

# AColyte

May 1, 2020

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

## The PRESENCE



## of the ABSENCE

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Among the Empty Chairs  
In the Empty Chapel  
And Feeling Okay  
May 1, 2020

*The words go nice together.*  
--Max Stalling,  
"The Beatles and the Thunder"

I've been thinking about my friend **Bain Ennis** this week.

Here we are at my house in 2017:

By then, Bain and I had been playing guitar and writing songs together for about 35 years. We wrote our first song, "One More Texas Sunrise," in Room 322 of Baker Hall in 1982. And we've written a couple more songs since that photo was taken (the most recent of which is about a Belgian divorcee and includes a Choctaw reference).



He will always be a better guitar player than I, but we both love words.

As I said, we've been playing guitar together and writing songs for a long time.



That photo was taken at my parents' house in 1983. Apparently my brother was still learning about shirts and shoes at that point (he's doing much better now).

I think we wrote a song called "Keeper of the Flame" that day.

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Somewhere around the time that second photo was taken, Bain

recommended a book to me called Billy Phelan's Greatest Game. That book is the second of a trilogy of novels by William Kennedy about Albany, New York in the 1930s (the others are Legs and Ironweed). They're all great books and I recommend them, but that's not what I want to talk about now.

When Bain first mentioned that book to me, he read me one sentence that he liked and (correctly) thought I would like as well:

*...for I know how it is to live  
in the inescapable  
presence of the absence  
of the father.*

--William Kennedy,  
Billy Phelan's Greatest Game (1978)

Our Dads were fine in 1983 (and still are).

But Bain and I liked that phrase, those words, that concept:

“the presence of the absence.”

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Back in the B.C. era (“Before Coronavirus”), we here at Austin College had intended to dedicate the renovated spaces in Wynne Chapel on Monday April 27.

President O’Day and I—along with many of our colleagues and students—had worked hard to put together an appropriate program. We were excited about having the chance to gather as a community, honor the donors who made the project possible, and use and celebrate those new spaces.

Instead, I spent last Monday morning in the Chapel with President and Mrs. O’Day as they filmed their weekly “Postcard from Austin College” in the beautiful, but extremely empty, Clifford Grum Sanctuary.

(You can see their Postcard here: [https://youtu.be/mzjj2G\\_0LHw](https://youtu.be/mzjj2G_0LHw))



That’s when I took this photo.

As I stood there on the sanctuary stage, I thought about that line from Billy Phelan's Greatest Game. Looking out on those empty chairs, I was acutely aware of the presence of the absence of students, colleagues, and community members.

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*Everything is everything  
But you're missing*  
--Bruce Springsteen

[Here comes one of those abrupt jumps to the Bible.—ED]

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts includes a description of the birth and development of the early Church.

It's a familiar chapter, but when I read it this week one phrase from verse 46 got my attention in a way that it never had before.

*...they broke bread at home...*  
--Acts 2:46

That's what we've been doing.

Literally.

Every Sunday night, we have continued to have Austin College Communion services. Since Spring Break, they've been on Zoom.

We have had good participation from students, faculty, staff, and alumni (and a couple dogs). Many of the participants have obtained and used their own bread and wine as we have shared the Lord's Supper virtually together.

We've been "breaking bread at home" – intentionally participating in a ritual that enables us to remember that our particular stories take place in the context of a larger common narrative.

I think that's a big deal.

And many more of us are "breaking bread at home" in other ways as we participate intentionally in other activities that remind us of our common story.

Fraternities and sororities are meeting on Zoom.

The Service Station Board is facilitating service opportunities that can

- a. be done from home; and
2. benefit other who are having a hard time.

Sports teams are meeting together online.

We're all continuing to do things, individually and intentionally, that contribute to our common life.

This pandemic has not caused us to cease to be who we are.

We're "breaking bread at home".

The presence of your absence has not completely shut down our life together.

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In fact, it's *good* that you're not here (on campus – where I am as I write this).

I find myself appreciating the presence of your absence.

There's a dangerous new disease among us.

Nobody wants to catch it.

And we know that there are certain of our friends and neighbors who are especially vulnerable to the novel coronavirus – people for whom the virus could be deadly.

We don't want to get sick.

And we certainly don't want to make them sick.

We know we can make it less likely that our vulnerable neighbors will get COVID-19.

We *know* there are things we can do.

So we're staying home.

We're going to a lot of trouble, and encountering a great deal of inconvenience, to protect others.

That's exactly what we should be doing.

That's how gifted people act.

It's hard.

So?

Let's keep doing this hard thing.

Thank you for staying home (even if "home" is on the AC campus).

The Presence of Your Absence means a lot.

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So, as I said, above, I thought about the "presence of the absence" line as I stood on the Chapel stage on Monday and photographed those empty chairs.

When I got home I decided to get out my ladder and climb to the top of my bookshelf and retrieve my copy of Billy Phelan's Greatest Game.

I wanted to find the "presence of the absence" line and quote it accurately in this *AColyte*. But I had no recollection of where it was in the book. So I just started at the beginning and thumbed my way through.

Fortunately, the line appears very early in the book (on page 7).

Even more fortunately, before I found the line I was looking for, I came across this passage on page 2:

*Some [people] moved through the daily sludge of their lives and then, with a stroke, cut away the sludge and transformed themselves.*

*Yet what they became was not the result of a sudden act, but the culmination of all they had ever done; a triumph for self-development, the end of something general, the beginning of something specific.*

**[sludge**  
/sleɪ/  
*noun*

1. thick, soft, wet mud or a similar viscous mixture of liquid and solid components,
2. especially the product of an industrial or refining process.]

I like that language as well.

That's where we are now – individually and collectively.

There's a lot going on in those two sentences. And they make me think about this pandemic.

Maybe COVID-19, and the social distancing, and the frustrations of remote life are part of the sludge that we need to cut away. Maybe we need to look beyond our current, uncomfortable, radically-limited circumstances and focus our attention to the place to which we are going. Maybe we need to keep our eyes on the prize and see survivors looking back at us from the mirror and not victims.

Or maybe the virus and the and the lock-downs have helped us cut away the sludge. Maybe this time of anxiety and isolation has helped us re-focus and remember and concentrate on the things that matter most to us.

Either way, it's clear to me that in the coming days and weeks and months we all have the opportunity to “transform ourselves.”

I don't think any of us can choose to go back. There's not really a “back” for us to go to.

Everything is different now.

[A line from a good Don Henley song—ED.]

Trying to go back, to completely recreate a situation that is no longer feasible, will lead to disappointment and frustration.

We can't go back.

But we can “cut away the sludge” – we can overcome the external forces that are impeding our progress – and “transform ourselves.”

We can choose to go forward into a new situation, with the confidence and faith that— even if we don't completely know where we're going— we do know who we are.

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Many of us in Student Affairs will have a meeting next week to discuss details and contingencies related to the Opening of School next Fall. We don't know — we *can't* know — exactly what that will look like. There are all sorts of variables that will affect the details.

We know we're gonna need to “transform ourselves.”

But we also know that we will still be Austin College--#ROONation.

What we can — what we will — become, will not be the “result of a sudden act.”

It will be the “culmination of all we have ever done.”

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At this time of uncertainty and anxiety, we will all do well to remember all the things that made us want to be part of this community in the first place.

Those things are still here.

The Austin College Mission Statement lists seven values, seven things to which are committed as an institution:

- Personal Growth
- Justice
- Community
- Service
- Academic Excellence
- Intellectual and Personal integrity
- Community Life

“**Personal Growth**” is why your professors know your name and pay attention to you.

“Justice” is why we all are taking steps to protect our most vulnerable neighbors during this dangerous time.



**“Community”** is why somebody from Student Affairs called every single AC student on the phone the week after Spring Break. We wanted to be sure everyone was okay.

**“Service”** is why AC Alums are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19 all over the world. And it’s why the Service Station Board has developed and disseminated “No-Sew” mask instructions that enable every interested AC student to produce virus masks and share them in their particular communities.

**“Academic Excellence”** is why your professors all know more about Zoom now than they ever expected to.

**“Intellectual and Personal Integrity”** is why AC students are all still getting grades this semester, even though things are weird and uncertain. We made a promise to take you seriously. And we mean to keep that promise.

**“Community Life”** is why we’re continuing our rituals. It’s why we will mark the end of the Academic Year with a Baccalaureate Service. It’s why we will publicize Honors and Awards like we do every Spring. It’s why we will have an in-person Commencement Service for the Class of 2020.

Personal Growth  
Justice  
Community  
Service  
Academic Excellence  
Intellectual and Personal integrity  
Community Life

That’s still us.

And that’s who we will continue to be.

It’s a tough time right now.

Most of our lives – and the life of Austin College – were easier and less stressful last February.

But we can’t go back.

I don’t think we should want to go back.

Let's go forward together.

Let's cherish and maintain the relationships and rituals that remind us of our common story.

Let's help each other cut away the sludge and transform ourselves.

The world needs us to be who we are.

*Further on up the road  
Further on up the road  
Where the way is dark and the night is cold  
One sunny morning we'll rise I know  
And I'll meet you further on up the road.  
--Bruce Springsteen*

I'll meet you further on up the road.

Let's write some new songs on the way.

Until Next Time, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Trying to Remember to Wear My Mask  
And to Be Grateful When I See Others Wearing Theirs,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain