

# AColyte

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



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## WHAT IS THE *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2021-22 school year.

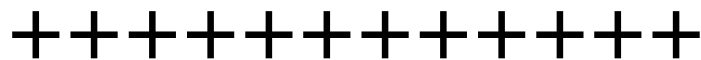
This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian.

That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "AColyte" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.



### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Wynne Chapel

Finals Week

The Week After the Jewish Students Association Chanukah Luncheon and  
The Austin College Service of Lessons and Carols

*Disagreements? Work 'em out.*

--Paul Simon, "Old"

*You're doing it wrong – dissecting the bird*

*Trying to find the song.*

--John Craigie, "Dissect the Bird"

My mind is all over the place this week.

You'll probably see a lot from me in the next few days.

Let's start with this:

I've long thought that one of the reasons I have ended up with two History degrees in my life (including one from Austin College) is that I grew up in the same city (Ft. Worth) as all four of my grandparents.

In some way that I can't fully explain but that I somehow think is true, History was always close enough to reach out, hug me, and tell me stories.

I'm grateful for that part of my life.

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When I was a very young boy, I called my mother's parents "Mamaw" and "Granddaddy." I don't think that was particularly unusual for a kid in Texas in the early 1960s.

But then my younger brother came along in 1965 and everything changed.

He was a cute little scamp and everybody loved him (including me most of the time). He got lots of attention.

But something really strange happened as he grew and began to talk.

I began to notice that he did not use the proper terminology when talking to or about our common grandparents.

I thought everybody knew that they were "Mamaw" and "Granddaddy."

But my brother soon began calling our grandmother "Honey" (probably because that's what she often called him).

And he called our grandfather "Pee Pie." I think that's because, when our grandfather would play Peek-a-Boo with him, he would always cover his eyes and say "Pee Pie" instead of "Peek-a-Boo."

That was somewhat troubling.

My brother didn't use the right words.

I had to think about that.

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On Tuesday November 16, the Austin College Muslim Students Association hosted an Interfaith Dinner in the Clifford J. Grum Sanctuary in Wynne Chapel.

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My brother and I had very similar experiences and relationships with our common grandparents. They clearly loved us both very much and we were able to experience that love in a variety of ways over many years.

But our experiences were not identical.

For all kinds of reasons, we didn't experience or interact with our grandparents in *exactly* the same way.

So it also follows that we used unique language to describe and enact our relationship with them.

Our grandparents were the same source of abiding, unconditional love for both of us.

But even though the source was the same, we used different words and categories to articulate our understanding of, and response to, that love.

More about that later.

But first let's consider some music.

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A few months ago, AC alum, devoted educator, goofy father, and guitar badass **Cody Pruitt** ('05) turned me on to a singer-songwriter named **John Craigie**.

Cody's got great taste and he was right: I really like John Craigie.

Craigie has a really conversational lyrical style, I like his music, and he produces some really good, tight individual lines like:

*When the Apocalypse is over, I hope you like your job.*

*Do yourself a favor, don't go looking at the pictures on my phone.*

*I almost stole some weed from Todd Snider  
Everybody calm down, I said "almost."*

*No rain, no rose.*

Check him out if you're interested in some fresh, current, often funny folk music. Don't get hung up on the PG-13 language and marijuana references, he's a great writer.

John Craigie has a song called "Banjo Renews" that has been on my mind a lot in the last couple weeks as we're thinking about and living out our religious diversity here at this little Church-Related college on the Texas plains.

Check it out:

<https://youtu.be/QFu3QTN0Gt4>

*The rain's been making my woodstove hiss  
There's a hole in the ceiling, there's a hole in the ceiling that I can't fix*

The character in the song seems to be a little bit frustrated because he can't fix the hole in his ceiling and the rain is coming in. I think perhaps this might be a metaphor for the various irritations and inconveniences that we all face—irritations and inconveniences that have been particularly acute in our lives in the last couple years.

*I've been tripping on my fever, someone's casting spells on me  
Someone's casting spells on me and I'm getting healed*

Suddenly, he's less frustrated about the leaky roof.

Things are looking up.

I wonder why.

*And I call all the angels and I tell 'em that I'm sorry, you know  
Life comes from every angle, when you let go of your worries  
Oh darling let go*

Letting go of your worries seems like a useful strategy if it's storming outside and you can't fix the hole in your ceiling.

One wonders if it works as well for facing all the major and minor consequences of a damn pandemic.

Then, a little later, we get:

*...I've been catching all the drips in a pot  
I'm boiling up the rain now,  
I'm boiling up the rain and I'm making tea*

There's something really cool about that image of a collecting the rainwater that drips in through your leaky roof and using it to make tea.

Now watch what he does next:

*God came to me in a vision as I drank*

Sounds like that was some pretty good tea.

*My god was the fire,  
my god was the storm outside  
My god was my dinner,  
my god was my banjo  
My god was the highway,  
my god was my Astro van  
My god was my audience,  
my god was your laughter  
My god was your soul,  
my god was our soul  
Screaming down from the stars*

I actually think I might know what's going here.

Rather than fretting and resenting the unfixable hole in the roof, the character changes his perspective. He suddenly appreciates and feels deeply connected to all the other parts of the story; to the fire, the storm, his dinner, his banjo, the highway, his van, his audience, their laughter, and the soul of whoever is listening to the song. They all help him get beyond his immediate irritation about the leaky roof.

It's a really cool verse as the character describes emerging from his rain-soaked funk and realizing his ultimate, energizing, life-giving connection to all those things.

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Then comes the line that made me think to write to you about my grandparents.

After that long string of lines that begin with "My god was..." Craigie sings:

*Singing my god and your god may not be the same,  
but they probably are.*

Just sit with that for a minute.

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Like my grandparents who my brother called by different names, maybe the god/God/gods to whom Christians like me refer and with whom we interact is the same god/God/gods that other humans from other religions believe in.

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The MSA Interfaith Dinner on November 16 included a panel in which students representing the Baha'i faith, Catholic & Protestant Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism discussed traditions and celebrations within their particular communities when a child is born, when a child becomes an adult, when a marriage takes place, and when someone dies.

We learned that all the religious communities represented at Austin College have profound and intentional ways they mark those passages in the lives of their members.

Some of those activities are unique to a particular religion.

But it was interesting to see similarities between the religions.

I loved learning that both Hinduism and Judaism include rituals that involve whispering a baby's name into its ear.

Isn't that cool?

We all learned a lot.

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In Genesis 9:12-13, God says this to Noah after the Flood is over:

**...*"This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:***

***I have set my bow in the clouds,***

***and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."***

A lot happens after that.

But it's worth noting that according to the Bible, the very first covenant God makes is "between me (God) and you (Noah) and *every living creature* (no exceptions)."

That includes everybody who goes to church where I go to church.

But not just them.

It's all of us.

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The years in which current AC students will live out your lives will probably include multiple opportunities for you to articulate authentic faith in a multi-faith context.

There are and will probably continue to be plenty of loud voices trying to convince you that there is only one authentic, appropriate, correct way to understand and interact with god/God/gods.

Maybe they're right.

Maybe.

But I have a hard time imagining, or – frankly--worshiping, a God who disapproves of what's going on in this picture:



What's more important than that?

Being correct?

Using the right terms and categories?

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You know...my grandparents were equally responsive and loving to my brother and to me whether we called them Mamaw/Honey or Granddaddy/Pee Pie.

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*My god and your god may not be the same, but they probably are.*



Until Next Time, I Remain,

Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Wondering Whether Religious Exclusivism is a Form of Self-Idolatry,

JOHN WILLIAMS

Chaplain

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P.S.

Before we leave John Craigie, I want to show you part of one more of his songs ("Dissect the Bird").

Consider this a Pep Talk from your Chaplain to help you get through Finals and the Holidays:

*So when the candle flickers, when the days get dark  
They call them first world problems but they still break your heart*

I think Finals and Papers and Lab Reports can be considered First World problems.

He's right that we're all lucky to be able to have some of the anxieties we have.

But he's also right that those concerns are legitimate and real.

*When the universe feels like it's against you  
Just take a minute to realize all it took to make you  
Your parents had to meet, as random as that was  
And hang out long enough at least, to make some love  
And make a baby, and give it your name  
And all your ancestors had to do the same  
Exponentially backwards to the start of life  
So much had to happen just exactly right  
Sparks had to catch, oceans had to freeze  
Billions of cells had to survive endless disease  
Civilizations had to crumble, wars had to be fought  
Bad presidents had to get elected, good presidents had to get shot  
People had to leave, hearts had to get broken  
People had to die so your eyes could open*

*The universe is not against you  
The universe is not against you  
It went through a lot just to give you a chance  
It must have wanted you pretty bad  
No pressure, though  
No pressure, though  
The universe went through a lot but no pressure, bro  
You don't gotta be perfect  
You don't gotta be a saint  
Just don't waste it  
This was not a mistake*

Addressing God, the author of Psalm 139 says it this way:

***I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.***

Remember that the next time you look into a mirror.

It's the truth.

Peace,  
JDW