Christian Artists & Writers Collaborate on Our Inaugural Edition

JAX PORTRAIT ARTIST ANN KENYON
LOVING THOSE WHO REJECT GOD
LIVING LIKE A TRIBE
MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR
CHRIS KONKER

I've been drawn to this phrase ever since I came upon it in a Calvin Coolidge speech. As the former president lauded the lives of our nation's founders as worthy of emulation, he mentioned that their intellectual lives were centered around the "meeting house". In reference to an early example of such a place, historian Joseph B. Walker claims "this little block-house beside the brook in the wilderness, rude and humble as it was, served the triple purpose of sanctuary, schoolhouse, and town hall". This single "house" manifested their desire to unite the three missions of knowing God, learning about God and the world, and serving God in the world.

I believe every house could function that way! God himself created this world as a house in which to dwell. We hope to keep these three functions at the forefront of our magazine as well. At The Meeting House, we do this by telling stories through artistic collaboration between the editorial board, writers, and visual artists. Although some of us are professionals in these fields, many are amateurs and dilettantes who play with words, colors, and images, and who partner with others on creative ventures for the sheer delight of it. Myself excepted, we are all volunteers. I am thankful for our contributors' time, love, and hard work. And while our primary identity is followers of Jesus Christ, we are not focused on the administrative workings of Mandarin Presbyterian Church or its hired staff. Rather, our magazine is a contribution to the mission of MPC to invite, connect, equip, and serve in order to "love people to love Jesus Christ".

This is our first issue. (We hope to have more!) Highlights include a discussion with former Sudanese refugee, Santino Gatluak, who encourages us to step back and perceive cultural trends that lead to or inhibit genuine community. Ann Kenyon, the gifted painter of MPC's so-called "Jesus Window", reflects upon life as a portrait artist and the recent completion of her memoir. In the essay "Paradise Lost", Lynn Wehrmann introspectively seeks a way to love neighbors who are blatantly indifferent to God. Original works of photography and mixed-media are interwoven with the words on these pages.

Let us know what you think by emailing me at meetinghouse@mandarinpres.com. The variety of themes in this debut embodies our conviction that the world is a gift of our Lord Jesus, and to be part of this world is a gift. We thus hope you find our magazine to be a gift which rejuvenates a sense of wonder about being alive.

What is The Meeting House?

"Lynn's House" by Kate Vallas

Cover Photo: Interior of 17th Century Swarthmoor Quaker Meeting House in Cumbria, UK (John Morrison/Alamy)
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The Meeting House Magazine is a publication of Mandarin Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida which seeks to provide Christians a platform for telling stories about the world. We hope to connect individual voices to kindred spirits, and create a curiosity about our world which inspires the Church to be of greater service.
The followers of Christ walking to Emmaus engrossed themselves in conversation about the past three days. They had, after all, seen the "power of darkness" (22:43) at work: a sword-wielding mob, Judas' kiss of betrayal, a biased trial, a murderer preferred over Jesus, their innocent leader's public humiliation, a crucifixion. Women wailed. Disciples fled. Christ bled. The hope for a redeemed Israel was sealed in a tomb.

What followed the darkness was almost unbelievable: the power of God. The resurrection events caused their logic to lurch. How could they explain the earthquake and resurrected bodies walking down the street? What about the thick temple veil torn from the top and split open to reveal the Holy of Holies to everyone? Why those angels inside the empty tomb?

A stranger joined their conversation, someone they had followed for three years but could not identify while in their grief. Boldly, he chastised them for their sluggish belief. With thoroughness they'd never heard he pointed out the Messiah's coming—through centuries of recorded scripture. Showed them Christ in the manna and the showbread, the mercy seat and the sacrifices. Described how the acacia wood in the temple foretold his humanity as the gold foretold his divinity. Explained how he was the feasts and would one day be tabernacled in them. How Christ the man became the final Passover lamb.

Their hearts burned within them when he told them about the rock at Mt. Horeb where water flowed from stone—like living water would flow from men's bellies after the Messiah's coming. He described the cleft of rock where Moses hid when God passed by—like Christ's followers would ever live hid in Him. He even described Christ's physical appearance in Isaiah 53: a plain-looking man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

These dedicated followers had been taught the Law and Scripture at the synagogue their whole lives. They had factual knowledge plus the blessing of living with the man of God in the flesh for three years, yet they still did not fully know Him. Their insistence on Christ's empowering mission to redeem Israel blinded them from seeing Christ's passion to redeem each one of them. Knowing something is not the same as knowing someone. How, then, could they possibly know Him fully? They began to listen.

Christ made them hungry for truth and "they constrained him" to keep talking, to stay. Like Jacob insisting the angel stay and bless him. As they listened and ate, the Son of Righteousness rose with healing in his wings, as Malachi foretold, giving them spiritual sight. It would be the beginning of knowing Jesus the Messiah as friend, brother, and Lord. The Word.

They'd seen the power of darkness, and the power of God. Neither compared to sitting close to the Messiah and seeing Him. We want no less. Now is the power of prayer… "Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord. We want to see you."

The Road to Emmaus - Luke 24
By Inez Holger
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“The Road to Emmaus” by Michael Torevell
Paradise Lost
When a spiritual darkness invaded my idyllic retreat, God shed a revealing light on my heart.
By Lynn Wehrmann

"Thy Will Be Done in Me" by Lynn Wehrmann
Every summer, my family spends several weeks at our cozy and restful “camp” in Maine. It consists of a small cottage that sits on a peninsula, with a deck overlooking a large lake. There are no granite countertops or air conditioning. We have a wood-burning stove and one bathroom. The beauty of the lake provides a wonderful respite from shopping malls and highways. In the early hours of the morning, fishermen cruise the cove hoping for a bite. Occasionally fog hovers over the lake, adding to a sense of mystery. Some mornings are so quiet, I imagine time has stopped for everyone but me. I do a lot of reading in my hammock and Bible study on our deck over the water during these weeks.

This is the part of Maine that I adore. It fills my soul to stand and gaze across the lake in awe of God’s beauty. But over the past years I have found myself not wanting to spend as much time in Maine. I couldn’t put my finger on why until last summer I went to visit a dear friend, Melody, who lives fairly close to our camp. We originally connected here in Florida where she and her husband “winter” four months of the year from Gloucester, Massachusetts. During my visit, we had a wonderful time sharing about how God is working in our lives, encouraging one another, and hysterically laughing at how sorry we can be “in the flesh”.

When I returned to our Maine camp, I sensed a heaviness, a darkness around me. I felt depressed. Our camp is on a dirt road shared by an eclectic group of unbelieving neighbors, with whom I want to share Christ. At the risk of sounding judgmental, two of these friends have same-sex partners, though one wears a cross, while others co-habitate. There is all-day drinking and pot-smoking when they come up on weekend visits. Meaningful conversations become non-existent, and people talk at each other instead of with each other. I realized I was missing a “God connection” on our peninsula, like what I experienced with Melody.

After this discovery last summer, I immersed myself in Christian and secular resources on how to connect redemptively with nonbelievers who would rather lick a lizard than participate in a discussion about God. I pondered how to do it, what to say, how to say it, and the best timing until finally I gave up. I didn’t have it in me. Selfishly, my desire to want a “God connection” with our friends took over my heart. Wanting people we care about to love Jesus is not a bad thing. It’s how we think and react that gets in the way. I became frustrated that they can’t see Jesus or recognize Him in me. This frustration outweighed grace and forbearance. But He did not leave me in this state.

Graciously, God started working on me. He revealed that I judged and dismissed those who dismiss God, without extending grace or mercy. I judged instead of having a weeping heart for their salvation and redemption. I couldn’t see them the way God loves them. For all the judgment I was pridefully carrying, I had no capacity to love. I complained about what I considered dead-end relationships because they don’t know Jesus. What a revelation, to see in myself the very thing I rejected in them.

The truth is, I am human and get caught up in my selfish desires. I’ve said and done dumb and hurtful things. I’ve had a “glass too much” and I can forget who I am in Christ. The difference is I know I need a Savior. Do I want grace, mercy, and forgiveness in times I miss the mark? You bet! And I would bet they do, too.

This summer, I took with me to Maine this lovely quote from Proverbs Ministry: “I stopped trying to figure everything out. I stopped looking for a blaring answer from God. I simply began to pray. I prayed for wisdom, clarity and guidance about how to move forward. I prayed for peace and hope to fill my heart and mind — leaving no room for confusion and negative thoughts. I prayed that decision-making would be an extension of my faith, not an exhaustion of my efforts.”

I certainly don’t have all the answers, but I know the One who does. It’s God’s responsibility to change hearts. He asks me to love.
A TIME TO MOURN
WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY SUMMER OF GRIEVING
By Chris Curry

In the summer of 2015, I regularly video-chatted with my girlfriend Maria 2,000 miles away in Costa Rica. We talked about death and grief.

At 18 years old, death had been the farthest thing from my mind. I was in college and involved in a middle school ministry called Hang 10. Then, our friends Benji Piechoczek and Corey Goode died and suddenly it was all we could think about. The night before Benji’s death, he invited me to go with him on a trip to Ichetucknee Springs. I decided not to go because of Hang 10 obligations. Benji and his girlfriend, Jordan Gutheim, went but never returned due to a fatal car crash on the way home. Around the same time, my friend Corey died in a motorcycle accident in Cambodia where he was teaching English.

Maria lived in Gainesville and I was in Jacksonville so we were used to long-distance dating. But that difficult summer, she was in Costa Rica working for a ministry called Face of Justice. Her employment there made the long distance even longer.

Maria reads online devotionals from SheReadsTruth.com. Conveniently enough, right after these deaths occurred, there was a posting on the website for both men and women on the topic of mourning. This multiple-week series took us through Ecclesiastes and taught us how death and mourning are a part of life. When Maria and I video-chatted, we would talk about our week and then go over the devotional together.

Due to my involvement with Hang 10, I’ve occasionally thought about how I would honestly talk about the subject of grieving with a middle-schooler. Here are three things I would mention, based on experiencing and studying grief with Maria:

SADNESS
Death is one of the hardest things to come across at a young age and it’s OK to be sad. Telling my friends what had happened were some of the hardest phone calls I’ve ever had to make. I don’t recall how I approached them or what I said. I remember how I wanted to “hold everyone together”, which made it hard to face my own questions and properly mourn. It was a really hard time.

COMING TO TERMS
You eventually reach a point where it is still sad but you come to terms with the loss of a friend. The most memorable discussion Maria and I had was realizing that we may never receive answers to our questions about our friends’ deaths.
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"Mourning & Dancing" by Pat Setser

CELEBRATING

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You can celebrate the life they lived. Benji had been my friend since fourth grade. Corey was a mentor and I learned to minister to middle school kids like he did to me. I find peace in the fact that Benji, Jordan, and Corey lived wonderful lives while they were here. I see that God has blessed me through the gifts they gave to my life.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance..." Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Corey Goode’s parents founded a nonprofit to continue his work in Cambodia. For more information, go to CHDCambodia.org.
A
s a lifelong portrait artist, I reveal myself through art. We all do. And make no mistake—you, too, dear Reader, are an artist. To paraphrase the American painter and teacher, Robert Henri: You are a creature created to create. In whatever minute manner. To do a thing, anything, well. To live life. Your own unique life, well. That is art personified.

My recently completed memoir, Memories, Method, & Mastery: A Memoir of a Life in Art, is a string of little written glances into my life. Some, joyous. Some, sorrowful. And some, just plain laughable. Oh, me. Do I ever have a knack for wacky. And I risk to tell all (well, almost all) in hopes that you will identify. That we may recognize each other. That we might feel connected. All to the Whole.

The word “whole” reminds me of my art. I want my painting whole. Unified. Therefore value, color and visual connections are a must. Yes. A community of colors. Little patches of color combine to make the whole. We, too, are patches of color living in community. The community of Mandarin. In the community of Jacksonville. In the community of Florida. In the community of the United States. In the community of the whole wide world. All breathing beings. Our breath unites us. “Breath” from the Latin spiritus. Spirits, we, making up the whole. Dear Reader, let us squint. Look closely at our lives. Find our values. Open eyes wide to the glory of our hues. We, the little patches of color living in community. Making up the whole.

For more information about Ann and her memoir, visit her website at www.annmanrykenyon.com.
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Ann’s Inside Look at “A Look Inward”

A painting is stronger when there is a definite center of interest, as are we. (What is your center of interest? What is mine?) When painting the self-portrait “A Look Inward”, I have a goal: to paint my Now. A moment in time. For that is all we have. We see each other and the world beyond in a series of little glances. Try it. Look at the person next to you. You cannot focus on both eyes at the same time. We only have now. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow, unseen. One moment connected to the next. Strung together like luminous pearls. Break the strand and they tumble one by one into yawning mystery.

I scrutinize the woman in the mirror. Contemplate my canvas: White. Blank. Daring me to make the first mark. Scoffing. Go quickly now. Only two colors, opposite on the color wheel. Complementary. Orange hair. Blue jean jacket. Say the most with the very least. Let paint speak for the yin, the yang. The good, the bad. All of life.

With brush in hand, dipped in swirls of cadmium orange, I swipe lush color across the empty surface. Now who’s boss? A thrust to the left creates the top of her head and elongates the bangs hovering over a straight forehead and short nose. Following a vertical beneath the nostril, the upper lip splays outward. Cobalt blue calls to me. A pointed denim collar appears and drips toward infinity.

Quickly. Just a glance. I can but focus on one eye in this instant. Carefully one eye comes into view. All the rest is peripheral. Time flees. I lose myself in the rich aroma of paint and gesso. There’s no one but me, the painting, and the woman in the mirror. I cannot paint “tomorrow” but this moment is captured on canvas today.
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Years ago, Santino Gatluak worked for a glass company in Tulsa, Oklahoma. One day after a storm, he was dispatched to measure a residential window that had been broken by a neighbor's tree. While Santino conducted the estimate, the affected neighbors met for the very first time, although they had lived next door to each other for several years. Surprised by this, Santino told his client that maybe this wind had brought him a "good connection."

Santino is a Sudanese refugee who immigrated to the U.S. in the early 2000s with his wife Martha and four children. In the course of our friendship, his descriptions of life in the Nuer tribe in South Sudan have revealed a vibrant interdependence in the church and community. He speaks with great conviction about how the tribal networks among his people were a fertile soil for Christianity to be planted. While he loves being in the U.S., he loves being a Christian more. And it is harder, he said, for the Nuer to "stay Christian" in the U.S. because it is harder to connect with each other.

Pastor Tod Bolsinger's book *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian* asserts that the stable identity of the growing Christian is grounded in the shared habits of Christian community. It may not take most of us five years to meet our neighbors; yet the relational connections Santino has described as characteristic of the tribe seem like the sort of intimacy and closeness that would make many Americans uncomfortable.

For example, one attribute of tribal societies is a parenting culture which privileges age over youth. "[The] young person is a responsibility to anyone," explained Santino, including unrelated adults. Many parents in the U.S. would be shocked if a neighbor rebuked their child. They might say, "It isn't their place to say what is right or wrong in our home." Yet this perspective places the burden of discipline and correction on the parents alone. As Santino puts it: "You get a lot of help when you grow up through the tribe, in your family and outside the family."

Furthermore, the eating, celebrating, and resting that American families are more prone to do in their own homes, the Nuer did together. Santino detailed this for me one day when I stopped by his apartment to say hello. He said that, unlike his current apartment complex, typically 10-20 neighbors with nothing to do that day would spend hours together, sitting, eating, drinking. Many kitchens in South Sudan used smoky charcoal stoves, which required the cooking be done outside. As evening approached, families gathered outdoors to prepare food and eat together—men with men, women with women. Santino smiled as he told me this, but I could sense some disappointment.
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Furthermore, the eating, celebrating, and resting that American families are more prone to do in their own homes, the Nuer did together. Santino detailed this for me one day when I stopped by his apartment to say hello. He said that, unlike his current apartment complex, typically 10-20 neighbors with nothing to do that day would spend hours together, sitting, eating, drinking. Many kitchens in South Sudan used smoky charcoal stoves, which required the cooking be done outside. As evening approached, families gathered outdoors to prepare food and eat together—men with men, women with women. Santino smiled as he told me this, but I could sense some disappointment.
when he admitted perhaps only one person would stop by that day. And I thought about how the difference between him and me is that if one person stopped by my house today just to say hello and sit with me, that would be a lot!

But that’s the thing: I worked that day, as I do most days, and so I wasn’t at home. He told me about people getting together to eat and drink when there’s nothing else to do, but I think I’d be half-embarrassed to admit to anyone that I ever had nothing to do, much less go find people to celebrate it with. In Sebastian Junger’s recent book *Tribe*, he explains that unlike tribal societies, modern societies are wealthy and affluent, but they don’t create leisure time. They only create more work. When I asked Santino about leisure time in Sudan, he asked me to imagine a scenario in which there was a lot of work that needed to be done in a garden. He and his wife would draw 10 young people from the neighborhood with cooked food so that the gardening work would be completed in less time and everyone could enjoy the feast together. By contrast, the over-worked and overly-wealthy modern societies appear to be starved for relationships and for time.

These “good connections” seem to happen more naturally in other parts of the world. In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith argues that American individualism is a learned trait, and its habits subvert our belief. In other words, we may say we love and value Christian community, yet individualistic habits nurture a greater love for ourselves. In *Tribe*, Junger suggests that American armed service men and women form bonds with one another that are akin to those in tribal cultures. This can lead to profound loneliness when they return to American culture where bonds like this often don’t thrive.

Why might we find it easier to be Christian if we had some of the Nuer’s neighborly connectedness? When I asked Santino about the quality he was most proud of in the way the Nuer Christians follow Jesus, he told me that the Christians there realize that the only way you can be a good person in God is if you kill your desire. “Anything you think is your desire, kill it, and allow God to be in you fully,” he said. This sounds to me a bit drastic—which desires? Aren’t some of our desires good? But the interwoven tribal world that Santino has shown me, where the people live together, eat together, do nothing together, and share everything together, provides everything people need. The idea is that anything someone would desire beyond this—more material goods, more wealth, more power—would draw that person away from God and away from the community.

Of course, there are many qualities of tribal societies that we might not want to export to a modern society like in the U.S. After all, Nuer kitchens employed charcoal stoves because they didn’t have electricity. War continues in Sudan, and Santino, who has fought as a soldier, prays daily for Sudan’s peace. We don’t want everything from the Nuer tribe of Sudan. As Junger illustrates at length in his book, hard times bring people back to a life-giving mutual dependence which is still characteristic of many tribes. When the storms of adversity bring us into deeper reliance on our neighbors or on the church, I imagine Santino would smile and say, “Maybe this wind brought you a good connection.”
when he admitted perhaps only one person would stop by that day. And I thought about how the difference between him and me is that if one person stopped by my house today just to say hello and sit with me, that would be a lot! But that's the thing: I worked that day, as I do most days, and so I wasn't at home. He told me about people getting together to eat and drink when there's nothing else to do, but I think I'd be half-embarrassed to admit to anyone that I ever had nothing to do, much less go find people to celebrate it with. In Sebastian Junger's recent book *Tribe*, he explains that unlike tribal societies, modern societies are wealthy and affluent, but they don't create leisure time. They only create more work. When I asked Santino about leisure time in Sudan, he asked me to imagine a scenario in which there was a lot of work that needed to be done in a garden. He and his wife would draw 10 young people from the neighborhood with cooked food so that the gardening work would be completed in less time and everyone could enjoy the feast together. By contrast, the over-worked and overly-wealthy modern societies appear to be starved for relationships and for time. These “good connections” seem to happen more naturally in other parts of the world. In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith argues that American individualism is a learned trait, and its habits subvert our belief. In other words, we may say we love and value Christian community, yet individualistic habits nurture a greater love for ourselves. In *Tribe*, Junger suggests that American armed service men and women form bonds with one another that are akin to those in tribal cultures. This can lead to profound loneliness when they return to American culture where bonds like this often don't thrive.

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Outside, the last of the season’s leaves were falling to the ground, though a few resisted letting go and hanged on tremulously. Agnes called to Marshall. Slowly, he raised himself from the dog bed by the heater in the kitchen. After stretching out his thickening body and releasing a lengthy yawn, he met Agnes by the door. His beloved owner’s now-crooked fingers struggled with the leash buckle, but as always, Marshall was patient. Agnes slipped on her coat and boots and smiled softly at him as he tilted his yellow head, as if studying her.

The leash served as an unnecessary control, for Marshall would not stray from her side. Despite this fact, she liked the link between them. After adjusting to the first breath of near-freezing air, they idled down the path. Agnes listened to the crinkled leaves crunching under their feet. It seemed like only yesterday there were brilliant colors on the trees, and just before that, vibrant green leaves giving shade to the children below, and before that, fresh buds waiting to open and face the world. As Agnes inhaled the aromas of fall she pondered the changes in her life. How could this season bring such a peace to her soul, along with yearning?

As she turned from the path back to her street she saw the neighbors’ children playing the same games her own boys once played. Her three children were now adults with children of their own. She lived alone with Marshall, a gift from her sons after her husband died 10 years earlier and the house had become unbearably quiet. That all changed the day the grandchildren burst through the door carrying the small yellow lab. At first, she didn’t know what to think, but very quickly she found herself madly in love. Now in her late 70s Agnes had much less energy, but Marshall had lost his rambunctious edge, too.

Sometimes it would be Agnes that turned home early from their walk with, “I think that’s as far as we go today.” Sometimes, it would be Marshall that stopped suddenly in his tracks and would turn his graying face toward hers. “All right old boy,” she would say, and they would head back to the warmth of her living room. Today though, it was the anticipation of their arriving guests that cut the walk short. Agnes needed to bake and she needed to find the right words to say to her son.

Back home, she pressed oatmeal raisin and jumble jubilee dough onto the pans and prayed, longing for her son to avoid repeating the past. And she prayed for herself, that she wouldn’t repeat it, either.

Sydney, Ryan, and Richelle beat their father to the front door and tossed their boots haphazardly into the closet. Matthew followed behind them and lined up the boots, grumbling about their carelessness, as the children said their hellos.
Agnes placed her hands on both sides of Sydney’s head and pulled her in to kiss her cheeks, still plump with youth. Such excitement shone in her youngest granddaughter’s eyes, which were eyeing the cookies cooling on the counter.

“Grandma, the cookies smell great,” Ryan said, helping himself. “I’m starving.”

“He’s always starving,” said Richelle, rolling her preteen eyes at her older brother, who was hitting the growth spurts of a 14-year-old. She accepted her kiss from Agnes with a mumbled, “Hi, Grandma.”

Agnes wanted to see her son and grandchildren as badly as she wanted just about anything nowadays, even if the visits tired her. They showed up with all the wonderful energy of youth, the petty fights, and endless stories that could bore a saint. She listened and poured milk and served cookies while Matthew puttered with her to-do list. Today’s project was a toilet that continually ran.

Matthew gave her a firm hug, his face angled to avoid a kiss. “Hi, Mom. You look beautiful.” As usual, he turned abruptly and gathered his dad’s old toolbox from the hall closet.
Agnes stiffened as she remembered her husband Nathan, constantly on task. He was hard-working and provided well for them but he never seemed happy. She had always believed that, inside, he was still an angry boy, fuming that his father had left their family. Maybe he tried to assuage his pain by providing food and shelter, but to her, he was still empty. Stern. Distant.

Agnes watched Ryan flick cookie crumbs at Richelle. Sydney hummed and watched the TV, her blue eyes riveted on Say Yes to the Dress. Would they grow up feeling distant from their dad?

Richelle shoved her chair back. “Ryan!” she yelled, “You’re so dumb!”

“Stop it right now!” Matthew shouted from the bathroom. The kids promptly sat down, silent.

Lord, he’s just like Nathan, Agnes thought. She would have done anything to change her husband. She had loved being a mom, fixing wounds, listening to childhood dramas, finding solutions and ways to prevent harm. Hugging her children every chance she got. Nathan let her do it all. When she insisted that Nathan get more involved in their care, he would leave the room and find sports on TV. He’d quote sports stats and tell the boys to practice more. Tell them they needed to buck up and get tough.

If only he would come to Christ, she had thought back then. Then he would learn how to love. Surely God would do that, right? Make him a better dad, a godly man? But instead, every Sunday was a battle for her to get anyone to church. She felt an emotional weight all the time, as if everyone’s physical and spiritual survival was dependent on her every move. It was up to her to make her boys the faithful, disciplined men they needed to be. It was up to her to make Nathan know God. It was all up to her.

“Mom.” Matthew had come up behind Agnes. “Mom,” he said, louder. “Are you okay?” She was still standing in the kitchen where he had left her. The kids had wandered outside to the porch swing.

“I was just remembering,” she said, her voice shaking. “It must not have been good,” he said. “You look upset. What were you thinking about?”


“And?” He still had the toolbox in his hand.

“I just,” she said, hesitant, “love you—”

“I know that, Mom.”

“—and I don’t want you to make mistakes you’ll regret. That you wish you could undo.”

“Mistakes?”

“Like your father,” she said, looking down at the floor. “The way he couldn’t show love. Wouldn’t change.”

Matthew set the toolbox on the floor and took both of Agnes’ hands in his. He glanced at his laughing children on the swing.

“Mom, do you remember what Dad said before he died?” Agnes remembered her dissatisfaction and her long seasons of frustration. What had she forgotten in those 70 years of memories that was so easy for Matthew to remember?

“He said, ‘I did all right, didn’t I?’” Matthew smiled at the memory. “Sure, Dad blew it in some ways, but overall, Mom, he did all right. We knew he loved us. It was just different than what you wanted it to look like.”

Agnes felt her face get warm as she blushed. As Nathan’s cancer progressed, the boys had visited their father frequently. They sat next to him and read the sports section out loud. Occasionally, Nathan grumbled a remark or nodded in agreement with the latest news. Agnes prayed Nathan would finally express his love for them in a way that would affect his boys forever. Embraces. Affectionate words. Approval. Maybe even prayers. But all she heard were stats, meaningless stats. He died with the four of them by his side, each one holding his hand or arm. He had glanced at each of them and cracked a rare smile before saying, “I did all right, didn’t I?” He drifted off with such a peaceful look. Agnes had wondered who he was talking to, whose approval he was seeking when he uttered those final words.

Now, when she recalled this scene, she had her answer: her boys stood by their father’s side to the end, dedicated and affectionate toward him. Yes, he had done all right.

“Mom, you were a bit of a control freak, for sure,” said
Matthew, “wanting everything perfect. But I understand why now. Maybe,” he said, pausing, “I don’t show ‘fuzzy’ love like you want me to, but I’d die for my kids. I’m sure Dad would have, too.” He wasn’t sure he should continue speaking. Agnes seemed to be holding her breath.

“You know, he might have been tough on us,” said Matthew, “but we loved learning those stats that bored you to pieces. And yeah, he was a bear to work with, practically shouting ‘Number ten nails, son. Number ten.’ Or ‘Hand me the big wrench.’ I almost hated fixing the toilet with him,” he said with a laugh. “But we learned a lot from him, Mom, and we saw past the gruffness.”

Agnes gripped Matthew’s hands, a tear running down her cheek. Marshall padded over and stood beside her, wagging his tail.

“I think you’re remembering how he blew it and you’re seeing me blow it and it scares you, Mom.”

Agnes nodded her head, her soft white curls bobbing. “I know I’m making mistakes,” he said “and I work on that. Honest. But you made mistakes too. And you know what? You were still a great mother.” He pulled her closer and brushed her tear away. “I’d like to think I’m a good father, like Dad was.”

He hugged her and did not turn his face away.

Agnes stood on the porch long after her son drove off. Marshall was sitting obediently next to her chair. He knew it was their time now. Slowly, she eased into her worn recliner, the one the children kept begging to replace, and she let her hand rest on the dog’s head, slowly petting his aging crown. Her cardinals found their spots on the bird feeder again and the peace of acceptance settled in around her.

She returned to her memories of her husband’s final days, his final season. His once strong frame, capable of so much, was withered away. “I’m scared that when you go you will still be angry,” she had admitted to him.

“Angry?” he asked, his voice sharp. “Have I been such a bad husband that all you’ll think of me when I’m gone is I died an angry man?”

“You’ve been a good husband,” she affirmed by gripping his hand tighter. “You worked hard and made our lives what yours wasn’t. Maybe in working so hard at providing you sometimes forgot the real thing you were angry about.”

Agnes had hesitated, but continued, her voice soft. “You wanted your father’s attention and his love.”

At first, her husband only stared at the ceiling. “Agnes,” he had said, quietly, “I gave what I knew how to give.”

Agnes fell asleep remembering. When she woke, Marshall was snoring on the floor beside her and the fire was dwindling. She ambled over and threw another log on.

“Today didn’t turn out like I thought,” she said out loud. She leaned toward Marshall and stroked his soft muzzle. “It turned out better.”

They both stared silently into the fire listening to the crackle. Marshall rested his head on the arm of her chair and stared at her with sad eyes that seemed to say, “Now what, Mom?” What could she tell him? Agnes answered the only thing she could.

“We wait, my dear.” And that’s what they did.

They waited as the fallen leaves decayed and the winter clouds covered the sun. They waited as the snow began to fall and build up into banks, just so they could thaw again, allowing her cardinals’ songs to reemerge. All the while, family members burst into the waiting moments, wearing winter coats, then shorts, and winter coats again. Agnes and Marshall waited while her sons shoveled the driveway and fixed screens, while cookies baked and small memories coated her life like icing on a jubilee jumble.

“Final Season” is Tracy Tripp’s first short story. In 2014, she published the novel *Parting Gifts* (available on Amazon) and has completed a second novel. Tracy lives in Jacksonville with her husband and three children. www.TracyTripp.com
“Thy Will Be Done in Me”
by Lynn Wehrmann
Acrylic, watercolor, and stitch on watercolor paper

“How do we go when we cannot see what to do? I wanted to show the journey of following Jesus, often walking blindly, holding on to His guidance, and leaving behind fear, pride, and judgement. Moving toward trust and hope in Jesus who brings us light out of the darkness. Stepping out in faith.”

“Mourning & Dancing”
by Pat Setser
Mixed media collage

“Creating ‘Mourning & Dancing’ was first influenced by hearing the stories that [contributing writer] Chris Curry relayed about young friends who had died. At first in my mind’s eye I saw a split scene. One was quite dark and the other brighter. I researched symbols of death and also remembered a printed piece I had seen of a joyful dancing couple. The reflective light represents God’s love for us and the good that we have done in our lives. I think this is how we remember our loved ones and they live on through our stories. The threads could represent the connections we have to those we love. The thread ascends to the top of the painting and leads us back to the God who created us and loves us so much.”

“The Road to Emmaus”
by Michael Torevell
Mixed media and digital

“As in most of my Christian artworks, especially on the theme of resurrection, I try to achieve a vibrant use of color and light, to represent the light of Christ and new life. On “The Road to Emmaus” in particular, my use of brush strokes and patterns within the figure-work and landscape attempts to convey a feeling of mystery, wonder and revelation—that something happened here that changed our world forever. My hope was to create an artwork that is inspirational and transcendent—an aesthetic connection with the Divine.”
“Lynn’s House”  
by Kate Vallas  
*Acrylic*

“When I understood our group was going to be called *The Meeting House*, I thought how appropriate to paint an interpretation of the house we all met in that beautiful rainy Sunday afternoon [for a discussion with the contributing writers and artists]. The room has magnificent windows, and as I listened to each story, my attention kept getting called outside to an owl that was flying through the tall trees. I had once been told by an amazing woman that whenever she sees a bird, it reminds her that God is always with us. So, to me this was the Holy Spirit letting me know that, through all our trials and tribulations, God is always with us.”

“Lost at Sea No. 4”  
by Yei Truk  
*Water color and colored pencil*

“This is a chapter of a story of a child being lost at sea. He is calling for his missing father on a piece of his destroyed boat. I wanted the water to symbolize unfamiliarity. I attempted to do so by creating exaggerated wave patterns... lost in strange seas.”

“Untitled”  
by Yei Truk  

“This piece is a focus of warm and cool colors. The border is cool structured waves, and within that is me surrounded by flowing warm colors. This symbolizes the warm ocean bed in which I’m sleeping.”
Restaurant Review: The Great Banquet Café

★★★★ $$$$  
777 Paved-With Gold Avenue, Mid-Heaven

By Rob Mickler  
The Raised Eyebrow Press

One simply does not make reservations to a restaurant of this caliber. This is the ultimate dining experience, and it is available by invitation only. The much-anticipated cuisine—compliments of the same chefs responsible for the Passover, the wedding feast in Cana, and the pop-up dining sensation, the Last Supper—is finally here. The Lamb King has been preparing this eschatological establishment for some time, in anticipation of the grand opening.

We were enraptured from the moment we arrived. We entered the opalescent doors and were greeted by Martha, who was aflutter, making sure the room was well-served. She showed us to our seats in the spacious main room, which held about 144,000 people at tables of varying sizes. Every table had a magnificent view over the city, which reflected the glory of the Lord. The lighting was just right, as each guest had his or her own tongue of fire, and the flickering light reflected nicely off the crystal floors. Fine linen, bright and pure, was laid out on every table, and each guest was given new outfits. Everyone looked fabulous, by the way (the gyms around here must be amazing—some sort of apostolic cross-fit regimen?).

"Welcome to The Great Banquet," said our waiter. "My name is Stephen, and I will minister to you this evening. Can I start you off with some water? Our host can always change that into something more to your taste, if you would like."

Our first course was a revelation. A delicate dish of quail, roasted with coriander in a puff manna pastry was complemented by a touch of honey, paired with a glass of chilled milk. Melt-in-your-mouth good, and fork-tender, this set the tone for the rest of the meal. To cleanse our palate, we were then served a bean and lentil salad, with raisins, almonds, and figs. One diner confirmed they were very happy with the vegetarian course. "It was better than the fatted calf to me!"

Then sous-chef Peter came by our table to explain the next course: rooster served three ways. I asked him what the inspiration was for the dish, and he just flashed a wry grin, and ambled on to the next table.

As the courses went on, the noise level grew as the crowd swelled. A great multitude from every nation arrived wearing white and, after leaving their palm fronds at the coat check, they took their seats, and were served. A bus pulled in from Purgatory with plenty of room for those newly-arrived. Over in one corner, diners were singing 99 verses of some song about colors, but I couldn't quite catch the tune. Sitars, lutes and harmonicas joined to make a heavenly noise. I think I saw a Baptist tap his toe in response to the symphony of joy.

I did see someone at a table who seemed a bit bewildered. When I asked him why, he told me that he had been an interpreter on earth. "With everyone here able to understand each other perfectly, I am not quite sure what to do," he said. The two lawyers and one banker up here counselled him that they were certain he would be able to contribute somehow.

At the appointed hour, the wait staff walked around the room seven times, and then blew their horns. A wall between the rooms fell and a table piled high with dessert options came into view. The Presbyterians preferred the frozen desserts, while the Eastern Catholics made selections that were a little less orthodox. I decided to go with the chef’s special, which is difficult to describe because no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no tongue has tasted anything like it before. The evening stretched out for what seemed like years, and when I asked for an omer of food to take back to my room, I was reassured that we could come back anytime we liked. As we departed, following our precious jewel roads back to our homes, we reflected back on the words of our host. He had welcomed us home, as we began our thousands of years together in the New Jerusalem.

All prospective patrons should seek out a seat at the table and they shall find it. Just believe in the Host, and follow him in through the front entrance. Oh, and invite friends. They may be the ones holding open the doors for you when you get there. Bon Appétit!
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