

# Realistic Living

A Journal on Religion and Ethics

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## REALISTIC LIVING AFFAIRS

was and what the Christian Faith and Life Community was.

Joe Mathews was my SMU Perkins School of Theology ethics professor in the period from March 1953 to May 1956. In that role he was an earthquake of a presence and became to me mentor and dear friend for the rest of his life until his death in 1977. After my seminary graduation and ordination in the Methodist Church, I went in the Army as a Chaplain for the six years that Mathews was director of studies at the Christian Faith and Life Community in Austin, Texas. I followed him and his work there. I submitted an essay and a poem for the Christian Faith and Life journal, and I attended a Campus Minister's Colloquy



Joseph W. Mathews

## An Echo from the Past

A Response  
by Gene Marshall

Joyce received a recent e-mail from a 1950 high-school boyfriend who has become a member and dear friend of Realistic Living. This e-mail contained a question asked of him by a classmate at the University of Texas who had heard lectures by Joseph Wesley Mathews at the Christian Faith and Life Community in the time frame of 1956-1962. Joyce asked me to write a response to that question.

Before I share the question and my response to it I need to share with some of you who Joe Mathews

taught by Joe and other Christian Faith and Life faculty. I even interviewed for a position on that

## AN ECHO FROM THE PAST

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faculty. But just as I was getting out of the Army, Joe and Lyn Mathews, and their three boys, and eight other families moved to Evanston, Illinois and began a religious order of families who conducted a theological training mission as The Ecumenical Institute. My first wife, Ruth, three children, 8, 6, and 4, and I joined that religious order in November of 1962. I worked with that expanding group of colleagues until 1976.

The Christian Faith and Life Community was a brainchild of Jack Lewis, consisting of a men's and a women's dorm for students of the University of Texas. Those students lived in those dorms in a covenant to be a community of students doing 15 hours of theological study each semester. Later the faculty of this community also organized a training center for church pastors and adult laity. Joe was drawn to the experimental power of these innovations and became a light and a force in that role.

So back to the 2023 email and my response to it. The friend of Joyce's friend was asking what Joe Mathews meant by "the Abyss". He recalled that Joe's lectures on that topic had meant a great deal to him, but he had misplaced the edge, we might say, for what that meant. So following is my response. Joyce and I thought you might also appreciate this bit of theologizing history.

One of Joe Mathew's favorite quotes was this short reading from Nikos Kazantzakis' book *The Saviors of God*:

"We come from a dark abyss and we end in a dark abyss and we call the luminous interval 'life'."

This abyss does not simply pertain to birth and death; this abyss walks with us every day of our lives.

We do our best to learn enough about this abyss of mysterious Reality to navigate our days and years,

but we remain ignorant before a Mysteriousness that never goes away.

For example, what we knew about being married when we married soon gave way to a larger view,

and after several revolutions on this topic, we are still vulnerable to further revolution.

Even the foundational field of physics in our general culture has undergone huge shifts in our lifetimes, and is still undergoing significant changes.

This can be said not only for our knowing, but also for our actions. I have tried to make a meaningful difference, but those differences do not stay. For example, things I accomplished in the first parish church that I pastored have been entirely undone and basically returned to the sort of life that existed there before I made my difference. Sometimes things stick a while, but our life overall is an ocean of changing—washing on to entirely new concerns. Such experiences are the Abyss we face if we are sensitive to remain open to real life.

There is an **Abyss of oblivion** when treasured things pass away. And there is the **Abyss of resurgent possibilities** that overwhelm us with new callings to know, to embody, and to do. The whole of our life, if we are sensitive, can remain open to this Abyss of surprises.

Here is a metaphorical story I recorded in a recent book:

"The whole order of any culture of humans might be pictured as a small boat on a vast ocean of wonder. Let us say that when we are born, we are living at the stern of this cultural boat with little sense that there is something more. As we walk toward full adulthood, we come to the prow of this boat moving into the wonder of a mystery that never goes away. We can then retreat into the body of the boat and forget that dreadful sight, or we can work with the possibility of making friends with this permanent wonder—this opening of an awe before an Awesomeness that is our one and only Reality."

We can trust that this Awesome Reality is benevolent, the best case life for each of us.

Grace and Peace (transformative happenings and boundless equanimity),

Gene Marshall

## New Wineskins

Weekly Circling  
by Gene Marshall

For the first two decades (Nov 1983-Nov 2003) of the Realistic Living organization's existence, we continued the witnessing work of the Religious-Studies-One Weekend that was so important in the work of the Order:Ecumenical. These weekends became more and more difficult with the increasing absence of denominational congregations that were committed to lay theological education of a serious up-to-date quality. It became more and more clear to me, and others, that the future of the local Christian congregation as currently constituted was not able to contain such new spirit aliveness without a rupturing of the basic congregation pattern. The current congregation's basics discipline, its clergy/laity split, its mode of financing. all worked against, not for, its basic spirit mission. The congregational form, like any service club, can still do some good things, but for the overall future of Christian practice for the 21st century it is basically obsolete.

In the last two decades (Nov 2003-Nov 2023) of this now 40-year old Realistic Living organization's existence, we have focused on weekly meeting Circles of disciplined practitioners. Meeting this challenge is almost a reduplication of the shift asked for with the famous parable found in Mark's Gospel about new wine needing new wineskins. I believe that Mark was becoming aware that the Christ-Way Judaism of the early first century was due for an exodus from the Synagogues as its home.

So what is the application of new wineskins for meeting our current need for a new Christian practice for awakening and housing of what Christians have called the "Holy Spirit?" New experiments began in Europe, the Americas, as well as in Asia after WW II. We were doing experimental rituals and disciplines in the Order Ecumenical. Some Realistic Living program constituents have also been meeting weekly in new editions of what we first called a "House Church." The name of these Realistic Living experiments evolved over the years to "Christian Resurgence Circle" and now to "**Co-Pastor Circle.**" "Co-Pastor" is an effort to describe a



First century wineskins

key aspect of the quality of the community that we are attempting to beckon—a group of 5-12 with no single leader, no formal clergy. Theological expertise is a value for every member, and this new theologizing is less about book learning and more about life understandings—more about witnessing love for one another and personally intimate local group life structured with organic consensus for exercises of ritual, study, and mission that promotes a deep journey in the everyday lives of real human beings.

Learning such an effective Co-Pastor discipline is not too hard for us. What turns out to be hard for most of us is overcoming the old religious patterns that have been woven into us for the last 2000 years. Our experience is somewhat like Einstein's treatment of Newtonian physics—all the basic words have been transformed. The death of the two-realm symbol system brings with it impressive changes in the quality of our new theologizing. We are learning to think with methods calling upon existential experience. We are learning to think with metaphorical descriptions that awaken Wonder, rather than with stable certainties. Such theologizing is harder to tell about than it is to do once it is learned. In a new circle, however, everyone is learning. We need ways to assist new circles to weather this beginning and touch into the bliss of a realistic life together.

This journey forward may also be hard for those who are rebels against the old theological heritage. We can hate the old theologizing so strongly that we pollute the space for a new theologizing. We are

## OUR CIRCLE

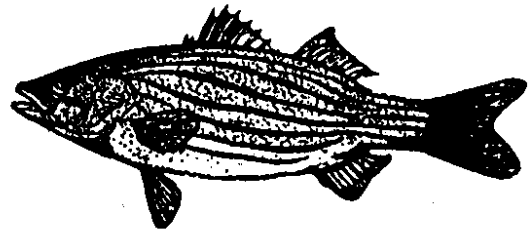
finding that our departing from the old requires a long march toward the new practice—a practice that includes a surprising degree of reuniting modern life with the lives and thoughts of the saints of old. We may have to do some of this rediscovery of the old to believe it is possible. It might be easier, so we mistake, to simply abandon everything called “Christianity” and start over with an entirely new religion. It turns out, however, not to be necessary to trash over 2000 years of probings into the Christ revelation: we can simply practice a new Christian practice—one that makes us more likely to experience Holy Spirit.

It might seem, however, that even the word “theologizing” might need to be replaced with something like “theoretics”—and that even a term like “co-pastor” may set some teeth on edge. “Pastor” must no longer mean “ruler of the Christian community,” but something closer to “spirit co-therapist” or “shamanic healer” where no special status is meant—only the function of saying the apt words and doing the true deeds that serve the deep consciousness lives of our companions in this search for a next Christianity.

Being to each other a “means of grace” is another pathway into this fresh co-pastorate practice—where grace means what Paul Tillich outlined as: (1) being opened to an awareness of our despair, (2) hearing our acceptance spoken to our true being by Profound Reality, and (3) accepting our acceptance from that Profound Source as a fresh start in our specific realism. We will work a ritualization of these dynamics into our weekly meetings, yet remain clear that ritual alone does not assure an event of grace. Grace is a gift of Profound Reality to you and me and our particular brands of ego-clinging. Each co-pastor spreads seeds each meeting to our companion co-pastors, but seeds take root and grow if and when they do. We seeders of our colleagues never know when or how that happening will be happening. We let fly with realism, and let Reality take care of the results.

Finally, we who begin one of these Co-pastor Circles will be taking on the disturbing truth that each person in this “blessed” community is going to be a sinner as well as a saint, a wayward spirit as

well as a pastor, a trapped soul as well as a free spirit, an addicted scumbag as well as a dependable servant, a rigid mind as well as a helpful presence, and a self-promoting prig as well as a humble witness to a profound consciousness that exceeds all of us put together. In spite of such real challenges that color the co-pastor journey, I am writing this spin to ask more of us to give this co-pastorate practice a try for its bliss as well as for its work of service in healing the planet.



Here are a few paragraphs by a member of the Bonham, Texas Co-Pastor Circle. She volunteered to write a short spin on her experience in our weekly Circle.

### Musing about our circle by Faye Wedell

When Joyce asked if I would be willing to write a few paragraphs about what our Bonham CRC has meant to me personally over the past two decades, I immediately agreed to do so. However, now that I’ve started, I’m discovering that putting it into words is not that easy. Here’s my attempt to describe one of the most meaningful experiences I’ve had, so here I go:

**C for Community.** Those in our circle represent a sense of closeness and acceptance among us both on Sundays when we meet for two hours and in times of need at other times.

**I for Introspection.** The studies we pursue, whether a book we have chosen to read or the Bible, give me a chance to turn inward and look at myself. I often find that when the question, “How does what we just read speak to you?,” I find that I reflect upon the many times the reading or discussion has spoken to me.

## THE PRINCESS AND THE FOX

**R** for **Release** to express myself freely in a safe environment where I won't be judged, even though I might be challenged to go further by someone in the small group —9 friends in our group.

**C** for **Compassion**. Many of the books we have studied have taught me the importance of compassion for those who may think differently than I, but also compassion for myself when life's "road bumps" occur.

**L** for **Listening**. When we have our confessional go-round, which is part of our weekly routine, I have learned the power of listening from the heart to another and then having the group listen to me without a sign of advice.

**E** for **Enlightenment**. I do not claim to be fully enlightened, but my participation in our CRC group has caused a new awareness of the Great Mystery in me. I am more able to "walk the walk" and be mindful of the Divine that surrounds me and that is in me.

### The Princess and the Fox

#### A Fairy Tale

By Joyce Marshall

Once upon a time there was a Princess. She was among those who was locked up in a tower for disobedience. She had refused to marry a prince from another country. Good Grief! She didn't even know the guy. So here she was -- looking out the window of the tower, watching the clouds.

Then she heard a sound down below and noted a Fox at the foot of the tower. And lo and behold, the Fox was speaking to her.

"Hey, Princess," he said.

She said, "Are you speaking to me?"

"Well, you're the only princess around here, I think."

"I'm just not accustomed to being addressed by animals. You are a fox, I believe."

"Yes, indeed, I am that."

"So, you have my attention."

"Well, I heard about your lockup. And I think I have a solution for you."

"My, my. What a surprise! And what would that solution be?"

"You probably aren't up on these things, but there's a flying dragon in these parts. I can put in a request for him to rescue you."

"Well, that is an even bigger surprise! Just what would his rescue entail?"



Art by Alan Richard

"You would leave your candle burning tonight and be ready to climb on his back from your window."

"Oh my! But where would I go?"

"Now that is a good question. It would mean you would no longer be a princess. You could live with our community -- of animals and magical creatures and a few rebellious people."

“Well,” said the Princess. “Can I have a day to think it over?”

The Fox replied, “Sorry, Princess. This is a one-time only thing. It’s now or never. Either you are ready to forgo your privilege or you’re not.”

The Princess knew then, in her heart of hearts, that she was indeed ready. This world was not her home. She told the Fox to summon the Dragon. She kept her candle burning. She waited by the window. She climbed from the window to the Dragon’s back. She entered another world where she remained for the rest of her days. . . . And she was never sorry.

## Love

**Interpretation**  
by Alan Richard

Since 2015, religious and political assaults on our bodily existence have brought my attention back to James Baldwin’s queer take on the the power of love. The key to Baldwin’s work, from his first novel to his last essays, is his affirmation that the spiritual love of God and the love that loudly proclaims its rootedness in bodily drives and inclinations is one love, that the spirit is to be found *in* and not opposed to the flesh. By the time vaccinations ended the near-total physical isolation imposed by the COVID pandemic, Baldwin’s affirmation had become my own. It cushioned me when, in the grip of that overwhelming spiritual force hidden in the body’s drives and inclinations, I once again fell, unexpectedly and unwillingly, in love.

But let’s back up. When I decided to make the move from Houston to Bonham and work with Gene and Joyce in 2010, I left behind a large LGBTQ community, a lucrative career in mental health and social services, a progressive church community in which I had a leadership role, and a relationship with another man that had lasted twenty years. At the time, I told myself I was moving in order to transition to a religious vocation that had been sidetracked by the urgency of the AIDS crisis, which had motivated supposedly temporary work that had



James Baldwin

instead become a full-time occupation. I was still telling this story when I began re-reading Baldwin.

But after my friendship with R, the man who would become my beloved, deepened, I recalled what Baldwin had written about the cunning ways human beings flee love. Was it possible, given my history of painful love affairs, that I was also moving to a rural area with few openly gay men, no LGBTQ community, and a social respectability fetish that confined homosexual encounters largely to the furtive, silent, and guilty couplings of earlier times, in order to protect myself from the possibility of falling in love again? Was I setting myself up for the loveless existence that Baldwin discerned in respectable American faces?

It was then that R, with whom I’d had occasional sex since shortly after moving to Bonham, began spending far more time with me. R took on an urgent need for home repairs in the house I live, resulting in greater time spent together. This changed the role R played in my life from “friend with benefits” to “very close friend” and then, without either of us wanting or expecting it, to my precious beloved. Suddenly, Baldwin’s warnings about the consequences of ducking love weren’t abstract possibilities. I was being challenged, here and now, to say “yes” or “no”

to the terrifying and uncertain possibility that falling in love offers.

Three and a half months later, my “yes” has demonstrated to me what a keen observer Baldwin was. Love, he said, is an overwhelming, intense, and unexpected feeling. It is also, however, a daily assault on the ego, a turn of the gaze away from one’s own inward suffering and one’s own perspective and toward another’s. Love is an unwilling, irresistible, seemingly chance encounter that is, nevertheless, only love retroactively when, in the wake of the storm that birthed it, the lovers blown together by its winds choose to abide with each other through an indefinite series of challenges, to remain faithful to the meaning that storm has taken on for them. Neither of the lovers is who he or she was before the encounter, and neither knows who this fidelity to their love will cause them to become. At any point, either could say “no” to this precarious experiment in intimacy but both know that doing so won’t return them to who they were before. Love, as Baldwin insists, will leave you alone if you insist, but love will not be mocked.

The reader might well ask, as Baldwin’s religious critics did, what all this has to do with the love that concerns Christian theology. As Soren Kierkegaard, a theological grand-daddy of Realistic Living and a clear influence on Baldwin, argued in his masterpiece, *Works of Love*, the love of neighbor is not the same as erotic love, parental love, or friendship. All of the latter are based on our preferences. We select beloveds and friends, and we opt to raise children. When we love our preferences, we are loving ourselves. When we love our neighbor, we abandon those preferences. For Kierkegaard, love of neighbor, which is made possible only by accessing our inner awareness of Reality’s love for us, transforms erotic love into a matter of conscience. Since love of neighbor is expressed in a way that suits whatever social role the neighbor might occupy or whatever social relation he or she may have to us, love of neighbor does not erase the particularity of the erotic beloved but makes it first a matter of conscience, applying love’s “thou shalt” to the drives and inclinations that compose erotic love. One does not, Kierkegaard insists, discover neighbor-love through erotic love but discovers the essence of erotic

love through the love of Reality or “God” and neighbor-love, its corollary.

Grand-daddy Kierkegaard, for all his insight, might here have been blinded by nineteenth century gender expectations. Kierkegaard imagines an erotic love that lasts a lifetime but doesn’t discover the neighbor in the beloved. Only a man accustomed to imagining a woman who perfectly complies with his wishes, has the same perspective as him, and has no



Søren Kierkegaard

suffering that isn’t his could imagine such a thing. The social machinery that maintains this image of women coerces them into ignoring their own feelings and their own needs in order to focus on those of their man and children. Without that coercion, this is not what happens when being in love inspires lovers to remain with one another after the initial storm has passed. Inevitably, the preferences that have selected the beloved and elevated him or her above all others are bound to collide with the otherness of the beloved, the differences between the ideal partner and the actual beloved that the intoxication of falling in love disregards. When this happens, every lover is confronted with the fact that her beloved is, first and foremost, the other facing her who is, prior to being the beloved, her neighbor.

Almost a month after R and I began to notice something shift in our relationship, I left for New York on business. When I returned, it was revealed to me that R had fallen for someone else, whom I’ll call J. R insisted that he loved me no less than before, and that he didn’t want to lose me. But in addition to being heartbroken, I found myself looking into his eyes and seeing someone I didn’t know. As for J, my erotic love for R cast him immediately as the villain of the piece. R could say nothing to console me because every word he uttered hit me as self-justification. But one word of his did break through. If I really believed in affirming love wherever it appeared, then his unanticipated fall into love with J and my

## LOVE

unanticipated fall into love with him were both affirmed. Please, he asked me, open yourself to loving J so that no one gets abandoned. A lifetime of living a queer life in a straight society, along with Kierkegaard's words about neighbor-love, made it barely possible for me to attempt this. Eventually, it was J who rescued me, suggesting that we move forward as a "throuple," with each of us promising to abide with the other two. As time has passed and we have spent more of it together, J and I have found an emotional kinship with each other aside from our relationship with R, and each of us retains with R a distinct resonance shared with no one else. When the three of us are together, we have begun to relate more gracefully, like three people fully engaged in a dance. The key to all of this was the serious challenge to erotic love's necessarily simplified, delusional and narcissistic aspect posed by the heartbreaking non-alignment we passed through on the way to where we are now.



My recent experience with erotic love has shown me that grand-daddy Kierkegaard rightly identified neighbor-love as what love qua love essentially is, with erotic love and other particular expressions of love being what love does with our drives and inclinations, transforming them into its expressions. Erotic love only seems to contradict love qua love when we forget that subtracting neighbor-love from erotic love leaves only an imaginary satisfaction of drives and inclinations. But my ongoing experience also shows me how erotic love inevitably shows us the neighbor and even, sometimes, the enemy *in* the beloved, challenging us to love the real person in

front of us rather than the object of desire our brain circuits have composed from our memories of mother, father, siblings, and other figures we took to be loving without thinking about it. When the beloved shatters the image I have projected on to him or her, it is only the affirmation that Reality is good when Reality gives me the other and not just a being with a will bound entirely to my wants, that enables me to abide in love with the beloved rather than abiding resentfully or seeking to escape entirely from the connection.

With that affirmation, the aspects of erotic love rooted in drives and inclinations are re-evaluated. Drives and inclinations are on an equal footing with the external factors that have determined when and where I show up and every being I will encounter, meaning every neighbor. Not only is the beloved my neighbor through his distance from the image projected on him by these unconscious forces in my brain, but even through his *resemblance* to that image, since it is not I but God behind those drives and inclinations and behind the series of encounters that have shaped them since I was in the womb. Loving Reality means that every event within me and every event outside me is affirmed, that every encounter is first and foremost Reality loving me by placing my neighbor in my path, and secondly my response to a particular neighbor with a particular relationship to me. Loving my beloveds as my neighbors, then, means loving them precisely as the erotic beloveds they are to me and not generically or abstractly. Before this, however, it means loving Reality for both the drives and inclinations that led me to them and for the frustration of those drives resulting from their existence as free others with their own agency and thus as neighbors instead of embodied wish-dreams.

The love of God, the love that saves us from the hell of loveless resentment and hatred bad religion proclaims as love, adds nothing to the love rooted in the body's drives and inclinations and in the particular and unchosen ways our bodies show up in this place and not that, in this time and not that, except the full-throated cry of "yes" that changes everything. When we say "yes" to Reality, we make it our God. God becomes the devotional word for Reality. Through this "yes," we affirm drives and inclinations along with chance circumstances and



## ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

accidental encounters, the idealized image we recognize in our beloved others *and* the otherness of those others that exposes this as a mis-recognition. We affirm that all this is not the fickle and untrustworthy hand of fate but the mighty work done for us by a loving God. The challenge of living out of the love of God and neighbor is the challenge of saying “yes” to all that is, to Reality, not as our enemy or our indifferent fate, but as love and only love. The experience of bodily love, in each and every instance, teaches the one lesson that saves. That lesson is contained in three words: God. Is. Love.

### ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

#### MOVIE



**Forgotten Love** is a 2023 Polish film produced by Netflix. It is about a surgeon at the peak of his career when his wife leaves him, taking his beloved daughter. Searching for them, he experiences a mugging involving a head injury which causes him to lose his memory. He is presumed dead. Then he shows up 15 years later as a homeless wanderer in the countryside and crosses paths with his daughter. This is a fine film and very satisfying as all comes round right in the end.

*Sun House*

#### NOVEL

by David James Duncan  
Little, Brown and Company, 2023

This is the most unusual and most affecting novel I have ever read. I read its 776 pages aloud to Gene. That includes the five pages of acknowledgment stories, and the six pages of bibliography. Yes, bibliography, with personal notes regarding his personal connection to the books and which ones can be read in large doses and which only in bits. They include Meister Eckhart and the Christian Beguines, Hindu and Buddhist myths, the Upanishads, and Zen Master Dogen. In introducing the bibliography he states the purpose of the book which he took seventeen years to write. He notes that he has seen countless op-eds calling for a change

of consciousness if humanity is to survive these challenging times, yet few descriptions of what such a change would look like or how it would be lived. That is what his book addresses.

And address it, he does. He introduces a number of characters individually and finally brings them together in an “unintentional” community in the mountains of Montana, where the author lives. Without sentimentality, and with a kind of wildness and unpredictability their stories are full of humor and hope. Another surprising aspect of the story is that its author is revealed to be one of the folks in the community. Appropriate, because the author himself notes that the characters are based on his friends and their experiences.

This might not be everyone’s cup of tea, but I found this book to be life-changing. I highly recommend it.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Reviews by Joyce Marshall



*Dynamic Interrelatedness in  
an Era of Disasters*  
by Charlene Spretnak

Spretnak authored the book on interrelatedness, *Relational Reality*, in 2011 and was recently invited to write an article on the subject for the European Journal of Ecopsychology, published in March of this year. We studied this 32-page article in our circle this summer. Here is a link to download the article which she asked us to share with people working on the climate crisis:

[https://ecopsychology-journal.eu/v8/  
EJE%20v8\\_Spretnak.pdf](https://ecopsychology-journal.eu/v8/EJE%20v8_Spretnak.pdf)

The article explores what is needed from human beings in this era of climate change. As she notes the happenings we are already experiencing and those likely to come about, she states the importance of relationships from birth and throughout our lives and how the nature of those relationships can carry us through these times. Family, friends, education, health care and community are explored. She also

## RECOMMENDED READING

emphasizes the need of healthy relationship with the natural world. Her closing words are worthy of quoting:

"Remember that every person you encounter is a wonder of interrelationships and creative possibilities. Remember that a kind word from you during these stressful times will instantly fill the other person's being, as it is perceived all the way down to the cellular level and ripples out through subtly vibrating fields of interrelatedness. Remember that a harsh word will do the same. To interact is to intract, so let us do it with quiet joy, fascination, and appreciation - now that we know. "

*Love Letter to the Earth*  
by Thich Nhat Hanh  
Parallax Press, 2013

In this book, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes relationship, as does Spretnak. He notes our deep connection to "Mother Earth" and how "her" happiness is connected to our own.



Thich Nhat Hanh

He offers practices for connection with ourselves, with one another and with Earth. A very inspiring book.

*The Heart of Prayer*  
by Rupert Spira  
New Harbinger, 2023

This book explores the highest form of prayer - discovering our deep essential connection to the infinite. Spira notes that to pray without ceasing is not constantly reciting verbal prayers, but remaining in touch with this deep connection, which he calls this 'great underground river of being' whose nature is love. Stillness, listening and consolation are aspects of this discussion. I particularly appreciated his rendering of The Lord's Prayer.

## Reviews by Gene Marshall

*The Will to Change  
Men, Masculinity, and Love*  
by Bell Hooks  
Washington Square Press,  
2004



Bell Hooks

This book vividly describes three sets of words: "patriarchy," "patriarchal masculinity," and "feminist masculinity." **Patriarchy** is illustrated as a very ancient and vividly contemporary malady that shapes and restricts the lives of men and boys as well as women and girls. The rule of patriarchy is so taken in our culture as "natural," that men ask feminists what this word even means. Bell Hooks insisted on using the word "patriarchy" and telling us plainly what "patriarchy" means for both women and men. In Hooks' words, "**Patriarchal masculinity** insists that real men must prove their manhood by idealizing aloneness and disconnection. **Feminist masculinity** tells men that they become more real through the act of connecting with others, through building community. There is no society in the world made up of one lone man."

She spells out such summary-type statements in gripping detail around such topics as male being in control, male violence, male sex, emotion, love, integrity, and the loving of men as women and as men.

Both men and women can profit from reading every chapter of this book.

*Unconditional Bliss  
Finding Happiness in  
The Face of Hardship*  
by Howard Raphael Cushnir  
Quest Books, 2000

At first glance this title offers more than any book can claim to provide. But "Bliss" in this book is something more and something less than we might suppose. Cushnir is making the case that "Bliss" is a

natural state of the human being that we are restricting with our resistance to the realities that we confront. Rather than allowing our lives to flow, we constrict them into some sort of box or prison—a personality perhaps, a pattern of behavior, a cultural cocoon, a vocation, a preference, a morality, a theory. “Letting life unfold rather than compressing it” is an experience of bliss. Bliss is life unfolding. A healthy baby does this.

We, however, do not know how we are constricting our lives or know how to find out. We may know that we are not experiencing bliss—that is, the flowing of our lives in its natural fashion is not happening. And we may not want to know about such a trauma and such a possibility.

Cushnir has come upon two contemplative questions that assist us to discover our restrictions or compressions of living and thereby discover ways to unwind these prisons and release our bliss. Here are the questions:

(1) *What is happening right now?* This includes both our outer and inner realities that we actually face.

And (2) *Can I be with it?* We answer this question honestly Yes or No and move from there.

Cushnir uses the whole book to illustrate precisely how living these questions works. You may simply need to read this book to learn the subtle wonder of this method of contemplative inquiry.



I ran across, hidden away on the Amazon site, a 2010 review by Ann St. John of one of my books.

**Review by Ann St. John**

*Jacob’s Dream*  
*A Christian Inquiry Into Spirit Realization*  
by Gene Marshall  
i-Universe, 2008

Gene Marshall has done more to advance the articulation of a relevant contemporary metaphor or mythos-of-depth than any living author of which I am aware. He has followed the masterful work of *The Call of the Awe* with *Jacob’s Dream*. In this engaging exploration Gene exercises fresh categories like ‘Transparent Attention,’ ‘the Wholeness of Being,’

‘the Infinite Every-thing-ness,’ ‘Messengers of the Encounter,’ ‘Messengers of the Response,’ ‘the Infinite Silence’ and many more. *Jacob’s Dream* reveals the ultimate path home in the form of a ramp connecting the finite with the Infinite. It is upon this ramp and through the interior exploration of trust, love and freedom we learn to reconnect with the Ultimate Mystery at the center of life. The reader is seduced to shatter the self-created boundaries of ego and personality by which we limit our encounter with Reality. *Jacob’s Dream* delivers us to a deeper, more expansive grasp of the encounter and response to Ultimate Reality revealing the transformational truth that this is my dream as well. I highly recommend *Jacob’s Dream* and the life-transforming journey to which it invites us.

*Reviews by Alan Richard*

*Love’s Work*  
by Gillian Rose  
New York Review Books, 1995, 2011

Gillian Rose was an essayist who taught philosophy at Sussex and, in her final years, Warwick University. Rose is now most famous for this, her final work, published posthumously. The book lurches back and forth in time, covering memories from childhood, student days, her two longest love affairs, and the feelings and thoughts accompanying her terminal ovarian cancer. This sounds like a sad book but it’s a genuinely funny book featuring Jewish stepfathers who inject English profanity during Hebrew language readings of solemn portions of the Passover seder, married priests every bit as promiscuous as their Chaucerian medieval counterparts, comically arrogant and socially inept surgeons and “bowel specialists,” colostomy bags, and hawkers of “screw-tape spirituality.” For Rose, whose title and main theme echo Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, love is the mercy that becomes necessary after love’s honeymoon period dissolves into a dance of approach and withdrawal. Love is a patient attending to an ongoing exchange in which love, whom she calls the third partner in the couple, throws one and then the other into the roles of teacher and taught, lover and beloved, ruler and ruled, smothering clinger and distant stoic. In doing this, love reveals the self to be

itself only as this rhythm of death and resurrection, grief and joy, and finally confers on its faithful if unwitting “researchers” a gallows humor that no longer relates to every being’s brief existence as tragic but as comic. Thumbing its nose at what she calls the final Protestantism of sober atheist nihilism, she describes the joy found in the everyday slapstick dance with life and death, and the beauty present in the beings who stumble together through this mortal predicament. Dead, she may not have the last word, but with this book, she continues to speak.

*A General Theory of Love*  
by Richard Lannon MD,  
Thomas Lewis MD, and  
Fari Amani MD.  
Third Edition, Vintage  
Press, 2007



Richard Lannon

Since its initial publication in 2000, this book has become a classic among researchers in multiple fields and among non-specialists seeking to understand their experiences of love. Three psychiatrists at the University of California San Francisco, each a researcher in his own right, scoured literature on attachment theory, the neuroscience of emotions, and practical psychology. They also explored philosophy, fiction, poetry, and memoir to develop a grounded phenomenology of love correlated to an empirically-justified theoretical account. Love, they argue, is a product of mammalian evolution that has bequeathed to us an inescapable biological connection to other human beings and their bodily rhythms without which selves are not formed, cannot be nurtured, and cannot be changed, and has denied us the kind of conscious access to its workings that Freudian therapy and its descendants claimed to bring to the surface. The emotional brain creates an infant’s stable sense of self, trusted other, and their connection, and subsequently refines this sense into a composite implicit memory-image of safety and intimacy. It changes this image with new experiences, erasing the

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old one each time. The image at age 40 differs radically from the image at age 10, but it feels like the same one. The emotional brain uses complex calculations to do the work, then forgets them and delivers the result, which comes to us as an intuitive feeling and not an effortful chain of reasoning. We cannot know the contents of the implicit memories the work of love puts into the image, but we can feel and sense it if we attend to our emotions and bodily sensations and to our intuitions. Each new intimate encounter attunes our feelings, our sensual “thinking,” to those of another. Love is thus real and material, experienced but not known. It depends on bodily proximity and even intimacy, since its signals are too subtle for conscious attention to synthesize, appearing only as feelings and hunches. The loss of these kinds of caring, touching, and listening happens when encountering a culture of overvaluing productivity and conscious reason. This threatens, the authors warn us, to separate us from the evolutionary gift that underlies these manifestations of it, and is the biosocial condition for stable human individuals whether pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. This sobering and important book is written for lay readers with no prior exposure to any of the specialties surveyed, and is, unexpectedly, a page-turner. If you care about the lovelessness you see around you and if you intuit that love may be real and important, this book may be the most consequential book you will read in the second decade of the 21st century.

## Realistic Living Mission Statement

The core mission of RealisticLiving 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.

## An Update on Realistic Living

One of the events of this last six months has been the publication of *So Be Free*, a new book on spirit  
November 2023

freedom—a life topic difficult for many people. Here is announcement of it by RoseDog Books, an imprint of Dorrance Publishing:

**Essays about Freedom using Both Christian and Secular Vocabularies**

*So Be Free: Pastoral Discourses on Freedom*, a new book by Gene Wesley Marshall.

What is freedom? Does it exist or are our lives totally determined? Do other species of animals have freedom of a somewhat less extended form than humans? Can we lose our freedom? Can we be enslaved in a bondage of will? If so, can we be released from these bondages? How was Jesus an example of freedom and of a path to our liberation?

*So Be Free* is a series of 24 essays that seeks to remind us, refresh us, and inform us on how our essential freedom comes to us as part of our consciousness of the Profound Reality we face. These essays use both secular and Christian vocabulary to express this Reality. Gene Wesley Marshall seeks to share a human reality that can be expressed with other religious vocabularies as well as with Christian and secular vocabularies. This book is something more than opinion or theology. These sermon-like essays are provocations for each of us to look within our own lives and see what we find there.

*So Be Free: Pastoral Discourses on Freedom* is a 224-page paperback with a retail price of \$19.00 (eBook \$14.00). The ISBN is 979-8-88925-020-3. It was published by RoseDog Books of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To buy the book visit our online bookstore at <https://rosedogbookstore.com/so-be-free-pastoral-discourses-on-freedom/>.

**The January 20th Zoom Seminar**

Gene has now conducted 15 Zoom Online Seminars on his 2020 book *The Thinking Christian*. Ten-session Zoom number 16 will begin on January 20, 2024 and extend until March 24th each Saturday at 1:00 until 2:00 central time. Let Gene know if you are interested: gwesleymarshall@gmail.com. I must

limit the enrollment at 12: 6 women and 6 men. There is no fee for the Seminar, which is a gift of Realistic Living for the inquiring spirit.

This Zoom features Part Two of this book on the topic of Christian theologizing. I am using the word “theologizing” rather than “theology” to indicate that Christianity has no once and for all “theology,” and that every member of the renewed community is called to do the practice of “theologizing.” We will be resourcing the best of theological scholars and we will be assuming that the Christ event in human history is an anchor for the Christian practice, and that our practice must also include living in the era and places of culture in which people live in order to help real lives be more likely to experience a contemporary happening of the Christian revelation. All religions are not just ideas, but journeys into authentic places of our existence.

There have now been 53 participants who have shared in these Zooms, 31 of whom have now graduated from all three Zoom Seminars.

If you do not already own a copy of this Wipf and Stock published book, *The Thinking Christian*, the publisher has published a second edition correcting most of the typos in the first edition. You can order either an e-book or a paperback from Wipf and Stock or through Amazon. This book is a 398-page pull together of 60 years of studying and teaching these topics. It is a staple for your library to be read multiple times.

**Realistic Living Financing**

During the four decades since Gene and Joyce founded Realistic Living, we have made regular appeals for support to the readers of this journal and to participants in Realistic Living’s programs. On rare occasions in some of the leaner years, we’ve made special appeals. To our appeal on July this year, enough members of the Realistic Living constituency responded with what they could give, that we avoided untenable budget shortfalls.

Nevertheless, we are still experiencing a gap between monthly giving and the expenditures for materials, operating space, travel, and the like incurred in our work. Our expenditures have

## REALISTIC LIVING

remained largely the same and are even reduced from some previous years, but giving has not kept pace. For this reason, we are making another appeal to you to continue this year the strength of our year end giving.

With Gene feeling the weight of his aging during his ninetieth decade and Joyce becoming 90 in February of 2024, Alan is the only one of us who is up for long-distance travel. It is our intention to continue the vital work of this organization as long as we can. We are projecting at least two more of these Realistic Living Journals for July and November of 2024.

We still gather every week at our home base in Bonham Texas for our weekly meeting Co-Pastor Circle. We also conduct a weekly spirit group for a wider public. Gene will continue facilitating Zoom Seminars for as long as he is able. We are intentionally giving away copies of books, booklets, and old journals to constituents who may benefit from them. Gene and son Wayne are re-doing the website, and Wayne will continue website service so that it can continue to be a central point for sharing information about the movement of which we've been privileged to be a part. He is also helping us move our mailing list onto a more up-to-date application usable by others. And we are working on archiving materials so that future offices that emerge can use the wisdom gained in this effort.

We have demonstrated that a service office for the renewal of Christian practice can be feasibly maintained without compromising with the local church. And we have proved that it is not impossible for a determined handful of people to do a radical task

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without depending on large grants with all the strings attached to them.

Also, when we find it best to close down this non-profit organization, we will be handing along to other non-profit organizations of similar mission our remaining financial resources. So we encourage you to know that no gift will be unneeded to aid our last years and to pass along our baton to others.

Those of you who give us the extra boost we need this year will serve this movement of ongoing creativity that can outlast our forty years of companionship and common concerns.

### How to Help

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 do not pay salaries to our three staff members, but only expenses that sustain our programing, electronic outreach, physical travel, and program attendance. Our 12-member official board is responsible for our non-profit 501-C3 corporation. The staff—Gene, Joyce, and Alan—seek the advice of this board, and our finances are legally reviewed by them.



## Realistic Living has launched a new program: The Great Give Away

We have in our house a lot of books, booklets, and old journal copies. We would rather give them to someone who can use them to read and teach rather than store or recycle them. So if you do not have one of the following books, let's guess you need it.

Joyce has already indicated earlier in this journal that she has boxes of her book, *The Queen's Quest and other Tales: Stories to Live By*. 1994.

We also have boxes and boxes of *To Be or not to Be a Christian* 1994, A Gene's early self-published book.

### We also have in our house for free give away:

20 copies of *Radical Gifts: Living the Full Christian Life in Troubled Times* 2018

8 copies of *Great Paragraphs of Protestant Theology: A Commentary on the 20th Century Theological Revolution and its Implications for 21st Century Theology* 2005

30 copies of *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy* 2011 by Gene Marshall, Ben Ball, Marsha Buck, Ken Kreutziger, and Alan Richard

8 copies of *The Love of History and the Future of Christianity: Toward a Manifesto for a Next Christianity*: 2014

20 copies of *The Enigma of Consciousness: A Philosophy of Profound Humanness and Religion* 2015

### The following book is only available as a free download from our website:

*The Creator of Christianity: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*. 2019

### The following books are not available in our house, but are available for purchase

See our RL Website for descriptions and purchase instructions:

*The Call of the Awe: Rediscovering Christian Profundity in an Inter-religious Era* 2003

*Jacob's Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization* 2009

*The Thinking Christian: Twenty-three Pathways of Awareness* 2020

For free copies of any of our old journals, we have boxes of hardcopies mailable from our house.

To remember which ones you want, see our website under "journals."

<https://www.realisticliving.org/journals/>

For free copies of our 8 1/2 X 11 booklets see our website for a list of these:

<https://www.realisticliving.org/realistic-living-books-and-booklets-order-form/>

# Realistic Living

*is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."*

Check out our newly revised web site: [RealisticLiving.org](http://RealisticLiving.org)



The road that we walk everyday.

Photo by Paula Brennecke

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