

AColyte

Spring 2012

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

“Of course, nobody’s actually seen God.”

“Yeah.”

“I have.”

“Oh. Really? And what did God look like?”



“Everything.”

(Ray Wylie Hubbard told me that joke/story a long time ago)

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Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

jwilliams@austincollege.edu



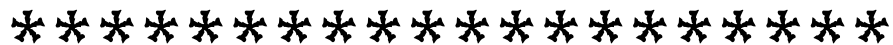
Déjà vu—

This photograph was taken in March at the Grace Presbytery Kidquake.

The five women in the middle are current Activators:
Megan Luschen, Madison McGee, Caitlin Caswell,
Coral Kennelty-Cohen, and Bridgette Deem.

The two at either end are
Janet Chester (left) and Amy Allen Parker.

Janet and Amy were two of the original
five ACtivators when the program started in February 1995.
Proof that ACtivators is kind of like herpes:
once you catch it, you never really get rid of it.



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Among fashion models, ukulele girls, and gypsy ghosts
Spring 2012

Everything is part of it.
--Tom Robbins, Still Life with Woodpecker

*I believe the universe wants to be noticed.
I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness,
that it rewards intelligence in part because it enjoys its elegance being observed...
The real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention.*
--John Green, The Fault in Our Stars

So – it's been a long, busy, interesting, and exciting Spring.

I've got kind of a lot to tell you.

I think it started one day last December. I was driving to a meeting in Dallas, listening to KXT 91.7 radio. A song came on that I didn't recognize.

When the vocal started, I thought it sounded like Jackson Browne. He's an old favorite of mine and I found myself hoping that he had released a new song. He could easily have written the first few lines:

*With his back against the San Francisco traffic,
On the bridge's side that faces towards the jail,
Setting out to join a demographic,
He hoists his first leg up over the rail.*

It was an interesting, if somewhat odd, way to begin a song.

San Francisco is an interesting, if somewhat odd, place. The last time I was there, in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, I saw police cars around a man's covered body. I don't know the details, but someone had clearly died. I thought of that as the song continued.

*And a phone call is made, police cars show up quickly.
The sergeant slams his passenger door.*

Fortunately, it looks like the police cars got there before there was a dead body.

*He says, "Hey son why don't you talk through this with me,
Just tell me what you're doing it for."*

Not what I expected.

It's a really nice turn in the story. I like this sympathetic, gentle cop.

*"Oh, it's a little bit of everything,
It's the mountains, it's the fog.
It's the news at six o'clock,
It's the death of my first dog,
It's the angels up above me,
It's the song that they don't sing,
It's a little bit of everything."*

Although I've never climbed up on a bridge with the idea of jumping off it, I can sympathize a little bit with that guy.

Sometimes it feels like things just line up to knock you off your game.

The weather makes you sick;
too many people are dying;
too many people are killing;
too many people are lying and cheating;
some things that you love have changed and will never change back;
the baseball team you've followed your whole life is one out away from winning the World Series but can't close it out;
there's lots that you're not as certain about as you'd like to be.

And it's not any single thing. It's all of it.

I get it.

I thought of a scene from the movie *Body Heat* in which William Hurt's character says something like, "Some days the crap rains down so hard all you can do is buy a hat."

Yep.

(By the way, if you ever see *Body Heat*, pay attention to the way Ted Danson's character practices dance steps in nearly every scene. It's cool.)

So anyway. By this time I had figured out that it wasn't Jackson Browne singing. I didn't recognize the voice, but I was intrigued. And then the song got better.

*An older man stands in a buffet line,
He is smiling and he's holding out his plate,
And the further he looks back into his timeline,
That hard road always had led him to today,*

A sad, but pretty common scene.

You and I know plenty of stories about lonely old people, many of whom live with sadness, regrets, and frustrations.

*Making up for when his bright future had left him,
Making up for the fact that his only son is gone,*

*And letting everything out once, his server asks him,
"Have you figured out yet, what it is you want?"*

I wonder if that's an existential question. It certainly could be.

That's not really all that far from the REST OF YOUR LIFE questions that AC students get a lot (especially at this time of year).

"Have you figured out yet what it is you want?"

But watch what the old man says:

*"I want a little bit of everything,
The biscuits and the beans,
Whatever helps me to forget about
The things that brought me to my knees,
So pile on those mashed potatoes,
And an extra chicken wing,
I'm having a little bit of everything."*

Whatever led the first guy to the depths of depression led the old man to stay in the dadgum game! He's having "a little bit of everything."

Maybe it's because I just turned 50, but I love that old man's defiance. Yes, he's had a hard road. Yes, some things brought him to his knees. But he's still here and he wants some of all of it.

I want to be like that guy. I want to have "a little bit of everything."

Then the third verse made me cry (in a good way).

*Somewhere a pretty girl is writing invitations,
To a wedding she has scheduled for the fall,
Her man says, "Baby, can I make an observation?
You don't seem to be having any fun at all."*

I've been a groom. And I've known a lot of grooms. And this notion of a groom looking at all the stress and anxiety that many brides face and saying, "You don't seem to be having any fun at all" is entirely consistent with my experience.

Like many (probably most) other grooms, it's hard for me to understand why fretting over the seemingly trivial details of a wedding – worrying about what some vague and imprecise group of other people think you're *supposed* to do – is worth all the nervous energy that it so obviously requires.

But she's clearly not looking to be rescued from all that.

*She said, "You just worry about your groomsmen and your shirt-size,
And rest assured that this is making me feel good,*

*I think that love is so much easier than you realize,
If you can give yourself to someone, then you should.*

She's barely in the same conversation.
She's loving it. All of it.
She's doing exactly what she wants to be doing.

*Cause it's a little bit of everything,
The way you choke, the way you ache,
It is getting up before you,
So I can watch you as you wake.
So on that day in late September,
It's not some stupid little ring,
I'm getting a little bit of everything.*

In what might well be a fictitious story, that's a real grownup describing real love in the real world.

It might not be factual. But it's true.

I hope you all have somebody in your life who thinks about you like that.

And the song isn't yet finished.

*Oh, it's a little bit of everything,
It's the matador and the bull,*

Both sides of the conflict. Like dogs chasing mail carriers. Everybody's doing their job.

It's the suggested daily dosage,

Somebody who you don't know is trying to help you out.

It is the red moon when it's full.

To quote John Green's, The Fault in Our Stars: "That's what I believe. The universe wants to be noticed."

*All these psychics and these doctors,
They're all right and they're all wrong,
It's like trying to make out every word,
When they should simply hum along,*

To quote Ferris Bueller: "Life moves pretty fast. You don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

*It's not some message written in the dark,
Or some truth that no one's seen,*

It's not a secret.
It's not just for the most educated,
or most passionate,

or richest,
or strongest,
or most spiritual,
or most fantatical,

It's a little bit of everything.

I've since learned that the song was by the band Dawes. The songwriter and singer is Taylor Goldsmith. It's a great song and I encourage you to buy it.

I've heard, bought, learned, and sung that song often throughout the Spring.

It keeps coming up in a variety of contexts.

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You probably won't be surprised to learn that the song reminds me of some passages from the Bible.

The first few verses of Psalm 19 say:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

That's the psalmist saying that the sky, the earth, and the regular passage of time are all evidence of God's glory.

Sky, earth, sunrise, sunset: it's a little bit of everything.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 says:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

Among Bible scholars, the author of Ecclesiastes is known as “The Preacher.”

That’s “The Preacher” telling us that it’s all part of it. All of it matters.

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During JanTerm and Spring Semester, I have had several meals and conversations with Austin College students. We’ve discussed serial killers, George Kennan’s role in the development of international relations theory, Middle Eastern nations, the status of aboriginal groups in Taiwan, Mexican movies, pedagogy, the striking evolutionary similarities between an extinct species of marsupial wolves in Australia and mammalian gray wolves in present day Canada, the relationship between ritual and narrative, Kenya, the economy of Hong Kong, the situation in Syria, the situation in the Presbyterian church, leadership, theology, music, and barbecue.

I love my job.

+++++

Late last semester, I had a conversation with AC Director of Public Affairs **Lynn Womble**. She was looking for a new “tag line” for AC—a concise and memorable phrase for us to use in our publicity materials; something that sums up and communicates who we are.

As most of you know, we used “Learning, Leadership, and Lasting Values” for (perhaps too many) years. By the end, some of us joked about “Learning, Leadership, and Lasting Slogans.”

But it worked well. “Learning, leadership, and Lasting Values” was a great, alliterative phrase that made room for conversations about AC to go in a variety of different directions from that single starting point.

I didn’t have much to offer Lynn when we had the conversation.

I thought of suggesting that we use Louis Armstrong’s definition of Jazz for our tag line: “Austin College—If You Gotta Ask, You’ll Never Know.” But that’s not really helpful.

We could use “Austin College—Gifted People Acting Gifted” but we’d have to always explain what we meant by that. “It doesn’t mean that people aren’t gifted at your school, too (bless your hearts).”

But then I turned on the radio on the way to Dallas. And I kept coming to work on this campus. And talking to AC students. And learning stuff.

So here’s my (unsolicited) suggestion for our tag line:

Austin College
It’s a little bit of everything.

Until Next Time, I Remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Trying to figure it out and make some of it rhyme,
JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain and Director of Church Relations

THEOLOGIAN OF THE MONTH

During The Christmas holidays in 2000, I was roaming around the Barnes & Noble store in downtown Ft. Worth. For reasons that I still don't fully understand, I ended up looking through the poetry section. I found a book that I really like and, although I've written about it in the *AColyte* before, it has been a long time.

As I prepare, along with Dr. Hass and the students in the History and Practice of Passover Seder Class, to make our Austin College Seder tonight, this seems like an appropriate time to reintroduce this guy into our conversations. So here it is:

*God wants to see
More love and playfulness in your eyes
For that is your greatest witness to him.
-A Poet*

Note—The following includes a whole bunch of disjointed but voluminous Bible quotes. Bear with me, I think it'll be worth it in the end. It wouldn't have the same effect with just one or two references.

In Luke 10:1-20, Jesus sends out seventy disciples to teach and heal in his name. They have incredible experiences and come back joyfully telling Jesus, "Even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus warns them about being too cocky, but they are understandably excited and determined to continue to be instruments of God's love in the lives of others.

They seem to have realized that they weren't just beloved, they were gifted as well. It's easy to imagine these people, many of whom were probably used to thinking of themselves as helpless victims of forces they couldn't control, suddenly realizing that, not only could they stop being helpless victims, they could maybe help some other folks quit being victims as well.

This poem makes me think of that story:

*I once had a student who would sit alone in his house at night
Shivering with worries and fears.
And come morning,
He would often look as though he had been raped by a ghost.
Then one day my pity crafted him a knife from my own divine sword.
Since then, I have become very proud of this student.
For now, come night, not only has he lost all his fear,
Now he goes out just looking for Trouble.*

Spend a minute with me roaming around inside the mind of this poet.

This guy describes himself as "a tambourine slapping against God's leg" and he's good.

Look at what he wrote about love:

Your love should never be offered to the mouth of a stranger.

*Only to someone who has the valor and daring
To cut pieces of their soul off with a knife
Then weave them into a blanket to protect you.*

I'd offer my love to somebody like that. In fact, I did; and it's turning out great.

The poet's reflections about what it means to live in a world where:

- a. God loves us and
2. everything's gonna be alright

are very interesting and entertaining.

It's cool to read his stuff with the Bible in your other hand. Let me show you what I mean.

Starting with Leviticus 19:18, the Bible repeatedly tells us to "Love your neighbor as yourself." The Poet suggests that it's a matter of etiquette:

*If God invited you to a party and said,
"Everyone in the ballroom tonight
Will be my special Guest."
How would you treat them when you arrived?
Indeed, indeed!
And [I know]
There is no one in this world
Who is not upon
His Jeweled Dance Floor.*

The tenth chapter of Deuteronomy includes the recognition that God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the strangers, giving them food and clothing." Then God tells the people of Israel, "Love the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Widows, orphans, and strangers were folks who had no one else looking out for them. It seems clear that God wants folks like us to look out for them.

Our poet guy said it this way:

*God blooms from the Shoulder
Of the Elephant who becomes
Courteous to the Ant.*

As was mentioned earlier, Psalm 19:1-4 includes recognition of theological truth in the world of astronomy:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.*

Our new buddy is more direct:

*Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth,
"You owe Me."
Look what happens with a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.*

In Psalm 36:8, a prayer of praise addressed to God, we read:

*[All people] feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drinks from the river of your delights.*

Our Poet puts it this way:

*Why just show you God's menu?
Hell, we are all starving –
Let's Eat!*

Psalm 118:24 is a call to recognize that every day is a gift from God and a cause for rejoicing:

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

The poet has this advice as we approach each day:

*This is the time for you to deeply compute the impossibility
That there is anything but Grace.
Now is the season to know
That everything you do is sacred.*

Psalm 149 starts like this:

*Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song,
His praise in the assembly of the faithful.
...praise His name with **dancing**,
making melody to Him with tambourine and lyre.*

Do you think that could somehow be related to this?:

*Every child has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who ever does anything weird,
But the God who only knows four words
And keeps repeating them, saying:*

(Before you read on, think about what four words folks think God repeats to all children.

"Follow all the rules"?

"Be Christian or else"?

Here's what four words the poet thinks God repeats to every child:)

"Come dance with me."

Come

Dance.

Isaiah 2:4 includes a promise that the day is coming when

*[Nations] shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

In a similar vein, our friend produces the following advice:

Let your

Intelligence begin to rule

Whenever you sit with others

Using this sane idea:

Leave all your cocked guns in a field

Far from us,

One of those damn things might go off.

Later in Isaiah, God says this to the people of Israel as they face tough, nasty times:

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

--Isaiah 66:13

Now check this out:

Once I found a stray kitten

And I used to soak my fingers

In warm milk;

It came to think I was five mothers

On one hand.

...

Surely there is something wrong

With your ideas of God.

O, surely there is something wrong

With your ideas of God

If you think

Our Beloved would not be so tender

Turning to the New Testament, we find some more interesting passages that can be illuminated by the poet's work.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5-7), Jesus offers several interesting pieces of advice and teaching.

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus offers a long list of reasons not to worry.

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...
Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...
So do not worry about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.
Today's trouble is enough for today.*

The poet guy has two poems that seem to be relevant as we consider that.

*I used to live in
A cramped house with confusion
And pain.
But then I met the Friend
And started getting drunk
And singing all
Night.
Confusion and pain
Started acting nasty,
Making threats,
With talk like this,
"If you don't stop that –
All that fun –
We're
Leaving."*

And also:

*Now
That
All your worry
Has proved such an
Unlucrative
Business,
Why
Not
Find a better
Job.*

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the problem of how to recognize whether God is actually at work in the people who claim to have had experiences of God's presence; people who claim to have been sent directly by God. In Matthew 7:15-17, he says

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about how a life touched by the Holy Spirit looks.

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23a)

I think that's what our poet is addressing in the following verse:

*Once a man came to me and spoke for hours about
"His great visions of God" he felt he was having.
He asked me for confirmation, saying,
"Are these wondrous dreams true?"
I replied, "How many goats do you have?"
He looked surprised and said,
"I am speaking of sublime visions
And you ask about goats!"
And I spoke again saying,
"Yes, brother – how many do you have?"
"Well,...I have sixty-two."*

*...
"How many rose bushes in your garden,
How many children,
Are your parents still alive,
Do you feed the birds in winter?"
And to all he answered
Then I said,
"You asked me if I thought your visions were true
I would say they were if they make you become
More human,
more kind to every creature and plant
That you know."*

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) Jesus suggests that all people – and particularly those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, or in prison – are members of his family.

Then in 1 John, we read:

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are... (3:1)*

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows
God. (4:7)*

So the idea would seem to be that to be part of God's beloved family is also to be loving

Love
So God will think,
"Ahhhhh,
I got kin in that body!
I should start inviting that soul over
For coffee and Rolls."

According to the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus began his ministry quoting Isaiah:

*The Sprit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...*

Much of Jesus' subsequent ministry can be seen as a matter of releasing people from the captivity of small-minded and legalistic (Pharisaic) notions of what it means to be part of the community of God's people. The society in which his ministry took place was one in which some people were ostracized (poor folks, women, Samaritans) and where many people had begun to take the rules more seriously than the God who the rules were supposed to help them remember and worship.

The poet addresses that state of affairs like this:

*The small man
Builds cages for everyone
He
Knows.
While the sage,
Who has to duck his head
When the moon is low,
Keeps dropping keys all night long
For the
Beautiful
Rowdy
Prisoners.*

In Romans 6:17-18, Paul says,

*[T]hanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin,
have become...slaves of righteousness.*

That whole "slaves of sin" thing was big for Paul. In his mind, a lot of what Jesus did was to help free us from that slavery. To get the poet's help understanding that, try this:

*Someone put
You on a slave block
And the unreal bought
You.
Now I keep coming to your owner
Saying,
"This one is mine."*

...
I will gladly borrow all the gold
I need
To get you
Back.

Psalms 139 says a bunch of amazing stuff about the extent to which God loves and knows and cares for us.

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol ["wherever you go when you die"], you are there...*

*In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
When none of them as yet existed...
I come to the end – I am still with you.*

Later, in Romans 8, we read

...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Exactly what might that mean? Maybe the poet guy can help.

*If this world
Was not held in God's bucket
How could an ocean stand upside down
On its head and never lose a drop?
If your life was not contained in God's cup
How could you be so brave and laugh,
Dance in the face of death?*

...
*There is a private chamber in the soul
That knows a great secret
Of which no tongue can speak.
Your existence my dear, O love my dear
Has been sealed and marked
"Too sacred," "too sacred," by the Beloved –
To ever end!
Indeed God has written a thousand promises
All over your heart
That say,
Life, life, life,
Is far too sacred to
Ever end.*

Some of us spend a lot of time studying the Bible and trying to figure out what stuff in there that might help us figure out which things matter more than other things. Reading some of these poems is a helpful way to do that.

The poet seems to be fairly clearly in tune with some distinct and important biblical messages and he expresses some truths about God and people and the world in a way that is refreshing and clear.

Now here's where it gets weird:

Those poems were written by a Persian (Iranian) Muslim in the 14th century. His given name was Shams-ud-din Muhammad, although he is better known by his pen name, *Hafiz*.

In Arabic, "hafiz" means "memorizer." It is a title given to someone who knows the entire Qu'ran by heart.

Hafiz lived from about 1320 to 1390 (he was a contemporary of Chaucer in England). He was a "Sufi" Muslim. The Sufis are a group within Islam whose faith is expressed in mystical terms. Their focus is on personal and immediate relationship with Allah. This relationship is achieved and expressed through "sufi", a word related to the Greek word "sophia." It means something like "wisdom" or "truth."

Through the years, his poems have been translated, admired, and endorsed by folks whose names are more familiar to us. Goethe and Nietzsche were big fans of his work. Sherlock Holmes quotes a Hafiz poem in one of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories. In 1858, Ralph Waldo Emerson called Hafiz "a poet for poets" and said, "He fears nothing. He sees too far; such is the only man I wish to...be."

He is clearly a good poet. How is he as a theologian?

Does it make any difference to you that this poet was not a Christian? Should we conclude that, because of his "Muslimness," we should look more skeptically on, or pay less attention to, his insights about the nature of the divine/human relationship?

Are we prepared to argue with his claim that "there is no one in this world who is not upon [God's] jeweled dance floor?" Is he wrong that "God blooms from the shoulder of the elephant who is courteous to the ant?" Does his failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, mean that there is somehow less insight in the recognition that "the sun never says to the earth, 'You owe me.'?" Can we conclude that he fundamentally misunderstands what he says when he suggests that divine love involves God's going to the owner of a slave to unreality and saying "This one is mine.?" Apart from Christianity, how could he even have uttered the suggestion that "Life, life, life is far too sacred to ever end.?"

Before answering, consider these things that Jesus says:

Mark 9:40—

Whoever is not against us is for us.

John 10:16—

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.

Might it be that there is some useful wisdom, particularly about God and us, loose out there beyond the church?

In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

There's not anything in there that says, "Oh, and by the way, of course you, dear reader – in your feeble, limited, sinful state – are fully capable of recognizing every way that I work in somebody else's life."

How can one read the following poems, as well as those already quoted above, and conclude that Hafiz is a stranger to the God who has found addressed, and embraced us in Jesus Christ?:

*Love wants to reach out and manhandle us,
Break all our teacup talk of God.
If you had the courage and
Could give the Beloved His choice, some nights,
He would just drag you around the room
By your hair,
Ripping from your grip all those toys in the world
That bring you no joy.
Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly
And wants to rip to shreds
All your erroneous notions of truth...
The Beloved sometimes wants
To do us a great favor:
Hold us upside down
And shake all the nonsense out.*

And, my personal favorite,

*God
And I have become
Like two giant fat people
Living in a
Tiny boat.
We
Keep
Bumping into each other and
L
a
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.*

Maybe we shouldn't pay much attention to Hafiz because he wasn't Christian.

But I can't figure out how that helps anybody.

In Micah 6:8 we are reminded that what the Lord requires of us is that we

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [our] God.

I think part of what "walking humbly with God" means is not worrying about what God thinks about people who don't worship like we do, or identify the same books as sacred. God can handle that without our help.

I like Hafiz.

He gets it.