

AColyte

Good Friday 2018
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



“The road goes on forever and the party
never ends” (?)



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

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CONGRATULATIONS

to the 2018-19 Sallie Majors Religious Life Interns

Stephanie Austin

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Hannah Eason

Joshua Green

Will Higgins

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Amber Ingrum

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Texas in 2018
Almost to the
First Sunday
After the first full moon
After the Vernal Equinox

We will be ready.
--President Steven O'Day
Inaugural Address

*With his gun, with his head held high,
he told me not to cry
Oh, my daddy said shoot.*

Oh, my daddy said shoot
With his right hand on his rifle
He swore it on the Bible
My daddy said shoot.
Oh, my daddy said shoot
He held it in his arms
And he taught me to be strong
He told me when he's gone
Here's what you do
When trouble comes to town
And men like me come around
Oh, my daddy said shoot.
Oh, my daddy said shoot
--Beyoncé,
"Daddy Lessons"

Somewhat lamely, the image runs
Of a brass-buttoned Jesus firing guns.
--Ambrose Bierce,
"Arma Virumque"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
--Mark 15:34b
(and Psalm 22:1)

...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks...
--Isaiah 2:4

My brain is pretty crowded this week.

Bear with me.

Lots of stuff keeps bubbling up.

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Last Friday, we inaugurated President O'Day.

It was a great day, complete with

- Some members of the Sherman High School Marching Band,
- shrimp tacos,
- the Austin College Scholarship Conference,
- and an inauguration service that included
 - distinguished guests from other colleges and universities;

- o world premieres of a poem by Texas Poet Laureate (and AC alumna) Carmen Tafolla and
- o a choral piece written by former AC First Lady Anna Laura Page and performed by the Austin College A Cappella Choir;
- o and a rich and diverse group of current students, faculty, staff members, alumni, Board members, Presbyterian Church dignitaries, and representatives of the Texoma community.

President O'Day spoke of "looking to the future with confidence" and I came away from the whole day filled with optimism as Austin College moves into this new era.

As I said to several people on Friday (and say often around here):

It's good to be us.

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Then Saturday came.

That was the day that millions of people all over the U.S. participated in activities related to the "March for Our Lives" campaign.

Conversations about guns have been all over our culture all week.

I actually spent most of Saturday driving to Denton and back to attend the funeral of an old friend, mentor, and role model.

As I drove to Denton alone, sat by myself through a 100-minute service, and drove back to Sherman alone, I found myself thinking a lot.

About guns.

And about guns in songs.

And about guns in songs I like to sing and have been singing for years.

I've been playing guitar and singing songs for 40 years. And I seem to sing about guns a lot.

I don't think I'm ashamed of that.

I've sung lines like this for years:

*She stepped out in the alley with a single-shot .410
The road goes on forever and the party never ends.
--Robert Earl Keen
"The Road Goes on Forever"*

*He met a woman sworn to another
And, in a rage, the other man
Shot him down with a long, black rifle;
Shot him down, and away he ran.
--The Kingston Trio
"Long Black Rifle"*

*"Come down, come down Red Molly," called Sargent McQuade.
"For they've taken young James Aidee for Armed Robbery.
Shotgun blast hit his chest, left nothing inside.
Oh, come down, Red Molly, to his dying bedside."
--Richard Thompson
"1952 Vincent Black Lightning"*

*I drew my pistol from my belt
And shot them graveyard dead.
--Shawn Mullins
"Cold Black Heart"*

*They kissed each other,
They turned around and
Saw me standing in the aisle.
Lord, I did not say much,
I just stood there watching
As that .45 told them goodbye.
--Lyle Lovett
"L.A. County"*

*Then he cocked both his pistols,
And he spit in the dirt,
And walked out in the street.
--Steve Earle
"Tom Ames' Prayer"*

*So I shot 'em down, one by one
And left them on the rails
I only use my gun whenever kindness fails.
--Robert Earl Keen
"Whenever Kindness Fails"*

Guns even show up in songs I've written with my friend and fellow AC alum Bain Ennis.

*I've seen the way the night looks
From both ends of the barrel of a gun*

*I'm on this federal train
Taking me to hang
For the things that I have done
Because I sing, sing, sing
And it'll be the death of me
For the songs that I have sung
To the music of my pistols
They sing a haunting melody
Lord, I love it so.
It's the only life I know
Train, train, you're gonna be the death of me*

I love those songs.

They're fun to play and I like the stories they tell.

But I don't love guns.

I don't own guns (although I have many friends who do).

I think it would be better if guns were less prevalent to our individual lives and our life together than they currently are.

But I love those songs.

Some of them are melodramatic, "love gone bad" stories in which guns provide decisiveness and finality. Even as I sing them, I don't think of myself as advocating the shooting of "lawmen" (Road Goes on Forever), "robbers" (1952 Vincent), or unfaithful lovers and/or their partners (Long Black Rifle, Cold Black Heart, L.A. County).

They're just good songs. And the guns help tell the story.

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I identify with some of the characters in these songs:

*Then he cocked both his pistols, spit in the dirt,
And walked out in the street.
--Steve Earle
"Tom Ames' Prayer"*

That character is an outlaw who finds himself in a bad situation ("trapped in an alley in Abilene with all but four shells spent"). In his desperation, he decides to pray. The prayer doesn't really go smoothly and he ends up concluding,

“who in the hell am I talking to? There ain’t no one here but me”.

Which leads to the last line in the song:

Then he cocked both his pistols, and he spit in the dirt, and walked out in the street.

I don’t have pistols to cock—and I don’t plan to get any—but I like the notion that sometimes you’ve just got to gather your resources and go face whatever’s out there.

I’ve felt like that.

You may well have felt like that too.

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*So I shot ‘em down, one by one
And left them along the rails
I only use my gun whenever kindness fails.
-Robert Earl Keen
“Whenever Kindness Fails”*

“Whenever Kindness Fails” is a troubling, gruesome little ditty that I enjoy singing from time to time.

*I crossed the desert in a dining car
In the spring of ninety-one
I met some people drinking at the bar.
They were laughing, having fun.
I told ‘em that I hadn’t heard the joke
That was so hilarious.
They said that I was just a dumb cowpoke.
I didn’t want to make a fuss
So I shot ‘em down, one by one,
And left them along the rails
I only use my gun whenever kindness fails.*

On the one hand, I can absolutely sympathize with that character who doesn’t appreciate being mocked and disrespected based on his appearance or perceived cultural background.

I’m a Texan who sounds like a Texan and I’ve been in situations outside of Texas where people made assumptions about my politics, education, or intelligence based primarily on their knowledge of my home state and my drawl.

I typically don't react well in those situations.

And this fictitious character's use of a fictitious gun to shoot down fictitious people who belittle him based on his appearance and manner is cathartically satisfying for me.

ca·thar·sis (kə 'THärsəs)

noun

the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions

--ED

I know the difference between actually shooting people who piss you off and fictitiously shooting them in the context of a song (or a video game).

And occasionally I like singing about that.

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On the other hand,

From another perspective, "Whenever Kindness Fails" tells a ghastly story about a capricious act of incredible arrogance and hubris and violence.

As I said above, there are no real consequences in the made-up story the song tells.

But I know true stories about people whose lives have been touched by acts of incredible arrogance, hubris, and violence perpetrated by somebody who had a gun.

There are multiple people in the Austin College community whose real lives have been changed forever by the real actions of a real person with a real gun; actions which have resulted in the death of individuals deeply loved by some members Roo Nation.

That isn't funny.

It's not clever.

It's not noble.

It's not romantic.

It's not cathartic.

It's not political.

It's tragic, and awful, and excruciating.

... So that's the kind of stuff I was thinking about last Friday and Saturday.

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This week has been different.

Sunday will be the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox.

That means it will be Easter.

Unlike Christmas, which falls on the same calendar day every year, Easter jumps around all over the Spring calendar.

The first official mention of December 25 as a holiday honoring Jesus' birthday appears in an early Roman calendar from 336.

In 325CE the Council of Nicaea established that Easter would be held on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox. From that point forward, the Easter date depended on the ecclesiastical approximation of March 21 for the vernal equinox. --TimeAndDate.com

Notice the similarities between the timing of these significant annual Christian events and ancient festivals relating to the Winter Solstice (December 21) and the Vernal Equinox (March 20).

Pretty convenient, wouldn't you say?.

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Christians like me geek out in some particular and curious ways during this week before the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox.

Last Sunday, lots of us went to church, waved palm branches, and talked about how Jesus was a king, but not like any other king anyone knows/knew about.

On Thursday, many of us went to church and talked about how, in the right context, eating and drinking and washing can be profoundly sacred activities.

That means today is Good Friday.

This day, always the Friday before Easter, is the day each year when Christians pay particular attention to the death of Jesus.

In the story that Christians use to guide our lives (the lens through which the world come into focus for us) Jesus—the king whose arrival caused us to wave palm branches and shout praises last Sunday—gets executed.

Killed. Brutally.

Tonight, many of us will attend services in which someone will read these words from Mark 15:33-34

33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

34 At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice,

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We read that every year.

While he's hanging on a cross after having been unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1. That's interesting because, even at this unimaginably difficult point in his life, Jesus looks to the resources of his tradition to find words to express and interpret his experience.

And what he's saying is: "Where's God at this awful time?"

He's feeling completely separated and abandoned; cut off from all he counted on; absolutely and entirely alone.

Kind of like somebody hiding in a closet at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School while a young man is shooting other students with an assault rifle.

Or like a gunshot victim who is slowly bleeding to death on the pavement where they had been enjoying a country music concert only minutes before.

Or like someone learning that a family member had been shot and killed at church.

Abandoned.

Separated.

Destroyed.

Alone.

According to the Christian narrative, Jesus will be dead before morning.

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Years ago, I had a great conversation in the Kangaroo Coffee Company with a Muslim friend who very earnestly and respectfully asked me, "How can you Christians worship a God who *dies*?"

I remember that story, and that friend, every year on Good Friday.

The reason is because Christians recognize that the world where we wake up every morning is a world filled with suffering, disease, violence, and death.

The reason is because the lens through which we view the world enables us to focus on that suffering, disease, violence, and death; to see it and not ignore it.

The reason is because we know we're going to die. And so is everyone we love.

The reason is because the story of the death of Jesus enables us to recognize that we will never face any degree of suffering, grief, or perceived abandonment that is truly beyond the presence and experience of God.

But the main reason is because this week's story doesn't end on Friday.

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The Council of Nicea didn't go to great pains to tell the Church that Jesus died on the first Friday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

They didn't want to ignore Good Friday.

But that wasn't their primary focus.

They wanted to encourage and enable the church to celebrate Easter regularly and carefully and intentionally.

The same narrative that includes the suffering and death of Jesus also includes a series of curious suggestions that Jesus didn't stay dead.

Throughout history, lots of people have offered a great variety of interpretations of those stories.

Some simply dismiss them as wishful thinking.

Some build their entire lives around the insistence that those stories are factually and demonstrably true.

And many of us find some kind of comfort in their suggestion that even though violence and suffering and grieving and abandonment and death are clearly part of the truth about the real world, they're not the whole truth.

Because of those Easter stories, many of us do our best to live among violence and suffering and grieving and abandonment and death by striving to be part of a bigger story—a story that includes peace and healing and comfort and attention and life.

We decide and endeavor to live in a world where Easter is true.

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I wrote a song in 1993 after the sudden and tragic death of Austin College Student Affairs Vice President Bob Bradshaw.

I think about him, and about that song, a lot this time of year.

*You wonder just which promises will keep.
The farmers know to wait before they reap.
The smartest shamans dance until it rains.
And the story never ends with just the pain.*

It's about patience.

And hope.

And commitment.

And faith.

And it's the truth.

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As we move into the O'Day years at Austin College, let's decide—hell, let's *prove*—that the whole truth includes more than violence and suffering and grieving and abandonment and death.

In all our magnificent diversity, together we can do that.

Why strive for anything less?

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Planning more conversations on campus about guns later this Spring,
And Still Convinced that It's Good to Be Us,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain