

AColyte

Commencement 2017
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



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Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

jwilliams@austincollege.edu

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

March 25, 2017

4,451 miles from my daughter on her 21st birthday

Wandering

*A labyrinth is a symbolic journey . . .
but it is a map we can really walk on,
blurring the difference between map and world.*

— Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust

Everything is part of it.
--Tom Robbins, Still Life With Woodpecker

So we've got a Labyrinth now.

It's painted in Austin College colors on a big piece of canvas that we spread out on the floor of the Small Chapel from time to time. It will be out all this week.

I really like it.

For many years, many people, from many different religious traditions have used labyrinths to aid in their practices of meditation and spiritual reflection. There are all sorts of guides and metaphors and practices that different people use as they walk through labyrinths and think and pray. Basically, I think they're helpful with meditation because they give walkers something to focus on so they're not interrupted and distracted by all the usual noises and irritations and worries that clog up our lives.

Labyrinths are quiet, relaxing places to walk.

And think.

And pray (if you're into that).

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I've got a story about walking our Labyrinth on March 25.

But first I want to tell you about something that happened on campus on March 23.

Our Lowe Lectures on March 23 featured Dr. Paula Arai from Louisiana State University discussing the work of a Japanese artist named **Iwasaki Tsuneo**.

Here's a brief introduction to Iwasaki's work:

Japanese artist and scientist Iwasaki Tsuneo painted as an act of devotion (Iwasaki is his family name, followed by his given name, Tsuneo, according to Japanese custom). Deftly interlacing his fluency in the languages of Buddhism, science, and art, Iwasaki portrays resonances he discovered between scientific and Buddhist views of reality to convey that all beings are an integral part of an ever transforming and vast cosmos. Making use of characters from the Heart Sutra—a text prized for its pithy expression of the core Mahayana Buddhist principles of wisdom and compassion—he extended the devotional practice of copying scripture. Instead of separating the verses into vertical blocks, he shaped the characters into artistic imagery drawn from ephemeral beauties of nature, Buddhist cultural life, and microscopic and telescopic wonders.



– <http://crowcollection.org/exhibition/wisdom-of-compassion-the-art-science-of-iwasaki-tsuneo-1917-2002/>

Iwasaki was a Japanese World War II veteran and career biologist who became a painter after he retired.

The painting above shows the familiar double helix of DNA.

The gold strands of the double helix are made up by the Sanskrit words of the Mahayana Buddhist “Heart Sutra.”

The Heart Sutra is a piece of Buddhist scripture recited and repeated in devotional acts. Dr. Arai translates it as “Emptiness is form, form is emptiness.”

(That can lead to an interesting conversation about Buddhist epistemology. But not now.—Ed.)

Dr. Arai showed us paintings in which Iwasaki depicts everything from a hydrogen atom to a waterfall to the solar system with the Sanskrit text of the Heart Sutra as part of the image.

I think that's so cool.

Iwasaki looks at the world and sees (and depicts) a continuity that he believes is there even if it isn't always visible to everyone (kind of like Pokemon Go).

To my mind, it's a little like depicting huge or microscopic images that include or contain

- “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” or
- “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet” or
- “God so loved the world that He gave the only Son.”

It's a way of expressing some sort of connection between physical and spiritual truths.

I really like Iwasaki's art (and his brain). Dr. Arai gave me a copy of this Iwasaki painting:

It will be hanging in my office by the time the Fall Semester begins. Come see it and we can talk about Iwasaki.

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On March 25, several AC students and I met in the Small Chapel with **Micah Mahaney**. Micah graduated from Austin College in 1975. He has had a wonderful career as a therapist and, in that context (and probably also because he's a good Methodist) he has become a big proponent of labyrinths. Walking labyrinths can be a useful activity for people who are seeking to alleviate anxiety and remember and focus on the things that are most important to them.



In recent months, Micah has helped Austin College get our own Labyrinth (along with some crucial support from Rev. & Mrs. Peter Crouch). He found the right design and the right artist.

And, as I said above, on March 25 several students and I met with Micah to walk the AC Labyrinth together.

Micah talked to us for a few minutes and then we took off our shoes and entered our Labyrinth one by one. Eventually, there were eight of us walking the Labyrinth together.

*That (labyrinth)...became a world whose rules I lived by,
and I understood the moral of mazes:
sometimes you have to turn your back on your goal to get there,
sometimes you're farthest away when you're closest,
sometimes the only way is the long one.
After that careful walking and looking down, the stillness was deeply moving...
It was breathtaking to realize that in the labyrinth,
metaphors and meanings could be conveyed spatially.
That when you seem farthest from your destination
is when you suddenly arrive is a very pat truth in words,
but a profound one to find with your feet.
— Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust*

As I began walking the Labyrinth, I was remembering the paintings we had seen earlier in the week; the ones depicting the Heart Sutra as part of various images. That made me wonder whether there is a concise passage of scripture that is as foundational for me as the Heart Sutra was for Iwasaki Tsuneo.

I finally settled on

*You are a gracious God, and merciful,
Slow to anger,
And abounding in steadfast love.*

That phrase occurs seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some scholars say that it was first written in Exodus 34:6 while others 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. It’s the single oldest theological statement in the entire Bible.

I think that’s my Heart Sutra.

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That’s what I was thinking about as I entered the Labyrinth:

- The Heart Sutra in Iwasaki Tsuneo’s paintings,
- Grace
- Mercy, and
- Steadfast love

So I started walking.

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At different points as I walked, some people were walking toward me, while others were walking away from me. There was traffic on the Labyrinth. We all twisted and turned around, accommodating each other as we walked, but all kind of lost in our own thoughts.

I looked up and noticed AC Senior **Andrew Dudasko** walking away from me. I’m not sure why, but that made me think about **Jack Pierce**.

Jack died on campus in September.

He was my friend and I miss him.

His loss was a huge blow to the entire Roo Nation.

At his Memorial Service, Jack’s family was presented with the first-ever 50-Year Service Pin in the History of Austin College.

Read that again:

Jack Pierce served on the Austin College faculty for *50 years!*

He touched thousands of Roo lives.

We're building a new soccer field next year in Jack's honor (with lights!). It will be called the "Pierce Pitch." He'd like that.

I like that.

I miss Jack.

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Then I made a 180-degree turn on the Labyrinth.

As I was walking back in the other direction, I looked up and saw Senior **Willa Van Camp** walking away from me.

And I thought about **Don Rodgers**.

Don died in November. Another huge and sudden loss to Roo Nation. The outpouring of grief and affection from current students, recent alums, and faculty colleagues at Austin College and beyond was stunning.

Don was beloved, gracious, productive, wise, honest, generous, and frank. I hear his voice every time I start to worry that Kim Jong Un has done something threatening in North Korea. When I used to talk to him about North Korea and the sensationalist ways U.S. media talked about North Korea, Don would always remind me to get over myself and remember that the actions and postures of the North Korean government should be understood in the context of what they meant to the North Korean people. They were the audience. Not us. Not me.

He was right.

I think about Don a lot. I wish he was around so I could talk to him about school bonds, grant writing, and President Trump.

By this time, I was aware that seeing Andrew and Willa walking away from me in the Labyrinth had made me think of departed friends. It felt good to pause for a moment, with few distractions, and think about the two excellent men that we lost last Fall. It felt right to pause, remember, and appreciate.

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*A man craves ultimate truths.
Every mortal mind, I think, is that way.
But what is ultimate truth?
It's the end of the road,
where there is no more mystery, no more hope.
And no more questions to ask, since all the answers have been given.
But there is no such place.
The Universe is a labyrinth made of labyrinths.
Each leads to another.
— Stanisław Lem, Fiasco*

Just as I arrived in the center of the Labyrinth, two things happened more or less simultaneously.

First, the train of thought that led from

- seeing fellow walkers on the Labyrinth moving away from me
- to Jack Pierce
- to Don Rodgers

led me next to **Marjorie Hass**.

Although certainly without the same level of grief or tragedy, Dr. Hass is also moving away from us as this year comes to an end.

She will become the 20th President of Rhodes College. Rhodes is a good place that's about to get better. Good for them.

As I moved into the center of the Labyrinth, I was feeling a profound sense of loss.

Jack is gone.

Don is gone.

Dr. Hass is leaving.

And I/we will miss them all.

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When we started our inaugural walk through the brand new Austin College Labyrinth, Micah Mahaney turned on some recorded music.

It was peaceful, instrumental music. It was fine, but not particularly memorable for me.

But when I got to the space in the middle of the Labyrinth I noticed that the soundtrack had changed. As I became aware that I had been thinking about Jack and Dan and Marjorie and change and loss, I realized that the music had stopped.

In its place was the steady, consistent sound of waves on a beach.

I could hear one wave arrive.

And then the next one.

And the next one.

Consistent, comforting, peaceful.

Steadfast.

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Andrew and Willa (who, you will recall, were on the Labyrinth walking away from me) are graduating on Sunday.

When I saw them on the Labyrinth, I thought about how they are leaving and how much I will miss them. They have been Sallie Majors Interns in my office this year (along with **Katie Barber, Kailey Gray, Chelseamay Law, Alex Lux, and Crosby Palmer**). I'm gonna miss them all.

But Andrew and Willa weren't the only people with me on the Labyrinth that day.

Eric Drake, Rebecca Franklin, Deric McCurry, and Bailey Page were also walking with me. They will be Sallie Majors Interns next year (along with **Jake Davis, Emily Everts, and Zoe Garner**). And that's the point.

Jack Pierce came to Austin College in 1967.

Austin College had been around a long time before he got here.

Micah Mahaney was a freshman in 1971.

I was a freshman in 1980.

This year's graduates were freshmen in 2013.

And the Class of 2021 will arrive in August.

Like waves on the beach.

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Some big Austin College stories are coming to an end.

Others are undergoing some major plot twists.

And there are some big ones that haven't even started yet.

In the meantime, let's have a party.

Let's tell stories about departed or departing friends that make us smile.

Let's thank the people we should thank and hug the people we should hug (and forgive the people we should forgive).

Let's rejoice and be glad in this day.

Because we've all got a lot to rejoice and be glad about.

And there will be more.

Count on it.

Like waves on the beach.

Until September, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Getting Straightened Out In the Labyrinth,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain