

# Realistic Living

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## REALISTIC LIVING AFFAIRS

psychology professor who doubled as the seminary student counselor. In the 1950's depth psychology was still a controversial subject to be even cited in the same sentence with Christian theology. So hiring professor Elliot was also a progressive act. Later in the 60's and 70's some theological writers attempted to reduce Christian theology to a form of psychology; consequently, for most of my life I have joined the fight against the psychologizing of Christianity.

## Realistic Living Theologizing

What is Realistic Living?

by Gene Marshall

In the early 1950's, The New Reformation of Christianity came to Dallas, Texas. The forward-looking Merrimon Cuninggim, then dean of Perkins School Theology on the campus of Southern Methodist University, hired three new professors—(1) Joseph Wesley Mathews an unusually effective Christian ethics teacher, a student of H. Richard Niebuhr, (2) a 28-year-old whiz kid, Edward Hobbs, a New Testament professor who had recently finished a Doctors' degree on Rudolf Bultmann at the University of Chicago, and (3) Robert Elliot, a theology and



Edward Hobbs

New Testament Scholar  
Gospel of Mark  
innovator  
1926–2018

All three of these new Perkins School of Theology professors were also students of Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as well as of modern art and music. The three of them joined together in teaching a theology-and-art course that was one of the highlights of my Seminary experience.

I showed up at Perkins School of Theology in March of 1953, right in the middle of this

vigorous furor of new theology in conflict with the old Christian liberalism. I am calling this theological intrusion into the old liberalism a New Reformation because, both in it and in the 16th century Reformation, Christian thought, religious practice, and Church life were being deeply turned into a whole new path. Just as in the 16th century Reformation, when history was turned by two of its most prominent theologians, Martin Luther and John Calvin, and then by a number of lesser lights, so in this 20th century Reformation four of the new theologians stand out: Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H. Richard Niebuhr. These four theologians dove into the deepest waters of this overall event. A number of other prominent persons such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Suzanne de Dietrich, Karl Rahner, Simone Weil, and others also made important contributions. Tillich, seeking to bring balance to this overall general dialogue, warned the German Confessing Church against the "strong but tight-fitting armor of Barthian supernaturalism." At the other extreme of this overall theologizing movement was the American giant, Reinhold Niebuhr, of whom I am willing to say that he, in spite of his many useful ethical gifts, remained a social action idealist who had not quite left the old schools

One of the gifts that Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and H.R. Niebuhr shared in common was a deep understanding and following of the breakthroughs of Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote his shelf of books almost exactly a century before them.

If we want to symbolize these five luminaries as one handful of theological visionaries, the thumb is Søren Kierkegaard who moved European philosophy into an existential



perspective and who also moved Lutheran theologizing into an existential perspective.

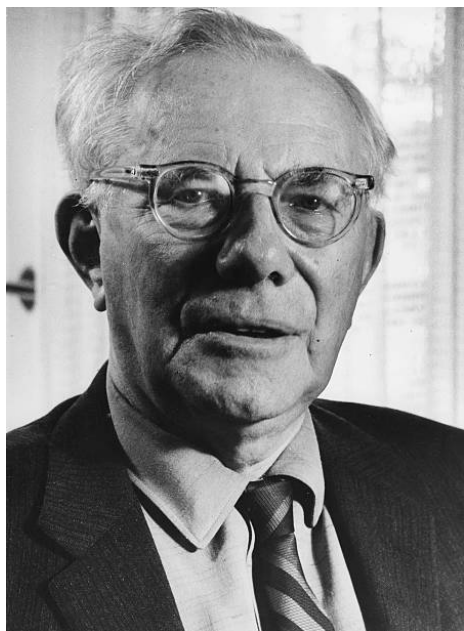
Rudolph Bultmann is finger 1. His pristine scholarship and interpretation of New Testament writings revived those writings, word by word,



metaphor by metaphor, in an existential manner that had become prominent thoughtfulness. He showed us the essence of the Hebrew texts and how the New Testament Good News is only clearly understandable when seen founded within that

Hebrew cultural perspective. Most significantly he gave us back the all-Powerful Yahweh of Profound Reality as a first order of clarity within the Christian Trinity.

Paul Tillich is finger number 2. He restored for us a non-moralistic, non-dogmatic, depth understanding of sin as estrangement and grace as a happening of healing of this estrangement-sickness so colorfully explored by Kierkegaard as despair. Tillich also showed us how this grace healing is not a moral achievement of humanity, but a gift of New Being for the primal relations of our human lives. Tillich was a systematic thinker who explored virtually every perplexing and relevant topic of our philosophizing and theologizing thoughtfulness.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer is finger number 3. He gave us the communion of saints as “life together” and the Holy Spirit of freedom ethics, the responsibility of the human being and the costly discipleship of obedient grace. I also call this gift the invisible church or the resurrected body of Christ. He gave us his own obedient body in sociological response of an



ecumenical and secular quality to the Adolf Hitler crisis.

H. Richard Niebuhr is finger number 4. He wrote a series of classic books on the inherited visible church and the next visible church. He was preoccupied with how we context the key choices for a recreation of our temporal practices as relevant Christians. His books *The Kingdom of God in America* and *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* are clear examples of this practical focus. But his more theological sounding titles have, I believe, the same purpose of illuminating a practical, historically visible Christianity.



These summary statements about these five luminaries were not made while I was in Seminary, ages 21 to 23. but as I am now facing a January 3, 2025 birthday to become 93. In all those intervening years, I have read twice many of the books of these five giants of this New Reformation. I admit that some of the more exegetically intricate or philosophically obscure works I have never finished or never started. My point here is that I have used and still use the writings of these five Christian theologizers as a New New Testament for my Christianity. Perhaps they can serve a similar role for you.

### Joe Mathews and Teaching New Theology to All the Laity

I will introduce Joseph Wesley Mathews as an ecumenical unifier who turned this handful of quite different theologians into a fist of an awakening weekend that opened Christianity anew for thousands of people.

Shortly after I left seminary to serve as a chaplain in the Army, Joe Mathews left Perkins Seminary to become the director of studies for the Christian Faith and Life Community in Austin Texas. A brain-child of Jack Lewis, The Christian Faith and Life Community provided live-in dorms for college students of the University of Texas who were willing to make a covenant to explore both a daily experimental liturgy and 15 hours of college level theological study. Enriched by Joe Mathews' innovative teaching excellence, this program became a most successful campus staple and was expanded later into a weekend course center for church laity as well as a set of special programs for local clergy and campus ministers.

As I was leaving the Army I attended a weekend for campus ministers at this Christian Faith and Life Community. On that occasion I was refreshed and blown away by the contextual talks and the seminars on the following three papers.

1. Bultmann's essay on God as both Giver and Taker of our various aspects of life—the Presence of God in the whole of our experiences, rather than only in the prettier parts.

2. Tillich's sermon "You are Accepted" in which both sin and grace were given a deeper look and perhaps an occasion for a grace-type healing of despair for some of the participants.

3. Pages from Bonhoeffer's book *Ethics* on the topic of freedom in the context of obedience to one's actual life situations. It

was the encounter with Bonhoeffer that put my life on a fresh course. The "free human" became my core view of our human essence long after this event.

I was in consideration for joining the faculty of The Christian Faith and Life Community, but when I finally got out of the Army, that Community had already fractured in two, the Joe Mathews half moving to Evanston, Illinois to begin a religious order of families. I had interviewed for a Campus Minister post at the University of Michigan. That did not work out. In November of 1962, I, with first wife Ruth, and children 8, 6, and 4 decided to join this new Order: Ecumenical and be part of its public face—The Ecumenical Institute, a Division of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago.

### Teaching the New Reformation

My first teaching assignment within that new vocation was a seven session weeknight course in a Chicago suburb—five sessions were similar to the five session course I took in Austin, plus two more sessions featuring:

1. An H. Richard Niebuhr paper on *The Nature and Existence of God*, and

2. An excerpt from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, describing the awfully despairing human in despair to the point of considering suicide.

Later in 1963 the Order:Ecumenical adults studied together a paper by H.R. Niebuhr on "The Social Responsibility of the Church." We were so impressed with that study content that we added part of it to the weekend program and gave that 5-session course the name "Religious Studies-One." RS-1 was the lead course in a curriculum of six more courses. RS II-A, B, & C and RS III -A, B, & C. The sixth of those courses was an introduction to the six religious/cultural

continents of the planet and to the handling of our cultural shock and our teaching effectiveness as we taught three-week Institutes across the planet. You can hear in these facts the astonishing creativity of Joe Mathews' and his ongoing insistent spirit.

Another of his educational extravaganzas was an eight-week residential program held in Chicago for men and women in the U.S. and across the planet that we called "The Academy." I was privileged to work for nine years as dean, teacher, curriculum builder, and teacher trainer for that program. One quarter, my competent colleague John Bagget led the Chicago program while I took this eight-week program on a trip to Australia. I view the fact of this trip as a capstone for how the Order:Ecumenical took these five New Reformation theologians to the world.

For my own nurture as well as for the 40 years of work with my second wife Joyce as a teacher and writer for the not-for-profit organization Realistic Living, I have continued to read and quote these five luminaries. I am going to wind up this essay on "Theologizing for the Future" with some recommended books—two each by the four mid-20th Century theologians and one book by Søren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard wrote a whole shelf of history-changing books. But for me *The Sickness unto Death* stands out from them all. And I am going to count it as two books. These two books might be named (1) "A Psychological Description of Despair" and (2) "Despair as Sin." Every page of this double book is a challenge to Christian life on planet Earth. This book, we might say, wipes out our understanding of sin as a moral failing or as a doctrinal mistake. Sin is a sickness of the human will. This understanding can shift every thought we have about what it means to practice a Christian religion. Also, *The Sickness Unto*

*Death* is like a medical manual on soul sicknesses for you and I as doctors of human souls—the priesthood of all believers.

(1) Rudolph Bultmann brought to the theologizing table a pristine scientific and existential understanding of the New Testament. Kierkegaard had explored a number of Old and New Testament passages with a surprising newness, but it is Bultmann who gave us a turning point in our methodologies for Biblical interpretation. I recommend the following two books as an opening into reading this luminary scholar:

1. *Jesus and the Word*—a form-criticism approach to the historical Jesus of Nazareth plus the metaphorical stories of the meaning of the events of Jesus' historical presence.

2. *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*—a historical and cultural plausibility for these originating events and the metaphorical meanings of these happenings for those times and for our times. In this book Bultmann also probes the Old Testament roots of our New Testament understandings.

(2) Paul Tillich was a systematic thinker who touches upon every theological tangle and any philosophical tangle that relates to theologizing. He also distilled the vast scope of his theologizing into three books of sermons, bleeding the meaning from familiar and unfamiliar Old and New Testament passages. It is here that I recommend getting acquainted with Tillich's perspective for a relevant next Christianity.

1. *The Shaking of the Foundations* contains the sermon "You Are Accepted" perhaps the best-of-all sermons in the 20th Century. Two more books of sermons follow—*The New Being* and *The Eternal Now*.

2. My second reading suggestion is a recently republished book by Wipf and Stock of three Tillich Earl lectures on *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*. Though brief, this is a deep book on perhaps the most urgent topic for Christianity in 2024.

(3) Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores the quality of human life that shares in the resurrected body of Christ, the invisible/spiritual Church, the communion of Saints, and the ethics of freedom. My two suggestions for entering into these very hot topics are:

1. *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which Bonhoeffer demolishes what he calls “cheap grace” with the “costly grace” that includes confession of our falseness and the forgiveness of Eternity that is also a fresh start in our authenticity.

2. I also strongly recommend his book that is simply called *Ethics*, in which Bonhoeffer works every corner of the paradox of obedience to God and the response-ability or freedom within the human. This is a long and sometimes difficult book, but we cannot know Bonhoeffer without it.

(4) H. Richard Niebuhr focuses upon the visible church as it manifests the invisible church within the practical topics of church history. His readable and practical works are based upon the lead edges of the New Reformation, but he is calling us to do real-world jobs of Christian practice restoration. I love all his books, but these two are most essential to me:

1. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* views “One God” as passionate devotional language for a most Profound Reality that appears to us when all our other God-devotions enter the twilight of the Gods—for

example, when the nation loses its final meaning

2. *Christ and Culture* reviews the whole of church history showing 5 ways that “the resurrected Body of Christ” or “the communion of Saints” has been related to the power of the reigning culture. Christ-quality living can be a transformation of culture rather than either an adaptation to culture or a separation from culture. For 60 years this book has remained an illuminating story of church history for me and for my own churchmanship.

Ever since my ecumenical-minded mentor Joseph Wesley Mathews blended these five theologians into a handful of theologizing for this turning point in church history, I have done my teaching and writing in this overall theological thread of meaning for an authentic revitalization of Christian practice. Joyce and I gave this Holy Spirit a more secular name “Realistic Living.”

Since Mathew’s death in 1977, I have dealt with still newer matters. such as radical feminism, Earth ecology, interfaith dialogue, and overcoming the economic caste system. Nevertheless, these deep topics have only enriched for me the basic directions of these five theologizers.

I have also read theologizing from women, from Catholic sources, from African Americans, from Latin Americans, from Asians, as well as from many scientific, philosophical, and historical sources. These many studies have served to further clarify that the Christian life is also a secular human life. Living the Christian revelation entails both a secular human project for each bioregion of the planet and a specific Christian practice project involving intimate Circles of Christian practitioners.

My 40 years with Realistic Living has been a call for a movement that honors in a central way these five theologians of the Christian faith and of the Joe Mathews pull together of them and of his innovations based upon them. Realistic Living has been a continuation of Joe Mathews' basic religious research. Realistic Living now has over 100 very active supporters and a receiving constituency of over 400 persons. We have lost count of the number of persons who over 40 years have attended something, read a Journal, or bought a book.

An important innovation of Realistic Living research and action has been the Christian practice of an intimate circle of intense study and simple ritual experimentation. We have called these Co-Pastor Circles, emphasizing that each member functions as a minister or witness to the other members of the circle. We try to have Jesus Christ as the leader of our circles, recognizing that each of us has to make that happen by being Jesus' resurrection in our own bodies.

We want these circles in their study, experimentation, and social mission to find the middle ground between dogmatism and individualism. The five theologians referenced in the above essay provide us with some guidelines for ascertaining the various off ramps from Christian faith. We are living in a time of vast transition such as the Reformation and other vast turning points of church history. In such a time, staying on course for a truly Christian transition is a challenge. We need at least to avoid both the abandonment of the Christian gifts or a regression to a past form of Christian understanding and mission that has become obsolete, irrelevant, and even oppressive. The above handful of theologians and some of their books are guidelines for such a disciplined journey.

## A Handful of My Theological Writings

For the 21st Century by Gene Marshall

In addition to my earlier attempts at writing, in the 20th century I have composed five books in the 21st century I want to suggest as my most important handful of publications.

The thumb is the 398 page 2020 pull together book, *The Thinking Christian*. Part One of this book is some existential philosophizing on "What is religion?" Part Two is about "Christian theologizing." Its core chapter is my best summary of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*. Part Three is about the practical religious practices of "a viable and vital next Christianity." I published this with Wipf and Stock and have conducted Zoom Seminars on it for four years.

The first finger is my 2024 book *Approximate Knowing* in which I do some further philosophizing in **Parts One and Two** on our natural human intelligence doing inquiry into a Religious revelation. **Part Three** is both a course on the Old Testament and a course on the New Testament. We can count this book as some further dialogue with Rudolph Bultmann. I published it with i-Universe.

The second finger is *The Creator of Christianity, a Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*. Every verse of Mark is quoted and commented upon. My fascination with Mark began with the teachings of my seminary teacher Edward Hobbs and also with my dialogue with Paul Tillich's preoccupation with healing events. In the early years of this century, I spent four years rewriting this book. I have published it as a free download on the Realistic Living website:

<https://realisticliving.org/blog/mark/>

The third finger is *So Be Free*. This book seeks to challenge the many misunderstandings of the Holy Spirit as Freedom. Yes, I credit Dietrich Bonhoeffer for my fascination with this topic. I also see this book as clarification of the Invisible Church or the communion of saints. I published this book with an imprint of Dorrance Publishers in 2023.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The fourth finger is my 2014 publication with Resurgence Publishing entitled *The Love of History and the Future of Christianity: Toward a Manifesto for a Next Christianity*. This is my attempt to share the importance of Church history and the practical matters of the visible church, past and future. I do not claim to be a professional historian, but I have been a fan of H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich on these historical topics. It is in dialogue with their pristine scholarship and their historical overviews that I have used for my detailed historical facts.

When you have read these five books, you may open windows on my efforts to define “Christian theologizing” for the 21st Century. Five more of my books, 82 journal essays, and at least 20 other essays and short booklets fill in gaps and suggest implications for this basic historical turn.

### The Kingdom of God

A sermon by Gene Marshall

The Kingdom of God is a sociological reality of real human beings. The Kingdom of God is not a psychological state that comes and goes. “The Kingdom of God” is a body of people we join or we avoid joining. The Kingdom of God pre-exists our birth and post-exists our death. The Kingdom of God is a permanent fixture of history.

This Kingdom of God is first of all the Everlasting Reign of the Profound Reality that created and is creating all things. “Creator and creation” are parts of a myth that is prominent in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic cultures. Modern secularists routinely dismiss this whole body of religious practices by pointing out that this is “just a myth.” But this myth is about an understanding of the cosmos (the cosmogenesis), of the evolution of life on planet Earth, and of the entire history of humanity. That Yahweh or Allah is our Creator means that humans are not. As Isaiah put it, any human king is but a “rod in Yahweh’s hand.” This too is mythic speech, but this myth points to a larger view of history than a battleground of human kings.

The teachings of Jesus on the “coming of the Kingdom of God,” means the coming of the Reign of Profound Reality in the core wills of human beings.

This is manifest in the hillsides of people gathering to hear Jesus, in the advanced teachings with the inner circle of followers, in 70 disciples being sent out to the villages of Galilee, in the Pentecostal assembly for Jesus’ memorial, in the resurrected body of Christ that moved out east and west, north and south from Jerusalem to everywhere on Earth.

Thirdly, this Kingdom of God is the consequent restructuring of social life on Earth—a task that is never completed—nevertheless a witness on Earth of the Reign of God—of Holy sociological expressions of Trust, Freedom and Love of an Eternal quality. We see this today in the fight for democracy with reactionary forms of authoritarianism, and in the fight for ecological sanity with the thoughtless and intentional destruction on this planet of continued habitation for all the most complex species.

The Kingdom of God is a kingdom because it is promulgated by a King, but this metaphorical King is not a pope or a priest or a pastor or an emperor or a president. This King is the Creator of the entire cosmos. We meet this King in every event of our personal lives and every event of our social lives. Every event is part of this Almighty King’s creating—this Invisible King’s ongoing creation of all events—this larger view of the meaning of history.

Humanity—estranged-from-Reality—cannot see this King, but Paul asserts that they have no excuse for their blindness, for this King’s “eternal power and divinity have been plainly discernible through things which ‘He’ has made and which are commonly seen and known, . . .” Romans 1:20.

Before Paul became an enthusiastic follower of Jesus as Christ, he was already an enthusiastic person of Jewish faith. The above quotation expresses the eyes of his Jewish faith with which he sees Jahweh as active in all things. Paul assumes that Jesus’ religious revolution begins with these eyes of Jewish faith, not with some different God.

Jesus’ proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God spoke about the coming of a community of radical faith. Faith in the omnipresence of Yahweh was already assumed by Jesus and his hillsides of listeners. We often find in our assemblies of humans today a people who are missing both the then assumed Jewish faith as well as the additional



revelation of a Jesus Christ enrichment—the coming now on Earth of the Reign of Yahweh in contemporary walking, talking human lives being illustrated and proclaimed by Jesus and his Christ-way understanding followers.

The coming of this Kingdom of God is also an illumination of God’s creation—its glory, its wonder, its Awe. The creation is also finite—the creations of God are all coming into being, being a while, and returning to the Void from which they came. In this sense, we humans do not build this reign of God. We join the kingdom when called to do so by one of its members. Perhaps we follow Jesus, as did Peter. Perhaps we are called by members of the resurrected body of Christ, as was Paul.

In any case, when we decide to join the body of Christ we are opening to some healing trust in our rebellion-sick wills. We are not forced to choose this faith. “Called” is God’s action. “Joining” is our response-ability or freedom. We choose to accept our acceptance among the forgiven. We choose to leave our slavery among the escapees of Moses. These are metaphors for a wide variety of events in ordinary human lives in which we participate with our active choices. These metaphors call us now, and this faith is historically grounded in real revelatory happenings of the past. A revelatory happening is a series of events that show a body of humans a pathway for authentic living. We humans with our God-given freedom can choose to take this pathway.

### **This Kingdom of Human Living is not an Autocracy**

Jesus speaks of this Kingdom in almost every thing he says. In the following passage we see Jesus distinguishing this Kingdom from the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus called them all to him, and said, "You know that the so-called rulers in the heathen world lord it over them, and their great men have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you, he [she] wants to be great must become the servant of you all, and if he [she] wants to be first among you, he [she] must be the slave of all men [women]! For the Son of Man himself [the arriving and coming Christ] has not

come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set many others free.”

Though this passage from Mark 10:42-45 is not likely a direct quote of Jesus, but even if it is a development of the early church, it can be viewed as a memory of the sense of Jesus’ teachings. This passage does not directly support democracy over dictatorship, but dictatorship is a mode of social organization that violates the spirit of this teaching. Democracy in its radical essence and furthest development is an establishment of servanthood in its popularly-elected leaders. Whether a majority vote always creates such office holders is another matter. It cannot be assumed that all the voters are members of the Kingdom of God. Earthly democracies can go astray, even to the ruin of electing a dictator. The Kingdom of God is something more real and lasting than any ideal Earthly governance, but we can assert that the living out of the Kingdom of God on Earth does trend toward a love of democracy over autocracy.

More certainly, our New Testament understanding of “the Kingdom of God” metaphor does not support having a king for our temporal polity. Having kings on Earth is not supported by viewing Profound Reality as our King. Rather this all powerful King calls us to an obedience that includes in us a love/care/service of all our neighboring beings and societies. Loving Yahweh with our whole being includes loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we know how to love ourselves we know how to love our neighbor. As we learn to love ourselves better, we learn how to love our neighbors better. There is no excuse for loving ourselves exclusively.

Loving our neighbor does not mean not loving ourselves. It means that to the extent that we know how to realistically love our own being, we know how to love our neighbors and are called by our faith to do so. Christian faith is an activism. An overall passivity to our presumed fate, when a model for living, is an off ramp from Christian faith. Christian faith takes in what is to be taken in, and puts forth what is to be put forth. And we are entrusted with a personal freedom to decide what that means for real me and real you in our specific situations. Our ethics is not a rule book that has dropped down from heaven. Our ethics is a risk of freedom that we ourselves choose in response to the Creator facing us with our specific bit of the creation.

When Jesus initiated “the Kingdom of God” as a metaphor for the arrival the Reign of Reality in the core wills of a portion of the human species, Jesus had never heard of democracy. Also the New Testament witness used other metaphors for this Divine Reign. “The Resurrected Body of Christ” is also a metaphor for the Reign on Earth

## RECOMMENDED READING

of God's Reign. We who trust Jesus as the Christ of authentic humanness are the resurrected body of Jesus. The resurrection happened to the body of the disciples, not to the corpse of Jesus. If we think it is most likely that the biological corpse of Jesus was fed to the birds, that has no effect on Christian faith. And if "the Kingdom of God" metaphor seems to violate your love of democracy, you can join "the Resurrected Body of Christ" instead. The two metaphors mean the same thing.

### Art on the Humanness Scale

Movie Reviews by Joyce Marshall



**Wyatt Earp and the Cowboy War.** - This Netflix docu-drama fits the Wyatt Earp-Cowboys situation into a much bigger US political and historical context. It combines excellent documentary film-making with fine acting. Sixteen years after the Civil War, the same North/South issues remain relevant to the residents of Tombstone, Arizona, and the entire country as the story spread in the newspapers. I found it to be both educational and extremely entertaining.

**Will and Harper** - It appears that about 1% of the population is transgender. This film is the story of Will Farrell's friend and long time associate on Saturday Night Live, Andrew Steele, who after a lifetime of feeling female, comes out and becomes Harper Steele. He and Will make a cross country road trip together to explore what this change means to their nearly 30-year friendship. I imagine most of us know someone if not several people who are trans. This exploration of that experience is deep and honest. And courageous. I highly recommend it.

**His Three Daughters** - This film on Netflix explores the relationship of the daughters of a dying man who converge at his New York apartment to deal with his death and one another. Very well done.

**Wicked Little Letters** - This British film is a delight. It is about patriarchy - very feminist. Also, anti-racist. Based on history in 1920, it is about poison

pen anonymous letters and finding and punishing the sender. Lots of fantastic character actors.

### Recommended Reading

Reviews by Joyce Marshall



*The Art of Power*

by Nancy Pelosi

Simon and Schuster, 2024

The sub-title of this book is *My Story as America's First Woman Speaker of the House*. I found it to be a most enjoyable read. Pelosi is plain-spoken, direct and honest. When she was first elected to the House in 1987 representing the San Francisco area of California and asked if she wished to speak, she was warned either not to speak or to be brief, as was the custom for new members. She was brief and mentioned that she was there to fight against the scourge of HIV/AIDS. Her colleagues were dismayed. One said, "Why did you say that? That is their first impression of you." She responded, "Because that is why I am here."

During Obama's presidency when they were struggling to pass the Affordable Care Act at one time it seemed impossible. Ted Kennedy had died and his Massachusetts seat in the Senate was replaced by a Republican. The press insisted that the ACA was dead and would never pass. Pelosi said they would achieve it. Her reply to reporters: "I told them we wouldn't allow anything to stand in our way. No matter how high the barrier. First we would push open the gate. If that didn't work, we would climb the fence. If that didn't work, we would pole-vault in. If that didn't work, we would helicopter in, but we would not let anything stand in our way."

She begins the book with the story of the recent attack on her husband Paul. She tells the details of the Donald Trump presidency including a long section on the January 6 event. She tells about the Iraq War during the George W. Bush presidency. This had particular interest for me as I wrote an article in our local paper at that time against going into that war.

## RECOMMENDED READING

She calls the Iraq War “the most destabilizing mistake in recent American history.”

Pelosi notes that the speakership is “both a uniquely powerful and an executive position that requires a combination of a policy background, strategic knowhow, and, above all, intuition.” She also notes that the role is probably the most challenging position in government. She lauds many of those she worked with through the years, both Democrats and Republicans. One of the things she emphasized about the House Democrats is that they listened to one another. In those conversations she considered herself to be a “maestro - guiding great musicians.” One thing she said that impressed me: “I truly believe that it is possible to have eternal friendships with those with whom you agree or disagree.”

I already admired Nancy Pelosi before reading this book, and my admiration has only increased as well as my understanding of the machinations of government and of recent history.

*War*  
by Bob Woodward  
Simon & Schuster, 2024

This book, by top reporter Bob Woodward, is basically a tribute to President Joe Biden and his core national security team of seven who, for the past four years, have managed to avert a World War in both Ukraine/Russia and Israel/Gaza. It is also an education in the art of diplomacy. For me, it has filled out what was missing from my on-line Washington Post and my television MSNBC coverage with what was said in the rooms where decisions were made. Woodward’s gift is that people trust him and most everyone shares honestly with him. I got better acquainted with Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley and got to know Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. I was introduced to National Security Adviser Jake



Sullivan and his deputy Jon Finer, CIA Director Bill Burns, and the female Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines. Woodward acknowledges that there were mistakes made, but with the combination of decades of experience the group shared plus an unusual amount of teamwork, and finally, “basic human decency” this group has protected the world from an all-out war—so far. The book reads like a novel. The other heroes are Volodymyr Zelensky and Kamala Harris. The villains: Putin, Trump, and Netanyahu.

*You Are the Happiness You Seek  
Uncovering the Awareness of Being*  
by Rupert Spira  
Sahara Publications, 2022

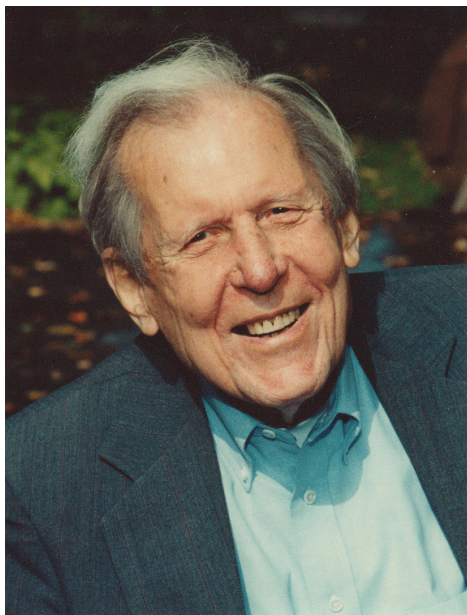
Spira explores what lies at the heart of many religious and spiritual traditions: Advaita Vedanta, Kashmir Shaivism, Hinduism, Buddhism, mystical Christianity, Sufism and Zen. In this book he looks at the very nature of our human being, noting that happiness and love are our essence. He gives methods to deal with our addiction to thinking, attending to painful emotions, and our resistance to our moment to moment experience. He quotes his teacher, Francis Lucille, saying, “Meditation is a universal ‘yes’ to the reality of one’s experience.” Spira sees that as the core of the teaching—opening us to our true nature and its innate qualities of peace and joy.

*The Great Search  
Turning to Earth and Soul in the  
Quest for Healing and Home*  
by John Philip Newell  
HarperOne, 2024

In the introduction of this book Newell refers to the last sermon in (my favorite theologian) Paul Tillich’s book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, titled, “I Am Doing A New Thing.” Rereading that piece, I was astounded at its relevance for today. Newell’s response is this book based on nine “saints,” (my word for them) each of whose work has been seeking the needed thing for this particular moment in time. Several have been my “saints” as well and three are new to me.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Newell begins with **Thomas Berry**, the Catholic priest who was our colleague in the bioregional movement beginning in the 1980's. He sees Berry as seeking the vision of living in true and sustainable relationship with Earth with every species as our neighbor. It drew me back to examine the ten books of Berry's that we own and to recall our memories of working personally with him. One emphasis of Berry was what he called "woman consciousness," as he saw earth consciousness and woman consciousness as inseparably related and the divine within every person, every place and every time.



Newell's second person is **Nan Shepherd**. I was not familiar with her and I have ordered her book, *The Living Mountain*, in which she describes her relationship with a piece of earth. Newell sees her as a seeker of Earth. Shepherd is Scottish (where Newell lives) and the mountain refers to the Cairngorms mountain range there. She lets the mountain teach her by being open to the "enchanted radiance" at the heart of nature and inviting us to fall in love with Earth.

**Martin Buber** is noted as Seeking Presence. A Jewish rabbi he was a leader in the spiritual resistance to the Nazi domination in Germany. He fled the country with his wife and children, settling in Jerusalem where he had to deal with the Jews perpetrating on the Arab population some of the same wrongs done to the Jews in Europe. He felt that presence is the greatest gift we can offer one another and the greatest

gift we can receive. We already had his book, *I and Thou*, in our library.

I was surprised that Newell's next person is **Carl Jung**, the founder of analytical psychology, and he is noted for Seeking Awareness. One of Jung's quotes: "Like every other being, I am a splinter of the infinite deity." He spoke of God as the mystery of love that is beyond understanding and the journey of awareness as a journey of love for Earth, for one another and for ourselves.

Person number five is **Julian of Norwich** who was Seeking Wellness. Which, of course refers to her famous quote, "All shall be well, and all shall be well,



and all manner of things shall be well." She said that our essential being, or our spirit, is bound inextricably to our "sensory being." She saw us not as essentially sinful but as essentially divine and that we are "made for love." That we have been born to love. It is our beginning and our end.

The next person, named as Seeking Love, is **Jalaluddin Rumi**, the poet, who said that Love is the "true religion." His relationship with the Sufi mystic Shams is familiar to most of us. A familiar quote: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." And one more:

I called through (the door of my neighbor) . . .  
"The mystics are gathering in the street" (I said).  
"Come out!"

## RECOMMENDED READING

"Leave me alone" (said my neighbor) "I'm sick."

"I don't care if you're dead!" (I replied) "Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!"

Next is **Rabindranath Tagore** who is Seeking Wisdom. For the Indian poet it is wisdom that accesses the inner realm of truth. Whereas the Western world has pursued knowledge, the Eastern world has been more rooted in wisdom's unitive way of seeing, remembering the oneness of the divine and the human, the kinship of humanity and Earth, and the interrelationship of all things. Newell notes that this wisdom is crucial at this time when humanity's lack of oneness with Earth threatens to undo us.

Also new to me is **Etty Hillesum** who is named for Seeking Meaning. Like Anne Frank she died in a Nazi concentration camp before the end of the war and also kept a diary, later published as *An Interrupted Life*. She lived in Amsterdam, was a tutor in Russian and was a secular Jew. She became the assistant and then the lover of Julius Spier, a Jewish therapist in Amsterdam who had trained under Carl Jung. Together they explored the writing of Meister Elkhart, the Torah, the Quran and the Bible. Her take on the Bible: "It is so rugged and tender, simple and wise. And so full of wonderful characters, too." As Newell noted, she learned of the wisdom of Jesus "without the encumbrance of the Church's doctrinal teachings." What is amazing is Hillesum's spirit that did not flag in the camp. A quote: "The misery here is quite terrible, and yet, . . . time and again, it soars straight from my heart like some elementary force, the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness."

**Edwin Muir** is named for Seeking Faith. I was also unfamiliar with him. He was a Scottish poet who died in 1959. He lost his faith early in the 20th century when his family had to leave the Orkney Islands for his father to work in Glasgow. Several family members died and Muir worked at demeaning jobs. Then he met Willa Anderson and the two of them worked together doing translations

(mostly of Kafka) for the publishing world. Later his poetry was published. When Willa became ill he found himself reciting the Lord's Prayer over and over. And he began reading the New Testament over and over. Later he wrote, "Now I realized that, quite without knowing it, I was a Christian, no matter how bad a one." Newell notes that Muir's faith was always humble, tentative, and undogmatic.

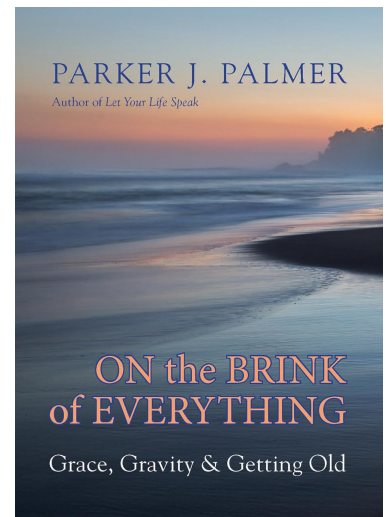
In conclusion, Newell notes that his "motley crew" share a love of Earth and of the human soul and that they can help point us in the right direction now at this particular moment in time. His summary: "We are longing for an expanded vision of the universe, a reawakened love affair with Earth, and a deepened sense of spiritual presence in every moment and encounter of life. We are yearning to grow in awareness, to find wellness in relation to the whole and to delight in love together. And we are longing for the recovery of wisdom, for meaning in both the joys and the sorrows of life and for a reimagined faith in the immortal light that shines in all things. This is the Great Search for healing and home."

Books by Parker J. Palmer

*Let Your Life Speak  
Listening for the Voice  
of Vocation*  
2000, Jossey-Bass

*On the Brink of  
Everything Grace,  
Gravity & Getting Old*  
2018, Berrett-Koehler

*Healing the Heart of  
Democracy  
The Courage to Create a  
Politics  
Worthy of the Human Spirit*  
first published 2011 -  
republished with new  
introduction in 2024,  
Jossey-Bass



## RECOMMENDED READING

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Parker Palmer is a Quaker who has founded the educational Center for Courage & Renewal. His book on vocation particularly interested me in his discussion of his dealing with a period of depression when he was in his forties. The "Brink" book is on aging and I am over 10 years past where he was when he published it, so it really grabs me. Thomas Merton is one of the "saints" he often quotes in that book. I own (and have read) 22 of Merton's books, and it drew me back to connect again to Merton. In "Brink" he deals with the Trump presidency, and how an angry Quaker carries on a "lover's quarrel" with his country. The reprint of the Democracy book is in response to Trump's second run for office and the imperilment of democracy.

**Review by Alan Richard**

### *All About Love: New Visions*

By bell hooks

*All About Love* is the first book in cultural critic and feminist scholar bell hooks' series of analyses of love, and serves as the foundation presupposed by later books in the series, which addressed the challenges to love for women, for men, and for Black people. And hooks begins by focusing on clarity. Against what she regards as romantic theories of love, she argues that, even if love is little understood, definitions are important. Without them, we cannot have an authentic conversation. So, hooks borrows M. Scott Peck's definition: "the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth," partly because of what she sees as the weakness in romantic conceptions of love, and partly because Peck, unlike most authors and lecturers, offered a definition and it was the only accessible one hooks had found at the time.

For hooks, Peck's definition of love means that love is not a feeling but an effortful practice with essential dimensions: care, affection,  
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recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and honest, open communication. She writes that most people have experienced the first two dimensions, care and affection, in their family of origin and wrongly think they were loved. That is partly due to the way normative expectations of American families were lowering our expectations and distorting our efforts to love. But care and affection alone are not love, and it is not an absence of either the provision of necessary resources nor the absence of hugs that make for a loveless culture. It is the absence of respect, recognition, and commitment.

Although commitment is given an entire chapter, the bulk of the book focuses on these three neglected elements in relationship to the purpose of love and on the difference love makes in what is prioritized in religious practice and community, in ethics, in friendship, in couples, in our relationship with death and the dead, and in our efforts to address the scars left by the absence of a willed, effortful love in their childhood or in their adult relationships with partners and friends. Throughout the book, she uses examples from her own life and from the literature to underline that a life informed by love will be a life, not so much gripped by a powerful force undermining our agency, but as the intentional and disciplined exercise of it. Because our society cannot see love as an act of will, hooks argues, it has developed social expectations that wall love out of most contexts and render the society loveless.

Now 25 years old, *All About Love* doesn't read like a book written in a bygone era. This is partly because the aspects of our society, media, and politics have only gotten worse, and partly because hooks' understanding of love is still unusual in its insistence that love is a matter of will and responsibility, not a matter of affect and/

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or of being buffeted by a force too powerful to resist, or that is primarily about transcendency, or inward spiritual growth. If you read a single book about love in and lovelessness in the U.S., let *All About Love* be that one book. It will alter your understanding of love and inspire you to adopt a program of practices that together add up to love as a way of life,

## Realistic Living

Dear Realistic Living Journal Readers,

This will be the last and the 82nd Realistic Living Journal, an average of 2 per year for the last 41 years. At our Realistic Living board meeting in January 2025, we will be ending the incorporation of Realistic Living. Gene will be 93 January 3rd. Joyce will be 91 February 19th. We will continue some of our teaching and writing ministries, but the anchoring of a non-for-profit organization is work we need to phase out of our increasingly limited lives.

Nevertheless, for the time being Gene is planning to continue his Realistic Living pointers the fifteenth of each month as well as correspondence and other sharing for as many months as possible. Joyce too will continue producing study guides and other correspondence. Alan is seeking other work in other locations. We are all three here in Bonham, Texas through 2024.

Wayne Marshall will continue maintaining the Realistic Living website indefinitely. David Marshall will become the custodian of Gene's copyrights. Roy Philbrook will be the custodian for the Realistic Living mailing list. Scores of people will be continuing the heritage of Realistic Living in dialogue with the Institute of Cultural Affairs and other works of love extending Realistic Living into the future of a viable and vital Christian practice.

## Realist Living Financing

Our main message for this journal is "Thank You" for your years of support for the 501-C-3 non-profit corporation Realistic Living. When we have received a large gift of \$1000 or more, we have usually celebrated our rescue from some impending crisis; nevertheless, the bulk of our economic support has come from smaller gifts. I want to especially thank our list of monthly givers who have given our financial wellbeing a needed stability.

If you are one of those monthly givers, please note that we still need your November and December gift, but starting in January there will no longer be a non-profit organization, Realistic Living, for you to donate to. So you will want to notify your bank to discontinue any automatic check payments you have contracted with them.

It appears to us in late October that we are on track to make our budget for 2024, provided, of course, that your usual giving continues through December 31, 2024

In the early weeks of January we will be sending you a letter verifying your 2024 contributions for the IRS and/or for your own records.

Again, *thank you* for your financial support as well as for your other work in support of this movement for a viable and vital next Christian practice.



# Realistic Living

*is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."*

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



**"Goodby"**

Photo by Paula Brennecke

**Realistic Living**

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