

AColyte

Advent 2017

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



Wishing you a
MARSUPIAL CHRISTMAS
and a
HAPPY ROO YEAR!

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

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A Faculty Carol from Finals Breakfast (by Professor Mark Hebert)

To the tune of *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*

It's **time** to head back **to** your dorms and **toil** a-way the **night**!
And **we** all know that **sleep** will be the **tough**-est thing you'll **fight**!
Oh **why** can't Star-bucks **just** stay **o**-pen morn-ing, noon, and **night**?
Oh-oh **pil**-low I'll **not** see you to-**night**, ne-ver to-**night**.
Oh-oh **pil**-low I'll **not** see you to-**night**.

Bi-**o**-logy and **Chem**-is-try are **going** to drive me **mad**!
And **are** they really **need**-ed for a **pre**-med un-der-grad?
And **what's** wrong with a "**C**"? A **C's** not **real**-ly **all** that bad!
O-oh **please**, please just **mail** my grades to **Chad**! Or Tri-ni-**dad**!
Just don't **send** them to my **dear** old mom and **dad**!

Sung as chant on last note:

Or grandma and grandad.

Or mom and mom.

Or dad and dad.

Or any other caregiver we forgot to include but you may have **had**.

But **this** is all just **fool**-ish-ness, we **know** that grades are **bull**!
And **e**-ven if you **fail** a class your **life** can still be **full**!
Just **trans**-fer where the **mas**-cot's not some **damn** mar-su-pi-**al**!
A-nd **who** chose the **name** of Katie **Roo**? [Spoken: "**Katie Roo**?"]
Did some **three**-year old find **that** name at the **zoo**?

Our **stu**-dents, staff, and **fa**-cul-ty, are **one** big happy **crew**
But **af**-ter 14 **weeks** we're sick of **you** and you and **you**!
And **we** know that you **feel** the **same** 'bout us, oh yes we **do**!
So it's **time**, for us **all** to say a-**dieu**! A-dieu! A-dieu!
Have a **safe** trip home but **don't** come back too **soon**!

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

1987, 2017, and points in between
Comfortably Ensnared Behind a Guitar

Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?
--Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"
by Tennessee Williams

*All around the world, in every little town
Every day is heard a precious little sound
And every mother kind and every father proud
Looks down in awe to find another chance allowed.*
--Steve Earle, "Nothing But a Child"

I got to preach at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton on December 3.

It's a great Church with lots of Austin College ties and I saw a lot of old friends when I was there. I had a great time, but one moment from the service kind of hung me up a little.

One of the prayers in the service – the Prayer of Confession – included the words,

*We have not searched for signs of your love in the world,
or trusted good news to be good.*

Wow.

That's a pretty serious thing to confess.

The words are from a pretty typical and widely-used Presbyterian prayer.

Presbyterians confess a lot. We think prayers of confession – admitting and acknowledging our failure to be the people we claim to be, the people we think we are called to be – are an important part of public worship.

And we don't just confess for ourselves, we say these prayers of confession on behalf of the whole world.

I think congregational prayers of confession are useful, honest, and theologically responsible. It's important for us all – smart, able, and powerful as we are – to remember the difference between who we are and who we might be.

But that's not what I'm writing to you about.

I'm writing this because saying the words, "we have not...trusted good news to be good" made me sad.

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It's the waning days of 2017.

I'm fairly literate and moderately aware of my surroundings.

So I'm not sure how much I trust *any* news right now.

In the context of my life in the larger community, beyond my house and the Austin College campus, I feel as though I'm being "spun" or flat-out lied to most of the time.

I know that Facebook only shows me what it thinks I want to see.

It's pretty clear that CNN wants me to be anxious all the time and Fox News and MSNBC want me to blame my anxieties on other people.

I try to identify and access responsible and trustworthy news sources, but there are so many options that I always tend to gravitate toward sources that confirm my biases and tell me what I want to hear.

I'm suspicious.

That probably means I'm smart.

But sometimes that makes me sad.

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Brace yourself—
Here comes an abrupt jump:

In 1987, I heard a suspicious, disillusioned, and disappointed retiring minister speak to a church meeting.

He was done....burned out.

He was bitter.

He was tired of being ignored.

And he told the rest of us that we'd better get our stuff together before it was too late.

He was tired of "fighting the good fight" and he was essentially giving up and throwing in the towel.

I thought of him when we confessed to not having trusted "good news to be good."

He couldn't get past his disappointment and disillusionment.

He was clearly stuck there.

He no longer trusted "good news" to be good.

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I wrote this song in the few days after I heard him.

*I know an old man
Who gave his life to Jesus a long time ago.
Now he's tired and he's hard,
He's angry and scarred
By the things that he knows.*

I get that.

I know several versions of that guy.

Occasionally I might even be that guy.

You might also know versions of that guy.

*'Cause it's a cold world
And there ain't no sign of Jesus in the deep, dark night*

30 years ago, I thought poor grammar
might be a sign of authentic songwriting.

*The rich just get richer,
And the poor just seem to give up the fight.*

Remember, this disillusioned and disappointed preacher was sharing his concerns in 1987.

Some things never seem to change.

It wasn't new in 1987 either.
Check out Amos 5 in the Bible.

*There was a time
He was gonna change the world with his pure heart
But the red tape strangled him
The setbacks mangled him
And tore him apart.
And now in his mind
That was all wasted time
'Cause people keep just looking out for themselves
The world let him down
Now he's convinced we're headed for Hell.*

Again, that was 30 years ago.

I heard this guy.

I understood many of his grievances.

I agreed with lots of his economic, political, and theological opinions.

But I was fresh out of seminary.

At least on some good days I was probably ready to change the world with *my* pure heart.

And he wasn't helping.

I retreated to my safe place.

*But it'll be alright.
The light will drive the darkness away.
It'll be alright.
The truth is gonna have its day.*

That's essentially an amalgam of the basic Christian optimism that is the product of my upbringing as a white male Presbyterian who got to attend Austin College.

I understand a lot more about privilege than I did then.

But I believed all that.

And, dammit, I still do.

*And, though violence and pain
Seem to be the refrain
When you try to give a damn for what's right,*

Of course, that whole "what's right" concept is problematic.
Who decides "what's right?"
How do they/we know?
I've got some ideas about that.
I'm a lot more inclined to ascribe authority to what "we" decide is right
than what "I" decide is right,
or what I read in some book that somebody else told me is uniquely authoritative.
But I think the motivation to "try to give a damn for what's right" is a good motivation—
particularly if it leads us to think about more than just ourselves
and our immediate comfort.

*And, though violence and pain
Seem to be the refrain
When you try to give a damn for what's right,
It's much too soon to give up the fight
It's gonna be alright.*

That old man made me a little sad.

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But he also irritated me.

I'm a young man

30 years ago, I **was** a young man.

*I'm a young man,
I'm wet behind the ears and I've got stars in my eyes
And often I'm told
That, when I start to grow old,
I'll see where the truth really lies*

I really used to hate that.

Don't ever let anybody (including me) suggest to you that your idealism is cute and naïve, but you'll learn better when you're out there in the "real world."

Learn the lessons that are there to be learned. Build on your negative and positive experiences.

But keep a healthy idealistic impatience. We need that from you.

We've already got enough cynics.

*But I don't intend
To ever give in*

I used to get chastised for splitting infinitives like "to ever give in"
(technically "ever to give in"
would be the grammatically proper way to render that phrase,
not "to ever give in").

I'm still not sure what the big deal is with splitting infinitives.
I don't understand what problem that rule is attempting to solve or avoid.
So--years ago--I pledged to unapologetically continue to brazenly split infinitives.
(That's right, Status Quo: I plan to consistently be *that* dangerous.)

*But I don't intend
To ever give in
Just because the night is hard and it's long.
The sun's gonna come*

Or it could be "the Son's gonna come" if you Christians want to turn this into an Advent song.

Either way will work.

*The sun's gonna come
And I intend to stand in the dawn.*

*It'll be alright.
The light will drive the darkness away.
It'll be alright.*

*The truth is gonna have its day.
And, though violence and pain
Seem to be the refrain
When you try to give a damn for what's right
It's much too soon to give up the fight
It's gonna be alright.*

*And I still believe
There's a fire that burns in the night
I still believe
That the darkness won't swallow the light*

Austin College Student Athletes,
Austin College Thinking Green,
AC Unplugged,
Austin College Greek organizations,
Black Expressions,
other committed students and student groups,
and especially the **Austin College Service Station Board** all worked hard in our HELPING HARVEY'S HEROES Hurricane Relief efforts this Fall to raise **\$6433.66** for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and the Houston Food Bank.

They spent all kinds of time and creative energy to raise money to help people they will never meet.

I still believe.

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The song goes on:

*She's just a baby.
Her Mama and her Daddy are just babies themselves.
She laughs and she sings
And teaches me things
I've learned from nobody else.*

That verse was originally written about my niece who was born in July of 1987.

Thirty years later, she's turning out great. The world is better because she's here.

Meanwhile, **Baby Abigail** was born last Friday.

Her Mama and her Daddy are two of my favorite AC alums.

My list of favorite AC alums is really long, but they are definitely on it.

What I wrote about my niece in 1987 is just as true about Abigail in 2017.

*And now it's her world,
So we don't have a choice,
We've got to keep up the fight.
The light's in her eyes.
It's pure and it's warm and it's bright.*

*And it'll be alright
The light will drive the darkness away.
It'll be alright.
The truth is gonna have its day.
...it's much too soon to give up the fight.
It's gonna be alright.*

I really believe that it'll be alright.

I'm confident that we all have gifts and skills and ideas
that we can employ together and individually
to help ensure that it'll be alright.

This is the season when people from my tribe really geek out waiting for the arrival of some baby who somehow keeps showing up every year.

We get excited every time.

We geek out because we need to be reminded that it'll be alright.

We geek out because we think that somehow we have a little bit of opportunity and responsibility to help ensure that it'll be alright.

Years ago, former AC First Gentleman **Larry Hass** told me that the most common magic trick in the world happens every time any parent tells any child "It's going to be alright."

That magic trick works because those parents know that it's much too soon to give up the fight.

They're right.

It's still much too soon to give up the fight.

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I've told this story for years.

I'm gonna tell it again.

Stick with me.

- Charles was six years old.
- Some Austin College Service Station students invited him to write a letter to Santa.
- He asked Santa for a “Mocking Troll Car.”
- Charles was just learning to read and write.
- He had not read nor written nearly as many words as he had heard and spoken.
- He used the gifts to which he had access.
- He wrote his letter.
- It didn’t take much for some of Santa’s helpers to get from “mocking troll” to “moe-king troll.”
- And from “moe-king troll” to “remote control.”

Charles used his gifts to write to Santa.

His friends used their gifts to decipher his letter.

He got a remote control car for Christmas.

That’s part of the whole truth.

It often takes work and we usually need help.

But sometimes good news is just good news.

It’s much too soon to give up the fight.

Until next year, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Wondering Why Anyone Would Choose Not to Believe in Santa Claus,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

