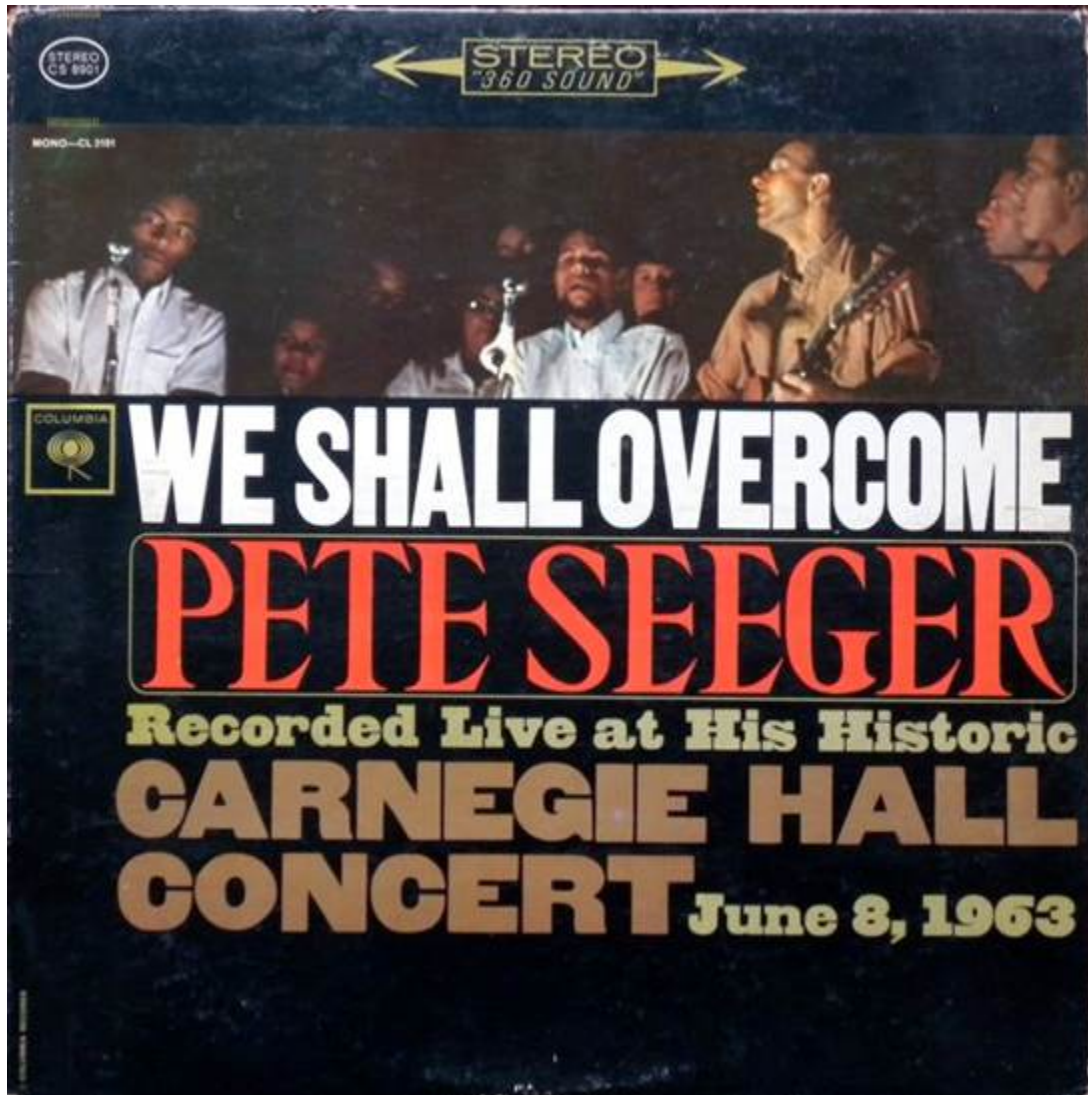


# AColyte

Commencement 2014  
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



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## **THANKS FOR A GREAT 2013-14 for Religious Life at Austin College to**

All 51 ACtivators,  
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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Fifty Years Later  
In a Similar Place

*Only thing we done was wrong  
Was stayin' in the Wilderness too long  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!*  
--Pete Seeger

*You'd better start swimming  
Or you'll sink like a stone,  
For the times they are a-changing.*  
--Bob Dylan

*Underneath, it's all the same love.*  
--Macklemore

*We are gentle, angry people.  
And we're singing for our lives.*  
--Holly Near

Pete Seeger died on January 27, 2014.

He was a significant guy for some of us who grew up in the second half of the twentieth century.

When I was growing up in Ft. Worth and Odessa in the 1960s and 70s, we had in our house a record of the "We Shall Overcome" concert that Seeger recorded with several musicians and Civil Rights leaders at Carnegie Hall in New York on June 8, 1963.

I was 10 months and 2 days old on January 8, 1963. I'm pretty sure I didn't have many opinions on the Civil Rights Movement then.

But the songs on that record — *If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus*, *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*, *I Ain't Scared of Your Jail*, *Oh Freedom*, *A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall*, *We Shall Overcome*, and others — were part of the soundtrack of my childhood. As I grew, and with much assistance from my parents, I learned about the Civil Rights Movement. Little by little, I became aware that there were places — in my country, my town, my extended family — where Negroes (that's the term I knew then) were systematically treated unfairly, brutally.

But I also learned that there were many people out there who thought that needed to change. I learned that at home. And at church. And, I think significantly, at public schools in Texas.

Ft. Worth schools were integrated by court order in 1971. As I tried to get my head around going to school with African-Americans for the first time (4<sup>th</sup> grade for me), Pete Seeger helped me figure out that, despite the inevitable discomfort and difficulties, that was a very good thing.

I'll always cherish that record.

It was a big deal in my life.

It was a big deal in the life of the U.S.A.

And Pete Seeger (privileged, male, white, Yankee that he was) deserves some of the credit for that.

The fact is that – given the injustices and inequalities of American history and culture – Pete Seeger had access in 1963 to resources and audiences and record companies and venues that were almost completely unavailable to the African-American musicians and Civil Rights leaders who joined him on the Carnegie Hall stage that night in 1963.

As we both got older, I began to find Seeger a little tiresome. In my opinion, he became kind of the Patron Saint of Condescending Liberalism. I often felt kind of scolded by his music and political activism.

He seemed always to be protesting something.

And often I thought – and still think – that some of his protests were simplistic, naïve, and shortsighted.

But listening to the songs on *We Shall Overcome* can still make me tear up a little and vow to go marching out to make the world better.

Although there is still much left to do, our culture is vastly different, and better in some important ways, than 50 years ago.

Don't jump too quickly to the undeniable "Yes, but..." response that we critical thinkers are so good at, the fact is that, in an important sense, the good guys won.

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Pete Seeger was a prophet. Like biblical prophets from Isaiah to Jeremiah to Amos to Habakkuk, Pete Seeger (through his music) was able to help me and many, many other people think about the difference between who we are and who we might be;

Could be;

Should be.

It wasn't always pleasant.

And I think he was wrong sometimes.

But I'm grateful for Pete Seeger.

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Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says:

*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords,  
the great God, mighty and awesome,  
who is not partial and takes no bribe,  
who executes justice for the orphan and the widow,  
and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.  
You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Relative to our current conversation, this passage essentially says the God who's ultimately in charge of all this

- Intends for the whole thing to be fair;
- Pays particular attention to the folks in the community who don't have an adult male looking out for them; and
- Encourages folks who seek to live intentionally and responsibly in the community to also take care of the ones no one else is looking out for (like widows, orphans, and outsiders).

Pete Seeger's ghost and I think that might be a good outline for a Commencement Speech.

Or for the life of a beloved, gifted, and capable Austin College graduate.

Try to make it fair.

Pay particular attention to the ones no one else is looking out for; to the ones having the hardest time.

Don't sell out.

It matters.

You matter.

Overcome.

Until September, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Singing for Their Lives (and Yours),

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain