

AColyte

March 2010

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

The Persuasions are Coming!



"The Persuasions started as five boys singing on street corners, schoolyards and in subway stations of Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn in 1962. Singing without instruments to accompany them... singing without a band to back them up... singing *a capella*."

AColyte

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

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Dancing among Impudent Saints and Rowdy Angels
Since the Spring of 1995

Life's mostly attitude and driving.
--Jack Ingram

*There are varieties of activities,
But it is the same God who **activates** them in everyone.*
--1 Corinthians 12:6

It's true. The **Persuasions** are coming!

World-renowned *A Cappella* singing group the Persuasions will be giving a free concert in **Ida Green Theater at 7:30pm Thursday April 1**. Everybody at AC is invited and welcomed to attend. If you want to know about the Persuasions, go to www.thepersuasions.net.

The story of how they came to be invited to perform at Austin College this Spring is long and a little bit complicated. It's a story that involves

- 3 men in a box;
- 2 songs on a mix tape; and
- an unexpected e-mail.

~~Three Men in a Box~~

The “Three Men in a Box” were two other Presbyterian ministers and me on an elevator at the Galt House Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky in March 1994 (my first year working for AC). One was **Rev. Jimmy Caldwell**, Director of Church Relations at Trinity University in San Antonio. He was my pastor in Odessa, Texas when I was in kindergarten. It was cool to see him and to be in a situation where we were colleagues.

The other guy on the elevator was **Dr. Harry Smith**. Harry was President of Austin College from 1978 to 1994. He retired a few months after this trip to Louisville.

We were at a conference where we spent a lot of time and energy thinking about how to be church-related colleges in the 1990s – about raising money and recruiting Presbyterian students. The three of us were going to dinner together in Louisville (for some reason that still puzzles me the guy from San Antonio wanted to get Mexican food – in *Kentucky?!!*).

As Harry stepped onto the elevator so we could go down to our car, he told me that he thought Austin College probably had more reasons than any other Presbyterian school to recruit Presbyterian students in New Mexico. There were some big Presbyterian churches in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Las Cruces and he told me to look into ways we might be able to raise AC’s visibility in those churches.

I’m pretty sure that was the first time the **PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE** explicitly directed me to do something. It was a little bit intimidating. How, exactly, could Austin College get the attention of Presbyterians in New Mexico?

In my effort to figure out how to raise the visibility of AC in New Mexico, I called my old friend **Jim Collie** to see if he had any ideas. Jim worked for Santa Fe Presbytery and he told me that they needed to have a presbytery-wide youth event for kids from their various congregations.

I told him that I could bring some Austin College students out there in the Spring of 1995 to help them plan and lead a weekend retreat.

He said that would be great.

I hung up and wondered if I had told him the truth. Could we really do something like that? We never had before.

That's when I re-learned a lesson that I've learned over and over again in the last seventeen years:

This is Austin College — of course we can do it.

I ended up driving my 1989 Hyundai Excel to Albuquerque while five intrepid AC students flew out there to join me.

Brandon Wert, Michael Harper, Janet Chester, Noelle Castin, Amy Allen, and I led a retreat for 37 high school students and sponsors. It was a rousing success. We all had fun.



After the retreat ended, those students and I went to Santa Fe — where we had dinner at the Blue Corn Café with Harry Smith and his wife Etta (who moved to Santa Fe after Harry's retirement from AC).

The next day, the students went off to the airport for their return flight and I loaded up the sound system and hit the highway.

~~Two Songs on a Mix Tape~~

Here's a quick aside:

*Regular readers of the **AColyte** know that I'm an old songwriter. I notice lines—lines from songs and sometimes out of context lines from real conversations. Recently, I've overheard the following real lines in different places and they are all kind of bouncing around in my head:*

"If I wanted to pay retail, I'd have gone to WalMart".

"Who will hold my baby when they take the Bridal Portrait?"

"We have a Narcotics Anonymous group that meets at our church, but I don't know anybody who goes to it."

"Not bad for a fat dog."

*"I've got a truck that'll run over **that**."*

Sometimes, there's a whole lot of back story and potential narrative context in a particular line. I like noticing those things—and I've been that way for a long time.

Anyway--as I set out from Albuquerque after working with those five students to lead that retreat, I was pretty pumped.

I like driving (sometimes long distances by myself). I like going to youth retreats. I like talking and thinking about God, the Bible, and the Church.

It was a good day. I felt like a boat fully under sail. I was going fast and it was kind of easy.

Somewhere between Tucumcari and Amarillo a song came on the mix tape I was listening to (like I said – it was a 1989 Hyundai Excel, I was lucky to have a cassette player).

The song was "Deliver Me" by the band Sonia Dada. It is written as a sort of prayer from a young man facing many difficulties.

*God, won't you deliver me from the pain and my confusion
Growing up on the city streets in a desperate situation.
And a crying mother's deep despair comes as no surprise
There's a crying angel over me that is keeping me alive*

O God deliver me.

That's kind of an intense beginning. But it's compelling. It feels believable.

*I had lost my innocence and I had lost my pride
Every time I looked at her you know my mama cried
She said "What could I do different – there ain't no one by my side
What could I do different – I was trying to survive"
O God deliver me.
Frightened of this world.
O God deliver me.*

*I have heard the voice of evil speak to me alone.
Sitting cold and lonely and so far away from home
In the darkness of the prison cell I can hear the angry screams
Calling out to no one in a place where no one dreams.*

Now remember – that day I was tired and sentimental and really fired up about church conferences and Austin College students and ready to go charging out – somewhere – to change the world.

I was pretty sure that none of the kids we met in Albuquerque were facing anything near the desperation embodied in that song. They were by and large middle class Presbyterian kids. But still, coming out of that weekend, with those AC students, and those bright and energetic young people, and because I've always been a sentimental Bible geek, I think I teared up a little as the song reached its climactic lines:

*God, won't you deliver me – I've never been before
People say you're watching me – watching me
But I'm not really sure.*

And my mind went racing.

I could easily imagine some of the kids we met in Albuquerque – and kids I had met at similar events in Louisiana and Oklahoma and all over Texas – saying that to God.

*People say you're watching me – watching me
But I'm not really sure.*

I thought of 1 John 3:1 (really – I can't help it)

See what love the Father has given us,

*that we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are.*

I knew that neither I nor even those amazing Austin College students could ever single-handedly convince any young person that that's the truth. But I thought then – and I think now – that together we really can be part of the process of helping particular kids come to understand and believe that the truest thing about them is that – despite what they or others might think or might say – they are beloved and gifted children of God.

Right now.

I *am* really sure.

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About the time I crossed over the Texas state line, another song showed up on the mix tape.

*I woke up worried today – can't help but wonder why
I see all these little children; disillusion in their eyes.
There's no one to look up to who will set their spirits free.
I swear those days are over. **The change begins with me.***

*We've got to break through the fear.
We've got to bust through the hate.
Reach out our arms.
Pass on the love.
(to the little children)*

*Don't hold back. Don't hold back.
Don't hold back. Pass on the love.*

That took me right back to those earlier thoughts about helping young people come to understand and believe that they are beloved and gifted children of God. Clearly there are – and will likely always be – “little children” with “no one to look up to who will set their spirits free.” Why couldn't Austin College students be part of addressing those concerns?

A week or so before we went to Albuquerque, I had been invited by Grace Presbytery to plan, direct, and speak at a Junior High conference in northeast Texas in May 1995. I told them I couldn't go because I was already committed to speak at a conference in Louisiana that weekend.

But as I heard the line “the change begins with me;”
and kept hearing the lines “Don’t hold back. Pass on the Love;”
and reflected back on my weekend with Amy, Noelle, Janet, Michael, and
Brandon;
I realized that--even though I couldn’t go – there were abundant and more than
sufficient gifts in the Austin College student body.

Maybe we could send some students to lead that retreat.

What if we cut loose a bunch of AC students on the Presbyterian youth of
northeast Texas?

What if they didn’t need “adult leadership”?

What if they *were* the “adult leadership”?

They could handle it – if the church leaders would let them.

Back there on Interstate 40 outside Amarillo, I wrote down one word in my
journal as I started dreaming about AC students leading church retreats:

ACTivators.

(Especially in the 80s and 90s, we were quite fond around here of using words
that begin with “AC.”)

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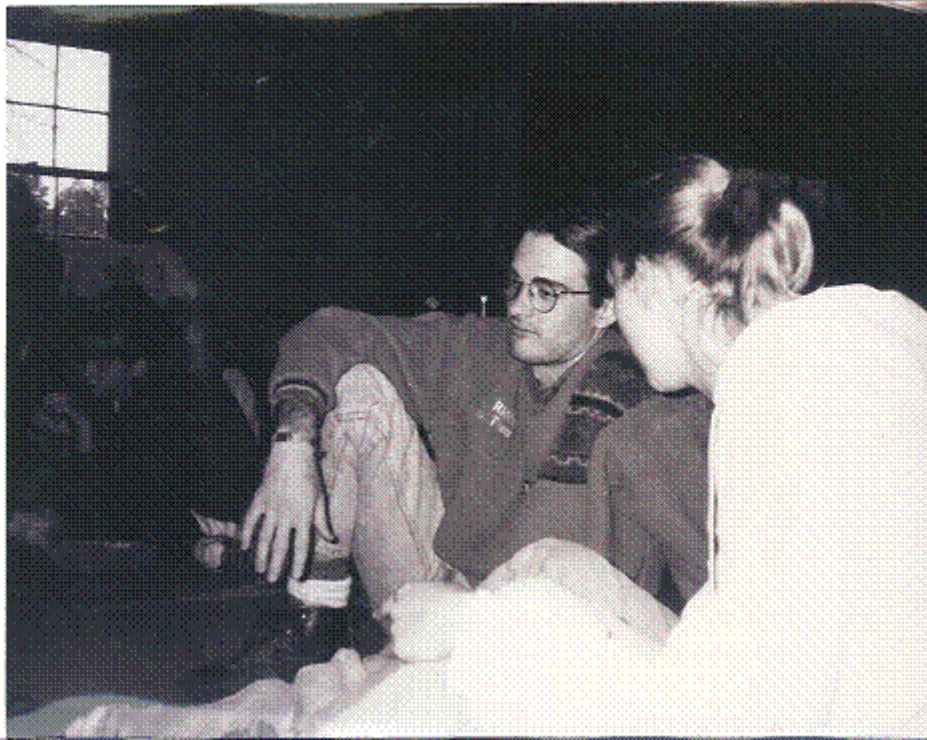
When I got back to Sherman, I contacted the Grace Presbytery folks who had
invited me to speak at their event and suggested instead that they let our
students lead their whole event.

I expected some hesitance and resistance.

There was none. They enthusiastically embraced the idea. (And Grace
Presbytery has been a great partner for the ACTivators ever since).

Fifteen AC students went to East Texas in May 1995 and led what was, by all
accounts, an excellent event.

Before they left, they each received a black T-Shirt that said “Austin College
ACTivators” on the front and “God gave us brains and expects us to use them”
on the back.



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That was fifteen years ago this Spring.

In those 15 years, the Austin College ACTivators program has involved 419 Austin College students who have traveled over 139,000 miles to plan and lead 386 local, regional, and national ministry events involving over 38,000 children, youth, adults, and senior citizens from 20 presbyteries in 13 states.

ACTivators have seen the Marfa lights in West Texas; danced to Mason Ruffner's rockabilly in the Blues City Café in Memphis, Tennessee; watched sea otters frolic in Moss Harbor, California; heard frogs, eaten crawfish, and seen a bobcat in Louisiana; visited the hot springs outside Durango, Colorado after a day of skiing; led worship and danced to "I Will Survive" in a state park in Mississippi; stood in four states at once (twice); engaged in more than one snowball fight in Missouri; smoked cigars in the snow above Santa Fe; and met hundreds – thousands – of great kids.

Twenty-four former ACTivators currently serve as full-time clergy or educators in Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations in 11 different states. Ten former ACTivators are currently in seminary. Fourteen former ACTivators have served as Presbyterian Church (USA) Young Adult Volunteers in Ireland, England, Guatemala, Kenya, Peru, and several sites in the United States.

And none of it would have happened exactly the way it has happened without those 2 songs from that mix tape – “Deliver Me” (“People say you’re watching me, but I’m not really sure”) and “Pass on the Love” (“I swear those days are over. The change begins with me.”)

~~An Unexpected E-Mail~~

The song “Pass on the Love” has been especially popular among ACtivators and in the entire AC Chapel program. Through the years, lines from the song have been used 5 or 6 times in the *AColyte*.

Still, I never expected to get the e-mail I received on August 9, 2009.

A friend of mine happened to forward a copy of your January *Acolyte* journal, which included the lyrics of “Pass On the Love.” For the record, The Persuasions did record it, but words and music were written by me. I am, however, EXTREMELY pleased with the way they are being presented in your journal, just wanted to set the creative "record" straight.

Yours truly,
George Cameron Grant

I learned “Pass On the Love” on a PBS Special that Spike Lee produced called “Do It A *Capella*.” I knew the Persuasions sang it, so I always gave them credit when quoting the song. The songwriter saw the *AColyte* and contacted us.

Wow. This was really cool.

I sent him a response on August 10.

Mr. Grant,

Thank you very much for contacting me. I'm pleased and honored to make your acquaintance.

I apologize for my failure to give you the appropriate credit when quoting "Pass on the Love" and I will rectify that in the next *AColyte*.

I first heard "Pass On the Love" on the Spike Lee PBS Special "Do It A Cappella." I learned the song off that show and it has been much beloved both in my family and among Austin College students ever since. My wife

writes Church School curriculum for the Presbyterian Church and she loves the song.

In addition, Austin College sponsors a program called the ACTivators in which many of our students plan and lead retreats for children and youth. "Pass on the Love" is a popular song at those events--both among kids and college students.

On a personal note, "Pass On the Love" is a song that I think of often as I reflect on or explain my approach to ministry. "Break through the fear," "bust through the hate," "reach out your arms," "pass on the love" and "don't hold back." That's a good model for ministry.

Again, thank you for contacting me and for writing an excellent song.

He responded on August 16:

Dear Reverend Williams,

I can't tell you how grateful and inspired I was to read your letter regarding my composition PASS ON THE LOVE. The fact that somehow the song has found its way into the tapestry of your college and has meant so much to you, your family and students fill me with emotion I can't adequately express in words. Ironically, after reading your email, I immediately attempted to contact the group, almost immediately received a call back from member Jimmy Hayes, and found out that they were performing a mere 15 minutes away from me the following night. I went to see them perform, and afterwards shared your email with them. Needless to say, they were equally moved and motivated by your kind words and insights.

Reverend, I must tell you that I've always felt that this song had a place in the world, and might be an inspiration to those who had the opportunity hear it. It never had proper initial distribution, so the fact that it was selected to be on Spike Lee's show was merely a fluke, so it is encouraging to hear that the song, and its message, has found its way into your, and hopefully, other communities.

I must also tell you that your words have compelled me to take another shot at getting the song out there. The guys are all for it, and we're in touch with the original producer who has the masters of the original recording (which I think is a much better version), to see about getting PASS ON THE LOVE out in the world in a way it should have happened originally, perhaps in time for the Holidays, and perhaps this time with a full chorus during the second half of the song.

Since in some ways you have been the inspiration for what hopefully will be the re-birth of PASS ON THE LOVE, I must offer my heartfelt thanks.

Another thought...I can't help but wonder how extraordinary it would be if at some point The Persuasions could perform the song in person on your campus. Things DO happen for a reason, do they not?

Don't hold back...

Yours truly,
George Cameron Grant

What a good idea.

He said "don't hold back" and so we didn't.

If you want to hear the Persuasions singing "Pass On the Love" go to www.passonthelove.org or come to Ida Green Theater next Thursday night.

The Persuasions **and** George Cameron Grant will be on the Austin College campus next Thursday, April 1.

Here's the plan for that day:

11:00am—The Persuasions and George Grant will be introduced and "interviewed" by John Williams and Wayne Crannell in the Craig Hall Recital Hall.

12:00pm—George Grant (who is an accomplished and widely-produced playwright as well as a songwriter) will be available to meet interested students in a "Carry-your-Tray" lunch in the Moseley Room.

7:30pm—The Persuasions will perform a concert in Ida Green Theater to celebrate the ACTivators Fifteenth Birthday
The Austin College Quartette will open the show

Come join us.

It's gonna be great.

We get to have such cool friends around here.

Until next time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Wondering if we need to get a Quinceanera gown for Sallie Roo,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain



**CONGRATULATIONS to the
2010-2011 Sallie Majors Religious Life Interns**

**RACHEL DODD
ASHLEIGH JOHNSON
AMY KALMBACH
HAILEY MALCOLM
PHILIP RAWLINGS
COURTNEY REYNOLDS
RACHEL WELLS**



**AUSTIN COLLEGE MODEL SEDER
DINNER TUESDAY MARCH 30, 2010
5:00PM IN MABEE HALL**

Every year Jews convene at Seder to recall their past, explain their present, and envision their futures. The Exodus from Egypt is retold as the foundational paradigm in Jewish history, and thus an integral part of the Christian Story. Jesus was celebrating a Passover Seder with his disciples the first Holy Week just before his death; thus the Passover Meal is closely related to Holy Communion, Mass, or Eucharist.

This year, we will host a **Model Seder Dinner** in Mabee Hall at 6:30pm on **Tuesday March 30**. All students are invited and welcome to attend. Students on meal contract who plan to attend the dinner are invited to sign up in the Dining Hall at any meal through lunch on Tuesday. Please register there if you plan to attend this service and feel free to contact John Williams (X2220; jwilliams@austincollege.edu) if you have questions. AC folks who are not on a meal contract are welcome to attend the dinner for no charge. Please reserve your place by e-mailing jwilliams@austincollege.edu

Austin College ACTivators

15

years of
passing on the love
1995-2010

The
Change
Begins with
Me

