

AColyte

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

**...then he said,
“Word to your Savior!”,
dropped the mic, and walked away.**



“Wait...What?”

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

Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

jwilliams@austincollege.edu

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

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2014-15 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.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Albuquerque, New Mexico
November 8, 2014



*All she could pay was attention,
So all they could take was her time.*
--Kris Kristofferson

*You need a minute? I've got the time.
You need an hour? You can borrow mine.
I've got all the time in the world.*
--SubDudes

Yeah—so that happened.

That's me in the chair, beating my wedding ring against the metal of the frame as a way of laying down a phat beat so that the guy in the hat and orange shawl can walk in and rap the Lord's Prayer as the finale act at the Santa Fe Presbytery Mid-High Conference Variety Show in Albuquerque on November 8.

His rapper name was "Big Steady Love" (that's a reference to the seven passages in the Old Testament-- Exodus 34:6, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2—that talk about God as a "gracious God, and merciful; slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love").

He really did rap the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father who in heaven art
Respected be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done
In heav'n and Earth the same.
Our daily bread, please, to us give.
Forgive our sins as we forgive.
Don't lead us where we might be tempted;
But make all evil things preempted.
Yours is kingdom, pow'r and glory.
That will always be the story.*

Then he said, "Word to your Savior!" dropped the mic, and walked away.

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"Big Steady Love's" non-rapper name is **George Leby**. George Leby is a retired physician, a dedicated Presbyterian youth sponsor, a good piano player, and perhaps the kindest, coolest guy I know.

George made his career caring for whoever needed to be cared for; and especially working to treat and eradicate tuberculosis among Native Americans in New Mexico and Colorado.

As he tells it, over the course of his medical career, George learned that often the best thing he could do for his patients was to listen to them; to give them someone to talk to.

That recognition led him to seek training as a counselor in addition to his medical training.

He has spent his life paying attention.

He's very, very good at it.

Mark that – it will be important later.

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The photo above of George and me was taken by AC senior **Susie Fox**.

She posted it on her Facebook page and it understandably elicited a variety of comments, including:



[Kerby Haltom](#) Not the 1st time I've seen him in a boa.



[John Williams](#) "Glass houses," Kerby.

Former Gamma Gamma Gamma President **Kerby Haltom** was one of my roommates in Bryan Apartments (7-A) in 1983-84. We met at a Presbyterian Junior High Retreat (like a Youthquake) in 1973 or '74.

Thinking about Kerby – especially in light of his tacky Facebook comment – made me think of an old song that we used to listen (and dance) to back in the early '80s: "Industrial Disease" by Dire Straits. It came out in '82 or '83.

Sometimes it feels to me like that song could have been written this morning.

Warning lights are flashing down at Quality Control

(Think "Airbag recalls")

Somebody threw a spanner and they threw him in the hole

There's rumors in the loading bay and anger in the town

("Ferguson")

Somebody blew the whistle and the walls came down

("Eric Snowden")

There's a meeting in the boardroom they're trying to trace the smell

("General Motors ignition switches")

There's leaking in the washroom there's a sneak in personnel

Somewhere in the corridors someone was heard to sneeze

("Ebola")

Goodness me could this be Industrial Disease?

I've always thought "Industrial Disease" was a good phrase to describe the noise and mess and angst of our frenetic culture.

The caretaker was crucified for sleeping at his post
("Secret Service")

Refusing to be pacified it's him they blame the most
("Barack Obama or John Boehner – depending on your political opinions")

The watchdog's got rabies the foreman's got fleas
("IRS scandal" – look it up. Cincinnati office)

And everyone's concerned about Industrial Disease
There's panic on the switchboard tongues in knots
("CNN")

Some come out in sympathy some come out in spots
Some blame the management
("MSNBC")

some the employees
("Fox News")

Everybody knows it's the Industrial Disease
The work force is disgusted downs tools and walks
Innocence is injured experience just talks
("Bill Cosby?" Maybe.)

Everyone seeks damages and everyone agrees
That these are 'classic symptoms of a monetary squeeze'
On ITV and BBC they talk about the curse
(Back in the day, ITV and BBC were the British versions of CNN, FoxNews, and MSNBC)

Philosophy is useless theology is worse
("Hobby Lobby Supreme Court Case," "objection to President Obama quoting scripture in his Immigration speech," "Westborough Baptist Church")

History boils over there's an economics freeze
Sociologists invent words that mean 'Industrial Disease'

Doctor Parkinson declared 'I'm not surprised to see you here
You've got smokers cough from smoking, brewer's droop from drinking beer
I don't know how you came to get the Betty Davis knees
(Quick History lesson: "Betty Davis Eyes" was a fairly forgettable Kim Carnes Pop Song in the early '80s)

But worst of all young man you've got Industrial Disease'

He wrote me a prescription he said 'you are depressed

(Watch a news broadcast and count how many commercials you see for prescription medications. They're not anything you can just buy, but the prescription companies hope you can pressure a physician into prescribing them for you. And sometimes that turns out very, very well. Sometimes.).

I'm glad you came to see me to get this off your chest

Come back and see me later - next patient please

Send in another victim of Industrial Disease'

I go down to Speaker's Corner I'm thunderstruck

They got free speech, tourists, police in trucks

(Ferguson again)

Two men say they're Jesus one of them must be wrong

There's a protest singer singing a protest song

(Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, *Same Love*; Holly Near, *Gentle, Angry People*; Steve Earle – cover – or Chambers Brothers – original – *The Time Has Come Today*; The Legendary K.O., *George Bush Don't Like Black People*)

He says, "They wanna have a war to keep us on our knees

They wanna have a war to keep their factories

They wanna have a war to stop us buying Japanese

They wanna have a war to stop Industrial Disease

(Halliburton; Blackwater; Iraqi "Weapons of Mass Destruction")

They're pointing out the enemy to keep you deaf and blind

("Anchor Babies"; "Voter Fraud"; "War on Christmas")

They wanna sap your energy, incarcerate your mind

They give you Rule Britannia, gassy beer, page three

Two weeks in Espana and Sunday striptease'

(These are England-specific references to cheap patriotism, cheap consumer products, and cultural objectification of women. Nothing like that goes on around here – right?)

Meanwhile the first Jesus says 'I'll cure it soon

Abolish Monday mornings and Friday afternoons'

The other one's on hunger strike, he's dying by degrees

How come Jesus gets Industrial Disease?

I think that's a great song.

It's a good image for:

Too much input;

Too many voices;

That are Yelling too loudly;

Too many distractions.

Industrial Disease.

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For decades, George Leby and Kerby Haltom have been youth sponsors.

When junior and senior high kids from First Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque (George) and First Presbyterian Church in Ft. Worth (Kerby) have needed adults to accompany them – at fellowship meetings, on ski trips, to retreats with ACTivators – George and Kerby have stepped up.

They've showed up.

They've driven vans.

They've slept on floors.

They've woken up.

Again and again and again.

Amid all the distractions that are part of their lives, like they're part of all our lives, they've *paid attention* to the young people entrusted to their care.

* * *

Last Spring, author Michael Lewis said this to graduates at the Princeton University Commencement:

Do not be deceived by life's outcomes. Life's outcomes, while not entirely random, have a huge amount of luck baked into them. Recognize that, if you've had success, you've also had luck. And with luck comes obligation. You owe a debt – and not just to your gods – you owe a debt to the unlucky.

That's an interesting thing to think about as we celebrate Thanksgiving and come to the end of another semester at this fine little expensive liberal arts college.

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 says:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

I frankly think it's a good and appropriate discipline for all of us who have worked hard to be part of this community to recognize and remember that there's a "huge amount of luck baked into" our presence here.

That recognition shouldn't make us ashamed, guilty, or lazy.

But we should probably "take heed" lest we think that our story is simply about us and what we've accomplished ourselves. There is value – perhaps especially in this "Thanksgiving" season – for us to pay attention to the fact that, in addition to our own real and legitimate hard work, all of our lives include a multitude of blessings that we did not earn.

And I think the best way for us to respond to that recognition is to work hard to do what we can to ensure that our luck – our good fortune, our giftedness – is good news for somebody else, and especially for the "unlucky" – the ones who are having a hard time.

Whatever vocabulary you prefer, I think it's appropriate for us all to pay attention to the fact that we are lucky/fortunate/gifted/blessed.

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When **Katie Koestner of the Take Back the Night Foundation** was on our campus on November 20 she told some very personal stories that included a detailed description of a time that she was the victim of a sexual assault.

As part of her fine and important presentation, she asked all of us – students, faculty, staff, and community members – a series of questions.

She said, "I want you to think about you."

And then she asked us all:

Do you notice when someone makes you uncomfortable?

Are you good at being assertive when you're not comfortable?

Did anyone ever hurt you and kiss you at the same time?

Would you be willing to do better than me to stop rape?

If a building is burning, does the fireman ever say, "I'm not going in"?

Those were hard, uncomfortable, tragic, relevant, crucially important questions.

She was talking about paying attention--to our own circumstances but also to the circumstances of those around us.

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I didn't realize how much Katie's comments were related to the rest of our life together on this campus until I got to Bible Study on November 18.

Because of the Thanksgiving Break, the passage we looked at on November 18 was actually the one that will be the center of our Communion service on November 30.

November 30 is the first Sunday in Advent.

Advent is the season of the Church Year in which Christians get ready for Christmas as we prepare again to celebrate the birth of Jesus (which is a pretty big deal in the Christian circles I tend to run in).

It's like the time at a concert when the lights go down but the show hasn't started yet.

Interestingly, though, the lectionary passage for the first Sunday in Advent this year comes from the end of the Gospel of Mark.

It's a really weird passage that several of the students at Bible Study correctly called "end-timey" and "revelationy".

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

If you don't think that's at least a little bit weird, you're probably not paying attention.

Lots of Christians through the centuries have ignored the part about no one knowing when Jesus will come back and gone a little crazy waiting for—and wishing for—some kind of dramatic, cataclysmic event in which Jesus will come punish the people they don't like and tell them that they've been right all along and that God's opinions coincide exactly with their prejudices.

If that's how God works I was in trouble a long time ago.

But at Bible Study we decided that this passage isn't all that helpful as a prediction about the end times.

We decided it's about watching for the good, godly stuff that's already going on.

It's about waking up,
 Showing up,
 Stepping up,
 And paying attention.

While we were discussing this passage in Bible Study, a couple different conversations kind of broke out. And somehow they both ended up involving AC Senior **James Tenney**.

As he was talking to one of the groups, James heard his name mentioned by the other group. He realized that he was being asked something, but he had missed the lead-up to the question.

He had been paying attention to other things and other people. So when he realized that something was going on across the room that somehow involved him even though he wasn't sure exactly what was going on, he said the two words that I've recently heard from lots of people younger than me as they realize that something important might be going on that they might have somehow missed:

"Wait...What?"

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And that's when I figured out what I think might be the point of all this.

"Wait...What?" is not necessarily a bad contribution to the conversation.

Understood sympathetically, "Wait...What?" can be interpreted as an effort to stop the noise and refocus on something that was certainly missed and might be important.

But sometimes "Wait...What?" might be a troublesome sign.

*"Wait...What?
You mean the story of **my** life is not just about the amazing things
I do and I have
because **I'm** awesome
and I earned it all?"*

"Wait...What?"

*You mean that encounter I saw at the party
that made me a little uncomfortable
led to a sexual assault?"*

"Wait...What?"

*You mean there are new, important,
loving, courageous, profound, selfless
things that are being done in the world right now – today – by people like me?"*

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I think the antidote to Industrial Disease is paying attention.

Deuteronomy 10:12 says "take heed."

Mark 13:37 says "keep awake."

Katie Koestner asked us, "Do you ever hold steady? Do you ever stay strong?"

George Ledy shows up every week.

He doesn't always rap, but he shows up.

It's about paying attention. Always.

The world will tell you that's hard.

It is.

So?

Rest when you get tired.

Do the work.

Wake up.

Show up.

Step up.

Now is the time.

Until next time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Pretty sure this whole thing is related to the Buddhist concept of "Mindfulness,"

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain