

AColyte

DECEMBER 2012

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

Have I ever told you about the time last Spring when I thought **Todd Penner** was going to get me **THROWN IN JAIL?**



You can also read below about the design of this year's Activators T-Shirts.

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

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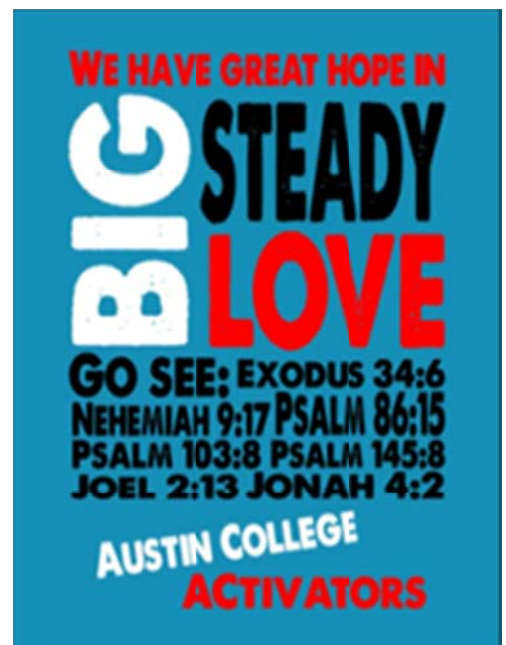
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WHAT IS AN *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2012-13 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.

Sorry it's taken so long to get this out. We'll shoot for 3 in Jan Term and the Spring.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Arousing Suspicions and
Getting Too Much Attention
DFW Airport
April 15, 2012

*Leave your guns at home...
Don't take your guns to town.*
--Johnny Cash

Mama says a pistol is the Devil's right hand.
--Steve Earle

I should've known better.

I had run with this rough crowd of wild, irreverent, iconoclastic, and dangerous biblical scholars before.

I had seen some things. And heard some stories.

But never before had Federal agents been involved.

Still---I should've known better.

But there we were – [AC Cloud Professor of Religion] Todd Penner and me.....going through a security gate at DFW Airport.....trying to catch a flight to St. Petersburg, Florida to get to a conference at Eckerd College on the Bible and the Liberal Arts.

I went through the screening process without incident.

But then there was a snag.

After Todd's backpack went through the X-Ray machine, some lights started to flash, the TSA woman (that's "Transportation Security Administration") who was in charge of the screening area made a quick phone call, and all of a sudden there were several more guards in the area – guards who were bigger, more obviously armed, and more severe-looking than the ones who had been there when we entered the gate.

One of them took Todd's backpack and went to a table in the security area.

"Whose backpack is this?"

Todd (rather sheepishly): "Mine."

"Am I going to see something in here that I'm not going to like?"

And I thought:

So this is how it ends.

Sure – I knew there might be trouble when we hired this backslid Canuck Mennonite from Emory who talked about Southpark in his candidate lecture.

But he had been doing so well lately – embracing his role as department chair, serving ably on the Presidential Search Committee (apart from his reference to the "54 yard line" in a football-themed question to a candidate) and not scaring or scarring nearly as many students as he used to.

I thought he was in a really good place.

But now there's God-knows-what in his carry-on bag.

And all these other people around here probably think I'm his freakin' accomplice!

Fortunately, I didn't say any of that out loud.

In response to the Security agent's question about whether he would find something he didn't like in the bag, Todd told him: "Oh...yeah. I'm sorry."

And then Todd told them about an ongoing series of stories and good-natured jokes that he had been exchanging with a woman named Robin Gipson. Robin is married to Eckerd College Chaplain Doug

McMahon. Doug and Todd are part of a group of Chaplains and Bible professors from Presbyterian-related colleges who have been getting together recently to discuss the Bible and the Liberal Arts. The group has been meeting together for a couple years now (that's the context in which Davina Lopez and Tina Pippin have come to speak at AC recently) and Todd and Robin – who is in Law Enforcement – have developed this pattern of ribbing each other about law enforcement, firearms, and the gun culture of the U.S. and especially Texas.

In that context, Todd had gotten for Robin a tacky little plaque with a Texas map on it, some clever saying about Texans and guns (I don't remember exactly what it was – probably something like “*All we need in Texas are big hats and boots/Plenty of guns, and somethin' to shoot*”), and – this is what got the attention of the Feds – a miniature plastic toy pistol attached to it.

That toy pistol that got all the TSA folks all wound up.

Todd apologized about the misunderstanding and for his foolishness packing a toy gun in his carry-on bag.

Everybody exhaled, most of the TSA agents left, and the TSA lady in charge of the area told Todd, “Because of you, now I'm gonna hafta fill out about a hundred forms.” He apologized to her.

And then she did something else. I'll get to that in a minute. But first I want us to look at a Bible story (really).

2 Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:2-11)

Now check this out:

2 Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple.

Early in the morning,
a Chaplain and a biblical scholar went to the airport.

All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery;

The TSA guards X-rayed the biblical scholar's backpack
and saw a tiny “gun” in there.

That got their attention.

and making her stand before all of them, **4** they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

One of the Security guys said,
"Am I going to see something in there
that I'm not going to like?"

5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"



6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. **7** When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." **8** And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. **9** When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

After the Bible scholar explained the situation,
and the reason for the misunderstanding became clear,
the extra security guards wandered away,
returning to their stations.

10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" **11** She said, "No one, sir."

After it became clear
that the Bible scholar was not a terrorist
and probably not crazy.....
the extra security guys left the area.....
the Bible guy apologized to the remaining TSA lady
who was in charge of the screening at that gate.....
she chastised him about creating a situation
where she would have to fill out
"about a hundred forms".....
and—as they started to leave the gate and head toward the plane—
she smiled,
pulled the plaque with the tiny gun on it out of the trash,
and gave it back to him so he could give it to his friend!

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

We live in a complicated and potentially dangerous world.

Rules are important.

They got to be “the rules” because earnest and insightful people thought they would help us.

That’s part of the whole truth.

But another part of the whole truth is that sometimes you don’t get the punishment you might deserve. Breaking the rules doesn’t necessarily get you kicked out of the story. Sometimes grace happens.

That feels like relevant messages for this time of year.

Keep calm.

Pack carefully.

Tell the truth.

Give a little grace.

It’ll be alright.

I’m just glad that Robin Gipson didn’t work at the Snake Farm (“Just Sounds Nasty”).

Until 2013 I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Wishing You Peace, Love, and Laughter for the Holidays,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain and Director of Church Relations

P.S. – Todd gave the plaque to Robin at dinner one night at a pub in St. Petersburg called “The Ale and the Witch.” As we got further into the evening many of the Chaplains and Bible professors discussed opening a competing pub across the street. Its décor would be based on the book of Jonah and the story of Jesus healing the Ten Lepers in Luke 17. The name of the pub would be……wait for it……*The Whale and the Itch.*

MARK YOUR CALENDARS



ACTivators Events this Spring

Thanks to all 47 ACTivators who have helped lead events this Fall.

Here's what we've got coming up:

January 26-27, 2013

Grace Presbytery "Kidquiver" (Dallas)

February 1-3, 2013

Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection (AC Campus)

Wednesdays February 20-March 27, 2013

Covenant Presbyterian Church "WOW" Program for Children (Sherman)

March 1-3, 2013

Grace Presbytery Youthquake (Glen Rose)

April 19-21, 2013

Grace Presbytery Kidquake (Gilmont)

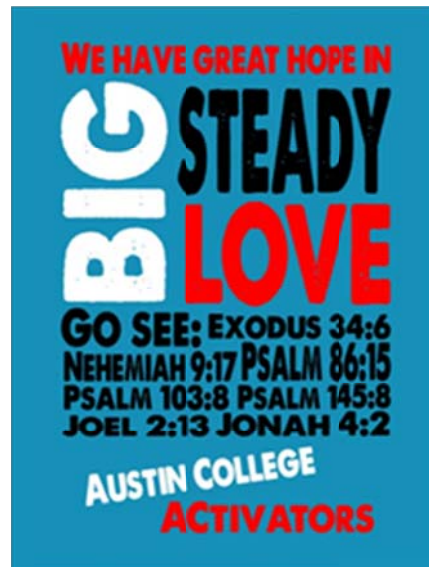
April 26-28, 2013

Grace Presbytery Kidquake (Gilmont)

July 29-August 1, 2013

Grace Presbytery "JHaMS" Conference (AC Campus)

Contact jwilliams@austincollege.edu if you want to help with any of these events.



THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW WE DESIGNED THIS YEAR'S ACTIVATORS T-SHIRTS:

For a variety of reasons, I spent a lot of time last summer studying and thinking and reflecting about the first 8 verses of Psalm 145.

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.*
- 2 Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.*
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.*
- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.*
- 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works,
I will meditate.*
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.*
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*
- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

And I came to a theological conclusion that might surprise some of you. Here it is:

*In a hip-hop, rap music world,
God's Rapper Name
would be "Big Steady Love."*

Now that name's not copyrighted or anything, so Mike Imhoff is still free to call himself "Big Steady Love" when he enters his retirement and finally decides to take the plunge and start his own rap career. It's only a matter of time.

But I think Psalm 145 and several other biblical passages – especially in the Old Testament--suggest that God's rapper name would be "Big Steady Love."

I'll tell you why I think that in a minute, but first I want you to think for just a second about how you're reacting right now

- to this 50-year-old white preacher
- telling this random story
- about God and rap music.

I think it's likely that some of you are thinking something along the lines of:

*Rap music?
If he's talking about rap music,
he's sure not talking to me.*

Frankly, if I were receiving this instead of sending it, that would probably be my reaction.

To you I say, "Hang in there. Stay with me for a minute. I'm going somewhere with this. Honest."

I also think maybe that there are a few folks who might perk up a little when they see the Chaplain writing about rap and hip-hop and Big Steady Love. It's not something we usually talk about here in this dark, stuffy Chapel full of pews and hymnals and dusty pipe organs.

To you I say, "Welcome to the party. Maybe all this Religion business is not quite as far from your real, everyday lives as you sometimes think it is."

I think there might be some generational distinction between the ones like me who have little interest or inclination to talk about God and rap music and those who are intrigued and engaged by the idea of God having a Rapper Name.

In Psalm 145:4 the psalmist tells God:

*One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.*

That verse hints at an issue that's relevant for all of us as we live out our lives and try to take the right things seriously on this campus.

This is my 20th year working for Austin College and my 30th year involved in youth ministry (not counting the time way back in the last millennium when I actually was a youth). I've had lots and lots of conversations that are essentially conversations about how one generation can communicate with the next generation.

There's a sense in which that's what's going on in verse 4 of Psalm 145.

Although we have varying degrees of comfort using God language, I think most of us who work here spend a lot of time and energy trying to articulate and communicate ideas and stories and truths and messages to people from a different generation than ours.

We have to do that a lot.
We're pretty good at it.
But sometimes it's hard.

When I was growing up in Ft. Worth in the 60s and 70s and studying here in the early 80s, "diversity" essentially meant that it was okay that we didn't all go to the same church.

Today, Austin College students arrive here having been exposed to more diversity, more voices, more choices, more of the world, than I had been exposed to when I was a student here.

On the whole, I think that's a good thing. But it means that students today cannot take for granted in 2012 what I took for granted in 1980.

The world is different. Many of the categories that applied a few decades ago are simply no longer relevant.

Look back at Psalm 145:

*1 I will extol you,
4 ... laud your works...,
...glorious splendor of your majesty...*

My kids don't talk like that. AC students don't talk like that. Actually, I don't even talk like that unless I'm reading from the Bible. Words like "extol", "laud", and "splendor" feel kind of old and stuffy and stale to me.

In our efforts to speak from generation to generation, we will always face struggles about how to meaningfully communicate with each other.

(See how I split that infinitive there – "to meaningfully communicate" –? I bet that drives a few English professors crazy.)

Former Cunningham Lecturer Leonard Sweet has recently written about how we've become a "T.G.I.F." Culture –

That's

- Twitter
- Google
- iPhones and
- Facebook

He's probably right – he usually is about changing features in the culture. Those are features of most of our lives and our culture that simply weren't present ten or fifteen years ago. Sweet and lots of other people talk about how we all need to learn to speak that TGIF language.

Several times last summer, Tim Millerick “encouraged” those of us who work in Student Affairs to think about how we can do a better job using social media to support and enhance our work.

Okay...that's a fair point. Austin College has always adapted the way in which we address and engage our students to the different cultural, demographic, and historical situations in which we find ourselves – and we'll do it again.

But there is danger in focusing so much on *how* we communicate across generations in a changing culture that we get confused about exactly *what* we should be communicating.

And that's where we get to what I think is the genius of Psalm 145. Not only does the Psalm remind and urge readers to celebrate the works of God across the generations, it also offers a significant piece of advice about how to do that.

Verse 8 simply says,

*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love.*

But that's more significant than it may seem at first glance.

Most Biblical scholars believe that those words – “*The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” – are the oldest words in the Bible.

The phrase occurs seven times in the Old Testament. Some say that it was first written in Exodus 34:6 while other say the words first showed up Joel 2:13. But the consensus is that this description of God – gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love – dates back farther in the history of God's people than any written documents.

Think about that. It means that this language is part of the way a particular community of people talked about their collective experience of who God is and how God acts.

For centuries and millennia, people--including the community that gave rise to Austin College – have consistently experienced God to be

- Gracious – giving them all that they need and more
- Merciful – not giving them what they deserve
- Slow to anger – not abandoning them when they failed to be faithful to God, and
- Abounding in steadfast love--Their experience has been that there's always plenty of it. And it never wavers.

In other words, the community that wrote down the Bible always experienced “Big Steady Love.”

In all 3 Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), those concepts are central to the understanding of who God is, how God acts, and how God's people ought to act.

Now, at this point, it would be really easy to say something like:

*For centuries, people have been saying that 'The Lord is a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,' so that's how **we** should be at Austin College.*

But I've been here too long to think that's just a description of who we *should* be.

It's actually a good description of who we are.

- We *are* gracious. We really are.

We focus more on what we have to offer to students and to the world than what we want or deserve to get for ourselves.

- And we're merciful.

We don't always give students what you *deserve*. We certainly articulate and maintain standards. It would be dishonest and disrespectful to our students if we didn't. But

- we'd rather invite than dismiss;
- we'd rather encourage than scold;
- we'd rather accompany than punish.

We can't help ourselves. We're a merciful bunch.

- And we're patient.

We stay in the room when students and colleagues stumble and disappoint.

We give second chances. We'd rather be a little too lenient than not lenient enough. Again—it's not that we don't articulate and maintain standards--but we are committed to helping students and each other meet those standards.

We're more patient than we have to be. It's just who we are.

- And we embody Big Steady Love.

We strive every day to serve each student consistently and lovingly.

As I say that, I know it sounds almost unbearably sticky and sweet—like it came out of the sappiest sort of cheap brochure.

But I've been around here a long time. And I know lots of stories—including some that you don't know. And lots of you know stories that I don't know about how we work together—often quietly and without fanfare—to love these students who are part of our community and part of our lives.

If you're new around here: keep your eyes open. You'll see it.

So that's it:

Grace
Mercy
Patience
and Big Steady Love.

We know how to do that.

We've been doing it for 163 years.

And we'll do it again in 2013.

Earlier this Fall, Majors Interns **J.P. Marshall** and **Jason Henry** heard some of my ramblings about "Big Steady Love" and decided that should be the theme of the 2012-2013 ACTivators T-Shirts.

J.P. designed the front, incorporating a kangaroo, an homage to Michelangelo's depiction of the Creation of Man on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the Austin College logo, and a depiction of God looking appropriately like a hip hop Santa Claus.

He ended up with this:



Meanwhile, Jason designed the back, incorporating all seven biblical references that include some version of the statement that God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

He ended up with this:

So that's why the ACTivators T-Shirts talk about "Big Steady Love."

We're squarely within a 3000+-year-old tradition of talking about our experience of God.

"Grace. Mercy. Patience. Big Steady Love."

I'd wear that.

