

# AColyte

Commencement 2010

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

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IT'S ALL ABOUT PUNCTUATION.

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## AColyte

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

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**Thank You  
for Another Great Year  
in the Chapel,  
in the Religious Life Program,  
and at Austin College.**

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wonderful place.



## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Deep in the Bowels of the Chapel  
(but not too far from the sunshine)  
In the waning days of the Academic Year  
May 2010

*When I was just a little girl  
\*I asked my mother,  
"What will I be?"  
--Doris Day*

*Sooner or later,  
It's now or never.  
Don't you think it's just about time?  
--The Flatlanders*

I've been thinking a lot lately about punctuation.

While sitting in my little lair in the corner of the Chapel closest to the Kangaroo Coffee Company and watching another school year grind, gallop, glide, gambol, and gush to a close, I've noticed that the ebbs and flows and peaks and valleys of the lives of Austin College students can be described to some extent by the relative relevance of five different punctuation marks: ? ... ; . !.



As we all know, Finals Week is the season of the question mark.

There are the mundane (though important in their context) questions you might encounter on a Final Exam.

*What is a stock's intrinsic value?  
Who did Andrew Jackson defeat in the Presidential  
election of 1820 and why did he win?  
What is the melting point of paradichlorobenzene?  
What were its uses?  
And why is it no longer used?  
What are the primary strategic interests of Turkey in  
relation to NATO? To Iran? To Iraq?  
What is the significance of the Passive Periphrastic  
in ancient Latin and how can it best be translated into  
contemporary English?*

*Who first and most famously articulated the idea of  
multiple intelligences?  
Is Buddhism a religion? Why or why not?  
What are the advantages and drawbacks of the Moral  
Example Theory of the Atonement?*

Actually, I made up all of those questions except one, but you get the idea. The life of every Austin College student during Finals Week involves lots and lots of questions.

They are important;  
because you are important;  
and the world in which they are relevant is important.

So relax.  
Suck it up.  
You'll get through it.  
It's part of what we do here.  
It'll be alright.

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But the air around here these days is also heavy with peskier, messier, more irritating questions:

**WHAT ARE YOU DOING THIS SUMMER?  
DO YOU HAVE AN INTERNSHIP?  
DO YOU HAVE A JOB?  
DID YOU GET INTO GRAD SCHOOL?  
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO  
WITH  
*THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?***

It goes with the territory. Pesky, messy, irritating questions.

My sense is that AC students sometimes think that everybody else around here is at a different place than they are.

I think most seniors who aren't yet certain what they are going to do next year have this vague sense that all of their colleagues are locked in and ready to launch into some bright and exciting future.

And many of the students who have definite plans for what they'll be doing after graduation often feel a little guilty that they're not facing the same anxiety and uncertainty as their friends and colleagues.

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In the verses right before the famous stuff about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, the character in the Book of Micah asks a bunch of questions.

*"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?*

*Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"*

(Micah 6:6-7)

I think that guy would fit right in at Austin College during Finals Week.

*What am I supposed to do?*

*What kind of person do I need to be?*

*How many degrees should I get?*

*What does the rest of the world have the right to expect from me?*

*Whom am I prepared to allow to depend on me?*

*Should I make a lot of money so I can take care of myself and help others?*

*Or do I need to go and help the people in the world that no one else seems to be looking out for?*

Those (important) questions are not new at all.

They are authentic and legitimate features of all of our lives.

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When I was just a little boy, we had a record that included an almost insufferably cute Doris Day song:

*When I was just a little girl*

*\*I asked my mother,*

*"What will I be?"*

*Will I be pretty?*

*Will I be rich?*

*Here's what she said to me:*

*Que sera sera.  
Whatever will be will be.  
The future's not ours to see.  
Que sera sera.*

Although I fully recognize the danger, folly, and potential futility of considering the existentialist ramifications of a Doris Day song from the 1960s – and I freely admit that there might well be some value in the confident, peaceful equanimity suggested by the song's reassurance that “whatever will be will be” – nevertheless my status as an Austin College alumnus and employee compels me to push back against the passivity suggested by the song.

Around here, we're not really about reminding each other that “whatever will be will be.”

We want to ask questions about who we are and how things are and to invite each other to think about how things might be – how things should be. We want to recognize and embrace the extent to which we each can determine – or at least affect – “what will be.”

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There's a wonderful and easily overlooked verse in the second chapter of Genesis. After God says “It is not good that the human should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him” in Genesis 2:18, Genesis 2:19 says:

*So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air,  
and brought them to the man to see what he would call them;  
and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.*

Talk about vocational pressure!

At this point, Adam is the only guy around. And God keeps bringing him all these newly created animals and asking what to call them. I wonder whether Adam sometimes thought those were pesky, messy, irritating questions.

Reality – how things *are* – depended to some extent on his responses.

Pesky, messy, irritating questions are part of who we are. They are part of the process of figuring out how we can affect “what will be.”

Ultimately, it's good and exciting and energizing to realize that we can be a part of that process. We really can affect “what will be.”

That's why the questions matter.



Those three dots printed together are called “ellipses.”

Ellipses are used in a variety of contexts, but the usage most relevant to the lives of AC students during Finals Week is their indication of a pause in speech or an unfinished thought.

Especially at this time of year, many of your lives are dominated by pauses and unfinished thoughts.

Many of you have applied for jobs, or scholarships, or admission graduate schools ...

and now you’re just waiting.

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In the Revised Standard translation of the Bible, Habakkuk 2:3 says

*For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end--it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*

*"Yeah—whatever.*

*All my friends have definite plans for the Summer and next year.*

*I filled out a bunch of applications and did some interviews, but I haven't heard squat.*

*My parents say they just want to be supportive ...  
but they keep mentioning retail jobs I could get,  
and telling me about what other people are doing,  
and pointing at their watches."*

*"If it seem slow, wait for it"? Really?*

I know, I know — that’s easy for me to say. I’ve already got three degrees, a great job, a beautiful spouse who lives with me on purpose, and a great family.

But that hasn’t always been true.

We've all spent lots of nights wrestling with question marks and ellipses – even the ones among us who are now asking the questions and grading the papers.

But here's the thing: the sun has always come up.

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I keep thinking of a song by the Ozark Mountain Daredevils that I learned on this campus back in the '80s:

*Seems like everyone is out looking for the sun.  
Singing rain and pain on he who hesitates.  
But it'll shine when it shines.  
You might think I'm wasting time.  
But I'm just a good old boy that's learned to wait.*

"It will surely come."

Wait for it.

All that stuff you've been hearing about how special and gifted and awesome you are is still true.

Try to relax.

Have some bubble gum.

It'll shine when it shines.



In some ways, the semicolon is the most relevant and distinct punctuation mark at Austin College.

Semicolons mark the end of an important and significant idea; but their presence also indicates that there's more to the story, thought, or sentence than is contained in the clause that precedes the semicolon.

What comes before the semicolon is part of the truth; it's not necessarily the whole truth.

That's a huge idea for a Liberal Arts college.



Understanding that what we mean by “truth” varies somewhat from class to class and context to context, we can say confidently that what you learn in class is “true” while also recognizing that there are more true things – and more ways to talk about the truth – than can be captured, contained, or articulated in any particular class or context.

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This idea that the whole truth might be bigger than particular true statements is intriguing.

The other day, I heard Darryl Lee Rush on the radio (KHYY) singing

*I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.  
I believe in love, when I feel it not.  
I believe in the good Lord above even when He is silent.  
Make plows out of all your guns.  
I believe in the sun.*

A little spelunking around on the internet led to several references to the story that, after the Second World War, the following words were found written on a cellar wall in Cologne Germany:

*"I believe in the sun,  
even when it is not shining.  
I believe in love,  
even when I don't feel it.  
I believe in God,  
even when there is silence."*

All this is relevant in a discussion of semicolons at Austin College during Finals Week because it reminds us that, just because some difficult thing is true now (whether it's persecution by the Nazis or the absence of definite plans or opportunities after graduation) doesn't mean that it's the only true thing.

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As the book of Habakkuk begins, Habakkuk is clearly in a major funk.

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and  
violence are before me; strife and contention arise.  
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.  
The wicked surround the righteous –  
therefore judgment comes forth perverted*

(Habakkuk 1:2-4).

He's grumpy, upset, stressed, and disappointed. He goes up to the top of the city wall and waits for God to answer. And God does answer.

*"Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end--it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*

(Habakkuk 2:2-3)

We've already talked about the "wait for it if it seems slow" part but we also need to notice that God does not argue with Habakkuk. God doesn't deny the facts of violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, or wickedness. God's answer doesn't ignore or eliminate or dismiss Habakkuk's complaints; but God does seem figuratively to put a semicolon at the end of Hab's whiny statements and grumpy observations.

Yes, certainly there's violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, and wickedness out there (not to mention loneliness, uncertainty, anxiety, disappointment, and fear); we shouldn't deny it. But we should maybe put a semicolon at the end of it instead of a period.

Because that's not all there is. There's this vision. The whole truth also includes kindness, graciousness, love, selfless sacrifice, service, happiness, courage, compassion, hospitality, hope.

Pay attention to the vision—no matter how long it takes to figure out what comes next. Write it down in huge letters. Decide to live in a world where it's true.



Still and all--it's not just about question marks, ellipses, and semicolons. There are also periods; complete sentences; whole thoughts.

First John 3:1 says

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.  
And that is what we are.*

First Peter 4:10 says

*As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift you have.*

An old gospel song by the Rev. James Cleveland says

*I don't feel no ways tired,  
I've come too far from where I started from.  
Nobody told me that the road would be easy,  
I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me.*

Those are complete thoughts.

You are a beloved and gifted child of God. Period.

God didn't bring you this far to leave you. Period.

None of the question marks, ellipses, or semicolons in your life will change that.

When you start to bog down or things get slippery, go back and stand there.



In my first few years working at Austin College, I would get really depressed on the evening of graduation and in the days following. The campus emptied out, all of a sudden there were no cars parked in front of my house, a whole crop of seniors to whom I had grown very close was packing up and moving away – perhaps never to be seen again. It was really sad.

It's a pretty common experience for college chaplains (and other faculty and staff). We work hard meeting and helping and learning with students whom we come to love, and then they leave.

I was talking one day to a colleague from another school about how sad I got after Commencement. "Oh, I know," she said, "I used to go home and weep after our graduation. But then one night my husband told me, 'I don't know what you're crying about. All those kids that you graduate every year are like little Molotov cocktails – you light one end, toss them out into the world, and wait for them to explode.'"

I love that image. Whoever you are, wherever you end up, however you end up spending your time, I think it's likely that at some point all you Austin College people will be responsible for some figurative explosions – some big time exclamation points.

**BOOM!**

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In Luke 10:19, Jesus tells seventy of his followers,

*Behold, I give you authority to tread serpents and scorpions.*

I don't think this is necessarily evidence that Jesus hates vermin. If we assume that serpents represent everything that scares people and scorpions represent everything that hurts people, we can maybe conclude that in this verse we are all invited, empowered, encouraged, and enabled to contend against things that hurt or scare people.

That's where the Molotov cocktail image becomes useful.

That's what we hope and intend for you to blow up and destroy – not people; *never* people – but maybe some of the things that scare or hurt or diminish people.

*Somebody said they saw me  
Swinging the world by the tail,  
Bouncing over a white cloud,  
Killing the blues.  
--John Prine*

We're completely confident that there will be big BOOMs!, warm smiles, and exclamation points in your future.

Some of you may have longer fuses than others, but the day will surely come when somebody somewhere will fondly remember and joyfully mark with an exclamation point the day that *you* showed up.

You might not believe that. But we do. And we know what we're talking about. We've been doing this longer than you.

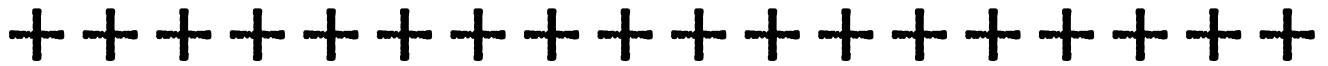
Hang in there.

Stomp on some serpents and scorpions!

Kill some blues!

Until September, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Anticipating graduation and feeling like I do on Christmas morning when somebody who I love is gonna get a great gift and I know what it is but they don't know yet,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain



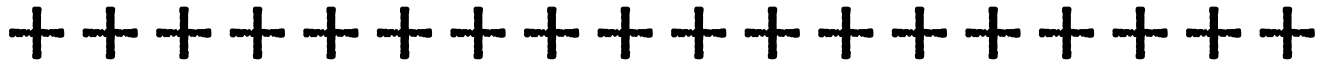
*Because of your  
generosity,*

this semester's "Give It Up for Haiti" campaign has enabled the Austin College community to make a donation of **\$1915.50** to Paul Farmer's Partners in Health to support their earthquake relief efforts in Haiti

and

an additional donation of **\$1915.50** to the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) in honor of Austin College alumnus Rev. Clinton Rabb, who died due to injuries suffered in the January earthquake. The UMCOR donation was designated to support Grace Children's Hospital, a medical facility in Haiti with which AC alums Dr. Jeannine Hatt and Dr. Chuck Phelps have been involved for many years.

Thank you to **Redwanul Hoque, Ariel Ketcherside, Carolyn Stone**, the Service Station, and Aramark for their leadership in the project and to all of you who made contributions.



And a huge

**THANK YOU**

to

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Gil Torres, Dave Revels, and Jimmy Hayes)

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