have thereby been given this new meaning: “a relatively slow process.” Words tend to stop time, but real time does not stop.

This shift in the imagining of “temporal realities” includes the awareness that all our thoughts are approximate. Each thought is a process moving from a past form to a future form. Each thought can become a better thought. No thought has dropped down from some world of permanent thoughts. Some thoughts are long-lasting like Jung’s archetypes, but even these are cultural temporalities awaiting betterment.

Nevertheless, becoming aware of that enduring Mysteriousness that is constantly encountering us can reveal to us better from worse with regard to our thoughtful approximations of that Final Mystery. It is not that we create what is more real. We only create better or worse approximations of expressing the enduring Profound Reality that always was and always shall be. Reality continues to be a real *Thereness* that “judges” which approximations are better and which are worse. Our very best overviews are not Reality with a capital “R,” but only our best approximations of Reality. This humility is quite easy

LIVING IN THE LAND OF MYSTERY

to come by; we just admit the reality of it. Real life humility is just a matter of giving up the arrogance of our pretenses of some completeness of thought.

In this process-conceived world of thoughtfulness, our new sociological visions now arrive in our minds as narratives that interpret the events of the past in order to project options for the future and enable decisions to be made in the present. In this context of meanings we see Thomas Berry naming future prospects like the Ecozoic future and the Technozoic future. Each of these two futures is one of two options for choice to be made in the present. Neither is a prediction, and neither is a fate. Both are viable and possible options to be chosen by humanity in the present. Our past events provide content for understanding these options. Berry does a similar naming of a long past era of life on Earth with the overall necessity for a radically new type of era for the next era of life on Earth. He contrasts the 65-million-year-old Cenozoic Era with a now emerging era he calls the Ecozoic Era in which humans have become a very prominent natural-Earth power whose choices matter in a whole-Earth way. These general thoughts characterize any currently-adequate anthropology.

Another key source for an adequate anthropology I have found in Susan K. Langer's book *Philosophy in a New Key*—in which she made clear to me the essence of art, language and mathematics. These three actions of the human intelligence distinguish the intelligence of the human species from the chimpanzee and other primates. We share so many of our genes with the chimpanzee that the human species can meaningfully be called "the third chimpanzee" (the other two being a pygmy chimp (the smaller species) and the larger species we know best.).

Furthermore, language, art and mathematics form a unity we might call "symbol using intelligence." We cannot even understand what language is without understanding what art is and what mathematics is. Understanding this trio of symbol-using also assists us in understanding the nature of the difference between those three unique aspects of our human intelligence and those aspects of our own consciousness that we share with the

other animals. This intelligence that is unique to humans is built upon that basic animal intelligence. We humans must not project upon these other living species an intelligence using the human symbolizing of art, language and mathematics.



Mathematics is a study of the ordering capacities of the human mind. Mathematics is an enormous field of study—as immense as the field of linguistics. Mathematics is more than an abstract form of language; it is a third symbol-using facility.

Art is also an enormous field of study. Music, dance, and toning are non-linguistic arts that have to do with time (virtual time). Painting, sculpture, and architecture are non-linguistic arts that have to do with space (virtual space). Poetry/song, story, and drama are linguistic arts that have to do with events or narratives of meaning (virtual events). All the arts express a grounding in specific "being" while mathematics is a highly abstract form of "knowing" compared with language's usefulness for specific processes of "doing."

"Knowing, being, and doing" (KBD) are primary dynamics of all consciousness—human consciousness, chimpanzee consciousness, alligator consciousness, worm consciousness, amoeba consciousness. Is there a tree consciousness? If there is, it will be found to also have knowing-being-doing aspects. In the human form of consciousness, the only form of consciousness humans know directly, we humans speak of these KBD aspects in the following ways:

awareness—identity—freedom
attention—presence—intention
taking-in—self-awareness—putting-forth
encounter—formation—response.

All this vast complexity can be boiled down to the “knowing—being—doing” pattern. as a symbolizing ordering all this boundless enigma for which we use this word “consciousness.”

Furthermore, aliveness and consciousness are corresponding concepts. Every entity that is conscious is also alive. And every entity that is alive is in some measure conscious. Using the word “measure” here is a stretch.. Furthermore, every word of language we use to describe consciousness is an approximation of the real consciousness of our consciousness that no word can fully describe.

About the Book

The above essay is from the introduction of a new book entitled *Approximate Knowing: Some Anthropology for the 21st Century*. Following is the table of contents for this book:

Table of Contents

Introduction: Living in the Land of Mystery

Part One: The Evolution and Presence of Natural Intelligence in the Human Species

A. Seven Layers of Natural Intelligence

B. Four Paths toward Approximating the Mysterious Truth

C. The Interfacing of A and B Typologies

Conclusions to Part One
the relativity of human identity

Part Two: Knowing Profound Reality Approximately and the Defeat of our Anthropocentric Rationalism

A. What is Religion?

B. The Wisdom of Primal Metaphors
Arising to our View in our Inter-religious Era

C. Beyond “Knowing Approximately”

(1) Immediate Presence

To the Otherness of Profound Reality
and to the grounding of our Escapist Mysticism

(2) Obedient Freedom

To the Otherness of Profound Reality
and to the disintegration of our Ego Promotion

Conclusions to Part Two

Faith as a true deed of trust
in the trustworthiness of Profound Reality
however that trustworthiness is being revealed

Section A of Part One

In this section I explore more of what I introduce in this introduction. I continue this sketch of an emerging anthropology of consciousness using some ancient wisdom from India called “the seven chakras.” I compare this contemplation of human consciousness with seven stages of evolution revealed in the contemporary sciences.

Section B of Part One

In this section I explore four different human approaches to approximate truths of the Ultimate Truth that we know we don’t know fully with our finite minds. Nevertheless, we have a direct connection with this Unknown Reality in our deep or profound consciousness.

These four approaches to truth first came to my awareness in my dialogue with the writings of the philosopher Ken Wilber who gave me an understanding of three distinct approaches to truth: (1) the *It-approach* [the objective science approach], (2) the *I-approach* [the interior contemplation approach] and (3) the *We-approach* to truth. I have broken down this third approach into two sub-approaches. Here are my names for them: (3a) the interpersonal approach and (3b) the social commonality approach.

In this section I explore how these four approaches to truth are unavoidable—taken on by

every human being. I also spell out how these four approaches to truth cannot be rationally reduced to one another. Each one of the four remains an approach to that One Overall Profound Reality of Absolute Mystery. This means that the human mind is incapable of ever achieving a total rational grasp of the Full Truth. The best that we humans will ever be able to do is strap together for practical purposes four separate pools of approximate truth.

Section C of Part One

In Section C of Part One, I combine the evolutionary time quality of the seven layers of human intelligence with the intellectual spacing of the four approaches to truth, thereby creating a narrative of historical development for each of these four approaches to truth.

Part Two

Part Two of the book is about religion—religion as a vast number of different efforts for giving approximate expression to the inexpressible experience of the one overall Profound Reality—that Encountering Eventfulness that each of us is up against, confront, encounter, and respond to every moment of our lives. Profound Reality sustains us, and Profound Reality is that *Void* out of which each of us have come and into which each of us will return. This *Void* is also an enduring companion in which our awareness can swim in each living now.

In addition, Profound Reality is that *Fullness* that connects everything and that includes our freedom as response-ability for the lives of all humans, for all life on the planet, and for all the Earth-processes that support life and bring all life to a close.

Religion is best understood as a practice that some people do, rather than as an identity. or even a subculture to which people belong. We practice a religion in a similar sense that we practice a piano or a violin. Yet religion is a different practice than playing an instrument or creating art. The practice of a religion is for the sake of assisting us to be more immediately aware of Profound Reality and/or of

acting out our lives from our states of Profound-Reality-awareness. In other words, there is nothing Eternal about a religion, yet an effective religion can assist us to be in touch with the Profound Reality that is Eternal.

Help!

Those of you who are students or explorers of these topics who would like to dialogue with me about finishing this brief book, please e-mail me at gwesleymarshall@gmail.com. I welcome any sort of commentary encouragement, critique, suggestions, or corrections. Questions for further clarity can also be helpful tips to me.

EcoTheater

A Theater for the Ecozoic Era

By Joyce Marshall

(This article was written for Herman Greene's Ecozoic Journal in 2005.)

The Ecozoic Era will include a new culture to undergird a new polity and a new economy. That new culture will include a new human being. This new human being requires being who we already are in our own deep nature, being who we are in our own local history, and being who we are as members of a natural community of people, animals, plants, and microbes.



To enable us to realize this new humanity we will need, among other things, a new art. And a new art will include a new theater. EcoTheater is such theater. EcoTheater is an art movement that is already in history with considerable sophistication. The name EcoTheater means a place for seeing (Theater) home (Eco) -- a place for seeing home. EcoTheater provides a venue for seeing our home -- who we are and where and how we actually live our lives.

The name EcoTheater often causes people to assume that it is out to further ecological causes or "grind axes" of some sort. EcoTheater, however, is art -- that is, not propaganda for any cause no matter how good we might consider it to be. It is concerned with protecting the authenticity of its productions so that each is a purposeful, concentrated communication that reveals the mystery of our connectedness.

A Brief History of EcoTheater

I discovered EcoTheater through an article in a 1984 issue of CoEvolution Quarterly written by the EcoTheater founder, Maryat Lee. Theater was my minor in college and I resonated immediately with Lee's dissatisfaction with theater as it is usually presented. In the article, she says, "The words 'acting' and 'actor' have an association with pretension for most people outside the theater. I want something different. I just want the person simply, and not so simply, to be themselves. When that happens, there is a beautiful unspoiled quality of truth and an authority that nourishes me and makes it all worthwhile." She goes on to explain that this approach does not mean the actors play the same "being" in each play. Any one person's capacity to be many people with different aims, habits, accents, is amazing. In casting, it is important that the actors find within themselves the character they are playing.

Lee's idea of theater as a mirror and a window for seeing one's own home was also captivating. She had come upon the method in 1951 in Harlem, when as a student at Union Theological Seminary she created a play called "Dope!" from interviews with

residents and with local non-actors. Performed on the streets for thousands (many on fire escapes), it was featured on the front page of Variety and in Life magazine. Lee went on to develop SALT (Soul and Latin Theater) in the 60s which played in New York City streets from a hay wagon. In the 70s Lee returned to her native Appalachia and led a number of productions featuring the life of the people there. By 1984, Lee had incorporated EcoTheater and was beginning to teach others to be playwright/directors and to use her method of showing local people how real, significant, and precious their life experiences are. I was fortunate to do the full training (6 week-long workshops) with Lee before her death in 1989. Since that time I have trained others to be playwright/directors and directed local performing troupes.

The Methods of EcoTheater

The fundamental role of EcoTheater is to encourage the development and performance of original theater created by local people. This includes the understanding that theater is a natural, simple, and universal ability in everyone and that the telling of your own story has a powerful and life-changing impact. Many EcoTheater scenes are developed from oral history -- the stories of local people about their lives and times. Lee discovered a method of collaboration between playwright and actor that allowed the natural talk of the region to flow uninhibited. EcoTheater is committed to bringing theater back home, honoring local speech and idiom. This means trusting the power of that local voice which does not "talk down" to its audience, in fact, which does not "act" at all, but simply reveals that which is usually hidden.

The co-creation between playwright/director and actor involves the necessity of learning to take authority as a whole and to "flip" it. Lee discovered an important life truth: authority is not cut up in little pieces and shared. One must grasp full authority in order to keep it whole to flip to others. The playwright/director takes authority to write a script, then "flips" the authority to the actors to improvise and make the script their own. The playwright/

director then rewrites the script, judiciously using the actual words of the actors. The result of this collaboration is that the scripts are made to fit the performers, not the other way around. Another result is that in performance, the scenes feel real. Audiences of EcoTheater are aware that there is no invisible wall between them and the actors and they are often moved to laughter and to tears. A central aim of EcoTheater is to create “moments of being” when we know our connectedness with each other and with our home, to allow us to experience our common humanity.

Another aspect of EcoTheater is its commitment to a theater stripped down to its essentials, to what is basic and real, even if crude. This means it does not try to imitate the gloss and polish of professional productions. It is a theater from the bottom up, which can operate on low budget or no budget. We avoid getting involved in creating fancy effects with lights, staging, costuming, makeup. This means that a performance can happen with simple statements: “O.K. Here is the stage. The characters are—.”

So, from 1989 to 2014 I was a playwright/director of EcoTheater. The link below is the only video of all the scenes and songs in one of our evening’s performance. It is the final performance of our local Bonham Troupe who performed dinner theater for 12 years. I didn’t watch this video until this past year. I thought of it as our “worst” performance. We had lost one of our principals (John Howell) and some of our crew was unable to participate and we were breaking in a new performer, etc. etc. But when I saw it I was surprised that in spite of all those whatevers, the truth of EcoTheater still came through. Paula’s link includes a brief history of our troupe, a review of the performance written by an audience member (which gives a good sense of how the audience experiences EcoTheater), a history of Maryat Lee, and excerpts of her writings. The video has the scenes and the songs which our troupe included for each scene, but unfortunately not the audience response.

<https://paulaspicsandsuch.shutterfly.com/prairiehometheater>

Feline Familiars

A Cat Obituary

By Joyce Marshall

I first saw Gray, Gray Cat, heard her, in December of 1991 when we were fixing up the house we’d bought to move 5 miles north of Bonham Texas. It was a 1976 doublewide mobile home. We were tearing out the old shag carpets to be replaced and painting dark walls white. Pat was helping us. She and I took a break and walked into the woods. There was (and is still, as we rebuilt it) a two-story playhouse near the house. We heard a cat as we passed it. I climbed up and there she was, on the second level curled up in the leaves. Solid gray, small and thin and scared. We fed her some milk. We returned to Dallas. She showed up again when we moved in later that month. I didn’t plan nor expect to have a pet. She came to the door, hungry. I couldn’t deny her food. Gene agreed to feed her. Of course she returned. Then the weather got very cold. I couldn’t deny her the warmth of the house. Gene reluctantly agreed, so we had a pet. She was petite and sensitive. I liked her and identified with her. In the cat book she looked like the Russian Blue, solid gray with green eyes. We named her Gray Cat and called her Gray. The vet guessed her age at two years and said she’d already been spayed; so she had been someone’s pet. Why anyone would turn out such a fine beautiful animal to fend for herself, I can’t imagine. She was a beauty. Very soft, small face, small body, balanced.



Photo by John Howell

FELINE FAMILIARS

It was like having a new baby. We had to work out our relationship to her. It took time. She was the first “child” we parented together. We enjoyed her antics. She enjoyed playing with a ping pong ball and chasing the bird toy. She was very good and fast. She created a game she often repeated. She would jump up the wall at a certain spot in the hall, then race through the back of the house and back down the hall through the living area. She brought a bit more wildness into our lives. She wasn’t allowed on cooking or eating places. At first she was squeamish. She wouldn’t allow her stomach touched at all. But she gradually warmed up, became calmer. She loved to have her head and face touched and brushed. She purred as long as you touched her.

At first she was cautious with new people and other animals, but she always joined every gathering when people were here and became friendly and playful although afraid of children. She loved music. If I played or sang at the piano she came and sat on the bench beside me. She also liked to dance. I would dance holding her for a long time. She loved it.

Here is how I described her at the time: She makes it clear what she wants and when she wants it. She wants no doors closed and easy access to wherever she decides. She climbs between me and my book when I’m reading. She is fine being alone most of the time but when she wants attention she wants it now. She is a study in wild dignity.

She goes to Gene for her morning food. I am considered the best lap. Uncle John (who moved into the mobile when we built our straw-bale house) is like her second parent.

She chases cats that come around and growls at them. Except for Old Gus. She lets us feed him but doesn’t want him in the house. She lies near him in the sun outside. Later when we took in Lego as a kitten she was aging and did not accept him. Her toleration remained low toward him.

Once three dogs chased her. Noisy! She climbed high in a tree and didn’t come down for a long time. She seemed to make a resolution to stay closer to home.

She showed affection by touching her nose to mine and sometimes lightly nibbling my fingers or

licking my hand. Or flopping her body against us in the night. It became a ritual for her to join me on the bed for my morning journaling and reading. She guarded it as her time when Lego joined us. Every morning began with her nose kiss. She liked to lie on me with her face right next to mine.

She was a good hunter: lizards, mice, moles, rabbits. She brought them all to us, sometimes dead, sometimes not. Occasionally she got on a tear and rushed through the house. Once ending up on top of the buffet and my Mother’s Japanese teapot crashed to the floor in smithereens. Another time she played with a ginger jar, knocking it to the floor. The tile floors in our straw bale house we built later are unforgiving. Sometimes she would follow us on walks to the lake, staying close to the trees.

When we moved the mobile home to build the new house she got into the heating ducts and I had to pull her out by the scruff of her neck.

The only time she appeared to notice the TV was when there was a special on cats. She heard them, got to watching and sat fascinated.

Gray slurped when she bathed herself and snored a bit when sleeping soundly. When hungry she meowed loudly and if you asked her she answered “yes.” When you let her in from outside she made a small acknowledging sound - “Thanks.” As she aged she became more vocal - yowled, cried, asked for food with loud expressive sounds.

Her health was good until she was 16. Then she developed kidney disease. Got very thin. She lived two more years growing steadily thinner and weaker. Her legs began to give out. She had difficulty getting up on couches, the bed, the windows—clawing herself up and sometimes getting her claws hung. She could no longer cover her litter and sometimes she missed the box and peed on the floor. She evidently wasn’t absorbing her food as she wanted to eat all the time. She often cried or yowled after eating or drinking. It seemed to comfort her when I talked to her, telling her I heard her. Also holding her, massaging her. She always loved touch. She slept a lot.

This is how she died. On Tuesday, September 30, 2007, she did not follow Gene to the kitchen for her food, something she always did. He carried her there.

She ate a small amount which was unusual. She did not get up to my desk to drink out of “her” glass. She had peed on the floor. That day we went to the dentist in Dallas and did not get back until about 2:00. We both stumbled over her in the hallway (unusual). She went to the living room window and slept. (Our straw-bale house has wide window seats.) We each stretched out on a couch and napped to recover from the dental work and trip to Dallas. I had opened the door to the deck as it was warm out and cool inside. When I woke, Gray wasn’t in the window. I thought she might have stepped out on the deck to warm up. No. I searched the house. No Gray. Gene and I searched the woods. No Gray. I don’t know how she even got down the deck steps, much less into the woods. Evidently she knew it was her day to die, and with super cat strength, she got to a private place to do so. She laid herself to rest - where she chose.

I sent an email to those who knew her. Many expressed condolences and how they would miss her, too. I did a lot of crying. Listened to Leonard Cohen. I realized yet again, that death is final. It is now fourteen years since she left us. I still miss her. I still grieve her loss. She isn’t there on the cushion in the window, on the bed, on her favorite living room chair, on the kitchen stool where she watched us eat. I miss her awareness, her presence. Her Being. Her talking, even her complaining. Dancing with her. Her sitting by me on the piano bench when I play and sing.

A beautiful being, a strong presence, a fine hunter. She enjoyed people, loved music and dance, loved to cuddle and be touched, expressed herself clearly and kept her boundaries. Her unrepeatable glory will never be forgotten.

My daughter Leslie read my memories of Gray and wrote this poem which expresses my feelings perfectly.

Gray’s Elegy

What did it cost you dear, my Gray
So swift, to limp so far away?

My loyal loving, social cat,
Why did you disappear like that?

July 2022

I would have held you close,
to lie within these arms to die—
have let you feel your place is here,
have comforted you, kept you near.
To faithfully repay the love you gave
from day to day.

Your death you spared me by your art,
Though you will never leave my heart.

Grief, Mourning, & Freedom

A Witness by Alan Jay Richard

If you live in the United States, the chances are good that, at some point during the period between January 2020 and now, grief came to your doorstep. Someone close to you died, perhaps several someones, and this took place at a time when it was becoming terrifyingly clear that the U.S. public health system was dead, had in fact been deliberately murdered, that the strangulation of local news and the rise of “big data” may have already killed truth itself, and that U.S. democracy was dying. We are having to learn once again what it means to grieve, and we will learn, if we haven’t already, what happens when we refuse to do the work of grieving.

My own mother died in January 2020, just before the first wave of the coronavirus in the U.S. was reported. My father, already suffering from the consequences of a stroke the summer before and increasingly isolated from medical care due to physician overload and coronavirus restrictions, particularly acute in rural counties, continued to decline and died in January of this year. For the last month of his life, I was in the town of my birth in the only house I remember living in as a child, working with caregivers and the fragments of the health care system available to make him as comfortable and able to function as possible. In early January 2022, I finally left for Bonham to get some work done, intending to return after a few days. That night, he died. I learned of his death while spending the night in a hotel on the way to Bonham.

To my knowledge, neither my father nor my mother died of coronavirus, but my knowledge is

limited by the difficulty my father had accessing coronavirus tests and the fact that the sibling who became his primary caregiver after my mother's death did not trust the medical system, the tests, or the vaccines and maintained a sustained ignorance around coronavirus for those two years. So I will never know if the virus itself killed either of them. But at least with regard to my father, I can have no doubt that the impact of coronavirus on our deteriorating health care system helped hasten his death. Like anyone else who lost a family member or a close friend during this period, I have experienced my father's death within a context that bears the stench of unnecessary, policy-driven mass death. I have experienced the deaths of my parents also in the midst of a reckoning with our nation's white supremacist past that has been, as it was at least twice before in our nation's past, countered by an increasingly violent and highly organized backlash.



This brings me to a second, more difficult aspect of my grief over the deaths of my parents, one I am also confident I share with many other people at this time. My parents, lifelong Republicans, were caught up in the MAGA wave of 2016. My mother voted for Trump, she confessed to me, because she believed in the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, an absurd early version of Q-Anon that could only make sense to anyone if that person believed that homosexuals are pedophiles and that pedophiles are homosexual. My father never told me why he voted for Trump, but before he became too ill to speak well or in full sentences, he would occasionally mouth MAGA

talking points. To my knowledge, which again is not perfect, they went to their graves as complicit enablers of an attack on democracy that wasn't close to being in the rear-view mirror when Biden was elected and is even now gaining steam. The people who gave me life, who in many crucial ways shaped what I am today, are the same people who worked to end democracy in America and to produce a series of convenient scapegoats to target for acts of violence, not just LGBTQ people but Black people and non-white immigrants as well. My parents' contributions to MAGA were admittedly small, but they are no less real for that.

I remain unable to discern how to handle this second aspect of my grief. In retrospect, I believe that I delayed dealing with my grief over my mother's death so that I could help with my father's care, so that I ended up confronting grief over the loss of both parents at the same time. For the first six months after dad's death, I found myself thinking about and fondly remembering my mother's care for her household, her encouragement of my interest in the arts and in public speaking, and her wide circle of female friends, many of whom were regarded as vulgar by members of the social class my mother married into. I remembered my father's commitment to the town where he had grown up and where he raised me, his choice to sacrifice career opportunities in order to spend more time with his three children, and his generosity toward others in that town when they fell on hard times, which included at least ten people who expressed their gratitude to me or to my sister after his funeral. Occasionally, I would remember the first decade of the AIDS crisis, when my parents and I rarely spoke and when I rarely visited "home," and that horrific Pizzagate conversation with my mother in 2016. But as quickly as these memories would arise, I would scold myself for them and do my best to suppress them. I told myself that I ought not reduce my parents to their politics, but the truth is that it was just too painful to juxtapose these memories with the fond memories I cherished and that enabled me to remain in sadness rather than descending into anger toward the dead.

Last week's January 6th hearings have brought me to a new stage, or at least what feels like one. The

GRIEF, MOURNING, & FREEDOM

committee has been laying out the evidence that the January 6th attack was not an accident or a rally that got out of control, and that the violence of that day was a small part of a larger plot to upend the rule of law and replace it with an authoritarian regime in order to preserve white supremacy. My parents almost certainly did not knowingly participate in such a plot, but it is not conceivable that they were simply fooled either. They decided to believe things that they were at least vaguely aware were patently absurd, and they did so because something in them wanted to use these beliefs as justification for something they wanted done. That something was being done when they died, and neither of them objected to it. In grieving the passing of my parents, then, isn't it the case that I am grieving the loss of people who were, objectively speaking, my enemies, who were enemies of the friends killed by AIDS and the friends whose lives were upended and destroyed by the perfect storm of MAGA and coronavirus?

I can't give this question a definitive answer now. Maybe I won't ever be able to do that. But my difficulty in even coming to that question reminds me of Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Mourning is the conscious process of grief, a process that culminates in the emotional and bodily as well as intellectual realization that what one is grieving is really gone and will not be coming back. Melancholia occurs, Freud argues, when I am unable to consciously process the loss, unable to fully feel the final absence of the loved object and to confront the reality of death that goes with it. In melancholia, I fool myself about this reality. This doesn't usually take the form of straightforward denial ("my parents aren't dead, they're just on a journey") and more often takes the form of answering to a suppressed but active internalized version of the lost object that isn't consciously recognized as the lost object at all but is experienced as inwardly directed self-recrimination, anxiety, malaise, and aimless depression.

It strikes me that this first stage of experiencing the loss of my parents has been a kind of melancholia. While my sense of their complicity in our national tragedy and shame was muted or suppressed, my sense of my own complicity has been

experienced as especially sharp and painful. I have found myself making decisions that I don't fully understand, like my decision to preserve the family home and to eventually take up residence there. While this decision stands as I write this, I am aware that the reasons I can give for it are finally unconvincing. It is as if I were commanded to do this by something in me I can't fully identify but that I may justly suspect is the voice of my parents in my head, which isn't of course really their voice (my mother, for her part, didn't even want to keep the house) but the voice of melancholia bidding me to cling to and thus magically preserve what is gone. Perhaps I have not yet begun the real work of grieving, and will not until I can emotionally disinvest in the work of keeping my parents alive on the level of feeling, and instead fully feel their absence.

I am not writing this essay as a method of treating that melancholia. Only mourning can do that, and mourning is a slow process that will take longer than six months. I am writing this essay because I have observed that loss is being experienced now on a broad scale all across this country. As people lose individuals who were part of their lives, they are also losing the political, institutional, and social contexts that have given their lives meaning. At my mother's funeral, my uncle remarked that the worst thing the MAGA crew did during Trump's administration was to expose the founding, exploitable flaws in our political system. Certainly, the story that I grew up with, one that cast the United States as a nation with such a strong foundation that it was capable of overcoming the ugly aspects of its beginning and was moving toward more and more freedom and equality, is dead. That story was of course justly criticized before the MAGA movement, but the latter brought to the surface so many violent and anti-democratic patterns in our history that we can no longer acknowledge these patterns and still retain the story. We have lost the old collective sense of who we are together, but we are not ready to give ourselves a new one. Instead, we find ourselves trying to preserve the dead without fully admitting that we are doing so because we can't let the dead be dead. This is rather obvious in the violent, racist nostalgia of MAGA, but it is also present in the promise of a "return to

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

normalcy” that managed, barely, to beat MAGA at the polls and is now looking like a false promise.

So the losses being experienced at this time are simultaneously individual and collective. Those who have no choice but to take on the work of mourning their dead also have no choice but to take on the work of mourning the death of their national identity. In both cases, the temptation to idealize what one has lost prevents us from letting the lost go, which means letting the dead be who they were and not who we would prefer them to have been. It prevents us from mourning the real chunk of ourselves that doesn't belong to us, from mourning the real parent, spouse, child, or nation, the one that, if we are honest with ourselves, we would not have chosen but which nevertheless we really loved even beyond our ideal image of that lost one. Mourning, if we understand it like this, seems selfish. How dare I dishonor my dead parents by needlessly recalling our unresolved and now unresolvable conflict? Isn't it just too easy to manage their deaths by reminding myself of their horrifically all-too-human qualities? And how dare these young people, these BLM protesters, these “critical race theorists,” dishonor their own nation by casting it as a settler colonial enterprise, a white supremacist regime, and a bulwark not of democracy but against it? Isn't this the political equivalent of dishonoring one's dead parents, a way of “moving on” by burning it all down?

Although again I don't have a definitive answer to this, I do not at this moment think that withdrawing from these idealized images is selfish. The reason is that letting go of the dead that one has loved, being able to see them in their flawed complexity and to feel their absence, is also letting go of the self one is and can be only if the dead are preserved as an image that self wants, indeed *needs*, them to be, an image that they, being dead and gone, are no longer in a position to correct. Mourning may look selfish from the outside, but from the inside it feels like one is dying oneself. The same goes for mourning one's religion or one's nation. When we are not willing to let them die, we are not willing to let them be themselves and instead build an increasingly delusional image of them that denies

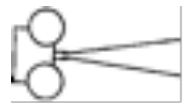
what they have really been and done in history. At the same time, when we are not willing to grieve their loss, when our response is to tell ourselves “good riddance,” we are denying that our sense of self has anything to do with them. Because mourning is the way we have to both affirm that our loss is a real loss and to affirm that what we have lost, in its reality, was *not* us but other than us and ultimately mysterious to us, mourning is a letting go of self as well as a letting go of the people and things we have used as supports for the self we were and can no longer be.

Who am I now, without the parents I fought with, feared and loved? Who are we now, without the nation to which we pledged our allegiance, which we defended verbally and sometimes with our bodies, which we worked to make a more perfect version of itself? When I listen to neighbors and friends and when I see what is happening in Texas and around the country now, I am persuaded that we are all in our way asking some version of these questions and that none of us has the answer to them. But I do not imagine an answer will be given to us. I imagine an answer will come in the form of the choice we make after our melancholia gives way to mourning, after we grieve and let the old self die, and all that is left is our freedom.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

MOVIES



Cyrano. 2021. I consider it a crime that the Academy Awards basically ignored this film. I would have chosen it as the best film of the year. Based on Erica Schmidt's 2018 stage musical, which was based on the Edmond Rostand 1897 play, it is surprisingly creative, with fine music and perfect performances. Peter Dinklage plays Cyrano, giving a switch to the reason he is not considered a match for the beautiful Roxanne.

Glory. I first saw this film in 1990, then again in 2013. Recently we saw it once more. I think I was more deeply affected by it than either of the other two

viewings. It covers with historical accuracy one of the black regiments that fought in the Civil War. It is the best war film I have seen, and right up there with the best films of any genre. Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington are, of course, excellent, along with many black actors unknown to me. Matthew Broderick is at his best as the commander of the regiment. The cinematography is outstanding. And the music! Usually when the music plays such a major role in a film, it gets in the way. But I found the score to simply enrich the emotional aspect of the film. I was weeping off and on throughout. If you missed this film, by all means see it now. If you saw it, you might want to experience it again.

Downton Abbey. We missed this series when it was popular and have appreciated the upstairs/downstairs drama of servants and masters as it played out in England in the early 1900s through the 1920s.

The Roosevelts: An Intimate History. Everyone probably knows that Ken Burns is the best ever at documentaries. This one we found to be particularly inspiring. It tells both the amazing political story and the deeply personal one of possibly the three most influential figures in the U.S. if not the world: Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt. It involves seven 2-hour episodes covering the period from 1858 to 1962.

Gene and I were born during FDR's first term as president. He saw his distant cousin Theodore as a role model, but it turns out that FDR, in four consecutive terms, brought about the most progressive programs ever enacted and during a time of severe depression and then world war. AND he was crippled by polio. He died too soon, in 1945 at age 62, just beginning his fourth term and no doubt from the efforts put forth to end the war. He and Eleanor were partners in serving the country, in ways far ahead of their time as they also worked out creative ways of dealing with their more intimate relations. Eleanor was often criticized and demeaned until people worked with her, after which they changed their tune dramatically. I don't know how to describe her other than as a secular saint. Her last contribution before dying in 1962 was offering

July 2022

leadership in creating at the UN the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I highly recommend this series.

Servant of the People. This series stars the now president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, when he was an actor/producer. He plays a history teacher who becomes president of the country. The series itself resulted in the actor actually being elected president and we have all witnessed how well he has played that role in reality under the stress of the invasion by Russia. It is a creative, satirical comedy created in 2015-2019. There are three series of about twenty-five 25-minute episodes each. His work as president in the series is to weed out government corruption.

MOVE. This 2020 series of five episodes features innovative dancers from the U.S., Israel, Spain, Jamaica and Bangladesh. It is jaw-dropping and also at times it is impossible not to get up and MOVE with the dancers.

Stillwater. 2021. This film is based loosely on the Amanda Knox story. Matt Damon nailed the leading role as an unapologetic Okie in France trying to prove his daughter's innocence and get her out of prison. Beyond that, the movie got all the characters right. It took an unpleasant story, played it real, the folks grew and left you sitting in awe at the end. Gene Marshall was born, raised and educated in Stillwater Oklahoma and both his parents were professors at what was then Oklahoma A&M. I was born in Norman Oklahoma. Although my father and his brother both attended Oklahoma University in Norman, they also attended one year at A&M where they were on the wrestling team. So this movie relating to a man from Stillwater had great interest for us.

I Know Where I'm Going. This 1945 film directed by Britisher Michael Powell stars Wendy Hiller. It wears amazingly well as a feminist film about a woman who knew from baby hood that she wanted to choose her own life.

Official Secrets. 2019. This is a true story of British intelligence officer Katherine Gun who blew the whistle prior to the Iraq War regarding the George Bush/Tony Blair lie about Iraq weapons of mass

destruction. I had not heard of Katherine and had a strong identity with her as I wrote a lengthy letter to the editor of our local paper at about the same time, opposing entry into the war. Kiera Knightly does a fine job as Katherine.

42. This 2013 film tells the story of Jackie Robinson, the first black athlete to play in major league baseball. Harrison Ford is almost unrecognizable in his role as Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who invites Robinson to play with them. The late great Chadwick Boseman plays Robinson. I was unaware of the relationship of these two men which made possible this breakthrough, and also unaware of the intensity and hostility of the racism Robinson and his family faced, both on and of the field. An inspiring film.

The Fencer. This 2015 film is also based on a real-life sports figure, Endel Nelis, an accomplished Estonian fencer and coach. Caught up in the Nazi occupying forces and then Stalin's regime, Nelis flees Russian secret police and attempts to keep a low profile teaching fencing to children in a remote Estonian town. Another inspiring film.

The Other Son. This fine 2012 film is the story of two families separate by a wall of war and different in religion and beliefs and culture. The 18-year-old son of the Israeli Jewish family registers to become a soldier like his father. His blood tests reveal that he is really the son of a Palestinian family. It is revealed that the two were accidentally switched as newborns in the hospital. The film masterfully portrays how the young men, their parents and their siblings take in this profound happening.

Harriet. This 2019 film depicts the amazing heroine, Harriet Tubman, in all her glory. Everyone should see this film for what it reveals about slavery and about women. Cynthia Erivo not only plays Harriet beautifully, but also wrote and sang the fantastic song ending the movie.

Respect. This 2021 film stars Jennifer Hudson portraying Aretha Franklin in her life story. I struggled with how very long it takes for women to demand appropriate respect, but it is a fine film with one fine black female singer depicting another.

Realistic Living Mission Statement

The core mission of Realistic Living is to clarify the essential Christian message and to promote and inspire a new Christian practice through small, intimate circles and their action as members of a local bioregion.

We carry out this mission with many forms of research and workshop attendance, and then share those findings. We write essays, books, journals, newsletters, and manuals. We maintain a website, a blog site, and other electronic ministries. We organize training events, Zoom meetings and Seminars, political and justice participations, bioregional organizing, interfaith dialogues, and more. We create both solitary and group religious practices. And we offer each of these works as a homeopathic drop in the ocean of need.

Over the 38 years of the existence of Realistic Living, we have gathered together a huge collection of writings to study, study plans to consider, simple yet deep courses to teach, as well workshops and solitary exercises to do.

Resources

Go to our website <http://www.realisticliving.org/> and look over the material laid out there. Also see our blog site www.realisticliving.org/blog/. It contains Realistic Living Pointers essays, whole books, study guides, and videos. If you want to receive our annual Newsletter and our monthly Realistic Living Pointers, send your email to gwesleymarshall@gmail.com.

Here is a new event on the Zoom Schedule

On the first of every month, Realistic Living is enabling a Zoom meeting for Symposium members. The Symposium is a collection of dedicated enablers of a RL next Christianity. We used to meet every summer for four days in Bonham Texas. More recently we have limited our connection to a monthly e-mail. This year we dropped the emailing and are holding a

Zoom meeting the first Saturday of each month from 11 to 12 Central Time. Joining this Symposium now has a simply ritual: start attending the monthly Zooms. To do so just email your wish to do that to gwesleymarshall@gmail.com

Zoom Seminars

Gene has now conducted 9 Zoom Online Seminars on *The Thinking Christian*, each 10 one-hour sessions on successive Saturdays.

Beginning on August 6, 2022 until October 8, 2022 Gene will facilitate Zoom Seminar number 10 This one is on Part One of *The Thinking Christian*. This Seminar is on foundational breakthroughs on the understanding of religion in general In January of 2023 Gene will begin a Zoom Seminar on Part Two of this book on edges in Christian theologizing. Part Three on Ethics and Communal Life will begin in April.

If you do not already own a copy of the Wipf and Stock published book, *The Thinking Christian*, I still have 2 bargain copies that can be shipped within the United States free of charge. Simply send a check made out to Gene Marshall for \$28 together with your name and postal address to 3578 N. State Highway 78; Bonham, TX 75418. Or you can order both an e-book or a paper copy from Wipf and Stock.

An E-mail-Dialogue

We are open to assist you to understand these resources or to discuss any of these matters with you. Our new email addresses:

Gene: gwesleymarshall@gmail.com

Joyce: joycemarshal623@gmail.com

Alan: alanjayrichard@gmail.com

Realistic Living Finances

Financial gifts to Realistic Living go directly into needed services. We raise and spend a budget of **\$30,000 a year** on programing that is useful to our constituency.

We send complimentary copies of this journal to new people for a temporary period of time. If you want to be sure of continuing to receive this journal, we ask for a minimum donation of \$20 a year.

This work is support for a movement of religious renewal that is primarily Christian, but also relevant to religious renewal in general—as well as to an ethics that is intentionally inter-religious.

We encourage you to join the increasing number of people who contribute on a **monthly basis**. Your bank can work out a way to send these contributions for you.

If you are a customer of *Amazon.com*, you can set up through *smile.amazon.com* for a small portion of your Amazon purchases to be contributed to *RealisticLiving.org*.

We do not pay salaries to our three staff members, but only expenses that sustain our programing, electronic outreach, physical travel, and program attendance. We have a 12-member official board who is responsible for our non-profit 501-C3 corporation and who are also an active working board, that now meet twice a year by Zoom. The staff—Gene, Joyce, and Alan—seek the advice of this board, and our finances are legally reviewed by them.

We thank you for the years of support so many of you have given us for enlivening a movement to assist a next Christianity to find a place in the drama of history.

Alan, Joyce, and Gene



Photo by Paula Brennecke

Realistic Living

is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."



Photo by Paula Brennecke

Realistic Living

3578 N. State Highway 78
Bonham, TX 75418

July 2022

Issue No. 75

Printed on
Recycled Paper



Nonprofit Org.
U. S. Postage
PAID
Bonham, TX
Permit No. 100

Current Resident