

AColyte

SEPTEMBER 2011

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



THE “V” WORD (AND SOME STUFF ABOUT GOD)

AColyte

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

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WHAT IS AN *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2011-12 school year. This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian. That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "*AColyte*" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Read on and let me know what you think.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

250 miles inland
Barely close enough to West Texas

*Do you know why the trees bend
At the west Texas border?
Do you know why they bend
Sway and twine?
The trees bend because of the wind
Across that lonesome border
The trees bend because of the wind
Almost all the time.
--Joe Ely*

So here you are, having arrived at Austin College either to begin or to continue your strange and perilous journey toward

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.

You're trying to figure out who you're supposed to be, and what you need to do. It's kind of exciting, but also a little scary.

You could do anything.
You could be anybody.
You think you probably actually *should* do *something*, eventually. But what?
What if you choose the wrong thing?
How will you know the right thing?
What about your passions?
What about your gifts?
What about having food on the table and a roof over your head?
What about your parents?
What about God?
Do you have a calling?
How do you know?

I know you.
You've been thinking about this stuff.
Welcome to Austin College.

I think we're talking about vocation. "Vocation" comes from the Latin word "vocare" – "to call." Your "vocation" is what you're "called" to do and be.

Thinking about who or what you are called to do and be also involves questions about who does the calling.

Is it God?
The cosmos?
Your family?
Your bank account?

Those are all good, and virtually unavoidable, questions around here. We talk about vocation a lot.

Back in 1998, a singer/songwriter named **Guy Clark** came and performed at AC. He's a big-time talent (he wrote famous Texas country songs like *LA Freeway* and *Desperadoes Waiting for a Train*).

I'm not sure he knows it, but I think he's written some good stuff about vocation.

*You've got to sing like you don't need the money
Love like you've never been hurt
You've got to dance like there's nobody watching
It's got to come from the heart if you want it to work.*

Not bad vocational advice.

There's another Guy Clark song that I think is about vocation, but it will take a minute to show you why:

*Oh, the South Coast of Texas,
That's a thin slice of life
It is salty and hard,
It is stern as a knife.
Where the wind is for blowing
Up the hurricanes for showing
The snakes how to swim
And the trees how to lean.*

Guy grew up in Rockport, TX, and that's a song about living on that part of the Texas coast. I play that song every now and then, and when I do it often gets me thinking about sailing.

Thinking about sailing gets me thinking about **Jimmy Buffet**.

Earlier this week, as I was dredging up old Buffett songs that I used to play a lot when I was a student at AC, I came across the second chorus of his *Son of a Son of a Sailor*:

*Haul the sheet in
As we ride on the wind
That our forefathers harnessed before us
Hear the bells ring
As the tide rigging sings.
It's a son of a gun of a chorus.*

I've always loved the imagery in those lines. They capture some sense of the rush of riding on a sailboat that is fully under sail and making elegant progress across the water.

I've never done any significant sailing, but there's something engaging about that vision. Most of us know some similar experience where everything is working together and, at least for a moment, things are going along just right. It feels effortless and invigorating at the same time. That's what Buffett is writing about there.

So that kind of stuff was bouncing around in my mind when I went to Bible Study last Tuesday (September 13).

We were studying Philippians 1:21-30.

In verse 22 of that passage, Paul (the author of the letter) says,

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me

And that led us to a conversation about "fruitful labor."

What is "fruitful labor"? How can we tell?

Questions like that come up a lot at Austin College Bible Study.

That discussion about "fruitful labor" made me think of a previous Bible Study from a few years ago. We were looking at Psalm 51:1-12. In Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation of the Bible, called the *Message*, that passage ends with the following words:

...put a fresh wind in my sail.
--Psalm 51:12b (*The Message*)

When you put all that together

1. Real, live Austin College students talking to each other about God, vocation, fruitful labor, and **THE REST OF THEIR LIVES**;
2. Guy Clark singing about the wind on the South Coast of Texas;
3. Jimmy Buffett singing about “riding on the wind that our forefathers harnessed before us;” and
4. Eugene Peterson’s translation of the second half of Psalm 51:12 as “put a fresh wind in my sail;”

and then add in some interesting ancient language trivia:

1. The Hebrew word *ruach* means “spirit, breath, and wind”; and
2. The Greek word *pneuma* also means “spirit, breath, and wind.”

then you (or at least I) end up with

THE NAUTICAL THEORY OF VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Here’s how it goes:

1. Vocational discernment is the process of building and testing out sails until you find the one that most effectively catches the wind (or Spirit) that blows through your life.
2. Vocational discernment is not about finding the right harbor in which to drop your anchor. It’s about setting your sails to maximize the benefit of the wind (Spirit) that blows through your life. If you do that, you’ll end up in the right place.
3. There’s not necessarily one particular harbor (another good Jimmy Buffett song) where you are “called” or “supposed” to land. The wind in your life blows you in a certain direction. There might be lots of good moorings on the coast where you’re heading.
4. Pettiness, condescension, crude materialism, insensitivity, arrogance, greed, diminishment of others, and selfishness are rips in one’s sails. They make your boat inefficient in its effort to catch the wind that blows through your life.
5. You’re “there” whenever you find a good place to drop anchor.
6. Your life has mainsails (major, career, family, etc.) but it also has jibs—smaller sails that help direct the wind into the mainsail. These could be hobbies like art, reading, playing video games, traveling, or playing guitar. They’re not necessarily the biggest sails on your boat, but they are useful nonetheless. Tend them.

7. It's always windy at the beach. The wind might help you stay where you are. But it also might pick you up and take you somewhere else.

So that's it. That's the product of years of talking about vocation, playing a bunch of old songs, and thinking a little about the Bible.

It might not help you get a job or pacify your parents.

But if it helps you get yourself someday into a situation where you know the feeling that Jimmy Buffet was singing about, "riding on the wind," or what Guy Clark means when he talks about "dancing like nobody's watching," then maybe it can be helpful.

Tend your sails.
Dance.
Try stuff out.
Find the breeze.
It's there.
Seriously.

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Hearing the unmistakable sounds of *Call Me the Breeze* on my J.J. Cale Pandora station
(thank you Jim Johnson),

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain



THEOLOGIAN OF THE MONTH

In most of our issues, the *AColyte* chooses a **Theologian of the Month**. Often, people who are designated as Theologian of the Month don't even realize that they are theologians. They receive this not-really-coveted distinction because they have made some contribution to the culture that can be helpful for the rest of us as we think about the ultimate theological question:

WHICH THINGS MATTER MORE THAN OTHER THINGS?

This month's **Theologian of the Month** distinction goes to a multiple winner: **Steve Earle**.

Steve Earle is a gifted songwriter. His stuff is sort of country, but it's more like Red Dirt, Biker country than the starched jeans, "clever people trying to sound dumb", Old Navy model with a guitar, Nashville, CMA brand of country music (not that there's anything wrong with that).

Steve looks like the heroin addict that he was for 18 years. He got kicked out of the Del McCoury bluegrass band because, as Del McCoury himself told him, "There's no room in Bluegrass for profanity."

But Steve Earle clearly thinks and writes and sings a lot about which things matter more than other things. He's not really all that pious, but he has a very clear biblical vocabulary and perspective. In *Jerusalem*, for example, he sings:

*Maybe I'm only dreaming and maybe I'm just a fool
But I don't remember learning how to hate in Sunday School
Somewhere along the way I strayed and I never went back again
But I still find some comfort now and then.*

Interesting. Especially for a pretty rebellious, sometimes loud, sometimes cynical growler.

This summer, Steve Earle released new album called "I'll Never Get out of This World Alive."

In the liner notes on the CD, he says

I lost my Dad three Christmases ago. ... These songs were written during a three-year period beginning a few months before my dad's passing and ending in December 2010. ... They are, as far as I can tell, about mortality in one way or the other; death as

a mystery rather than a punctuation mark or at least, as a comma rather than a period. ...This disc [is] ... the only art that I could have possibly made as I attempted to glean any lessons from the last days of my Father's life that I can apply to whatever's left of mine.

It's a good CD. There are eleven good songs. They're not maudlin. They're not sappy. They're definitely not depressing. They are not obviously about death at all.

One of the tracks is a great song called "The Gulf of Mexico" that sounds like an old folk song, but turns out to be about the BP oil spill.

And there's a song on there called "God Is God" that has been bouncing around in my head since the first time I heard it.

As people who try to take the right things seriously and try to figure out which things matter more than other things, it might be worthwhile for us to take a close look at the words to "God is God."

***I believe in prophecy.
Some folks see things not everybody can see.
And, once in a while,
They pass the secret along to you and me.***

It's hard to know exactly what Earle means by that. But it's at least related to the stories of the prophets in the Bible, and especially the ones like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and John of Patmos who talk about visions.

There are some pretty vivid vision stories in the Bible.

Think about why communities of people all over the world would have preserved those stories and remembered and been comforted or challenged by those visions. Apparently lots of people think those prophets "passed the secret along to you and me."

***And I believe in miracles.
Something sacred burning in every bush and tree.
We can all learn to sing the songs the angels sing.***

When talking about his Father's death in the passage quoted above, Earle says he died "three Christmases ago." He doesn't say "in December 2007." He uses biblical images as talks about things – miracles, the sacred, bushes, trees, and singing angels.

See Psalm 19:1-2:

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

And Exodus 3:2

*...the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a **bush**;*

And Revelation 22:2:

*On either side of the river is the **tree** of life*

And Psalm 40:3:

*He put a new **song** in my mouth.*

Yeah, I believe in God, and God ain't me.

That's a really interesting way to follow up those first two faith statements about prophecies and miracles.

Although Steve Earle wouldn't use this language, that last line is a clear affirmation of God's transcendence, that is; the idea that there will always be a huge difference and distance between God and any of us bumbling, sinful humans.

A case could be made that we are living in a time and place where some people overlook that difference and distance. There are folks around who are entirely too ready and too eager to speak authoritatively on God's behalf in every situation; as though God's prejudices coincide entirely with theirs and they know exactly what god thinks about everything from reproductive health to tax policy.

Job 42:3 might be relevant here:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand.

That's Job figuring out that "God ain't me."

The song continues.

***I've traveled around the world,
Stood on mighty mountains
And gazed across the wilderness.
Never seen a line in the sand or a diamond in the dust.***

I think the “line in the sand” reference is questioning the notion of “promised land.”

Some people in the world have a book that they say gives them the right, directly from God, to claim ownership of land that *other* people, who look to a different book, say *they* own.

Earle is saying that there’s nothing evident in the land itself that suggests that it should belong to some people and not others.

It’s interesting to think about. Those claims, largely based on the Bible that I use and believe to be the word of God, have surely been the source of lots and lots of conflict and violence and suffering and misery through the centuries and right down to the present day.

That’s worth thinking about.

***And as our fate unfurls,
Every day that passes I'm sure about a little bit less.
Even my money keeps telling me
It's God I need to trust.***

As the ninth chapter of Acts begins, this guy Saul is sure that the most faithful and godly thing that he – as a good, bright, and committed Jew – can do, is help round up Jews who have become followers of Jesus and bring them to Jerusalem to face trial as heretics.

As Acts 9 ends, Saul is no longer sure that that’s what he should be doing. Jesus comes to him and calls him to be a Christian evangelist.

In Acts 10, Peter has this dream where God tells him to kill and eat “four-footed creatures, reptiles, and birds of the air.” Peter is sure that the bible calls those animals unclean and that he should absolutely not eat them. But then God tells him, “What God had made clean, you must not call profane (Acts 10:15).”

The Bible is full of stories where people have experiences about the scope of God's love that leave them "sure about a little bit less."

And I believe in God, but God ain't us.

Does this mean that God can't be contained in the rules, traditions, practices, and habits of any one group—now matter how serious and scholarly and devoted they are?

Maybe.

See Hosea 11:9:

*I am God and no mortal,
the Holy one in your midst.*

It gets a little dicier for some of us as he comes to the last verse.

***God, in my little understanding,
don't care what name I call.
Whether or not I believe doesn't matter at all.***

Really? It's hard to say.

John 3:16 says:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone who believes in him** may not perish but may have eternal life.*

And the second half of John 3:18 says:

*...those who do not believe are condemned already, **because they have not believed** in the name of the only Son of God.*

That seems pretty clear.

But

***I receive the blessings.
That every day on Earth's another chance to get it right.
Let this little light of mine shine and rage against the night.***

Whether Steve Earle “believes” or not, he’s got some kind of notion that there are some things that matter more than other things. His use of the words “right,” “light,” and “night” suggest that some things are better (and worse) than other things. “Right, light, and night” imply the existence as well of “wrong, dark, and day.” One wonders how he decides what the difference is. How do any of us? When you decide, you’re “believing” in something.

Just another lesson

Maybe someone's watching and wondering what I got.

Maybe this is why I'm here on Earth, and maybe not.

Kind of an agnostic way to end. (“Agnostic” – “without knowledge.”)

Maybe. Maybe not.

But I believe in God, and God is God.

He may not be ready to buy into the whole package as it’s presented to him by some folks who seem to be “sure” about more than he is, but at the end of the day, as he considers his father’s death and maybe contemplates his own, Steve Earle chooses to live in a world where God is involved and some things matter more than others.

See Psalm 139:18b:

I come to the end – I am still with you.

Micah 6:8 says that we are required to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. I think perhaps that “walking humbly with God” might involve recognizing that

God’s not me.

God’s not us.

God is God.

while also remembering that we each have a “light to shine and rage against the night.”

Not bad for a reprobate honky tonker.



SUNDAY NIGHT WORSHIP WITH COMMUNION

**6:00PM SUNDAYS
IN THE SMALL CHAPEL
FOLLOWED BY DINNER IN THE HOME
OF AN AC FACULTY OR STAFF MEMBER.**



**5:30PM TUESDAYS
IN THE MOSELEY ROOM:**

(bring your tray and your brain, we'll provide the rest)

B.S. in the W.C.

*(That stands for "Bible Study in the Wright Center"—
get your mind out of the gutter.)*



GREAT DAY OF SERVICE

Saturday November 5, 2011

SIGN UP.

GET BUSY.

BE SURE IT'S GOOD NEWS FOR SOMEBODY
ELSE THAT YOU SHOWED UP HERE.



Austin College AActivators



The Austin College AActivators are a group of Austin College students who work with Chaplain John Williams to plan and lead regional Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) youth ministry events. The AActivators traveling teams normally include four or five Austin College students and Rev. Williams. The teams choose scripture-based themes and prepare keynote presentations, small group materials, music, and recreational activities for each event. AActivators also act as partners with other program organizations, filling leadership roles and working with other church groups who work with children, youth, adults, and senior citizens.

Since its founding in February 1995, the AActivators program has involved 442 Austin College students who have traveled over 145,000 miles to plan and lead 517 ministry events involving over 43,000 children, youth, adults, and senior citizens from 20 states.

Any AC student interested in becoming part of this program is invited to contact John Williams at jwilliams@austincollege.edu.

Remaining 2011-2012 ACtivators Schedule

Friday-Sunday September 16-18, 2011

Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church All-Church Retreat
Pine Cove (Tyler, TX)

Saturday October 8, 2011

Grace Presbytery "STARS" Leadership Training

Saturday October 29, 2011

Kids College
AC Homecoming Weekend
AC Campus

November 4-6, 2011

Grace Presbytery Junior High Youthquake #1 (Gilmont)

November 11-13, 2011

Grace Presbytery Junior High Youthquake #2 (Gilmont)

November 11-13, 2011

Santa Fe Presbytery Mid-High Retreat (Las Vegas, NM)

November 18-20, 2011

"WARP'D"
Palo Duro Presbytery Youth Conference
Butman Methodist Camp and Retreat Center (Merkel, TX)

January 27-29, 2012

Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection
AC Campus

Wednesdays February-April 2012

Covenant Presbyterian Church WOW Program (Sherman)

March 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #1 (Gilmont)

March or April 2012

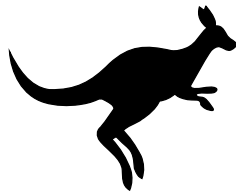
Arkansas Presbytery Senior High Youthquake
Ferncliff Conference Center (Little Rock, AR)

April 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #2 (Gilmont)

April-May 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #3 (Gilmont)



We need you;
we've got a lot to do.



ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT MAKING A
CAREER WORKING FOR THE CHURCH?



DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE
CALLED TO MINISTRY?
HAVE YOU TOLD ANYBODY?

Austin College Students Considering Church Vocations

is an informal group of students who are thinking about these things. Their names and addresses are shared with seminary admissions offices (if they so desire) and they occasionally talk to guests on campus about various forms of ministry and other church vocations. If you would like for your name to be included on the list of Austin College Students Considering Church Vocations, please notify John Williams at jwilliams@austincollege.edu.

You don't have to be sure of anything except that you are thinking about maybe making a career in the church.