Southern Cross

True stories of miracles, visions, voodoo, snake handling, civil disobedience, and a search for existential answers along the back roads of the Bible Belt

By Tess Gadwa

Southern Cross

True stories of miracles, visions, voodoo, snake handling, civil disobedience, and a search for existential answers along the back roads of the Bible Belt

By Tess Gadwa

Cover Illustration: Second Line parade following Sunday service at the St. Augustine Catholic Church, Treme neighborhood, New Orleans, Louisiana

CONTENTS

PRELUDE

"Today is Tuesday, Juneteenth," says Sylvia.

Her doublewide trailer is cool and peaceful. The living room's glittery ceiling and green shag carpet gives the sense of being inside a cave with a mossy floor.

I have been on the road for six days, waking up in a different place almost every morning. Americus to Atlanta to Birmingham to Selma to Montgomery to Mobile to the Mississippi Delta. Memphis is still to come.

I knew this would be my last big trip, and I kept putting it off. Finding the time to plan, let alone go, seemed an impossible obstacle. When you're traveling more than a day's drive from home, you want to make every stop *count.*

In late May, I finished a big website project and finally had some free space on my calendar. I made a few phone calls the week before and then I started driving. It was time. To be honest, I didn't prepare very well. But even if I had scheduled more interviews in advance, I don't know when I would have squeezed them in. Just getting from one place to the next has taken everything I had.

Nor did I anticipate the regional habit of talking for two hours, three hours, five or more hours at a stretch. People just don't have that kind of time in the Upper South. They are too busy organizing committees and making business deals.

"Why would you ever want to go to Mississippi?" Blake asked me. "Nothing good comes out of there." I said that I had to get back to the Deep South sometime—passing through on the way to New Orleans wasn't enough.

PART I: THREE SHIPS

1. Americus, Georgia

I arrive at Koinonia Farm well after midnight, thanks to my new satellite navigation device placing the address 20 miles away from its actual location (the first of many malfunctions to come). I pick up my welcome packet and settle into my assigned room. The space is plain but welcoming, with a brown and white vinyl floor, mismatched towels, and silk flowers on the dresser.

I first encountered Koinonia reading about the history of Christian social justice movements in the South. I was amazed to find it still operating and accepting overnight visitors. Founded in 1942 by Clarence Jordan, a student of agriculture and New Testament Greek, his wife Florence, and a second couple, Martin and Mabel England, the farm's purpose was to create "a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God." They hoped to build an interracial community whose members would live and work together after the example of the first Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles. Residents shared a common purse and invited black and white neighbors to eat with them at a common table.

In the 1950s, all this suddenly became threatening to white residents of nearby Americus, Georgia. The farm endured firebombs, threats, boycotts, and a 70-car motorcade by the Ku Klux Klan. Children learned to drop to the floor if they heard shooting. When Jordan complained to state authorities about the violence, he was investigated himself for being a communist agitator. Without a local market for its produce, the farm began a successful pecan mail-order business that continues to this day.

After Clarence Jordan's death in 1969, Koinonia would become known as the birthplace and incubator for Habitat for Humanity and a number of other influential social justice ministries.

Chapel is at 8:15 AM, which is a bit of a struggle given when I got in the night before. Once I'm up, I don't regret it. The heat of the day is not yet upon us and the fields have a luminous, mystical quality. A faint humming sound hovers on the edge of hearing. You only get this in wide open spaces, I've noticed. The sound is the buzzing of insects yet it seems to emanate from the earth itself, the pulse of life made audible. Tall pecan trees and live oaks provide shade for scattered outbuildings. Irrigation equipment gleams in the morning sun. This place has both harmony and beauty. I find myself wanting to stay longer.

At chapel, I see a lot of people in their 20s and early 30s, perhaps the majority of the crowd. There are also a fair number of seniors, but not as many baby boomers as I would have expected. This morning's chapel theme is nonviolence in a time of war. A white-haired woman tells us that nonviolence always gets back to doing our inner work, and that she can sometimes see energy auras around people and trees. Then she has us listen to Chopin on a boom box as our closing meditation.

After chapel, we get assigned our chores. Along with most of the other short-term visitors, I have asked to participate in work projects as well as interview people. I introduce myself to Ann, the hospitality coordinator. It appears my first task will be making the salad for lunch. We walk over to the kitchen and then to community organic garden. Even though it's June, there are not many ripe vegetables in the garden—-Ann suggests using basil from the herb garden and edible flower petals to augment the peppers, carrots, and iceberg lettuce in the big refrigerator.

While out gathering rose and day lily petals, I run into a woman in braids with a baby on her back. She introduces herself as Emory. The six-month-old baby in the gingham cap is named Kellen. I learn that the baby is not hers. Watching five young children is one of her contributions to the community.

At lunch, a young guy with long blond hair and tall rubber boots announces he will host a "Kurt's house is clean" dinner on Saturday night. There will be painting party and brunch earlier in the day, for anyone who wants to pitch in.

I strike up a conversation with a tattooed man holding the same baby I saw earlier. Brendan and his wife Sarah are from Cincinnati. "We could have bought a house with a mortgage, but instead we came here," he says. In addition to Kellen, they have a three-year-old daughter named Ida. As former contractors, their home maintenance skills are much in demand.

I notice that the lunch table has offerings for both meat eaters and vegetarians. I notice that the tub of salad I prepared is nearly empty. And I notice that nearly everyone in the room is white.

Following the meal, the other guests and I get a tour of the property. We visit the bakery and gift shop and then ride out through the fields on an open wagon pulled by tractor. Our guide Ellie wears a straw hat and pink checked shirt. She and her husband Dave are retired. They came here from a farm in Iowa eight years ago. "It's a God thing," she says.

These orchards need to be replanted soon, she tells us, as we drive down the long, majestic rows of trees. Sixty-five years is about the end of a pecan tree's productive life span.

We stop at a green wooden shack where Clarence Jordan wrote the Cotton Patch Gospels, translating New Testament texts into 20th century South Georgia vernacular. It's also where he died, from a sudden, massive heart attack. We drive back through the orchards to a low ridge known Picnic Hill, stopping at a large stone that commemorates Jordan's unmarked grave.

Then it's on to Koinonia Village, a cluster of unassuming one-story houses under tall pine trees. These 30 houses were completed in the early 1970s, not long after Jordan's death. Most houses have stayed within the same families, Ellie tells us, with a number of older homeowners raising grandchildren. A community center hosts elder programs and a children's summer day camp. The village served as the model for Habitat for Humanity, founded in Americus in 1976 by Koinonia members Millard and Linda Fuller. While no longer constructing new homes, Koinonia has a home repair ministry that helps maintain these aging buildings and others in the surrounding communities.

Turns out that Jo, the flaky-seeming lady from this morning's chapel service, is my neighbor at Jubilee House. I first spot her sitting on the screen porch with neat rows of gouache paints in front of her. I learn that she is an artist responsible for a number of murals at Koinonia. Later we sit outside and share an orange on the porch, while 1940s lounge music plays on her boom box and a friendly ginger tabby cat flagrantly ignores the "No Pets Inside" sign posted by the door.

She is 70 years old. She used to live at Cape Canaveral, where her husband worked on rockets with Wernher Von Braun.

"Once you get over the fear of death, life becomes like Peter Pan again," she says. "Everything is recycled. Everything that we can see in creation is used over and over again. Matter is only a reflection of the energy behind it."

That's what she was trying to get at in the chapel lecture, she tells me, but she's not sure it comes across. "Maybe we have technology because we've forgotten so much of our spirit knowledge. We try to control what's outside instead of what's inside. God is constantly with us, we just forget it."

Jo became a community member in 2006, after a previous stay as an intern. "Out in the world you don't get to spend much time with individuals. After a while Koinonia stops becoming a summer camp and becomes extended family," she reflects. "We all want the same thing. We all want a peaceful environment. Can we actually do it? I don't know."

This uncertainty doesn't much seem to bother her. "All things are in movement," says Jo. "Nothing stays the same."

There is no evening meal at Koinonia and I need to pick up sunscreen, so I drive into Americus with another guest who is also traveling solo.

The town is more prosperous than I expected; the stately brick and sandstone buildings on Main Street have been painstakingly restored and now contain boutiques and restaurants.

I noticed driving down that the whole region felt older and more rooted than most rural areas I have visited in the South. Giant oaks rose up from the flat red earth with a sense of permanence and grandeur. Small towns had impressive stone courthouses, some in better repair than other. Americus may get more than its share of tourists due to the presence of an ex-president and his presidential library; Jimmy Carter lives just down the road in Plains.

We decide to have dinner on the second-story balcony of the Windsor Hotel, looking down on Main Street below. The space fills up while we're there: guests in rocking chairs and businessmen downing beers at the bar. After our meal, a piece of chocolate cake unexpectedly arrives, complements of the house. The manager, a black woman her early 50s, introduces herself as Ida and asks if we are having a good time. The two of us start to laugh—my friend is African-American and both of us are certain we have been honored because we are an integrated table.

Knowing what Americus was like in the 1950s, I had been concerned that we might encounter hostility from the staff and other guests. Instead, we get free dessert!

Form an interracial friendship and reap society's rewards. It's a nice gesture, but also a reminder that tables such as ours are the exception, not the rule.

Next day, when I'm not scrubbing and scraping Kurt's small cinderblock house in preparation for the weekend painting, I try to corner just about everyone I can for an interview. I am already regretting not spending more time here. I daydream about coming back as an intern, somehow persuading Blake to move down with me. I find the

community fascinating, as much for its shortcomings as its successes. The place may not be utopia, but it's still here and apparently still functioning.

For me, one of its most appealing aspects is the childcare arrangement. In addition to marketing work and helping out at the store, Emory watches Kellen and Ida in the mornings and home-schools three older children. This frees up two pairs of parents to work, but it's a little more flexible than dropping a toddler off at daycare.

"It's great being able to work and still see my kids during the day," says Sarah, who has dark hair in dreadlocks and nearly as many tattoos as her husband. "And we believe in raising children in community. They're not taught to fear strangers."

She and Brendan live in community housing near the farm store. Inside, I notice a large crucifix in the kitchen, bongo drums, a futon covered in a Celtic tapestry, a crate of vinyl records, Dom DeLillo in the bookshelf, and a complete set of Charlie Chaplin movies.

When I arrive Sarah is nursing her baby on the couch. Red-headed Ida watches a vintage 1930s-era cartoon on the floor. A few minutes later Sarah heads out the door, leaving both children with Emory.

"We're organized by teams and each team has a coordinator," Emory explains. "There's a Farm Team, there's a Maintenance Team, there's a Products Team, there's an Administration Team... People cross over all the time. We also do All Calls for major projects, where everyone pitches in. Right now a big priority is marketing [of retail catalog products].

"When people come in we have to look at what they have to offer the community and whether we have space. Even though we're volunteers, we take up housing, we eat

lunch, and we do receive a small stipend. Some people who are interested in joining are put on a waiting list until we need someone that has those skills," she clarifies.

"Koinonia welcomes anybody and everybody to come for a visit. New visitors are invited to stay for up for a period of up to two weeks. They are welcome to participate in the work, or they can just come for a retreat or a sabbatical. I came as a working visitor in the Fall of '05," she recalls. "Then I came back in February of '06 as an intern, the same time as Sarah and Brendan. Ida was the baby then... we rotate through different areas of the farm. When I was an intern I worked in the Outreach Center with seniors and the after-school program. One thing I love here is that they're so many ways to be involved."

Emory was born in the mountains of Tennessee and raised in Memphis. She has six children, now grown. "My goal was to be a mother. I always knew that," she says.

After her marriage ended, she explored cooperative ways of living, researching a number of different communities. She decided to join Koinonia in part because of the possibility that it might someday host a Montessori school and children's home.

"That's what got me zinging back," she says. "I have a background with working in children's group homes and crisis centers. But there's a lot of infrastructure and licensing requirements... now we're looking at it more in the long term."

Emory attended an Episcopal girls' school and converted to Catholicism as a teenager. Later, when she moved to Asheville, North Carolina she got involved with Jubilee church, which emphasizes nature and creation spirituality. She now attends Jimmy Carter's church in Plains, Georgia. Maranatha Baptist Church only has about 40 members, she says, but when the former president teaches a bible study they get a lot of visitor. "He's a good teacher," she adds. "He really prepares his lessons."

Emory identifies as Christian but believes that no religion has a complete grasp on truth. “If your child brings you a picture of a horse, it may not exactly look like a horse. But you know your child has made an effort in your direction and you appreciate it,” she says, by way of analogy.

“The essence of God is love. I don’t believe that anyone gets condemned forever. As a parent, there’s no cutoff point at which I would ever give up on a child,” she states. “I believe that ultimately, everyone gets saved.”

Chapel is never required at Koinonia, and there is no service on Sunday mornings. Members are free to attend a house of worship of their own choosing. The community has Catholic, Jewish, and Mennonite members. Emory respects this pluralism. “I look for people that are walking the walk,” she explains.

“We are a diverse group. We do pray about things,” she says “We’re not all alike. We do have disagreements. There’s a range of ages and people here. It basically gives me a second family.”

Soon after I walked in, I recall Emory bringing up a concern about Ida to the child’s mother. Emory had heard her say “Oh my God!” and was upset by this language.

My sympathies were definitely with Sarah. When not on my best interview behavior, more than a few cuss words have escaped my mouth. I think if it had been my three-year-old, I might have been tempted to use a lot stronger language in response.

That’s the flip side of community. Ties that connect also restrict. You have to be more concerned with what you say. You have less freedom in how you act and how you raise your kids. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the kind of remark an aunt or grandmother would make with impunity. The same words would have

sounded very different coming from a stranger in a grocery store. That's how extended families work.

Before lunch, I take a few minutes to talk with Norris Harris. He is chaplain at Koinonia and the pastor of three African Methodist Episcopal circuit churches. As part of the Farm Team, he has been mowing in the orchards all morning.

Norris wears a light blue work shirt and khakis. Wiry gray hair is visible under his dark baseball cap. Growing up in Americus during the 1950s, all he knew about Koinonia was the persecution. "If you were black and worked at Koinonia, you were jeopardizing your safety," says Norris.

He applied for a job as shipping clerk in 1993, based on a referral from the Georgia Department of Labor. He went on to work as products manager and co-coordinator, all while still serving as an A.M.E. pastor.

"There was a complete difference from the corporate world," he recalls. "I've always been a people person, but I always *was* the people person in other places. You following me?"

We pause as the noontime bell rings loudly behind us.

Says Norris, "What really carried it was my wife got really ill. They took her [to the hospital in] Emory. And then there were the people... a mixture of blacks and whites working together. Even though the same-old, same-old was still there, we had a bridge that brought people together."

He recounts the legacies of Clarence Jordan and Millard Fuller, then goes on to consider the future. "Our baptism is a little bit different. We have to learn from what they

did. The Civil Rights Movement is no longer as apparent. Housing still is, but Koinonia didn't want to cross over with Habitat for Humanity. What ministry is out there that would be as powerful?"

He continues. "I wish that we could be farming the way we used to farm. I wish we had the day care the way we used to have it. Everything was centered around Koinonia. It was a group of people searching for something we weren't getting from society."

People are walking past us to lunch now. Ida runs up and hides under out picnic table. We see her dad and let him know where she is.

"I've seen the pros, the cons, the good, the bad," he says. "God always sends the right people at the right time. I put my whole heart in it. Other people saw me, they put theirs in it too. A conversion takes place. This place lays its claim on us."

James, aka "J" is 29 years old. He has blue eyes and a short blond beard. We talk under a mulberry tree behind the main office building.

"I've been here for four years and I don't have any plans to leave," he tells me.

The first time he visited was in 1999, passing through between Florida. "They were going through some really tough times. They had a director that was embezzling. Now we have a team of people involved in accounting. It means one person isn't doing all the work, and we can also see where the money's going."

Despite these events, the memory of the place and its people stayed with him. He came back to Koinonia several times, eventually choosing to stay permanently.

Moving to an intentional community after retirement is one thing, but what it's like for someone our age? I ask J if he is concerned about not buying a house or picking a career.

"I have stepped off that path," says J. "I haven't felt that pressure from my family. Historically, people didn't work in that fashion. I try not to spend a lot."

Most of the younger people at Koinonia go without health insurance, he says. (Children in the community are covered by PeachCare, Georgia's state health insurance program.)

"There are some clinics available that work on a sliding scale," says J. "I've had to make a couple hospital trips, for stitches and stuff, small injuries." He is still paying off a $540 doctor's bill in monthly installments.

"I could easily put myself in a job that would provide all that," J adds. "I used to install floors for Lowe's. I worked my way into management, and then got completely burned out."

J was born Roman Catholic but his parents left the church early in his childhood. He cites his father, now a United Methodist minister, as a major spiritual influence.

"Having lived in the South for most of my life, I had a kind of narrow view of Christianity," he says. "While I was living out West, I actually came back to the Catholic tradition. Then I moved back to the South as a Catholic, which was a different experience. I have had a few tough conversations... I remember a roommate's friend tried to tell me what I believed. I love tradition and sacraments and mysticism. I go to mass and confession—at St. Mary's in Americus. We have a nice priest here. Very progressive. He challenges us to be peacemakers."

Here at Koinonia J coordinates site maintenance and the Heart-to-Heart home repairs. He is also one of eight stewards, "servant leaders" responsible for long-term planning. The stewards are nominated by an elected committee, similar in its workings to many elder and deacon boards across the country. A director who is also a community member provides day-to-day executive leadership.

"We bring ideas to the community and we try to work things out," he says. "It's people that have been here for a while and know the history, that the community trusts. It's a smaller, more focused group that can take more time to work through issues, do some problem solving."

I ask about the challenges of leadership in a small community. "It's a hard balance between not wanting to take too much power and for me, usually, not giving enough direction," he says. "There's this fear of people taking too much power."

When conflict arises, community members are encouraged to speak directly with the person involved. A Community Support Team exists for more serious conflicts.

"We have a lot of people that are introverts here, and it's easy to avoid conflict rather than face it and take care of it. I've seen an incredible improvement over the four years that I've been here, but we still have further to go," says J. "I had a talk this morning with somebody and it was heated, but then we worked it out. We got together and we talked. We hugged and everything."

J has been dating another Koinonia member for a little over three years. They met while at the farm. "We have been very open about our relationship," he says. "A year ago we presented the idea that Ann and I would like to live together. There was a year-long discussion about whether that's okay in a Christian community. We don't want to get

married legally. We're prepared to make that commitment to each other... we just don't want to tie our relationship to the state. The end decision was that we would have a commitment ceremony, a covenanted relationship."

Koinonia makes clear in its visitor policy that guests are welcome regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. J speculates that if a same-gender couple wanted to join the community and live together, they might be asked to make a similar commitment. "That's something we've still got to talk more about."

My final interview before getting on the road is with the aforementioned Ann. She coordinates hospitality at Koinonia, so was also one of the first people I spoke with. Originally she didn't think I would want to talk to her because she was not Christian. Actually, I was very curious about why she would choose to be part of a religious community when she herself did not share its religion.

"It turned out that living among people to faith mattered was really cool to me," says Ann. "Plus J's mom was praying for him to meet a good woman!"

Ann is tall with close-cropped brown hair and a wide smile. She is 28 years old. A native of Minneapolis, she worked there for a year after college, doing refugee resettlement. After that, she looked for a new direction. "Part of me was tempted to just get a job, get insurance, get a little car..." she says, "but first I decided to take a little road trip."

She researched and visited several intentional communities, some faith-based, some secular. "I felt like a lot of the nation's history was wrapped up in the South, and I

didn't really know it or understand it," she says. "I wanted to be some place that was more challenging than my hometown."

Ann explains, "I wasn't raised in any religion. My parents raised me really well, setting a good example. The first time I went to church was probably when I was 12, with my aunt for Easter. But I wasn't really interested. After college I did the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. You focus on sustainability and social justice and you live in community. That's when I did refugee resettlement. I'd never lived among those people before. Not in college, not at home. It was neat to see people who were drawing their direction from something besides themselves."

She goes on. "I still don't really have a name for it. I don't have a title. I don't claim much. I definitely have examples that I look to. I love the Bhagavad Ghita and parts of Jesus' life... I never expected I'd be here, in a Christian community."

I point out that she's wearing a Koinonia T-shirt that says "Building the God Movement" and she laughs. "My own visualization of the spirit is water," she tells me a few minutes later. "I remember walking into the ocean one day and being pulled by these invisible currents. That's kind of how I visualize spiritual things in my life."

Other community members respect her beliefs, Ann says—however the same is not always true of visitors. She remembers a tour with a visiting Baptist preacher. "He wanted to know about my relationship with Jesus. We talked a little bit, and then I told him I'd like to give him a tour of Koinonia and not focus on myself. He was a good guy, though. For him, Christianity had ended his belief in racial segregation."

Ann graduated from Oberlin College and considers herself progressive, even radical, politically. "Since I've been here I've gotten more of a chance to meet people

who are different than me and meet them on a safe plane," she says. "Faith is what can bring people who are vehemently opposed to a point of dialogue. There's people who agree with me on political or social issues who are just jerks! I have learned a lot from people who are pretty different than I am."

She adds, "I think that I have it easier than people who grew up in organized religion and had bad experiences because I had a blank slate."

She says that the community encounters criticism both for being too Christian and not being Christian enough. "Those people don't tend to stay. Koinonia has been around for 65 years. It's a ship that turns slowly. Usually the community outlasts anyone who is too bent on molding Koinonia to their own image."

She ascribes Koinonia's longevity to core people in different decades, and even some of the external pressures it faced, and to its willingness to change and be reborn. At present the community has 26 permanent residents. After a decade of operation as a nonprofit, Koinonia has gradually returned to a more communitarian structure.

"In the early 90s, it started to come to the surface that most of the partners—the fully committed, common purse people—were white, and had most of the decision-making power. The African-Americans in the community were feeling disempowered. People were really wrestling with this and didn't know what to do. The new structure was an attempt to make Koinonia more open and accessible.

"The structure changed to payroll. We had several African-American directors. We had volunteers and paid staff. I think that this is a class issue, too. And this is still true. Most of the people who are going to give themselves to a common purse lifestyle have been middle class. They've already sort of had something.

"If you can pay a decent salary, more people from all walks of life can be into it. But it can be different too, if it's just a job. It was just a really rocky time... things started falling through the cracks. The salary structure was bankrupting Koinonia slowly, because it cost so much more.

"The change in structure that happened in '93 wasn't 'Well, let's try out the corporate model!' It was an attempt to be more reconciling," she emphasizes.

In 2004, Koinonia began the transition back to its current, more communitarian structure. It has not returned completely to a common purse, but members receive small allowances. Currently the only paid staff are a small number of seasonal part-time employees.

Ann acknowledges that issues around race persist. "If you look at who's at lunch, it's obvious. But most visitors are white. The community is something like 20 percent people of color. There's a lot of ways you can do your math, pro and con. My feeling is that decision-making is spread out more. Two out of the eight stewards are African-American," she notes.

"I also think we have some relationships that need mending with the two neighborhoods built by Koinonia. We got pretty heavily into this social services organizations role. A lot of promises were made that weren't necessarily kept. People here come and go a lot quicker than people in the neighborhoods. They've been there for decades, so they have a better sense of history. Sometimes you get people with a sense of entitlement," she says. "Both parties click into these roles. We're trying to not be that institutional place anymore. We're trying to build connections that happen naturally, and not force it. You need a real, true human reason. A lot of times it's faith."

Meanwhile the community itself continues to evolve in change. “We develop our own culture here. We have a good sense of humor. We’re still working on the gossip thing,” she says. “And how do we communicate enough but not too much? People will be like, ‘You cut down that tree? That was a mulberry tree!’”

I ask her about Koinonia’s long-term direction.

“Listening is what we’re doing right now,” Ann says. “We’re trying to focus and figure out what really works. We’re working on becoming a better ship.”

As turbulent as recent decades have been, “There were just various people who came in and were just pillars of the place,” she says, “like Norris and Ellie and Dave. Somehow things survived. Everybody did their part to keep the place going.”

She pauses. “I think it’s a miracle, too. I don’t think it’s all just people.”

Koinonia gets scam artists from time to time—Sarah told me about one guy who tried to convince people to buy nonexistent frequent flier plane tickets to Hawaii—but it’s hard to imagine anyone staying here for long who did not subscribe to its core values. The rewards are just too meager. You work hard, you forfeit money and status, and for what? The chance to live with other people who give up these same things.

So what if they still spray their pecan trees with pesticides and only grow a small portion of their food on-site? They are trying. They have organic grapes and blueberries. About a month after I visited, they converted their tractors to biodiesel. They are not immune to mismanagement or the social divisions caused by race and class, but they are not in denial about them either. They have birthed ministries that teach nonviolence, feed

hungry neighbors, advocate for prison reform, and resettle refugees. No one can accuse them of being an insular bubble that ignores the larger world.

In Koinonia, I see a Christian community that fosters faith without dogmatic rigidity. There are prayers at meals, religious classes and Bible studies, but that is only one aspect of religious practice. There is a common purpose that holds this group together. People here are genuinely trying to love their neighbors—perhaps most difficult when they happen to literally be your neighbors.

I want to tell Ann and the others that it's okay to still be searching. The mission will come in time. Just continue to exist. You are a ship but also a lighthouse.

2. Fort Mill, South Carolina

The old Heritage USA tower is still visible from the freeway. It's only up close that you can see the damage from hurricanes and time. Never finished, the 21-story building would have housed time-share condominiums, if scandal had not toppled the PTL empire nearly two decades ago.

The Bakkers got their start in 1965, hosting a puppet show on Pat Robertson's fledgling TV station. But no one could dispute that Jim thought big. His 24-hour "Praise The Lord" (or "People That Love") satellite network launched in the late 1970s. Before its founders fell from grace, PTL was bringing in a million dollars a week. Heritage USA was once the nation's third largest theme park—only Disney World and Disneyland were bigger. Six million visitors made the pilgrimage each year.

You can't live in Charlotte and not hear stories about this place. From the tattooed bartender who worked here as a waitress during high school. From a local rock singer

whose family owned land adjacent to the park. Or from my friend whose classmate's mother was obsessed with the PTL, eventually running off with a preacher to Tennessee. There's an empty church in my neighborhood—briefly refurbished into a hip nightclub—rumored to have housed PTL offices back in the 1970's.

On my way to the park site, I passed the intersection of Heritage Boulevard and Heritage Parkway, lined with shiny white clapboard-and-brick houses. Nearby, bulldozers and contractors hammering on plywood frames were working to make more. Nearer to the freeway, I saw a strange, pyramid-shaped office building. Once the headquarters of the PTL, it is now the USA home of clothing retailer Laura Ashley.

The abandoned park used to be a place where high-school kids would come at night, to make out or just climb the fences and explore. It's hard to imagine anyone doing that today. There's simply too much going on.

Piece by piece, the 2300-acre resort has been sold off. International conglomerate Malayan United Industries bought the property out of bankruptcy in 1991.[1] They added a golf course community named Regent Park, briefly revived the water park, and reopened the hotel, shops, and conference center as a secular Radisson Grand Resort before pulling the plug in late 1997. Over the years, the property has attracted passing interest from the owners of Nashville's Opryland, as well as former NFL defensive end Reggie White.[1] But it wasn't until last fall that local developer and missionary Earl Coulston began to buy up the remaining land, with plans for 1700 homes and a mixed-use restaurant and shopping complex.

I am here on a sunny Tuesday morning in April 2005, the second week after Easter. I was initially worried about getting stopped for trespassing, but quickly realize

that among all the other parked cars, mine won't stand out. The lakeside vacation cabins are presumably still popular with vacationers; I spot license plates from Minnesota, Louisiana, Connecticut, and Washington state. I follow a path along the water, lured by the green and beige turrets of a Magic Kingdom knockoff further down the shore. I get as far as the water park gate.

The walkway and tram stop are in terrible shape, paint peeling everywhere, bits of railing missing. Across a thick iron grille, a faded sign lists rules for the water park: "Welcome. Your safety is our first concern." The water park island seems to be holding up a little bit better—the dual turquoise waterslides and artificial boulders look inviting, from a distance. On the other side of the gate, chain link fence blocks the walkway to the castle, turned into a Go-Kart track and arcade after the demise of PTL.

The abandoned shops up the hill look like Disney's Main Street after a zombie plague. The unfinished tower isn't doing real well either. Patches of the brick facade have peeled away, and weeds have grown up inside the building's chain-link fence. But a few yards away, grass is freshly mowed and teenagers hurry in and out of the Grand Hotel. In a way, it's more eerie than if the entire complex were deserted.

As soon as Earl Coulston got his first parcel together last September, he sold back 52 acres to Rick Joyner's MorningStar Ministries. MorningStar now owns the 500-room Grand Hotel, conference center, shops, and unfinished tower. Their stated mission for the property is to train "a radically devoted generation of missionaries who will likely risk their lives for the gospel."[1]

In progressive Christian circles, the word "prophetic" describes a calling to expose the injustices of society, rebuking the wealthy and powerful on behalf of widows

and orphans, like Amos and Jeremiah of the Old Testament. Joyner's followers take the definition a bit more literally. The Carolinas' five MorningStar[1] churches teach that Christ's return is imminent and that founder Rick Joyner is a latter-day "apostle" or "prophet." Speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other "gifts of the Spirit" are common occurrences at worship.

I walk toward a guy with a ponytail and a chainsaw, who is removing tree stumps from the hotel parking lot. He says he is a volunteer, just like the men I have seen driving riding mowers and trimming weeds. According to this guy, all of the maintenance and restoration on this property has been done by volunteers.

I decide to look around a little more before heading home. Some facilities are still in use, like "NarroWay: The Broadway of Christian Entertainment," an outdoor arena with a host of RV's parked in back. Other structures look even worse than the ones at the park entrance. Most of the roof has caved in at a giant barn-shaped hall where Heritage vacationers once worshipped.

I park and walk up to a set of statues—Pontius Pilate washing his hands before soldiers and the captive Jesus. Rising out of the asphalt parking lot, it's the first overtly religious piece of sculpture I have seen outdoors on the premises.

On the far side of the lot, an old man in a black pickup truck is stopped in front of the statues. Was he one of the eager followers who bought $1000 "lifetime partnerships" guaranteeing them three nights each year at Heritage USA—sold in far greater numbers than there were hotel rooms to accommodate them?

The Upper Room was built as a full-size replica of the site of the Last Supper. A "Walk of Faith" leads up to it. It's a path made of Bible verses carved into granite

flagstones: “Delight thyself also in the LORD and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” “My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Sin is only mentioned on one paving stone. This upbeat tone fits the message of the Bakkers’ “Prosperity Gospel”—give to the Lord, and the Lord will give back to you.

At the end of the Walk of Faith, the door to the Upper Room is locked. The ground drops away sharply on the other side of the path. At the bottom of the hill, a swollen and muddy creek flows by, awash with construction debris and discarded tires.

In the Morningstar newsletter, Rick Joyner writes about how he spent many hours with Bakker after his release from prison and hopes to learn from his mistakes. A few paragraphs later, he lists an 800 number for credit card contributions to the restoration of the old theme park. Those of us who are not prophets cannot predict his success.

Today, Jim Bakker is out of prison, with a new wife and a new TV show based out of Branson, Missouri. Tammy Faye remarried in 1993, and became a pop culture icon of sorts, as well as an outspoken advocate for gay rights. She appeared on “The Surreal Life” reality show and starred in two feature-length documentaries. Drag star RuPaul narrated her first documentary, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*. The second documentary chronicled her 11-year battle through multiple bouts of colon and lung cancer, which took her life in July 2007. Rev. Randy McCain, the gay pastor of Open Door Community Church in Sherwood, Arkansas, officiated at the memorial service.

I walk away from the Walk of Faith and back to my car. The old man in the pickup truck is still contemplating the statues with rapt attention. I don’t know how much longer he stayed after I drove away.

Film producer Heidi Dove first came to the park in 1978, as a student at the Bakkers' short-lived university. She was 20 years old.

"There was a general store, and a pool, and there were tennis courts. There were no theme park attractions at that time," she recalls. "We had schools in trams, because trams were the things that carried tourists around PTL... I had seven roommates in a little chalet, which was one of the first buildings built out there for visitors."

Her roommates were appalled that she listened to secular music. "I trashed all my albums as a sacrifice to God. I was standing in front of a big trash can and busted them all up, one by one," she remembers. "I had started my collection when I was 11 years old. I think my first album was James Taylor."

We are sitting in a coffee shop in one of Charlotte's faintly artsy neighborhoods. It's a Thursday night in June, about two months after my pilgrimage to Heritage.

"We were all 'on fire for the Lord.' We'd go out street witnessing, things like that," says Heidi.

She got her start showing tourists around the PTL studio, then located off Park Road in south Charlotte. After the university folded, Heidi was hired to coach softball for the PTL softball league, where she made the contacts that landed her first studio job.

"At that time, it was just a lot of fun," she says. "It became this really close-knit family for me... I really got close to people at the church, at work. That's all I hung out with. I didn't need anything else." She stops short of calling the PTL a cult—"no one was telling me, 'don't have contact with your family'" but acknowledges its huge influence on her life.

"I really sequestered myself from any other influences whatsoever. There was a time when I didn't even go see R-rated movies," says Heidi.

"One time a teacher came through, and she took a story about the children of Israel and how they ran out this city seven times shouting, and the walls fell down. And she associated that with if you want anything, run around it seven times, and pray and holler, and God will give it to you."

Heidi took the message literally, running around a Volvo in a car lot with her friends seven times, hollering and shouting. (God did not give her the Volvo.)

She stayed at the PTL through 1986, and continued to work for its successor, the Inspiration Network through much of the 1990s. "He got totally sucked into something that was bigger than he could handle," she says of Jim Bakker. "Surrounded himself with the wrong people. Didn't know how to judge people... I don't believe for a minute that Jim Bakker was sitting behind his desk, wringing his hands, thinking 'Who can I bilk out of thousands today?"

Whatever Jim Bakker's intentions, they didn't stop a $265,000 payoff to cover up his tryst with Jessica Hahn, or keep him out of federal prison on charges of conspiracy and fraud, or discourage an opulent lifestyle that encompassed gold-plated plumbing fixtures, multiple vacation homes, and an antique Rolls Royce.

According to Dove, televangelists don't see a contradiction between such luxuries and their religious values. "If they get rich, it's God's blessing. It's His will. They feel totally justified in their salaries, their lifestyles, their fat Mercedes, their big homes."

Heidi worked more closely with Tammy Faye, who had her own PTL show with an all-female crew. “I always liked Tammy’s heart. I always thought she just really had a tenderness for God, and a love,” she recalls. “I just got that from her. I don’t know why.”

She believes the Bakkers were caught up in a celebrity lifestyle that ultimately proved destructive. “They were always surrounded by people, all the time... You don’t know how to get out of it. You don’t know how to be you.”

She doesn’t think that their son Jamie Charles (now known as Jay) would remember her, although she knew his bodyguards. “He was a chubby little kid,” says Heidi. “I don’t think he saw a whole lot of his parents. He was on display at times, when there were Christmas specials and that kind of thing.”

She wonders how he can still practice Christianity, given his family’s history. “If I’d have been him, I’d probably have walked away from the whole thing, period.”

3. Atlanta, Georgia

Next Monday night I’m listening to Jim and Tammy Faye’s son preach a sermon in Hell. The old warehouse looks plenty apocalyptic from the outside, in the twilight after a violent summer thunderstorm.

Hell is the name of the ground floor at The Masquerade nightclub in Little Five Points, Atlanta’s hipster enclave. It’s a medieval-looking space with rough stone walls and faint fetish overtones. The other two levels are Purgatory and Heaven. Between the bar and the stage, a small congregation gathers every Monday night.

Jay Bakker was eleven when his family’s world came apart. His father was in prison for much of his teens; meanwhile, Jay was drinking, getting high, and leading the

life of an alienated high school dropout. Before he turned 20, he and two friends in Phoenix, Arizona had founded Revolution, a ministry designed to reach out to skaters, punks, and others overlooked and excluded by traditional Christianity.

Several iterations down the line, Revolution has moved to Atlanta and is doing its best to become a full-fledged church—albeit a church that meets in a bar and sells T-shirts that say "Religion Kills." The crowd is mostly white and young—some have unusual hair, tattoos, and piercings, but others could have come straight from the Gap.

Jeremy, 27, and Amanda, 26, started going to Revolution a few weeks ago. "I like it because it's about teaching, not judging actions," says Amanda, who works in production at Turner Broadcasting. "So many people are turned off by the traditional church."

There is no pulpit, no music, and no collection plate to be passed. Jay sits at a small round bar table in shorts and worn-out Chuck Taylors and talks into a microphone for an hour or so. He has kind of an anti-charisma thing going—together with the shaved head, goatee, and heavy frame glasses, I'm reminded of comedian David Cross.

Tonight's sermon is on The Sermon on the Mount. That's the one where Jesus says "blessed are the poor," "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice," "blessed are the peacemakers," and the rest of the Beatitudes.

About half of Jay's preaching seems to be directed at the people here in this room tonight, and half at an unseen audience—the religious right leaders who cast his parents out and those modern-day Pharisees who subscribe to a rigid, rule-based form of Christianity (what Jay refers to as "legalism"). He criticizes religious conservatives and their Justice Sunday event, talking instead about working on behalf of the poor and for

civil rights and racial equality, raising awareness of issues like sweatshop labor, fair trade, and AIDS ministries in Atlanta and in Africa.

"Justice is taking care of those who are downtrodden, who are hurt, who are going through hell and back," he insists. "It all really boils down to loving all people, loving those who have hurt you and wronged you... I have such a hard time trusting people."

Jay may go by a different first name these days, but it's plain that the adolescence and childhood of Jamie Charles Bakker are still very real to him. He recalls an older student who gave him a Jim McMahon NFL football when he was in fourth grade, and a math teacher who had kind words for him the day he dropped out of high school. "Those people in my life are the reason I'm sitting here today... because a few people took a few minutes to care about a kid, who had stuff and most people said was a spoiled brat."

He talks about he didn't go to church for five years because of a 30-second conversation, when a girl from his youth group caught him drinking a wine cooler. "She said, 'see I told you he wouldn't last as a real Christian.' I felt like I wasn't worthy of God," Jay remembers. "That's why God is saying be gentle, be humble, love other people. Make peace."

There is not much on *what* to believe in this sermon, just the Gospel text itself. But there's a lot about how to act—advice on reconciliation and peacemaking, how to say you're sorry "even if you know you're right," how to avoid self-righteousness. It's the kind of sermon that might make you a better roommate or spouse, not necessarily the kind that fires you up to go out and save unbelievers.

Jay closes with a prayer, and then the service is over. People hang around for a while, chatting and saying hello to each other. I introduce myself to Matt Debenedictis,

assistant pastor for the past two and a half years, and to Jay and some of the other Revolution staff.

I am told that the group usually goes to a bar after the service, and that I am welcome to come along. But nobody seems to be moving just yet and I feel awkward intruding. Also, I'm hyped up on Sudafed with a nasty summer cold, and liable to crash any minute. I decide to retreat back to my hotel room, but not before making plans to meet up with Jay and Matt the next day.

Religion is ever-present in the South, a whispering, flickering host of angels and ghosts. Even here, in this hip and cosmopolitan neighborhood, this oasis of vegan restaurants and Stella Artois beer specials, a simple walk around my hotel block can yield two Bible verses.

Revelations 3:20 is painted on the door of a brick apartment building, next to a shepherd with black skin, purple crook, and an orange halo. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear and opens the door, I'll come in and abide with him (or her)."

Next door to my hotel, Isaiah 26:4 is waiting like the prize of a scavenger hunt. In the half-abandoned basement of an antique store, amongst costume jewelry, seashells, and an orphaned Christmas bulb, I spot a card nestled within an old eyeglass case. The front shows a sweet-faced angel and cherubim. I flip the card over and read, "Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock."

During my two-hour interview with the Revolution pastors, people keep stopping by to say hello. You get the sense they hang out at this particular Starbucks a lot.

"People give us a hard time about going to a chain, but a lot of the people who work here are our friends," says Jay. "Plus, they have good benefits and they actually treat their employees pretty well."

A lot of what Jay and Matt do is, apparently, just hanging out. "We're not really a program-based church," says Matt. He has glasses and a wiry, dark beard under a trucker cap. Tattoos cover his arms from the sleeves of his Clash T-shirt down to his wrists. "Usually, when new people come, if I get a chance to talk to them, I'll hang out with them, go to lunch with them the next day, they end up going to the movies with us on weekends. They become part of our circle of friends."

They're making plans to drive to Athens, Georgia tonight and see Ian McKaye of Fugazi at the 40 Watt Club. The caravan will include Matt, Jay and his wife, Amanda, plus a bunch of folks from church. This overlap between church, work, and social life occasionally causes tensions.

"The personal drama that happens in our relationships—that affects the spiritual side of things," Matt says. "It's a very hard thing to do."

"I think people think I'm this liberal, crazy guy, and I'm really not. I might be politically—but in a lot of ways I'm kind of conservative," says Jay, doodling on his arm with a Sharpie marker.

"Sometimes I want to judge people when I know that they're having sex outside of marriage. I've been sober for 10 years now, and when all my friends are drinking, it's easy for me to feel morally superior... I think sometimes that's a struggle for me, realizing that I have to give grace to the people around me."

Grace is a word that comes up a lot in our conversation. It's all over their website, a central theme of nearly every sermon, and it's tattooed on Jay's wrist, just below his watchband. I ask for a definition.

To Matt, grace means understanding. He elaborates, quoting from Hebrews. "God was separated from humanity, because of not being able to understand our plight. When Jesus came, God was able to understand our struggles, our own weaknesses...

"We've reached an interesting point where I think grace is more understood—although not using those words—outside of the Christian community. Just loving people for who they are. Being friends with people just because you love them, not because you're trying to change them."

To Jay, grace means "freedom to serve God without boundaries." He believes that grace does create boundaries and structure in the long run, "but it allows you to realize that you can fall in love with Jesus just the way you are. And take your own time, do it at your own pace."

This presents a paradox. Since grace sets no boundaries, asks for no external change in behavior, there is no way to measure its effect. What makes Revolution a church and not a support group? What is the goal? What is the test?

They say they have never had a problem with physical violence—the tougher-looking members of the group tend to deter hecklers. But aside from that, is any and all behavior acceptable?

"Sometimes I want to grab people and say, why are you doing this to yourself? But then I have to remember where I've been and where I've come from," Jay acknowledges. "If they're hurting themselves, of course I'm going to sit down and talk to

them... But I'm getting to the point where I realize that I can't control people's lives. People would try to control me my whole life, with fear and legalism and religion and all these things. I don't want to do that."

There are no membership requirements at Revolution—attend one service, and you're a member (if you want to be). This goes for gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals, as well as those with unusual fashion and hairstyle choices.

"We're a safe place for people who might not be comfortable in other churches," says Jay. "That's why we started Revolution."

Matt Debenedictis (left) and Jay Bakker

The group's monthly budget is a scant $7,592—of which just over $5000 covers salaries for Jay, Matt, and three part-time staff members. Funds come from donations online and through the mail (collection is never taken at worship) and sales of T-shirts and other gear. Jay and Matt get some extra cash from speaking engagements, and Jay's wife Amanda has a job in the field of research psychology.

I could be wrong, but they don't appear to be in this line of work for the money. About the only conspicuous consumer good I saw was Matt's iPod. Currently in its rotation: Sonic Youth, Neil Young, Tom Waits, Rufus Wainwright, Yo La Tengo, Pearl Jam, and an experimental Athens alt-country band called the Summer Hymns. Jay's three musical heroes are Johnny Cash, Pedro the Lion, and Social Distortion—he once played in a Social Distortion cover band—although lately he's been listening to early punk like 7 Seconds and Black Flag.

I think I'm inclined to trust their motivations partly because we fit into the same subculture—they remind me of the people I see at local shows and bars. They've even visited my favorite neighborhood diner back in Charlotte, known for its fried pickles and vast jukebox selection.

But the two Revolution pastors say that the reception they get from the "alternative" Christian community is not always warm.

According to Matt, "We get invited back constantly to more traditional churches. But many of the Christian youth festivals and gatherings like that, we're asked not to come."

"All those Christians who maybe look like us, people with tattoos and stuff like that... we've got more of a problem communicating with them," says Jay. "There are

some younger Christians who are like hardcore, or punk rock, or whatever, who try to have everything be extreme... and they kind of forget the meaning of grace."

When Revolution first came to Atlanta in 1998, they hosted concerts at a building called Safehouse, as part of a larger urban Christian ministry. At the time, few other clubs would host all-ages shows. "We were actually one of the bigger hardcore venues," Jay recalls.

"Our whole idea was that we were going to bring unity into the scene between the Christian straightedge kids and the atheists. I had a goal that we were going to make a common ground area for people to come together and hang out," he explains. "Unfortunately, a lot of the hardest stuff was Christians... I had people look me in the face and say, 'I would die for my God tonight.'"

In 2003, the group had ended its five-year connection with Safehouse. Soon after, The Masquerade approached them and offered them their current Monday night worship space.

"The only way we could have done that was by being really involved in the community, being really involved in people's lives," says Jay. "It's taken time to show people that hey, we're not here just to save you. We're here to be a part of your community and support the community any way that we can."

Over the next few months, Revolution hopes to become a legally recognized church, and increase their level of social activism. They're planning volunteer work with AIDS Atlanta and a free November screening of a documentary about Wal-Mart's impact on communities and labor practices. They mention their support of Jim Wallis's

evangelical progressive Sojourners organization, and their efforts to keep T-shirt prices affordable, while using sweatshop-free labor.

"If we leave some sort of a legacy," says Jay, "it will be that we helped make the church a little bit more of a graceful place to be."

Even as they talk about their future plans, I sense a kind of wistfulness, particularly from Jay. Listening to a few of his recent sermons online, listening to him talk last night, I get the sense that he is struggling—with his mother's recurring cancer, with the small crowds each week at services, and with the damage he has seen inflicted in others' lives by Christianity. I wonder where he will be a year from now.

"I never went back," Jay tells me, recalling the abrupt end of Revolution's first year. "I had someone sell my car and send my clothes to me... I was burned out and I couldn't handle it any more. I was only supposed to be out of town for three days." By this time, Matt has left to get ready for tonight's show. Jay rode his bike here, and we're chatting while he waits for his wife to pick him up en route to Athens.

Eventually, Jay returned to the ministry he had founded. But his anger at the church still shows. "The best is when you're on top and they love you. They treat you well, and they care about you, and they make you feel that you're important. And when you're on the bottom, they kick you when you're down," he says with resignation.

"I've sat in churches and watched preachers preach against my dad, not knowing that I was in the congregation. I went to a youth group, and this youth pastor started making jokes about my parents, and I was just so brokenhearted, trying to give church a chance."

It's easy for me to shrug and think to myself, well, your dad *was* a convicted criminal. He exemplified a lot of the worst traits of Christianity. Of course other church leaders are going to want to distance themselves.

I think I first read about the PTL scandal in the Bloom County comic strip, when I was 10 years old. I remember a joke about the characters scrounging their savings to keep Tammy Faye in eyeliner a few weeks longer.

How weird would it be to have your mom and dad be the butt of these jokes? You might not have seen too much of them back in the era of the private jets and round-the-clock bodyguards, but they would still be your parents.

"I hate legalism, man," Jay says. "I hate when people's lives are hurt by the church. And they think it's Jesus, or they think it's God. And that's why I'm angry, because I lived through it."

He says he sometimes wonders how his life would have turned out if his family had not lost their ministry. "Would I be some televangelist in a suit, with a full head of hair cause I've had transplants? And a facelift by 30?"

For a long time, Jay felt he was in the shadow of his parents, but he believes that Revolution has built credibility on its own. "I don't really focus on being Jim and Tammy's kid that much any more. I'm Jay, husband to Amanda and pastor of Revolution. I love bicycling and punk rock music."

Jay is adamant that he and his wife will raise their kids themselves—not bodyguards, nannies, or the staff of a large organization. "I had a lot of people telling me what to do and what not to do... a lot of mixed signals."

But not every memory of his PTL childhood is a bad one. ”I remember being a little kid riding down the slides at the water park, and testing it out with my dad before they opened it. It was so exciting. It was any kid’s dream.”

Jay found visiting the ruins difficult. “You’ve had this grand dream and you go back, and it’s dead. It’s awful.”

But he is disturbed by the efforts of some church groups to restore parts of the property. “It was my dad’s calling at the time. My dad made some mistakes and there were consequences, and we lost everything...” says Jay. “There’s nothing sacred about that land. I believe there is something sacred about people.”

Eventually, I run out of questions and Jay is still waiting for his ride. We end up just hanging out for a while, chatting about bicycles, traffic, music, the ins and outs of selling T-shirts and accessories.

In a way, it amazes me that Jay would come back to Christianity after all that his family has been through. In another way, it doesn’t surprise me at all. If you had seen the adults in your life stumble and fall, what would appeal to you more than a philosophy of unconditional forgiveness and grace? At the same time, wouldn’t it drive you crazy to know how quickly things can fall apart—that everything you build may end in dust and ridicule?

He says that the most of the hipsters who buy the “Religion Kills” belt buckles at The Lucky Devil boutique down the street have no idea that they’re supporting a Christian ministry. But in case they ever get curious, the group’s web address is printed on the back, along with the legend “Restoring Hope Since 1994.”

A few years ago they had some prototype necklaces made, and one guy lost his necklace on a beach in California. A kid called them up from the West Coast a few months later. He had been to the Revolution website and wanted to know what the group was about.

"Hopefully that website will always be there, even after Revolution's long gone," says Jay, and it's clear that he's already writing that history in his head. "The archives of the ministry. What it was, who was involved."

PART II: THE SHINING INVISIBLE LINE

1. Waynesville, North Carolina

Pastor expels church members for being Democrats.

It made a good headline. I was trying to figure out what had actually happened.

I first met Selma on Mother's Day Sunday, when her battered blue car rolled into the already full parking lot at East Waynesville Baptist Church. The morning was sunny and hot, with the Blue Ridge Mountains unfurled behind us like God's own backdrop.

"Do you think I've blocked anybody in?" Selma wondered aloud, stepping out of her car. I recognized her from the local news. Wearing a striped cap over wiry gray curls, baggy slacks, and a purple orchid corsage sent by a talk radio host, she brimmed with disheveled good cheer.

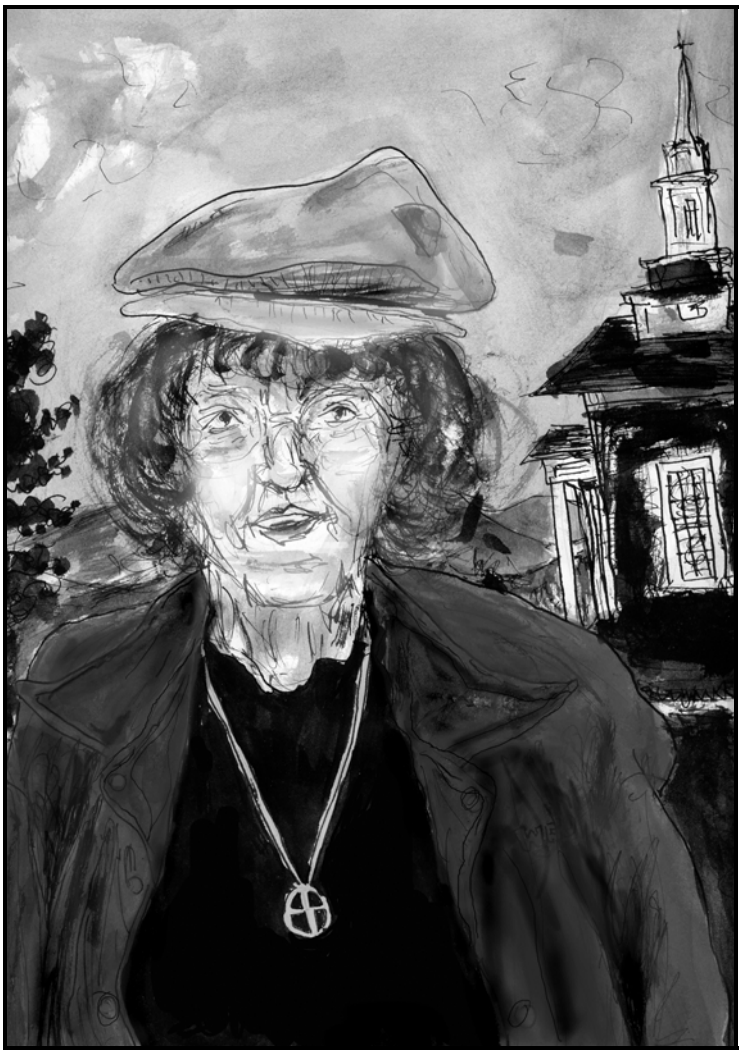
Without much conviction, I assured her that the truck parked behind her would probably have enough room to get out. I introduced myself, and we made plans to do our interview the following Saturday.

"I was raised in a Baptist home and my daddy always took us to church," Selma recalls. "The first church we went to was the First Baptist Church. That was when I was real small. We didn't have a car, so we had to walk about two and a half miles."

Selma comes from the Waynesville neighborhood known as Nineveh, whose name goes back to moonshine making and lawlessness in Prohibition days. Now retired, she worked in a shoe factory for most of her adult life. She has lived in the same house for 78 years, since her parents moved there when she was one month old.

She was saved at age 15. “I had a moment that I knew I wasn’t saved, and that’s when I was saved,” she says. “The preacher preached on hell, and he made it very clear. And I didn’t want to go there, so I went and made the profession and was baptized then.”

Selma has been treasurer at East Waynesville Baptist Church since the early 1970s and has taught Sunday school for more than 60 years. Her husband, now deceased, was a deacon. The church was their life. In return, the church was there for Selma and her husband through multiple bouts of cancer, driving them to treatments and fixing them meals.



Selma Morris

Two and a half years ago, Chan Chandler took the job of pastor at East Waynesville Baptist Church. “He did real good when he first came,” says Selma.

Last fall, she says, things began to change. “He wanted it to be a political church, and we’re not supposed to be a political church,” she maintains.

She says the trouble started last October, when Reverend Chan Chandler told his congregation it was a sin to vote for John Kerry. After the election, the partisan preaching continued, until matters came to a head at a Monday night deacon’s meeting. Exiled church members say they were told they must pledge to support the pastor’s political views or leave. As they departed the building, their fellow church members reportedly clapped and cheered.

“I don’t know what could have happened that would have prevented the church from splitting,” Selma Morris reflects. “That was his plan—to get rid of the deacons. I can look back now and see that.”

Selma found out about the showdown when a deacon called her up to say he would no longer be able to cosign checks because his membership had been terminated. “It made me feel real bad,” she says. “That’s not the way a pastor’s supposed to be... he’s supposed to be concerned about all of his membership.”

While she was not one of the nine members initially expelled, she has appeared with them on several news broadcasts. “I really didn’t feel good about us going on WLOS,” she confides, “But I said, well, God has been so good to me. I can’t stand by and let the church be taken over by him and the group that was following him.”

Selma feels that while religion has a place in politics, the pastor overstepped his bounds (and jeopardized the church’s tax-exempt status with the IRS) by naming specific

candidates. "I think that each individual, it's your privilege and freedom that we still have, that we can vote," she says. "He could have encouraged us to pray and vote for the person we felt was the right person for the position. And that wouldn't have caused no problem, but that wasn't the way he did it."

Selma says that she always prays before entering the voting booth. "I'm a registered Democrat, but I'm not a party person. I try to choose the person from what I learn about them that will do the best job for everybody. I prayed much this time because it was the first time, I guess, that I wasn't really sure."

In the end, she refused to vote for either Bush or Kerry, considering Ralph Nader before settling on the Libertarian candidate. Selma certainly does not qualify as liberal—Kerry lost votes, she says, because "He was for abortion and for homosexuals. And most Baptist churches, especially in this area, we know that's wrong."

Still, she feels that Christians need to look at other factors when they cast their ballots. "We've got to look at all the issues that are involved. We need to be open-minded about everything."

Like much of North Carolina, Haywood County was hard hit by plant closings in the past decade, losing about half its manufacturing jobs during the 1990s.[1] According to Selma, the area's service industry and tourism jobs have not made up the difference, particularly for younger workers with families.

"About the only thing here for them is just fast food places," says Selma, "and some of them work two of them to make ends meet." She says that some residents have been able to get jobs in Asheville, the nearest city, while others have had to move away.

"The young people that are graduating, they really don't have no hope of getting jobs here. They will have to go somewhere else. And that makes it hard."

And yet at East Waynesville Baptist Church, the bulk of the pastor's supporters—the ones who apparently had no problem signing a card saying they would support the pastor's political views—were teens and young families with children.

Selma shrugs this off. "Young people are easily persuaded."

I wonder if there isn't more to it than that. In the South and elsewhere, old lines between church and state are blurring, and new lines are being drawn. In western North Carolina, the generation that remembers the New Deal is slowly dying out. Younger "Wal-Mart Republicans" are not quick to identify Democrats with their economic interest. (And one could argue, why should they? Clinton signed NAFTA.)[1] If your church tells you that abortion and gay marriage are the most important issues, well, who do you trust more—God or a bunch of politicians?

I got to hear Chan Chandler preach on his final Sunday. The church was full but not overflowing—maybe 120 people. A stocky, balding redhead in his early thirties, he was unpolished but energetic in his delivery. To my surprise, the sermon was not about politics. Instead, Chan preached from John 3, about what it meant to be born again.

"It shows when you're walking with the Lord," he said. "You get put in a situation like I got put in this week, and there's nothing like having the presence of God with you."

It would be easy to mock the pastor's thick mountain accent—ten becomes "tin," Christ becomes "crossed"—or his folksy professions about "coming to know the Lord Jesus." But I am certain that he believed what he was saying, and believed it deeply.

This wasn't some slick operative of the televised Religious Right. Chan graduated from the local high school. His four-year-old son needed eye surgery to keep from going blind, and he was about to lose his $43,000 a year pastor's salary.

He probably knew by then that nobody was coming to his defense, not the Southern Baptist Convention, not Dobson or Falwell, not any of those North Carolina politicians who love to invoke God in their election campaigns. He must have been thinking, at least he'd go out saving souls.

The pastor wouldn't talk to me, but I eventually managed to speak with his attorney. John Pavey, Jr. practices law in the nearby town of Sylva and is Chandler's first cousin by marriage.

"The funny thing is, the majority of this church were Democrats," he told me in a phone interview several weeks later. "They may have voted for Republicans at the national level, but they vote Democrat in local elections. Waynesville is a very Democratic town."

By then, Chan Chandler had officially resigned, taking most of the younger members of the church with him. According to his lawyer, Chan will most likely return to seminary. Meanwhile, his supporters are meeting in private homes as part of a new congregation, called New Beginnings Baptist Church.

The lawyer's theory was that the East Waynesville deacons felt threatened by the many new converts Chan was bringing to the church. "Some of these people he was

bringing in, they had tattoos... they saw a changing of the face of their church, and I don't think they liked it."

He claimed that the nine members "essentially resigned" at the infamous deacon's meeting, and that the other members only voted in order to make their actions official. The attorney said he had it on good authority that "one of these dear old ladies flipped off the church as she walked out the door."

Was this really about politics, or was it about church politics? You could see a familiar story playing out—charismatic young pastor clashes with the entrenched leadership from an older generation, and the church divides around them.

Those who first tuned in—on weblogs and liberal talk radio—saw this mountain hamlet as the vanguard of an American holy war, where obedient believers would march in lockstep to seize the apparatus of the state, exiling all who might dissent first from their churches, and ultimately from the nation itself. Alarm bells sounded, across the nation and the world.

The conflict raging in the church might easily have erupted over the Sunday school curriculum, or the budget, or choosing a new color of paint for the sanctuary walls. But I don't think it was coincidence that at this particular time and place, ideology caused the split.

This little church was still consumed by the memory of the November election, unable to move on—as were so many Americans across the country. People simply could not let go of their convictions.

After our interview, Selma and I ride out to a Nineveh neighborhood reunion, at a church that she helped found in her teens. At least four generations are present, from old folks with oxygen tanks to newborns. I eat barbecue, hush puppies, and chocolate marble cake, and listen to old-timers' stories about stealing apples in their youth. Then it's time to stir powdered creamer into coffee and get on the road again, if I'm going to be in Nashville before midnight.

Driving down I-40 as it snakes down through the Smokies, squinting to see the road's next curve in the gathering dusk, I can't help thinking, how do you draw that line? After all, religion is supposed to *matter* in believers' lives. It should be more than a hobby or a social club. If I am serious about my faith, why shouldn't it influence all parts of my life—including how I vote?[1]

What Chandler did was probably illegal under the current tax code, but if the law changed to allow religious leaders to endorse candidates as well as preach on issues (as some members of Congress currently advocate), would Chandler's actions still be wrong? What if Chandler had been preaching in favor of the Civil Rights movement forty years ago—if he had said that voting for white separatist George Wallace was a sin? What if a liberal pastor had told the congregation to vote against Bush for his sins of war and greed? Would the story have triggered the same nerve?

I arrive at my friend's house in East Nashville a little after eleven, local time. Sarah is a graduate student at Vanderbilt, with a cute little renovated bungalow and a friendly cat. I haven't seen her since high school.

"So do you actually consider yourself a Christian?" she asks, incredulous, as we sit at her enamel kitchen table drinking tea. I tell her that I do, although I recognize that the word means different things to different people.

The subject of our conversation changes quickly, but I find myself pondering that question much longer. I could have said that I started this project to learn whether the fundamentalists and I actually worshipped the same God. That I needed to understand how the name of Jesus could lead so many people in such opposite directions.

What if this whole concept of God is just a fraud or a security blanket, a way to justify the values and beliefs we already hold? Or worse, what if the angry, judging God, the God of hellfire, the God of absolutes, is the real power in charge of the universe, while my God is just a pleasant figment? I am here because my faith demands it, but I am not sure I will finish this project with my faith intact.

2. Louisville, Kentucky

Next morning it's on to a megachurch in Louisville, Kentucky, where it's been one week since Derby Day and three weeks since "Justice Sunday" was held at Highview Baptist Church. The church has declined my request for an official interview, so going to their 11 o' clock service seems like the next best option.

About 1700 people attended the live Justice Sunday telecast on April 24th,[1] whose ostensible purpose was to prevent a threatened Senate filibuster against conservative judicial nominees. Speakers included conservative heavy hitters like James Dobson, Tony Perkins, Al Mohler, and (via videotape) Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist.

The event must have looked like a secularist's nightmare: leaders of the Christian Right and leaders of the majority party uniting to take over the government as crowds cheered wildly. And it spawned two sequels: Justice Sunday II in Nashville in August, and Justice Sunday III in Philadelphia in January.

There's no denying that Highview is big. The church's brand new "East Campus" has the same bland corporate hospitality as a mid-range business hotel—I suspect that the builder is responsible for more than one Hilton Garden Inn or Courtyard by Marriott. I pass through the entryway's oversized white columns and into the lobby, where a woman behind a tall desk hands me a glossy full-color magazine and asks if I am "a single."

I gesture to my wedding ring and explain that I am just visiting this particular Sunday while traveling, then hurry inside to a vacant row. No pews here—this place has theatre-style seating, upholstered in a cool shade of blue that coordinates perfectly with the stage curtains. It's like a high school auditorium, only nicer and bigger. Today the seats are only about half full. It's a more racially mixed crowd than I had expected, but still about 90 percent white.

No production value has been spared for the 12-piece Christian contemporary band with flute, guitars, bongo drums, dual keyboards, and a bubbly female soloist singing from a wireless mike. Lyrics are piped onto four giant flat-screen monitors, making hymnals obsolete. I don't hear many people in the audience singing, but it may be that the volume of the sound system is simply too deafening. Highview's basic statement of beliefs is sung to a perky, up-tempo melody—a bit jarring for lyrics involving the blood and death of Christ.

In the ceremony recognizing all of the church's graduating high school seniors, the pastor brings up the two great commandments of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," and: "Love your neighbor as yourself." He spends a lot more time on the first one than the second.

The main sermon is on the Book of Ruth—part of an ongoing series called "Women of Godly Character," delivered by a male pastor. The service ends with a heartfelt prayer, asking us if we are sure we would get to heaven if we died today, asking to invite Jesus into our hearts.

I am beginning to question why I drove 500 miles to be here. I don't feel any closer to understanding the motivations and beliefs behind Justice Sunday. I wish I had actually felt something during worship, instead of just writing down snarky comments in my notebook. It's just too different a tradition. I feel guilty and conflicted, sneaking into somebody else's church with a reporter's agenda.

After the service I head to the spacious, well-lit ladies' room to freshen up a bit, adjust my mint green silk blouse and silver cross. I am not sure what comes next in my plan.

So I find myself praying to find someone who will talk to me—that familiar, self-interested prayer known to believers and skeptics alike, the Prayer of Last Resort, when there is something that you really, really want and no other feasible means to get it.

Two hours later, I am eating lunch with the Ransdell family in their spacious, sunlit kitchen, thumbing through photographs of mysterious, intricately carved wooden scenes in miniature. I have to admit that when Amy Ransdell came up to me in the church

lobby and said her husband was an artist, my expectations were not high. I had visions of trite Bible scenes or soft-focus pastel landscapes in the style of Thomas Kinkade.

In fact, Michael Ransdell's sculpture turns out to be good. Really good.

The front room of Michael's studio looks like a magician's study, its walls lined with shelves full of strange objects—twigs, horns, bone, antique lamps, tiny clay people. "What I really liked doing was dealing with this whole issue of man-made versus God-made…" says Michael. "Of course, it's all God-made because everything that we see and deal with is made from God."

Michael's best work is also among his darkest. Carved from heavy, gnarled blocks of wood, the sculptures feel a little more alive than I am comfortable with. Almost-faces peer out of knots in the burl. One piece resembles a skeleton on an altar, while in another, heavy brass optometrist lenses take the place of eyes. Monstrous shapes seem to twist and writhe. I think of Ariel, imprisoned in a cloven pine.

"I use these burl woods that are just beautiful in and of themselves. They'll often have odd shapes. You can look at them and see things in them. You can see people or animals... I would carve sometimes just a little bit more, so that it would be easier for other people to see, but also leaving it like God had made it."

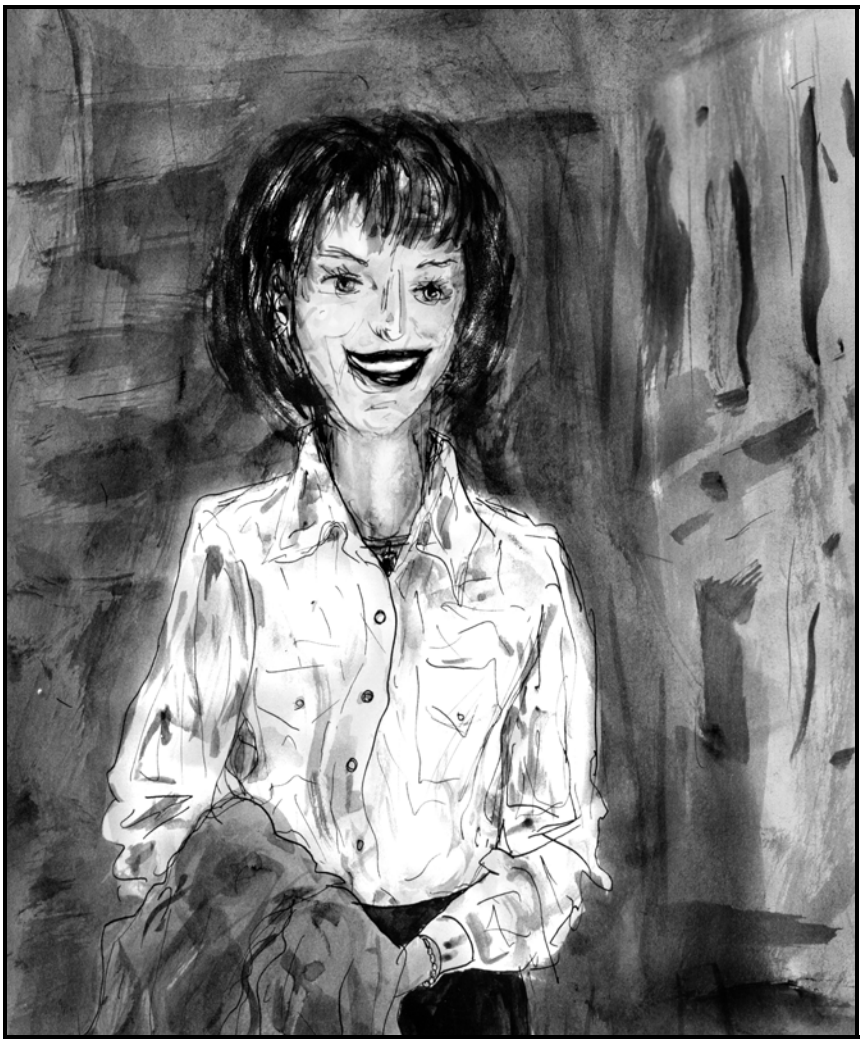
Michael Ransdell

Michael holds an MFA from Northern Illinois University, but when he graduated in the 1970s, teaching jobs were scarce. After three years of sending out resumes, he returned home to help run the family medical supply business, where he spent the next 26 years, eventually succeeding his father as CEO. At the end of the 90s, a heart attack convinced Michael it was time to go back to art full-time.

"I really thank God for it. I think that it was all in his plan." Michael adds that if his artistic career had bloomed sooner, "I probably wouldn't have met my wonderful wife."

The Ransdells are greeters at Highview Baptist Church. With her carefully made-up face, crisp white blouse, and coiffed brunette hair, Amy looks the part. She came up to me after the service, just as I made up my mind to head out the lobby doors.

"Are you new to Louisville?" she asked, flashing an immense tomato-colored smile.



Amy Ransdell

I explained that I was traveling on research and handed her a flier for my project. She read it with interest and promptly invited me to lunch and a tour of her husband's sculpture studio—dispatching Michael to pick up barbecue while hopping into my car to give directions. I suppose that Amy Ransdell thinks this could be a publicity opportunity for her husband, and I guess that I don't look very threatening in my church clothes. Still, I'm surprised that she would jump into a car with a complete stranger.

On the ride back, Amy was chatty and full of questions—about my husband, about my job, and most of all, about my church. She was excited to hear that the congregation is interracial, and a little more surprised to hear that the pastor was a woman. If she disapproved, she didn't let on.

The Ransdell home is a stately, brick neo-Georgian residence, in a genteel, tree-shaded neighborhood close to Louisville's city center. Amy shows me around her garden, pointing out the different varieties of iris in pale yellow, lavender, and pink.

"My children don't believe me, but I think they all have different smells," she confides, bending down to sniff the blooms in sequence. I follow her example, and she's right—some flowers smell peppery and spicy, while others are sweeter, like a rose.

Soon the men of the Ransdell family arrive, for what will be my second straight barbecue meal in a row. (If I had a pork allergy, I'd be in real trouble by now.) I spend some time chatting with son Ryan, who is in his early 20s and lives at home with his parents while training as a computer networking professional. Ryan attended Justice Sunday along with his parents.

"It was just cool," he says, recalling the event. "I didn't know it was going to be this large. Christians are very, very persecuted right now."

Ryan doesn't look particularly persecuted, sitting in an embroidered, overstuffed chair in his parents' living room. I want to ask him to explain himself further, but before I get a chance, we are called in to lunch.

It is a civilized and tasty meal. Amy has made sweet tea in the time-honored Southern way, dissolving sugar with the ea in a small saucepan of boiling water and even adding some peach extract. At one point, Ryan starts going off on the Baptists who protested Justice Sunday, but his father rebukes him, telling him not to attack people he doesn't know, saying they are mostly good people who believe different things.

The names of the two Baptist churches—liberal Highland and conservative Highview—are similar to the point of confusion, but they have little else in common. The senior pastor at Highview, Kevin Ezell, told the local paper that nobody who went to Highland would ever go to his church. Ironically enough, Amy and Michael first met on the steps of Highland Baptist. That was where Michael proposed to his future wife. They were once members there, as were Michael's parents. But then, they say, the church started "drifting"—getting liberal.

"That's where I was baptized. I loved that church, loved the people. I was a deacon there," says Michael. "We just left because we couldn't take it anymore... I guess we took the weaker way out."

For the Ransdells, the dividing line is biblical inerrancy—the doctrine that the Bible is authoritative and holds no errors.

Says Michael, “The Southern Baptist Convention has gone through a lot of difficulties in the last 50 years. All of those are issues of defining what your faith is, what your belief is. And when you start questioning the Virgin Birth and the miracles of the Bible, what you’re left with is just lukewarm at best.”

He adds, “If you go into a church when you’re on vacation, I don’t know about you, but I can pick up real quick whether somebody’s speaking about the truth in the Scripture.”

Michael and Amy have been members at Highview for seven years now. They have a hard time understanding why the rally at their church spurred such a negative reaction. “You would have thought we had hoods on,” says Amy, complaining of the coverage in the local alternative newsweekly.

“Actually, we’re just trying to preserve the foundations that our government was based upon,” she explains. “In the 70s, the Supreme Court started doing all these rulings... They did Roe versus Wade, they took prayer out of schools, they took Bibles out of schools… and you just look at the nightly news, and it’s like, who was abducted, who was killed?”

She quotes Thomas Jefferson, arguing that separation of church and state exists to protect the church from the state and not the other way around. This is perhaps the one idea that religious progressives and conservatives can agree upon.

“In our church we never promote a certain person, a certain party or anything. We just espouse a value,” Amy maintains. (I wonder about the poster of George W. Bush that was part of the backdrop at Justice Sunday.)

For Amy and Michael, as for so many other religious conservatives, the core issue is abortion. “If you did to any animal what has been done to human beings, there would be an uproar across this country,” she insists. “It is a silent holocaust.”

She volunteers at a pro-life pregnancy center named A Woman’s Choice. Women come to the center thinking they can obtain an abortion there, but for Amy, any deception is outweighed by its heroic mission. “They give 4D ultrasounds to girls, just to try to show them, *this is a little baby*,” she says, her voice breaking up. “It can already suck its thumb.”

She tells me that plans for another center are in the works, this one focused on mothers’ needs after pregnancy. It will offer a fitness center, a kitchen with cooking classes, career mentoring, and childcare during the activities provided. The idea came after one of the center’s clients shook her twin baby girls soon after they were born, leaving them mentally disabled for life.

I remind myself that to the Ransdells, each and every one of the 44 million abortions they cite is a murdered baby. And it strikes me that there is no way to actually know. They say life begins at conception. I say life begins at birth. But where does God draw that line? I find myself thinking, shit, what if they’re right?

If you believe that 44 million infant lives have been taken since 1973, and more are being slaughtered every day, shouldn’t ending that reign of terror be your number one priority?

For Michael, legalized abortion is the ultimate test of faith. “God has even allowed 44 million babies to die. And we can’t conceive of his purpose in that. But he has a purpose, because he could stop it like that! I’m afraid that it’s to bring about...”

Michael stops for a moment when he sees the look on his wife's face, concerned that he has said too much. "All I know is that the earth groans for his return."

Despite his credentials and prodigious output, so far Michael has had little success finding an audience for his artwork. He thinks that his explicit Christian faith may be one reason why. "If anybody ought to be able to respect and appreciate God's creativity and His great creation it ought to be artists, and most of them would never give God glory for anything."

It must be difficult for a conservative evangelical Christian to strive for recognition in a profession that values creativity, freedom, and individual expression above all else. How much of your success or failure will be determined by talent and how much by the clash of values?

"I was taught as an artist in college that I should experience everything I possibly can, so that it has an effect on my art," Michael recalls. "I would say that I was pretty doggone liberal. This is part of my testimony—that I have come to believe that it's not my opinion that counts."

Michael credits his wife with bringing him back into the fold, and he is grateful for it. "I *am* narrow-minded," he says. "I used to think that it was the grandest thing to say I am open-minded. If I didn't realize that God had a purpose and what his purpose was, I would still think that. But what I think means zero."

Amy interjects an artful compliment, telling me that I have the hands of a piano player. We talk for a while about the things we're looking forward to when we get to

heaven: being able to play new musical instruments, learn foreign languages that we could never master in life.

The Ransdells confound my stereotypes of fundamentalists. They are well-educated and well-to-do, compassionate and hospitable, courteous and articulate. One moment, Michael is condemning homosexuality as a sin; the next, he tells me that Francis Bacon is his favorite artist. Their worldview seems perfectly reasonable once you accept a few basic tenets. But in one respect, the Ransdells fit the stereotype—their certainty that they and no one else are right.

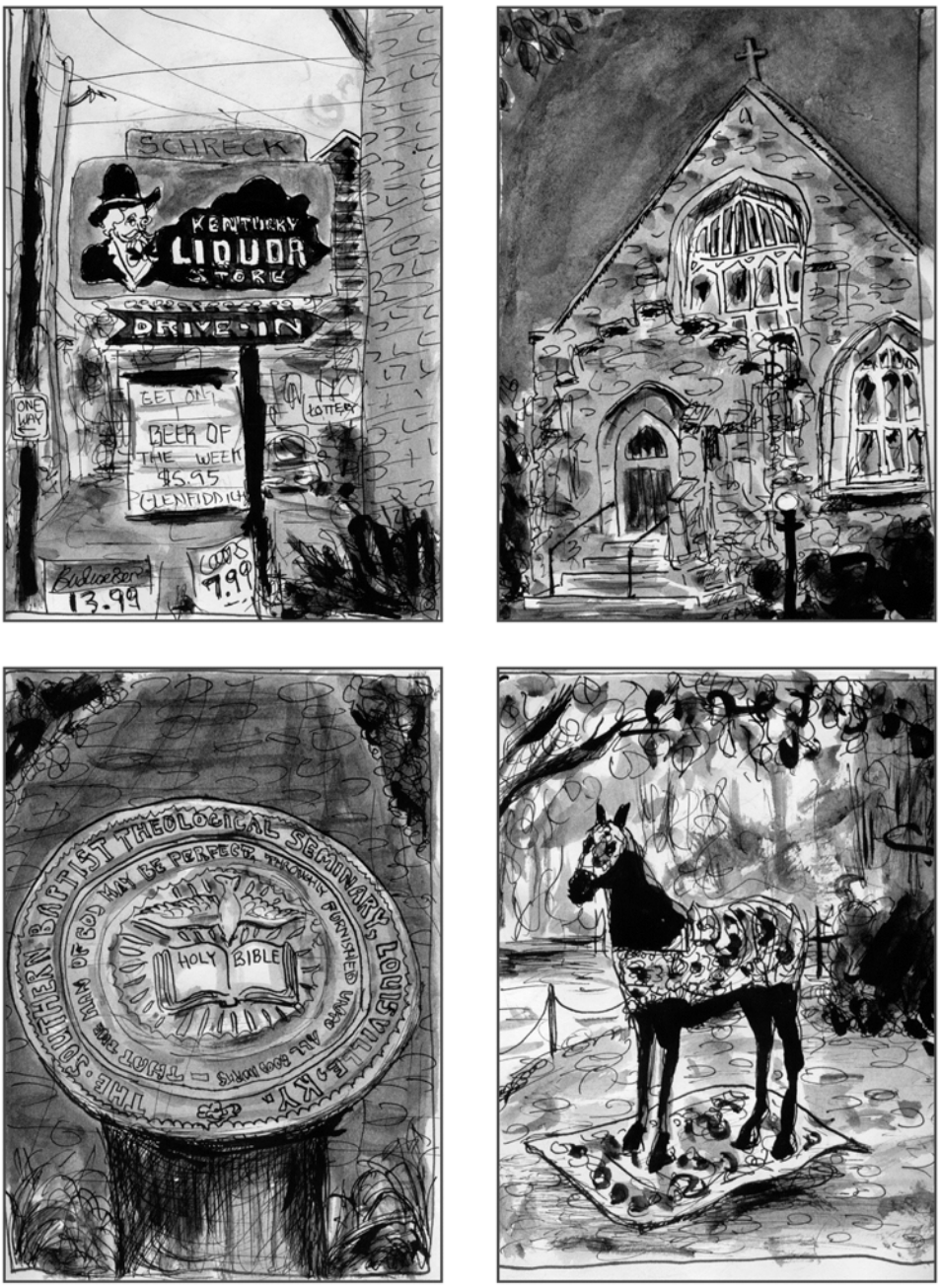
"You can compromise yourself, and get along with everybody. That's the biggest problem in this country," says Michael. "We've gotten so fat and so in no need of God."

They have no interest in reaching out or building bridges. Why should they? After decades of defeat, of increasing secularization and tolerance, their side is winning.

Louisville is a border town, and so perhaps it's not surprising that it has become a flash point in the culture wars. Built along the Ohio River, which once divided slave states from free, home to Louisville Slugger baseball bats and to America's first cheeseburger (or so Kaelin's Restaurant claims), the place owes as much allegiance to Middle America as to the Bluegrass State. In 2004 Bush won the state of Kentucky by a 60% margin, but Kerry won in Louisville's Jefferson County.

This seems to be one of those places like Austin, Texas or Athens, Georgia, where dissenters and nonconformists just sort of shake out from other parts of the South and come to rest. "Keep Louisville Weird" billboards and T-shirts adorn the downtown. I

yearn to explore the cafes, bookstores, and record shops that line a mile-long stretch of Bardstown Road.



Louisville Scenes

The city can summon vast troops of conservative evangelical Christians, but also many Christians who reject those labels. When the Justice Sunday folks announced their rally inside the megachurch, progressive activists scrambled to put together a rally of their own, in a church packed to overflowing.

With just over a week to plan, organizers were able to bring in nationally known speakers like Jim Wallis of Sojourners and Glenn Smith of Austin-based DriveDemocracy. The Louisville *Courier-Journal*[1] estimates that more than 600 people came to the "Faith and Freedom" counter-rally at Central Presbyterian Church; the *New York Times* puts the figure at twice that.

Three weeks later, participants are all elated. "It was like when Pete Seeger came in 1965," says George Edwards, a retired minister and professor from the Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville. George and his wife Jean are lifelong peace activists, both in their 80s. "This was triumphal."

"I got down there about 2 PM and saw television cameras from across the country," recalls Reverend Joe Phelps of Highland Baptist Church, who spoke at the counter-rally and was later quoted on CNN. "I saw the place pack out about 30 minutes early and knew that we had hit a nerve."

We are speaking in the pastor's study, a comfortable room with burgundy carpet, dark upholstered furniture, and a small wooden organ in the corner. With us is Pat Ramsey. She is a retired therapist, writer, and teacher who has been a member at Highland since 1968.

Joe has slicked-back hair touched with gray at the temples, twinkling blue eyes, and a Mr. Rogers-like aura of calm. You would not guess at the controversy he ignited by taking on his fellow Baptists for their involvement in Justice Sunday.

He explains his reasons. “Here we are, Baptists, with this historic Baptist understanding of separation of church and state, and these other people who claim to be Baptists were doing just the opposite.”

“That’s been one of the main tenets of Baptist belief,” adds Pat. “That in order for us to enjoy the freedom that we have, we have separation of church and state. I think pretty much we’ve held to that over the years.”

Pat Ramsey (left) and Reverend Joe Phelps

Joe continues, “The reason that religious liberty was so important to Baptists was because of their understanding of what faith was. Faith was not something bequeathed from one generation to another in a family lineage, and it certainly was not something that the state could hold reign over. The Protestant reformation said the Pope doesn’t hold sole authority, the Catholic Church doesn’t hold the keys to the Kingdom... the Baptists went a step further and said not only does the Pope not hold it, but the state church doesn’t hold it either, in England or Germany, in any of these places.

“It seemed very, very important that faith be free, that people be free to express faith and claim faith for their own. Faith not claimed for yourself is really not your own faith.”

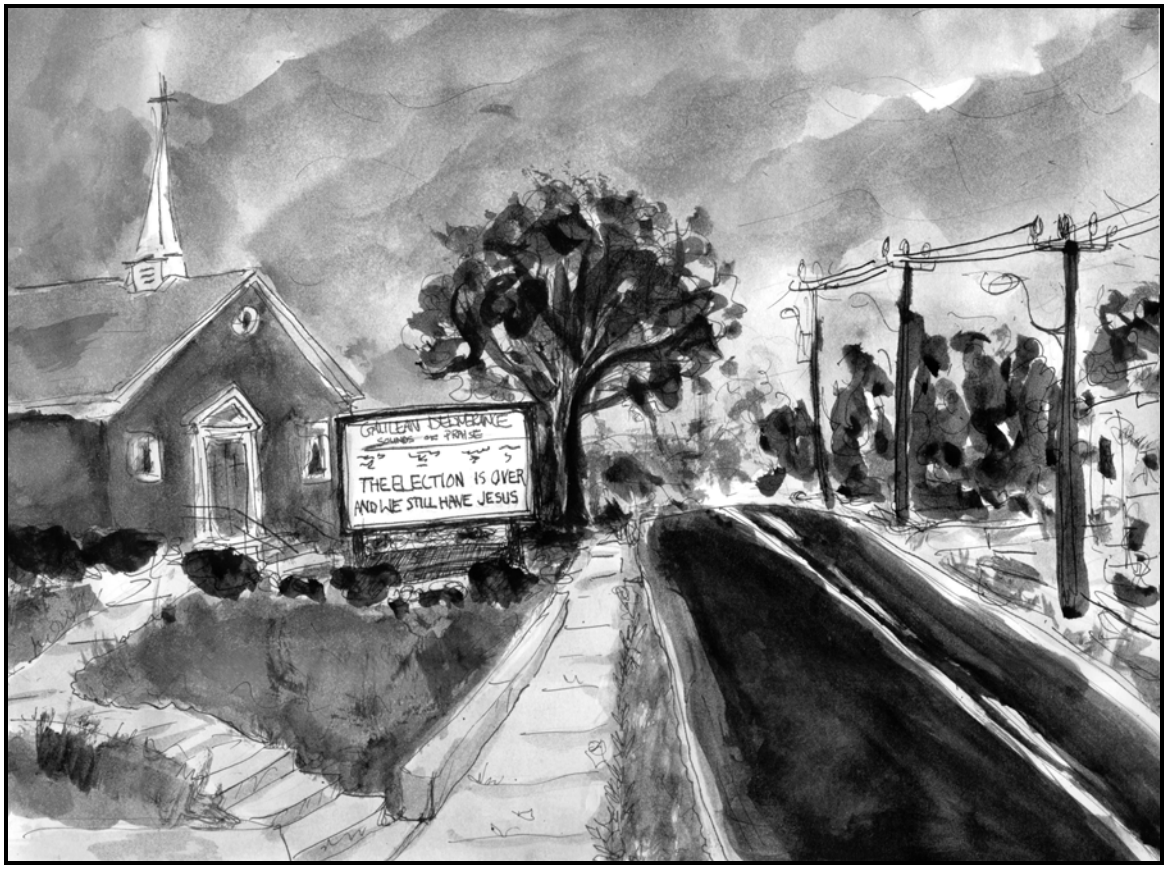
Although he disagrees with the goals of Justice Sunday, Joe sees danger in using religion to fuel any political agenda. “It didn’t mean that we felt like people of faith couldn’t be involved in expressing their views in politics, but it did mean there was a line. Sometimes a bit of a gray line, but a line that kept us from dabbling too much as an institution into the affairs of the state, and certainly kept the state from intruding on the rights and freedoms of the church.”

So how does one draw this line?

Says Pat, “I think, as individuals, it’s perfectly all right to take a stand. But to do it in the name of the church is what I resist and what I don’t like.”

While Joe was not comfortable with all aspects of the rally where he spoke—the American flag draped across the church balcony, the church choir singing patriotic songs—he believes that the purpose of the event was essentially different.

"We felt like we had to speak and say there's another Christian voice out here," he says. "Although it was more political than I was comfortable with, it in no way crossed a line like Justice Sunday crossed a line... Justice Sunday not only had pictures of President Bush in the backdrop, it was about judicial nominees and a Senate procedure called the filibuster. That was pretty political. That was so far over the line as to almost not be able to see the line behind you."



Charlotte, North Carolina church after the November 2004 presidential election

Episcopalians are generally assumed to be far more liberal than the Southern Baptists, but Brooke Pardue is no stranger to doctrinal conflict. A blonde SUV-driving mom who wears a "2008" pin on the lapel of her black knit blazer, she belongs to a younger and more recently mobilized generation of religious progressive activists.

"I had never done anything political before last summer," she tells me, as we sit in her sunny suburban kitchen. She signed up to volunteer for the Kerry campaign after seeing their booth at Shakespeare in the Park. "After the election, I couldn't just go back to normal anymore."

Brooke is now president of the Louisville Metro Democratic Club, and helped to organize the Faith and Freedom rally. "We had nine days to plan," she recalls. "It was standing room only. There were people on the steps, just listening... it just felt so good to hear religious leaders speak to our hearts. Our faith is who we are."

She says that the passage of the Bible that most informs her politics is "Love thy neighbor as yourself," but stresses that a person does not have to be Christian or religious to be moral. She cites Jim Wallis's statement that poverty is mentioned over 3000 times in the Bible, and warns that "Jesus was crucified when you mixed the church and the government."

Brooke lost her younger son to cancer in the spring of 2003. He was four years old. "They say it's not environmental, but I've watched too many kids die of cancer," she says, eyes filling with tears. "Thank God the church was there for us."

But the same people who brought her family food, who prayed with her and comforted her, who came to her child's funeral, would soon fall on the opposite side of the divide that fractured her denomination.

After the US Episcopal Church ordained its first gay bishop in August 2003, many of its more conservative parishes threatened to withhold funds and even break away from the national church. St. Francis, where Brooke attended, was the largest Episcopalian church in Kentucky and belonged to the dissenting faction.

"All of a sudden, when Robinson was ordained, there was this huge uproar," Brooke recalls. "I had no idea that the church that had been there for me every step of the way was a whole bunch of ultraconservatives.

"All of this started only six months after Sam died. It was just awful," says Brooke. She says that she tried to get involved, to talk to the rector, and even ran for vestry. "There's no way to describe it. Nobody was ever openly ugly to me, but you just sort of knew who was on what side."

But this past January, Brooke decided she'd had enough, and she and her family left St. Francis for the more liberal St. Matthew's. "I stuck it out as long as I could... it was so hard to leave, because I kept saying this is no more church than it is mine."

Maybe it's just human nature at work. But I am struck by how similar Brooke's story sounds to that of the Ransdells, leaving their home church because it had grown too liberal for their tastes. And I can't help thinking of the parish back in Waynesville, breaking apart like an iceberg in summer seas.

As much as Jesus preached on reconciliation and peacemaking, you would think that Christians might have an edge on getting along with their neighbors. I guess not. There's no fight like a church fight, or so the saying goes.

Back in the 1970s, the Southern Baptist Convention experienced what was quite possibly the church fight of the century. Depending on who you talk to, they call it the "Fundamentalist Takeover" or the "Conservative Resurgence." But no one denies the magnitude of its consequences. When Reverend Frank Page became SBC president in June 2006, he was seen by many as a moderating influence within the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Upon election, he immediately affirmed his support for the Conservative Resurgence.

"We have not changed nearly as much as they have," Reverend Joe Phelps insists. "In 1979 the Southern Baptists took a hard turn to the right, and basically said we don't want to do the big tent anymore. We don't want to have churches like Highland in our family anymore. They basically cut us off, over a course of years."

Highland Baptist Church is now part of the more moderation Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and removed its last official ties to the SBC from its bylaws in 2003.

A decade earlier, the rising conservative tide had reached the denomination's most prestigious seminary. When Al Mohler, Jr. took over as president of Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1993, more than 60 percent of faculty members left (either voluntarily or involuntarily) rather than conform to Mohler's more conservative theology—what he termed "confessional fidelity." The seminary's Carver School of Social Work was dissolved entirely.

"[Highland Baptist] was in many ways a seminary church," Pat recalls. "We had lots of students, we had seminary professors that were members here, and when they began to suffer, literally—they began to have people who spied on their classes, had their jobs threatened... I think that's been one of the hardest things."

She continues, her voice thick with emotion. “I just loved fall, when all the new students came in. I had worked for five years with a seminary couples class that I just loved. And to lose that, these people that you sent out around the world...”

But she doesn’t blame the younger generation for staying away. “I think it’s dangerous for a young person who’s going to be a minister to align themselves with a church that is seen as more liberal. They want a job when they get out of seminary!”

For Pat, it is not belief in the authority of the Bible that divides her from conservatives, so much as belief in the authority of the interpreters.

“I personally do not believe that we can interpret Scripture for other people,” she maintains. “We have our own interpreter, our own comforter... The voice of the Holy Spirit is something that I’ve learned. It’s like learning the voice of your child or someone that you love over a period of years. You recognize the voice. And I hope I recognize it much more quickly now. And I do depend on the Word because I don’t think, in my life, the Holy Spirit has ever told me to do something that was not scriptural.”

As radical as this idea might sound, it has a long history. Even the most conservative Southern Baptists still hold to something called “the priesthood of all believers”—the doctrine that all believers have direct access to God and can interpret Scripture for themselves. For centuries, this idea was the underpinning of Baptists’ passionate defense of religious liberty and separation of church and state. Terms like “soul freedom” and “the rights of conscience inalienable” have long been part of Baptist vocabulary. This is why Baptist churches have no common creed, and why, for all its rigid doctrine and strong rhetoric, the Southern Baptist Convention still has no direct

financial or administrative power over its member churches, only the ability to refuse a "wayward church" a seat at the annual convention.

I ask Joe and Pat if they see any way for religious conservatives and progressives to reconcile in the future.

"This sounds silly, but I think we just start reading the Bible," he answers. "I want to see the fundamentalists start reading Jesus again. Not just use him as a slogan, but read the Beatitudes. Read the Sermon on the Mount. And then see if we can't find some common ground."

He points to the example of Baptists and Catholics learning to work together over the past half century, despite their historic and doctrinal differences. "Now I'm open to hearing where we need to read. 'Cause I don't want to act like we've got it and they need to figure out where we are. We need to find out what we're missing in our equation too."

Joe suggests that the conclusions we reach may not matter quite as much as we think they do. "Although Jesus told lots of stories about what the Kingdom of Heaven would look like, I don't recall any story about what people thought. About their doctrine. About whether they were pre-millennial, or post-millennial, or what their doctrine of election was, or predestination..." says Joe. "The criteria [for salvation] in Matthew 25 is 'Welcome, you who fed me when I was hungry. Gave me water when I was thirsty. Gave me clothes when I was naked. Came to visit me when I was sick and in prison.'"

To its credit, the Highview megachurch provided snacks, coffee, and a golf cart for the elderly protesters who showed up to demonstrate against Justice Sunday in person. Apart from that, I can't see how feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick

and those in prison played any part in either church rally here in Louisville three weeks ago. And yet Christians on both sides felt compelled to act.

It all comes back to drawing a line. Picking a side. Saying "this is who we are" and "this is who you are." And then calling on faith for backup.

It's comforting to believe that in the cosmic scheme of things, this all amounts to one big high school debate—you're judged not on what side you're on, but on how well you argue your points and whether you play by the rules. Afterwards, we all get pizza and ice cream before the long bus ride home. Except that these beliefs are not just abstract principles. They get applied, and they can do tremendous damage.

Pat tells me that in order to build dialogue, she will often compromise on small things. I ask what are the things she would never compromise on. I expect her to say something like "equal rights for gays and lesbians," "social justice," or maybe "nonviolence." But her answer contains no slogans or talking points.

"To me a big thing would be to save my own skin and hurt someone in the process," she says quietly. "To sell out. I always try not to hurt another person, to devalue or dehumanize them. To deny Christ would be certainly something I would never do... Not knowingly to exploit anyone."

I want to shout her message to the rooftops, and yet it scares me. What Pat is saying mostly boils down to being nice to people while publicly acknowledging your faith. It's an admirable way to live your life. But how can these ideals counter a movement based on certainty and absolutes? How can it ever persuade someone else? How can this possibly compete with televised events reaching millions of households, position papers and 1-800 numbers to call your senators? The stakes are not low here.

It's not like what happened to the Southern Baptist Convention and their seminary here in Louisville couldn't happen to other institutions around the country. Boards of education, governor's offices, even judicial appointments...

Gary North of the Christian Reconstructionist movement, a man who advocates the overthrow of democracy and a return to slavery and public stonings in the United States,[1] speaks openly of his admiration for the SBC takeover, and its value as a model for securing control of the political process.[1]

All this talk about persecution, maybe it's getting to me. I can't help remembering that religious freedom, three or four centuries back, wasn't about losing your job as preacher or getting kicked out of your church. People were killed for their beliefs. Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites and others. When religion becomes a part of the state's mechanism for control, any dissent from the dominant belief structure threatens that control.

I think most Christians would like to find common ground between religious progressives, moderates, and conservatives. I think we are reassured knowing that we all share the same faith, all hold sacred the name of Jesus Christ.

But I am convinced that the differences matter at least as much. And I wish we talked about them more. Seeking peace does not mean silence. Allow your opponent to define you, and your core beliefs and values quietly disappear.

I am not very good at remaining impartial as a journalist. By now, that should be fairly clear. But as a Christian, I am trying to treat the other side with love and respect. And acknowledge that I can learn from them.

I don't think that any of the people I met regretted taking a stand, even when it brought painful consequences. In the end, I'm not sure they had another choice.

PART III: CHASING THE HOLY GHOST

1. Clarksville, Tennessee

Interstate 40 coils tightly coming down from Appalachia—hairpin turns cutting through green mountainside, skinny lanes flanked by guard rails and concrete barriers. By now I should know better than to pass tractor trailers on these tight curves, but I'm late and temptation wins. I slam the accelerator.

What was I thinking driving nine hours to a Pentecostal tent revival when I've got to be back in Charlotte for a wedding tomorrow afternoon? Fall is revival season in the South. It's not like I couldn't have found something a lot closer to home.

Brother Anthony Wynn, Anointed Country Preacher of Miracle Deliverance Tabernacle, is a televangelist of sorts, but his church has only about 150 members. When I called the number on his website, Wynn answered his own phone.

He asked if I'd been around many Pentecostal churches.

I told him I grew up Episcopalian.

He invited me to attend and then warned, "Pentecostals are some of the meanest and craziest people you are likely to meet."

Pentecostals' mode of worship seemed strange and possibly dangerous—speaking in tongues, shaking, prophesying, barking like dogs or rolling around on the floor. I imagined myself trapped in the midst of the spectacle, helplessly observing the chaos. Worse, what if I found myself caught up in it?

Veering northwest on I-24, the road gets empty, although it's early on a Friday evening. I see giant white smokestacks rising out of the forest, but few other signs of human habitation. After leaving the freeway, there's still a good 30 miles to my

destination. Clarksville has the bleakness I associate with military towns in the South. Factories and railroad tracks near the river appear to be abandoned. Downtown is full of crude cinderblock buildings, huge patriotic billboards, topless bars, ammo shops, and of course, churches.

Fort Campbell, home of the Army's 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles, is a few miles west of city limits. Its boundaries roughly parallel the route I am taking, but I don't see any helicopters out doing maneuvers. After a stretch of strip malls and lonely motels, only farms and houses remain to punctuate thick woods. Vegetation overhangs the narrow divided highway. I know that I'm close when I spot the first handwritten sign pointing the way.

The tent revival is impossible to mistake for anything else, except perhaps a circus camped in the middle of the woods. The tent is large, with red and white stripes. It glows amiably as twilight settles over the hills. The evening is chilly—unusual for late September, but of course, Clarksville is north of Charlotte. I choose comfort over professionalism and pull a thick gray fleece on top of my crisp black blazer.

With some reluctance, I finally emerge from my battered black Acura hatchback. I have been warned that Pentecostals don't trust outsiders and have strict dress codes for women. I don't know how they will react to me. Last month I took the blonde and red streaks out of my hair so that I could blend in better for this project. But I draw the line at driving nine hours in a skirt and pantyhose.

To my relief, a man walks over, extends his hand and walks me down the gravel drive to the tent. His name is Mark and his young son is Colton. They moved here from Michigan two years ago with their pastor, William Wiggins.

Tent Revival, Clarksville, Tennessee

"I didn't have a job or anything when I got here, but I found a job in three days as a meat cutter," says Mark.

Wiggins' church, Love Tabernacle Ministries, is hosting tonight's event. Brother Anthony Wynn is the guest preacher. Inside, the tent is nearly empty but the gospel band is playing like it's a full house, with a fast, hard-driving honky tonk beat. The women on stage all wear long skirts while the men have pressed pants and ties. I learn later that this is the Wiggins family band. They grew up traveling and performing together, back in Michigan. The pastor's wife is playing guitar.

I recognize Anthony and Shelia Wynn from the photos on their website. They look to be in their late thirties or early forties. Shelia has vivid blue eyes and wears her blonde hair in Farah Fawcett waves. Anthony is tall and thin, with slicked-back sandy hair and a warm smile.

They greet me like an old friend and thank me for coming all this way. "The presence of the Lord is just so sweet here tonight," Shelia remarks. "Can you feel it?"

Maybe it is the simple euphoria of finally being out of the car after all those hours of driving, but I think I know what she is talking about. There is warmth here, despite the chilly night—a sense of comfort and welcome among strangers.

"Our daddy bought his first tent in '66. I was six years old then," Brother Anthony Wynn tells me as we wait for the space to fill up. "In '83 I got my first tent. This is probably tent number ten or twelve. There's not as many tents as there used to be. It's kind of a highway and hedge ministry. No walls.

"We rode out some tornado weather in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, with hundred mile winds bending stakes. I had a tent tore up near Pennington Gap, Virginia in a storm. Tore one end of it. Had to take it down, sew it up, and have it ready by the next service."

Wynn recalls a visit to Harlan, Kentucky.

"A minister didn't like us because we were talking about the Holy Ghost. He tried to get us run out of town. I really felt like the Lord had sent me there. I rented the lot for $75, but then the businessman that rented me the lot didn't give a receipt... We weren't liked. We weren't wanted. I just felt the Enemy was fighting us for some reason. I called my daddy and family and got some of them to come up—they drove all the way up from Georgia to Kentucky to be with us and help us pray.

"On that Thursday they told me they was going to get a warrant for me, so I went up on the mountain to pray about daylight. About seven o'clock I knew I'd touched the Lord and I come off the mountain. The Harlan County Chief of Police came by and he said 'Mr. Wynn, I heard you preach last night and I feel like you're here to help our people. They said they're going to get a warrant for you, and if they do, I'll have to arrest you or let you leave town. But why don't you just go ahead and stay and see if they do something?'

"I felt the Lord had delivered me. So we went ahead and stayed. And my mother in law come that night and give her heart to the Lord and got healed. So that's probably why the Enemy was fighting us."

He continues.

"We've had tent revivals in Indiana, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Florida, and Texas," says Brother Wynn, pausing while the music plays on.

"Our desire is to tell people that Jesus loves them. Go to where the people are. Some come from curiosity. Some come to hear the music. Some come to please a friend. A lot of them end up getting touched and their lives change."

His daddy is still living, fasting five months out of the year and preaching at a one-room church in Copperhill, Tennessee. I am confused because Wynn sometimes refers to his family being from Georgia and sometimes from Tennessee. Later I check my road atlas and learn that his daddy's hometown is on the state line where Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina meet—an hour away from the nearest interstate, national forest on all sides, and only a few miles from the schoolhouse where the modern-day Pentecostal movement was rumored to begin.

Christianity is evolving and mutating again, a strain that first grew in the Blue Ridge Mountains spreading rapidly across the globe, continuing to change and bifurcate. The 1906 Azusa Street Revival in downtown Los Angeles is usually considered the birth of modern Pentecostalism, but the Shearer Schoolhouse Revival in the southwest corner of North Carolina predates it by a decade. The movement that followed held special appeal for the poor and disenfranchised, allowing women a greater role in worship and encouraging interracial services, even in the rural Jim Crow-era South.

Over time, the movement split along doctrinal and racial lines: Assemblies of God, Church of God, Apostolic, Holiness, and Oneness churches, the "Signs Following" snake handlers, and countless smaller sects and unaffiliated churches. Followers are

typically strict in their codes of behavior (no alcohol or gambling, no makeup, pants, or short hair for women) and exuberant in their modes of worship.

Today, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing branch of Christianity, with at least 500 million members worldwide. It has huge strength in the developing world, particularly Latin America and Africa. Through the charismatic movement, it has made inroads into Catholicism and mainline Protestant denominations as well. Speaking in tongues is believed to be proof of God's favor, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit first recorded in the book of Acts, revealed to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost after Christ's ascension to Heaven.

Pentecostals believe that they are carrying out a mission suppressed for nearly two thousand years. They consider the spontaneous mass revivals of the early 20th century to be the most important religious development since the days of the early Christians. The Protestant Reformation or Constantine's conversion of the Roman Empire would pale in comparison. History has yet to prove them wrong.

The opening prayer is the first sign that something is different about this service. As people come to the microphone to speak, a cacophony of voices from the crowd accompanies them. Murmured individual prayers overlap and blend together. Some of the prayers are not in English.

Speaking in tongues has distinctive and alien sound—short syllables repeated over and over, interspersed with longer words and phrases resembling Hebrew or another language outside the Indo-European family tree. It's eerily similar to the sounds my

husband makes while talking in his sleep, especially if he is feverish or having restless dreams.

One of the singers from the band walks up to the microphone. Her teeth are slightly crooked and she wears a colorful striped skirt with a slit on one side.

"I don't know if you believe in the healing power of the Lord, but I felt the Lord with me in the ER," she proclaims. "My pastor come in while they were doing their thing, laid his hands upon me, and proceeded to pray... the doctor was saying one second, 'Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Hall, you're having a stroke.' After the pastor prayed, the doctor said, 'Mrs. Hall, you're feeling better aren't you! Mrs. Hall, you're starting to move your mouth on one side.' And that's when I knew all was well."

More music follows, and more prayers: prayers for anyone who does not know the Lord Jesus, prayers for the troops in Iraq, prayers for a young man in a motorcycle accident, prayers for those who got lost on the way to the tent revival tonight and are late as a result.

Stragglers keep coming, and at one point an entire caravan rolls in. Little old ladies in jean jackets with white hair piled high take seats alongside parents, teenagers, and children. A playpen gets set up in one corner of the tent. It's cold enough to see your breath and many of the folding metal chairs are still empty, but the pace quickens. People clap and move around. The floor is shaking from the amp.

I have often wondered why people raise their hands when they feel moved by the Spirit. Is it to reach out and touch some unseen force emanating toward them? Or is it the ancient gesture of the witness stand, raising one hand to testify?

Brother Wiggins returns to the pulpit and in his heavy upper Midwest accent, introduces Brother Wynn, guest preacher. Wynn sings before he preaches, an old gospel tune called "I'll keep holding onto Jesus," backed by three guitars and drums.

"I believe God has some good memories of tents," he begins. "The Tabernacle used to be in a tent. I believe sometimes He just shows up in a special, special way. People come when it's cold out. They bring their babies. Heaven rejoices."

Wynn preaches a familiar evangelistic message: "Jesus loved us when we were yet *sinners*."

He reminisces about evangelizing with his daddy, in tents and door-to-door. Then he talks about his own relationship with God and starts to cry. The preaching goes through cycles of rising and falling emotion. At times, Wynn breaks into in a chorus of hallelujahs, at other times, into tongues. He ends by asking everyone to join hands and pray. People start coming up to the front, where the altar rail would be if this tent had one. He moves among them, blessing and laying on hands.

I decide I will go up to the front and ask for a blessing. This is not something I have done before, not at any other church. Anthony Wynn prays with me, placing his hands over mine. He prays for the success of my book, that it will find the right audience and be an instrument for God's will. He prays that I may one day have an even greater, deeper experience of the Lord.

I am bemused by that last part (a reminder that in the eyes of these people, I am half-saved at best) but I sense no malice or condemnation.

After the service I chat a bit more with Shelia Wynn. She says that she always accompanies her husband on tent revivals. Most of the time, their two teenaged sons

come too. It startles me to realize Shelia and Anthony are only a few years younger than my own parents.

I walk around talking to various members of the Wiggins clan, and to Bill, a 70-year-old retired General Electric factory worker from Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Bill came to the Pentecostal faith late in life. He has never received the gift of tongues, he says, but that doesn't bother him.

"When I go home tonight, I'll go outside and look at the sky and pray awhile. I have two kitty cats that go with me, Percy and Tabby. Percy will get up on my chest and look at me. I do that every night," he tells me.

"I live in the country and I'm close to the Lord. I don't know where He is. I don't know how big He is. But I know He's there."

2. Charlotte, North Carolina

The motel in Clarksville is the worst place I have yet stayed—cockroaches scuttling in the corners and a noisy argument down the hall. It's not a major inconvenience, though, since I need to be on the road by 6 AM on Saturday.

The next day, despite my best intentions, I end up running late once again. The wedding ceremony takes place in a soaring stone Presbyterian church in an old Charlotte neighborhood, the kind of place where hats and white gloves are no longer required, but one still feels faintly inadequate without their protection. Blake and I slip in just as the sanctuary doors are closing. The reception is at a renovated theater loft across town.

My friend from book club is marrying the son of a former North Carolina governor. They met at a NASCAR race on an outing for Wake Forest alumni. The

wedding is actually very understated by the standards of Charlotte's elite, but it is still a vastly different world from where I was the night before. None of the guests from fine old families introduce themselves, but our table is too busy sampling the signature cocktails to mind.

Next month I will be 30 years old. Blake and I have lived in Charlotte for most of our adult lives. We have a dog and a cute house in a fashionable, inner ring neighborhood. Our professional lives keep us more than busy. We have both served on philanthropic boards and have even been invited to some of the "right" parties. But something is still missing. Most of my old friends have either left town or settled down to raise a family. What's stopping us, I wonder? By now, this should be our world too. I wonder if it will ever actually feel that way.

A few days after returning from the tent revival, I call back Love Tabernacle Ministries in Clarksville. William Wiggins has developed laryngitis after preaching for seven straight days, so his daughter Tracey gives the interview instead.

I learn that she is the woman who got up that first night and told the story of being healed from a mini-stroke. This is not an unprecedented event in Tracey's 39 years of life.

Before the birth of her first son, Elijah, she says, ultrasound scans showed a condition called encephalocele, a neural tube defect where the brain develops outside the skull.

"I respected the doctors," she tells me. "I accepted their advice and diagnosis and prognosis. I said, 'I am not in denial. I am taking what you're telling me to God in prayer.' The neurosurgeon wrote on the medical records that we had strong faith."

Despite the severity of the condition, Tracey opted to continue with the pregnancy. "When Elijah was born, all of the brain was in the skull. The brain did grow and develop with him. A sac had formed and had sealed the opening of his skull. So it was a miracle." After several operations in his first two years, Elijah was able to live a normal life. "He's a bright child," says his mother. "He got up and testified for the tent revival."

Tracey credits God with saving her from an accident at a four-way stop sign, and for helping her bricklayer husband, Scotty, learn how to read as an adult. "He wanted to read the Bible for himself," she says. "People need to know that God can answer that prayer too."

It's hard to see a downside in overcoming adult illiteracy, but I wonder about the rest of her stories. If you believe that God can step in and intervene at any time, does that make you less likely to wear a seatbelt or take prenatal vitamins? Would not a God so personally active and involved remove a certain level of responsibility and autonomy from human beings? And would you not feel anger, even hatred, any time that God did permit illness, injury, or death?

Tracey believes that God told her to move the family's ministry from Michigan to Tennessee. "I had just sat down with a fresh cup of coffee," she recalls. "There was something on the news about Tennessee... I felt the presence of the Lord. I remember

crying. Did I hear an audible voice? No. It was as if somebody had just whispered to me, this is going to happen."

She says that when she told her husband, he said that he had received the same revelation in prayer, but kept it to himself to wait and see. She talked to her father, the pastor, and he told her that he too had felt the ministry would move.

And so, two years ago, like Abraham from the land of Ur, like Lot and his unfortunate wife, like the Pilgrims, the Quakers, the Moravians, and the Anabaptists seeking religious freedom in the North American colonies, the Wiggins family moved from Michigan to the promised land of Tennessee. Tracey and her husband had their own bricklaying business back in Michigan. They owned a house in the country with 11 acres of land. They put everything up for auction. She says that their income dropped by 60 percent the first year after the move, but they have since made up the difference.

"I believe that you gain knowledge of the Lord through experience," says Tracey. "All I can do is tell you what God has done for me and how he brought me through."

I think about all the time that Blake and I have spent poring over the *Places Rated Almanac*, wondering if we should move out to join friends on the West Coast, or closer to my family in New England. How nice to have the decision made for you, to hear a voice in your head that says, *"Go there."*

I wonder if God has ever spoken to me like that. What if I'm just not listening in the right way? Would I believe the message I received? What kind of sign would I not dismiss as the power of suggestion or chance?

It's strange. I have always felt more connected to the Holy Spirit than to the other two branches of the Trinity. Maybe it was because Spirit seemed less gendered than Father and Son, invisible and immanent, not confined by human form or human roles. Maybe it was just that people at church talked less about the Spirit, leaving me free to discover this aspect of God in my own time, on my own terms. I am deeply protective of these experiences, and honestly, not all that comfortable writing about them. So I guess I am automatically suspicious of any religion that claims to deliver the Holy Spirit on demand.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a recognized scientific phenomenon. A 2006 study by the University of Pennsylvania showed changes in blood flow to the frontal lobes, parietal lobes, and left caudate—a different pattern of brain activity than during other types of religious practice such as meditation or singing hymns. This is not to say that one particular pattern of brain activity is by definition more holy than another, or that some Pentecostals don't fake. (There is often intense pressure to speak in tongues, since it is believed to be evidence that an individual has been saved.)

And then there is the psychology of crowds—a particular emotional state that builds when you combine pheromones with a powerful rhythm. The membrane between self and group becomes a little more permeable. You feel the current, the energy... you want to get swept up, to lose yourself in the collective moment.

One month after the tent revival I felt the same burst of release and renewal under a very different tent—at a Halloween party outside an abandoned warehouse, wearing a black bustier with vinyl pants and dancing to a thudding techno beat.

I have seen young women at concerts spontaneously raise their arms toward the sound emanating from speakers in *exactly* the same gesture used by Pentecostals and evangelicals. Did they learn it attending Christian youth rallies in their teens, I wonder, or is it something more innate?

Even if this phenomenon can be described as a purely biological response to stimuli, I suspect that people tap into something old and deep, even sacred, at all these gatherings—just as I suspect it is not coincidence that the music in a Pentecostal church sounds a lot like rock and roll. Some 1700 years after the Greco-Roman pantheon fell out of favor, Apollo and Dionysus are still at war. As much as Christianity has tried to fashion itself as the religion of light and order, something dark and ecstatic stirs at its core.

3. Athens, Tennessee

I figured that I should see Brother Anthony Wynn preach again, this time at his home church. Although not as far away as the tent revival, it's still a five hour drive. The town of Athens seems small and pleasant, tucked into the western foothills of the Smokies. It boasts two small colleges, several attractive residential neighborhoods, and even a few blocks of downtown. In another life, I suppose I could have found myself in a place like this, teaching Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, and William Faulkner to undergraduates, settled and content.

The map that I printed out seemed clear enough, but the next morning I discover that it bears about as much resemblance to Athens, Tennessee as it does to Athens,

Greece. After 30 minutes of circling and retracing my route, I pull into a gap in the median and stop to consider my options. A sheriff's car pulls up almost immediately.

The officer wants to know if I need help. I ask if he knows where Miracle Deliverance Tabernacle is.

"You'll never get there," he says. "Follow me."

I follow the sheriff's car back to downtown, along a side street, then up another twisting street and along a country road that eventually turns to dirt. I am forced to agree that there is no way I could have gotten here on my own. Finally we arrive at the church's gravel parking lot.

"Brother Wynn has a real good reputation in town," the officer tells me. After I thank him and assure him that I can get back to town on my own, he drives off and leaves me in the parking lot. The service should have started 20 minutes ago, so I am surprised and relieved when another car pulls up. The elderly woman in a black and white hounds tooth jacket gets out and introduces herself as Zilpha, proudly announcing that she is a newlywed, married six months ago. Her husband is waiting inside, but she was running just a little bit late this morning. We walk inside together, and I grab a seat next to hers.

The church has a wood paneled ceiling and a dark green carpet. Two gilded lion sculptures and a painting of a lion in a temperate forest occupy the front of the sanctuary, near the altar. Otherwise, the space contains little ornamentation.

The crowd numbers about 120 people. Given the church's rural location, I am surprised that a substantial minority are nonwhite. The African-American couple to my right greets me warmly. Most people are standing up, praising God in English or speaking in tongues. One woman with long brown hair and a red blazer is ululating with

her arms upraised, an unearthly, keening sound. She walks over to Zilpha and wraps her arms around her, continuing to pray in her own unknowable language.

When Wynn comes to the pulpit, he starts by singing into the microphone, just as he did at the tent revival. I don't recognize the song, but the main refrain is "I want to be like Jesus." After his opening greeting and prayer, he preaches about the Congressional midterm election three days away. He does not tell anyone how to vote, but when he says, "A nation divided against itself cannot stand," and talks about how sometimes a family just has to make a decision and stick with it, his position is not hard to guess. The theme of Wynn's sermon is conflict, external and internal.

"Satan is happy if he can get a conflict going on inside of you," he warns, shaking a plastic bottle covered in a paper bag. The bottle is supposed to represent alcohol, but since Wynn doesn't touch the stuff, he uses Gatorade instead.

"As a little boy, I remember my mom screaming and crying," he tells his flock. "A man was standing in the room with an ax drawn back. Our neighbor had got drunk and hauled the man's horse and let the horse fall out of the trailer, and he dragged an expensive horse for five miles because he was drunk. Because of drunkenness, one neighbor's trying to kill another with an ax. And if my mom hadn't got between them..."

Wynn goes on. "I've seen maggots on the table, and my mom changed a little baby's diaper that hadn't been changed in a week because mama and daddy were drunk, and these babies eating bugs and maggots."

By now he is shouting, and the crowd shouts back. "A part of me's got to die," he tells them, "in order to get closer to Jesus."

Emotion surges through the room, ebbs and builds again.

"Take it to the altar and pray it through," he exhorts.

The congregation begins to move forward, while musicians sing the words to Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me."

As before, there seems to be no set order to the final portion of worship, just a long interlude of prayers, tongues, and music, followed by Wynn's closing prayer. He ends by asking God, "Please, don't let the Enemy use this message and beat somebody up."

After the service I talk to Betty, the African-American woman sitting on the other side of me. She and her husband have been coming to this church for seven years. She is proud that she was able to get Wynn's sermons carried on a mostly black Christian radio station in Georgia.

I ask what appeals to her about this particular church and pastor. She answers without hesitation. "He doesn't compromise."

The Wynns invite me to lunch after worship is over, along with Alice, the church secretary, and one other family. We exchange cell phone numbers and I join the caravan. Our destination turns out to be a chain restaurant called Charley's, in a strip mall near the freeway. Two tables pushed together are barely big enough for our party. I discover that I share with everyone else at the table a strong preference for Dr. Pepper, above all other soft drink choices.

Matt is a truck driver, in his mid thirties, with close-cropped dark hair and intelligent brown eyes. He wears a long-sleeved black work shirt with a black t-shirt

underneath, and I sense a bit of the rebel about him. When I compliment him on how friendly everyone has been at church, he just laughs.

"It kind of makes you wonder when you drive back into those woods what you're getting into, don't it?"

He says he and his wife Amy moved here from Chattanooga after watching Wynn's television broadcasts. "You can tell he means what he says. With a lot of these televangelists, it's a pastor's get-rich-quick scheme. There are so many phonies out there."

The rest of the table is busy talking amongst themselves. "I've got full confidence that he's not just coming up with a sermon that he's buying off the Internet or something like that, but he's really spending time with God to get a message," Matt continues.

"You can't buy your way to salvation," he insists. "There isn't one thing God needs from me. Everything from God comes from grace. It's free."

Eventually, Brother Wynn turns back to me. I learn that he worked as a mechanic in a Duracell factory before he started preaching. He tells me about a time when he growing up and the family was hungry, without any groceries.

"The Lord woke my daddy up about three o' clock in the morning, and daddy started driving with a friend," he recalls. "They came upon a wrecked chicken truck. My daddy's driving a pickup. The state patrol officer comes up and says we've got a truckload of frozen chicken in sealed boxes. Would you haul some of it off? And we had a nice empty freezer... The Holy Ghost, it's with you 24 hours."

Wynn talks about his hopes for the audio ministry—a volunteer is sharing CDs with soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan—and his hopes for the church.

"Pentecostal people put a lot of emphasis on speaking in tongues," he acknowledges. "But that's just a drop in the bucket. The Holy Ghost, it's a comforter. It's literally the Spirit of the Lord. It'll teach you. It'll warn you when there's trouble ahead to pray. It gives you peace. It's a real experience, and it literally lives in your heart. It's not just an emotional feeling. I know how it's affected me, and I'd like to see every young person in our church receive it."

Recalling my conversation with Tracey, I ask my recurring question. How do you know that the Holy Ghost is speaking and not just your own hopes, desires, and fears?

"He will never contradict the Bible," he tells me.

So we are back to the old literalism debate. It's not one I relish having, not here, sitting around a crowded restaurant table with people who have shown me nothing but warmth and courtesy. I let the point slide.

"When you don't do right, the Holy Ghost will gouge you," Brother Wynn continues. "You can't sleep, you can't rest. You might offend somebody or hurt somebody... He's trying to make you get it right. Then if you override that, your heart gets harder and colder. The Holy Ghost is really there to try to teach you to be like Jesus, to love people, to treat people right."

If only every part of the Bible agreed with the spirit Jesus preached! What about the verses in the Old and New Testament that condemn and judge, that advocate violence, subjugate women, condone slavery? What about the contradictions that show up from the very first chapter of Genesis on?

Trying to think of a safe way to pursue the topic, I ask why people would still need the Spirit, if they have the Word for guidance?

"It's like algebra," Brother Wynn answers quickly. "You need the instructor to explain it to you. That's one reason we have so many denominations. People have interpreted the Bible without the Holy Ghost... The Holy Ghost will never tell me one thing and you another."

So I guess that's the question. How do you listen, and whose voice do you trust?

It's late in the afternoon when I walk out of the restaurant with my leftover chicken salad in a box, dazed from an onslaught of hugs and entreaties to visit again. The people I met here and in Clarksville defy my stereotypes and expectations. I don't dismiss their experience, but I can't accept all of their answers. I am not even sure that we are searching for the same God.

I have a confession to make. I am not typically someone who spends time listening to preachers on the Internet, but the reason I decided to drive to that tent revival was a sermon I heard online. When I stumbled across Anthony Wynn's website, what struck me most was the preacher's raw need. His voice trembled as he prayed for anointing. He compared his soul to a wounded deer, panting after the Lord. He talked about how the devil will follow you to Wal-Mart when you're depressed and "get you to spend $100 you don't need to spend." He railed against ministries that deceive and exploit their followers. At times he broke into tongues. At other times he sang plaintively, almost crying. At the end, he prayed for God to touch the crowd, "but don't touch us so much that we'll never be thirsty again."

I knew what he was talking about. I knew that sense of wounded need, anyway, knew it all too well. But I am still thirsty.

Driving home, I remember another visit to this state, a little over a year ago. I was covering a televised rally at a Nashville megachurch in support of President Bush's nominees to the Supreme Court. The event was predictable enough: songs of praise and salvation, a giant cross flanked by equally huge American flags, and rhetoric alternating between the triumphant and the paranoid. What stayed with me longer were the conversations I had with liberal Christians on the same trip.

Our small focus group met over pizza in the basement of Saint Ann's Episcopal Church in East Nashville. Three women and one man spoke eloquently and passionately of their convictions. I admired their work to improve Nashville public schools and affirm the place of gays and lesbians within the church. I felt the pain of their isolation within a conservative part of the country and within their own faith communities. One woman, a writer of Christian's children's books, was afraid to reveal her name for fear of retaliation by her large evangelical publisher.

Towards the end of the session, Tom, the oldest member of the group, casually remarked that he did not believe in heaven. In his view, God was simply another word for the process of growth, change, and relationship. I would never want to dictate what anyone else should believe. I can't tell you who qualifies as a "real Christian." But his words made my heart sink.

Why do people on my side of the political divide have such a hard time believing in God? Are religious progressives a contradiction in terms? I don't mean God as an abstraction—God as justice, God as love, God as your favorite ethical construct. You can be an atheist and uphold all these ideals, living honorably and well.

I was looking for more. Most of the time I was afraid to say it out loud, even to the people I interviewed.

Seek and ye shall find.

I was searching for the one thing we're all taught not to expect—atheists because it would contradict a rational scientific worldview, believers because it would remove the requirement for faith. I was seeking reports and rumors, clues to the identity of an unseen power. If the same God could touch the lives of people with opposite beliefs, that might be the most persuasive evidence of all.

PART IV: OLD BATTLEFIELDS

1. Jolo, West Virginia

McDowell County, West Virginia is like no other landscape I have seen. The terrain here is on a different scale from the Appalachians further south. Instead of long ridges, the mountains are crinkled, folded on top of themselves. Summits measure only an acre or so across. There is no flat ground to be seen, only steep hills and deep hollows. This makes for slow going, especially on gravel roads.

In the forest I spot a huge white sheepdog watching over goats and a brown Clydesdale horse. Further down the road, three crosses rise above a sloped meadow full of wooly brown and black cattle. Hilltop cemeteries are common as well.

In some ways, it reminds me of the North—stone walls, wooded slopes, and two-story clapboard houses. But there are some major differences. On one ridgeline I spot a tarpaper shack with a small enclosure next to it. A few goats, a dog, and a skinny horse peer out from the wire mesh. What strikes me is not so much the poverty itself, but the fact that people living in these conditions have the skill and resources to keep animals at all. Elsewhere in the country, subsistence farming has all but disappeared. Even in most rural areas, if you keep sheep or goats on a small tract of land, you likely do it as a hobby, not because you need profit or protein from your flock.

I have come to see The Church of the Lord Jesus with Signs Following, one of the most famous snake handling churches in the South. I had read the obituary of longtime pastor and retired coal miner Bob Elkins, who had died last week of heart failure at the age of 80. I was curious to see how the church would continue without him. The church

website lists a Saturday night service, and after checking Google Maps I realized I had just enough time to pack for one night and drive up by 7:30 PM.

Jolo isn't really much of a town—just a few houses and a gas station along a winding road at the bottom of a deep ravine. Finding the church is not hard, but five minutes before the listed start time, the parking lot is still empty. I get out and take a few pictures of the church in the fading light. It's a plain one-story building with white vinyl siding and a magnificent hand-painted sign: black letters on a green background, decorated with an eagle and three crosses. A creek flows loudly down the hill from the parking lot.

Just as I am beginning to contemplate the distance to the nearest hotel, a pickup truck pulls up with a teenager and an old man inside. I walk up and introduce myself.

"Are you members of the church here? Would you have a few minutes to talk?" I ask.

"We've got all the time the Lord Jesus allows us," says the old man. He gets out of the truck, and the teenager, his nephew Richard, drives off.

We go inside the church building, into a small room with a table, a microwave, and refrigerator. I notice a stack of paper plates smeared with cake crumbs in the back corner. At first I assume we're in a parish hall. Later I figure out that these are living quarters for my host, who introduces himself as Dewey Chafin.

Dewey has white hair and intense light blue eyes. He is a retired coal miner and Korean War veteran. He was born in 1933, but looks much older than his mid-seventies. His hands look like claws, the fingers knotted and swollen, but whether that's snakebite or arthritis I can't tell.

"We've had several that passed on," he tells me. "Both my brothers died in the last six months. My stepdad [Pastor Bob Elkins] died last week. I'm the only one that's left now."

Dewey Chafin has been featured in numerous documentaries, including films by National Geographic and Sundance Films. I recognized his name immediately from Dennis Covington's memorable book, *Salvation on Sand Mountain,* a first-person account of an outsider's initiation into the tightly knit, insular world of Appalachian snake handlers. The practice originated in southeastern Tennessee as an offshoot of the Pentecostal Holiness movement, spreading through backwoods Appalachia in the first half of the 20th century. Because snake handling is still legal in West Virginia, unlike most other parts of the country, practitioners here tend to be more open about talking with the media.

"It all comes down to one thing. It's a snake," says Dewey.

Dewey learned snake handling from his mother. "My mom was bit over 200 times. She was terrified of 'em. She said if God don't move on me, I don't touch 'em. I'm just not afraid of snakes. I used to be. God has taken that away from me."

Believers take their inspiration from Mark 16: 18—"They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them."

They believe that the snakes represent evil and Satan and that by exposing themselves to danger they are enacting the literal word of God, as a demonstration of their faith. They expect that believers will sometimes be bitten and even die—again, as demonstration of their extreme faith and so that outsiders can know that the risk is real.

Believers often choose not to seek medical treatment after being bitten, although Dewey claims, “If anyone got bit and wanted to go to the doctor, we’d go.”

As best I can understand Dewey’s position, he believes that since the commandment is part of the Bible, somebody’s got to observe it and they are the ones chosen to do so.

“We believe in being a doer of the Word, not a hearer only,” he says but adds, “If God ain’t led you to do it, don’t do it.”

Dewey keeps his snakes with his nephew. He still finds many snakes in the nearby woods. When he was younger, he would take road trips around the South to hunt for snakes and swap them with other reptile enthusiasts (most of whom did not keep their snakes for religious reasons.)

“They’re good, sociable people,” says Dewey. At various times he has had cottonmouths, copperheads, canebreak rattlesnakes, Pennsylvania rattlers, and Western and Eastern diamondback rattlers.

“A Western rattlesnake is harder to get victory over,” he tells me. “Your Western’s hotter-tempered. They’ll bite you three times while an Eastern diamondback gets you one time. You can’t dodge ‘em. I know from experience.”

In addition to handling poisonous snakes, church members drink strychnine and sometimes arsenic at services.

“Some use Red Devil Lye, but that’s not deadly. It just hurts your body,” says Dewey.

While he welcomes members of the media to attend services, Dewey is critical of some of the coverage they have received. “I know why they come. I know what they

come for," he says. "Newspapers are the words. One of them wrote that we were trying to handle fire. We don't do that! It's not in the Bible."

He is sensitive about the reputation of his sect. "Just because you're a snake handler doesn't mean you don't have feelings. They make you feel like some kind of freak."

Born in Matewan, Dewey has lived in Jolo since 1962. He is married, now separated, with no children of his own. Dewey's official title at the Church of the Lord Jesus is "trustee." He says he one was one of the original builders.

"My mother grew up handling serpents. Father didn't believe in it," says Dewey. "I heard him really curse God. Well how can you curse something that doesn't exist?"

Dewey's father died when he was still a boy. His mother remarried, this time to another snake handler, Pastor Bob Elkins, a traveling revival preacher from Kentucky.

When he was 15 years old, Dewey lied about his age and joined the army. He shows me his tattoos from that era. One is a voluptuous brunette pinup in a short green skirt. Another reads, "Here's mine. Where's yours?"

"I'm ashamed of all of 'em," he says.

Recalls Dewey, "I come home on furlough and I used to be rowdy and mean. I had two felony charges. My stepdad would give me bond, get me out of trouble."

The first time Dewey took up serpents he was 26 years old. "One day they was holding a revival and there was a blind preacher. I knew he was a man of God. I just got under conviction," he recalls. "I prayed through that night to the Holy Ghost and got the spirit of God in my life. That's when I started praying. I was afraid of Hell. Them that endure to the end are saved."

He continues. “There’s a Holy Spirit, but there’s also a Hellish Spirit. A lot of people don’t believe in the Lake of Fire but I do. Hell is a place of confinement.”

It’s dark outside now. He goes on. “God made Heaven and God made Hell.” The lights flicker as he says the word. “You’ve got to have people to fill up both places.”

“I was dead once,” he tells me.

Yes indeed, Dewey Chafin is one spooky old man. I glance toward the door and plan an escape route, just in case.

“I went into cardiac arrest,” he explains. “I went to the hospital for an operation on my ear and they gave me too much anesthetic. It has to be God. If you’re alive and God want you dead, there ain’t nothing you can do but die.”

Dewey goes into the small room where he sleeps and brings out old photographs—of his mother and kinfolk, of Pastor Bob Elkins, and many others passed on. We walk over to the sanctuary, which is adorned with taped photographs of congregation members holding serpents. Many are missing, Dewey notes critically.

The sanctuary has a low ceiling, wood paneling, and pews upholstered in olive green. Cymbals and drum kit occupy one corner. Handwritten cardboard signs spell out the rules of conduct for members: no tobacco, no gossiping, no talebearing, no lying, no backbiting, no bad language or by-words. Women are not allowed to cut their hair, or wear short sleeves, dresses above the knee, jewelry, or makeup. Men are not allowed to wear short sleeves, or have long hair, moustache, or beard.

Under the pulpit I spot a plastic bottle half full of light green liquid. I wonder if it is strychnine.

Dewey invites me to come back for services the next day, although he warns me there won't be much of a crowd. No one seems to know who will lead the church now that Reverend Elkins is gone. Perhaps Dewey, perhaps no one.

I walk out to the parking lot and he follows me out, talking the entire time. Come back this summer, he says, and he'll take me snake hunting. Dewey is a little strange, it's true, but I am not frightened of him anymore. He is just a lonely soul, clearly starved for human company.

I say goodbye and promise to come back tomorrow. I feel rude driving off, but if I am going to make it to my hotel by midnight on these roads, I should have been gone an hour ago.

I get the very last room at the Comfort Inn on US 460 in Grundy, Virginia—apparently the NASCAR race in Bristol, 75 miles away, has everything booked up. It's a good thing, too, because I don't think I could have stayed awake long enough to reach a hotel off the Interstate, in Bluefield or Wytheville. Fast food is out of the question, but at least there will be a continental breakfast in the morning.

True to my word, the next day I make the hourlong drive back over the state line to Jolo for the Sunday afternoon service. I arrive a little before 1 PM, but again, don't see a single car in the lot. I decide to kill a little time, take a few pictures.

I drive up the road a little ways and park next to an old cemetery. Litter blankets the shoulder of the road—not just isolated beer cans but a thick white and turquoise carpet of plastic bags, old tires, and other debris.

Next I drive back to the church. It is just after one o' clock now. Still no cars. This time I drive just around the bend and park across from a field of chained roosters. There are no hens, and each rooster is chained to its own turquoise plastic shelter, out of reach from one another. Cockfighting is only a misdemeanor in West Virginia.

I drive back a third time. It's nearly half past and the parking lot is still empty. I feel like I should go in and say something to Dewey (surely he has seen my car by now) but I feel like it will be awkward whatever I do. Instead, with some measure of guilt, I drive away for the third and final time.

"There's nothing made without God made it," Dewey had told me yesterday. "Where else did these mountains come from?"

Nothing made without God made it. Would Dewey extend this categorization to snakes, I wonder?

I think that he probably would.

I did not see any snakes being handled on this trip, but I did see one snake in the wild, while parked across from the rooster field. March is early for reptiles to be out but it's been a warm spring. I have no idea if it was poisonous. It was just a little one, wriggling through the mud before it disappeared.

I have to say, many of the stereotypes about West Virginia appear at first glance to be true. Stopping at the gas station on the way out, I saw a woman in denim cutoffs and two overweight boys zooming through the streets on ATVs. I wasn't in the gas station to buy gas—just a packet of M&Ms, because I knew I would not find an open restaurant for 30 miles at least. I also noticed cake mix, cooking oil, and hot dogs for sale at the gas

station—if you live in Jolo or a place like it, this type of gas station would also be your grocery store.

Driving back, I notice how oppressive the landscape feels. It's not just the junk piled around houses, barns, and porches. It's the way that roads and houses hug the sides of these narrow valleys, water rushing beneath, steep slopes blocking the sun. It's the absence of sky, the difficulty of ever getting your bearings amongst these tortured hills and hollows.

Based on per capita income, McDowell County is the poorest county in West Virginia. Almost 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Signs of the coal industry are everywhere—railroad loading stations, scarred and blasted hillsides—even as coal mining jobs have disappeared. What must it be like to be live in a place like this, forty minutes drive from the nearest supermarket or McDonald's, where even the horizon seems out of reach? What was it like for the coal miners of the past, spending most of their lives in the dark?

I can see why snake handling would take hold in a place like Jolo. It is easy to believe in evil here.

2. Bedford, Virginia

In April 2007, I found myself in rural Virginia, getting ready to witness a re-enacted Civil War skirmish known as The Battle of Liberty. In June 1864, Union General David Hunter passed through the town of Bedford, then named Liberty, in an attempt to capture Lynchburg. The attempt failed and he retreated back through Bedford, pursued by Confederate General Jubal A. Early.

Re-enactor's Missions for Jesus Christ is a ministry dedicated to evangelizing the Civil War community, comprised of Reverend Alan Farley and family. I learned of their existence when I got stuck behind their trailer in traffic, driving north through Georgia on I-95. I looked up their website and found out they would be in Bedford in a few weeks. I called up Alan Farley, and not only was he willing to talk, he offered to set up an interview with General Lee—as played by Al Stone.

The Battle of Liberty will take place later this afternoon; however most people in the areas are preoccupied with a very different sort of violence. The Virginia Tech massacre that killed 32 people took place in Blacksburg less than two weeks ago, just an hour's drive away. I see "Remember" billboards up on the highway and Tech pennants and stickers on passing vehicles. In Bedford, a row of houses have been draped with orange and crimson flags, just across the street from the re-enactors' camp.

I find Alan Farley's tent without difficulty. (The 12-foot-tall wooden cross is a bit of a giveaway.) Rev. Farley looks much as he does on the website, in a Confederate chaplain's uniform, a trifle stout, with a full gray beard. Reproductions of tracts from the Civil War are displayed on a wooden table. Two women in long calico dresses are giving a demonstration on the spinning wheel in the corner.

We walk back through the main white canvas awning to a small, private tent at the rear. A firearm and a pipe rest on a cot, on top of a handmade quilt. China dishes are laid out on a small table. We sit down on two folding wooden chairs.

Alan got interested in the re-enactment community through a truck driver friend who invited him to the Battle of New Market in Shenandoah County, Virginia. "Five

years later, the Lord put a burden on my heart to start holding services," he says. "So I put down my rifle and picked up his sword."

The ministry has been his full-time vocation since 1991. Alan claims to have held services for as many as 1000 people, in cornfields and under tents. He says that the family travels about 40,000 miles every year, attending 20-25 re-enactments annually.

He was baptized Episcopalian as an infant, but walked away from the faith at age 16. "I was struggling with my school teaching evolution and the church teaching Creation. So I talked to my pastor about it and he said the Creation story was only a fable. At that point I lost all confidence," says Alan.

When he was 29 years old he heard a preacher speak at a funeral. "I heard the Gospel for the first time," he says. "He spoke of a relationship with God and Jesus as if they were friends—not distant from me. A little later I had to go out on a heating call, so I prayed for salvation in my truck."

He met his wife Faith in 1987. "She had been praying for a good Christian man. We read together, we prayed. On our honeymoon, we ended up at Gettysburg in the sleet."

Faith had no previous experience with Civil War history, but quickly threw herself into the ministry. "She has that desire to be used by God," says her husband. "She is a behind the scenes person. She is truly a helpmeet."

Just then Faith walks into the tent. She wears a pair of silver scissors around her neck and a grey cotton dress with high collar and long sleeves.

"I make all of our clothing," says Faith. "We want to be accepted in the re-enactment community, so it's important to be as authentic as possible."

The Farleys' two children, 18-year-old Katherine and 16-year-old Ben, are home-schooled. "They get better field trips than anybody else," says their father.

Faith speaks with pride of her daughter's skill at knitting. "Katherine's learning how to be a homemaker."

I had always thought of the Abolitionists as the most religiously motivated group during the Civil War era. But since he plays a Confederate chaplain, I ask Alan about how religion figured in the lives of the Confederate troops.

At first, he says the troops were not particularly observant. "Then, in 1862, the South started losing. People believed it was a direct retribution for the sin in the camps," says Alan. "God started honoring their devotion, pouring out his spirit upon them. A revival broke out. In Fredericksburg, they met at the Episcopal church three times a day, seating 1000 men. Men would read the Gospel tracts and come weeping to the chaplains to be led to Christ."

He cites W.W. Bennett's 1876 account, *Great Revival in the Southern Armies*, as evidence. "Over 100,000 men had come to Christianity during the Civil War. God allowed that revival in order for people to be saved and to prepare the people for Reconstruction."

He claims that nothing on a comparable scale took place within the Union Army. The Northern generals did not promote Christianity among their soldiers, he argues, or provide the same example as committed believers like Jackson and Lee.

What about turning the other cheek, I ask? How can violent warfare ever be in harmony with Christian teaching?

According to Alan, turning the other cheek was not the issue. “They were fighting for their homes, for their families…”

He is careful to state that he in no way condones slavery, instead emphasizing the Constitutional and economic causes of the war. He is critical of the Abolitionists and argues that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was mostly a political move.

“When a nation wins the war, they win the rights to write the history,” he adds philosophically. “I am of the firm belief that God did not allow the South to win the war because He knew that America would become the missionary-sending, evangelistic nation of the world. I believe that God needed to keep the nation together.”

He speculates that if Stonewall Jackson had lived to Gettysburg, the outcome of that pivotal battle might have been quite different. “Do we see the hand of God move? Who can say?”

After we have finished our interview, the Confederate chaplain walks me over to the tent of General Lee. His is a larger tent, with a handsome writing desk out in a front and a soldier standing (or in this case, sitting) guard.

Al Stone makes an excellent Robert E. Lee, with his neatly trimmed white beard, grey wool general’s uniform, and courtly manners. The chaplain has concocted a story for me, so that our conversation can take place “in character.” Apparently my husband is a war correspondent for *The Charlotte Observer.* He has fallen ill, so I had to ride from North Carolina on horseback to complete the story and bring back news for the home front of our brave Southern army.

I am not sure how I feel about being assigned this Rebel identity, but I appreciate the effort the re-enactors are making on my behalf. He leaves me with the general, and we sit down for our interview.

"What I'm seeing through the army of Northern Virginia is a tremendous resurgence of Christian values," General Lee tells me. "The chaplains are doing a wonderful job. Somebody who has accepted Christ exudes a certain peacefulness. In his mind, it really doesn't matter what happens on the battlefield. He knows that he is going to a better place. There is an old song called 'Onward Christian Soldiers.' The motive that impels us—the desire to do right—is exactly the same.

"I spend a lot of time on my knees," General Lee tells me. "All I can do is pray. My heart bleeds at the death of everyone of our gallant soldiers."

I notice that General Lee's guard has now fallen asleep in the chair across from us. I ask the general his view of the causes of the war.

"Let's step out of character for the moment," he replies. Like Farley, and I suspect most die-hard fans of the Old Confederacy, he believes that the South was fighting to defend the Constitution.

"What we as a populace must do is rise up at the polls, I would hope," he says.

What about the Second Amendment, I ask? Does it extend to the purchase of assault weapons like those that Virginia Tech sophomore Seung-Hui Cho used to murder 32 people? (Cho's purchase was legal under Virginia firearms laws at the time.)

"The right to bear arms is constitutionally protected," he responds. "I don't what the answer is, except to return to a society that respects values. I don't think gun control is the answer. Parents have got to become more responsible of their children."

Al Stone says that he attended his first Civil War re-enactment in 1996. He says there are about half a dozen other Lees out there on the re-enactment circuit. They try to coordinate their appearances so they don't show up at the same battles. One time, he recounts, he was invited to receive an award by the Association of Lincoln Presenters. "When I went to the meeting, I could say, 'Hello Mr. Lincoln' and about 50 heads would turn."

I ask if he ever feels tension between his evangelical mission and his commitment to historical accuracy. "I just try to live Christian values all the time," he says. "You don't say a word unless somebody asks you. I try to live the way that Christ teaches. And I fail."

I thank the general for his time and take my leave. There's still an hour and a half to go before the battle, so I decide to wander around the camp for a while.

I see many more grey uniforms than blue. Alan Farley said that there was nearly always a surplus of Confederate re-enactors, but that finding sufficient Union forces could be challenging. He attributed this to "the romance of the lost cause"—I wonder if the disparity is more pronounced in Virginia than for battles in Pennsylvania or Ohio.

Jimmy of Tarboro, North Carolina got interested in Civil War re-enactment after learning he had relatives that fought on the Confederate side. He plays Major Robert Hunt.

"You kind of pick out a character," he explains. Hunt was a former schoolteacher who served with Generals Johnson and Gordon and was present for the surrender at Appomattox.

I ask if he is familiar with Alan Farley's ministry. "I think that Brother Farley does a very fine job," says Jimmy. "He's a very good spiritual fellow. He just blends right in with the re-enactors. A lot of the re-enactors will come to his services and maybe this is the only church they get."

The re-enactment of the Battle of Liberty takes place in a large open field about five minutes' walk from camp. A large crowd of onlookers has gathered along the split rail fence. They arrive on foot and in golf carts, bringing blankets and deck chairs. Some wear hoops skirts and parasols; others are in t-shirts and jeans. A little boy and girl hold matching toy guns.

Confederate re-enactors are quick to emphasize their moral opposition to slavery. They point to the existence of black Confederate soldiers and free black plantation owners as evidence that the Old South was not as racist as is commonly assumed. All the same, I don't see any black folks among the re-enactors or the crowd of spectators.

A loudspeaker announces the event play-by-play, with a running commentary of brigades, divisions, and army corps. At one point, a group of Union troops runs up a hill guarded by a handful of Confederate soldiers, who fire down on them from above. Mainly, what I notice is the loudness of the artillery. According to our announcer, cannon fire from the Battle of Gettysburg could be heard in Washington, DC, 80 miles away.

After the battle, I walk back to the camp for the "Meet the Generals" event, where twelve Confederate generals answer questions from curious onlookers. The group's real life occupations include construction superintendent, carpenter, schoolteacher and

welder. One question involves the personal faith of Stonewall Jackson—his faith was strong, we are assured. Another question concerns whether Robert E. Lee's military strategies were based on the Bible—they were not. A woman wearing an oversized green bonnet wants to know what the role of women in the Civil War was—"and maybe could be today?"

I want to know more about this woman, who seems so self-assured, yet so retrograde in her aspirations and attitudes. I walk up to her after the panel is over. She has just made the acquaintance of an older Eastern European woman. I overhear an invitation to come to the house and make muffins.

I introduce myself and tell her a little about the project. Her name is Shelley, and her character, I learn, is Anna Jackson, wife of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. (Her husband is also here and in character, but he was not the Stonewall who spoke at the panel.) In fact, they are at work on a traveling production about the Jacksons, "Joy Unspeakable and Full of Glory: The Christ-Honoring Marriage of General Thomas 'Stonewall' and Anna Jackson."

Shelley and husband Jim homeschool their six children—ages 6 to 15. "Living history" from the Revolutionary and Civil War is a big part of the curriculum, she says.

Shelley introduces her 13-year-old daughters Rebecca and Grace, two of the family's "prayed-for triplets." If ever there was an advertisement for traditional family values, these girls are it. They have perfect manners and comportment at an age which I remember as being unbearably awkward. With their bonnets, long skirts, reddish gold hair, and blue eyes, they could pass for a pair of American Girls dolls come to life. At their mother's request they strike up an a capella tune, "Grace to my wandering heart."

She talks a little bit about the girls' home school curriculum. It seems to involve a lot of Internet research about courageous Christian women of the past, as well as exercises with a digital camera and Photoshop. Even if the goal for their education is still marriage and motherhood, these young women are learning about more than sewing and spinning.

"I'm here today because I'm a Christian, not because I'm a re-enactor," says Shelley. "I am sick of the bitterness. Some of these people need to get over losing the war! Everybody thinks they're right. That's just human pride. Southerners have a sort of groupthink mentality. Our greatest struggles are not with these issues, but with sin."

To be honest, aside from today, I have not met very many Southerners who seem deeply preoccupied with the Civil War. Maybe where I am, that era of the past is finally past. Or maybe they just don't care to share their sentiments with a Yankee.

North Carolina was never a hotbed of Confederate sentiment compared to neighbors Virginia and South Carolina. And within the state, Charlotte has shaped an identity that is solidly New South. I don't think I have ever seen a Confederate flag bumper sticker or t-shirt within city limits. Even our fancy new downtown history museum covers the span from "1865 to tomorrow," beginning its exhibits just after the Civil War.

But even if the Southerners I know are not clamoring to "rise again," the war still shaped the social, political, and cultural climate we inhabit today.

Alan Farley believed that the South was losing its historical character as a region of strong faith. "Are we still the Bible Belt today? I don't think so," he said. "That strong

dependence on God has been leaving the South and moving towards the West." He chalked this up to the influence of Northerners, as well as Catholics, Unitarians, and other denomination that are "not true Biblical religions."

Right or wrong, the question still remains—how did the South become the Bible Belt in the first place? At least through the era of the Great Awakening, the North was the more devout and religiously observant of the two regions. Colonies like Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island were founded by groups seeking religious freedom, while Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina were by and large established as land grants for wealthy planters—Georgia was also a penal colony. What caused the shift?

"The South has gone through so many social upheavals," Professor Charles Reagan Wilson, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi, told me in a phone interview a few months later. "The South is very tradition-bound, but it's experienced these social changes. Religion is a kind of counterweight to all that. It's the blessed assurance that someone's in charge."

Whether your ancestors were black or white, the greatest upheaval of them all was the Civil War. No other event would cause as much change, with as many lasting consequences, as the experience of military defeat on your own soil.

The next morning I head back into town for a period church service, led by Alan Farley, at the Bedford Historic Meeting House. First a Methodist house of worship, then Episcopal, now the property of the Bedford Historical Society, the building will return today to some approximation of its original purpose.

I am staying with relatives in Charlottesville, about an hour and a half away. I arrive just as the service is starting. The small meetinghouse is packed, with about two thirds of the crowd is in period costume. Shelley, wearing a pink hoop skirt today, gives up her seat before I can stop her.

A man in Confederate uniform sings "Amazing Grace." The congregation sings the doxology, and a hymn called "Rescue the Perishing." More people are singing than I would have expected.

The view out the clear glass windows is beautiful—new leaves, blue sky, blooming dogwood. I wish I could say the same for the sermon.

Alan Farley preaches in a vest and a blue striped shirt. "The Lord will come in judgment," he warns. "The world has developed the mentality that it can live in sin because God is a God of love. But God is also a wrathful God. If you have not accepted Christ as your savior, you will be judged."

He continues. "God's judgment is almost upon us. It is a fiery judgment. The Lord will burn sinners in an oven."

A sudden wind blows the church door shut.

"I cannot understand how any person given the gracious offer to be saved, would continue to reject it, knowing they will be judged by fire. God is just. But if you turn your back on His offer, you will get what you deserve."

This is not Rev. Alan Farley's historical character, I realize. This is what he actually believes.

"We will no longer have to live in this sin-cursed, rotten, depraved world…" he tells the crowd. "We are on the winning side."

He culminates by asking the congregation to visualize their friends and family members, those who have not yet accepted Christ into the lives, burning in eternal torment.

He ends with an altar call. About a dozen people come forward, praying while embracing. Shelley is one of the first to go up.

Once the service is over, I stumble outside. I take a picture or two, but I find myself unable to get out the microphone to interview anyone. I am too stunned and angry.

Shelley invites me to lunch, but I decline. I am tired of playing the part of the good listener, the journalist who keeps silent, refrains from judgment, and strives to discover common ground. Enough is enough.

It's funny. I have heard plenty of hellfire sermons before, but this is the one that got me. This visit was just supposed to be about historical perspective and maybe some eccentric local color. I did not expect the sheer sadism of Alan Farley's sermon—the way it not only set up a God who is a psychopathic torturer, but made the audience complicit in this torture.

Why did no one walk out when he asked them to imagine their loved ones engulfed by flames? Why didn't I walk out?

People in this town have offered me hospitality. Still, *"Shake the dust off your feet,"* is all I can think as I slam my car door and drive away.

I am not sure what I believe about the afterlife, or if there is one at all. I know that Jesus talks about Hell in the Gospel. He also says that he who tries to save his life will lose it, an almost Zen-like paradox that can be interpreted in any number of ways.

I cannot imagine a personal, all-powerful God without an afterlife. With as much suffering and oppression as there is on earth, any God who cared about individual people would never allow the balance to rest where it stands today. I believe that forgiveness is always possible, but that choices have consequences. These decisions shape the people that we become. In the words of the punk band Bad Religion, "Everything you touch leaves a mark on your soul."

I used to think that complaining about organized religion was like complaining about capitalism—it was a system, prone to abuses by some, but also supplying necessary goods and services for many, many people. But today's sermon reminds me of every single horror story I have heard about organized religion. I think of the woman whose mother held her down and performed an exorcism with corn oil when she was 16 years old, because she dared to question her pastor's authority. I think about the man who recalls fellow church members mocking and disparaging his physical disabilities in his teens. I think of all the men and women who have suffered through decades of guilt and self-hatred, trying to cure themselves of the "sin" of homosexuality. I think of the guidance counselor at the Christian school who told a suicidal young woman who had been sexually assaulted by her own father that she was "simply looking for attention."

All systems have the potential for abuse, but there is something particularly insidious about a system where the power wielded is not economic or political, but moral and spiritual—where God's chosen representatives claim for themselves the right to determine right and wrong.

Driving back, it finally hits me what angers me the most about fundamentalism—it's not the politics, the Biblical literalism, the intolerance, or the hypocrisy. The flaw

runs deeper than that. Even as conservative Christians claim absolute moral authority, the God they worship is completely amoral.

All those sermons about Judgment Day, eternal torture for the unbelievers and heavenly rewards for good Christians. It's all about getting cozy with the Big Man, joining the winning team. Some sects believe that in heaven they will have a front row seat to watch the tortures of the damned, for their own edification and entertainment.

It is understandable to want to be on the winning side. If you find yourself powerless and defeated, such beliefs can give great comfort. And should you happen to actually find yourself in a position of power, a religion built to revere hierarchy and authority can prove even more useful.

That's not the God I serve.

I have a question for those pastors who preach hellfire, and for all the people who stay and listen and come back the next week for more. Would you still follow Jesus if it sent you to Hell instead of Heaven?

PART V: HOLY GROUND

1. Welcome to New Orleans

"Welcome to the city where people like to eat," Earl King sings on the local radio, just as I'm about to cross Lake Ponchartrain. "There ain't no city like New Orleans."

The beat is a welcome distraction from the wreckage I've seen all along I-10. Unfortunately, the song also distracts me from the urgent necessity of finding a working gas station—not the easiest task on the Gulf Coast in March 2006.

I'm grooving along until I notice my fuel light glowing amber. Both stations at Slidell are boarded up, so I have no choice but to cross the world's second-longest bridge with my tank at the "Empty" mark and a wicked, mileage-eating headwind churning whitecaps all around.

Twenty-five miles later, cursing my own stupidity, I get off at what appears to be a major commercial intersection somewhere in Jefferson Parish. Most war zones look better than this. Traffic lights are out, buildings are gutted, and at weekday rush hour there is no sign of life except for SUVs that periodically dart up to the least visibly damaged gas station, vainly hoping that it might prove operational. I return to the freeway, terrified of stalling out, not daring to make another stop until I pull up to my hotel on Canal Street.

After dropping off my luggage, I wander around the hotel for a little while, but I don't feel brave enough to venture outside. The gospel choir rehearsal I had planned to attend is cancelled due to warnings of extreme weather, so I don't have much to do.

I wish I knew somebody in the city—not an interview contact, but a friend, or a friend of a friend. We could go out for dinner... maybe afterwards catch an act at one of the newly reopened jazz clubs.

I had always intended to visit New Orleans, to write a chapter about its unique mix of Roman Catholic and African-American religious heritage. Now those original goals seem trivial. Wait too long, and the story changes on you.

To my relief, apart from a tiny lunatic fringe,[1] religious fundamentalists have not claimed Katrina as God's judgment. Indeed, the Southern Baptist Coalition was among the first and most generous organizations to respond to the crisis, with both donations and volunteer labor.

The people that I interview shrug off the city's reputation for sin. Bourbon Street is for tourists, they say, and Mardi Gras is mostly about the parades and the costumes, something you take your kids to see. They insist that New Orleans is a deeply religious place—where you will see people in taxi cabs saying rosaries, where it can be difficult to get into Mass on Ash Wednesday. I can't attest to the spiritual character of New Orleans before the hurricane, but if ever there was a time to make folks turn to religion, this has got to be it.

Maybe it's just the high winds, but the people outside on the sidewalk look hunched over, battered and weary, like it's taking everything they have just to walk where they are going. Looking out the hotel's second-story window, I can see an old brick-and-stucco building that might have looked historic under other circumstances. Rusty twisted, crumpled balconies are swaying slightly in the wind. Window panes are broken. It is clearly still abandoned.

Back in my complimentary media lodgings on the 44th floor of the Sheraton Hotel, I feel insulated from conditions on the ground, yet not entirely so. Is it my imagination, or is the building swaying faintly in the wind? A friend who believes in such things told me that New Orleans has a certain energy—"It's not good or bad, not anything supernatural, it's just part of the landscape. You'll see when you get there."

I don't feel anything like that, just a sense of hollowness and anger. Eighteen hundred dead. Hundreds of thousands left homeless. We live in a world where these things happen. Happen all the time, in fact, just a little less often in the United States.

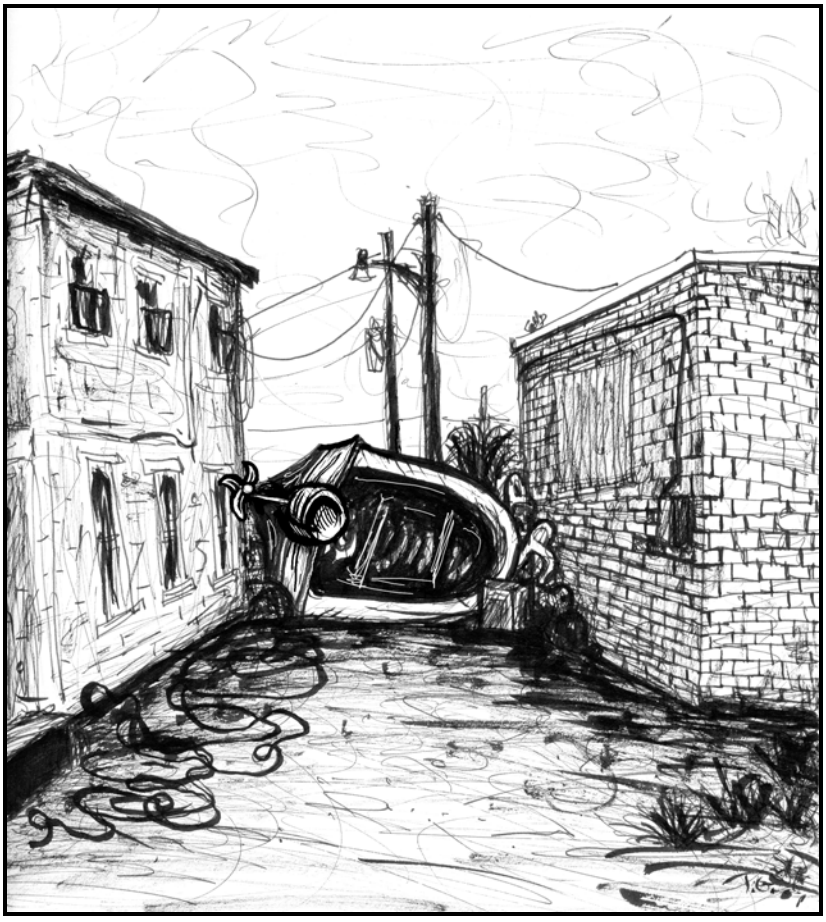
Death is not blind. Death has a special hunger for the poor, the sick, and the weak.

You can say that Katrina was a humanitarian tragedy more than it was a natural disaster, that its losses were magnified by official incompetence and violent looting. You can even blame the natural disaster on rising ocean temperatures caused by human folly and greed. But that doesn't exactly let God off the hook. You just come back down to the problem of human suffering, which seems a little less remote today than other days. If God made this world and all the people in it, devised our laws of nature and our species' flawed moral character, then surely God bears some responsibility.

Free will is the catch-all explanation, but the people who suffered most in New Orleans were those with the least freedom and control in their lives—those who could not evacuate due to poor health or lack of a car. That is pretty typical for wars and natural disasters all over the world.

Over the next week I will hear many people give thanks to God for saving them from the flood. But I can't help wondering, what about all those people who prayed to

God for rescue and drowned anyway? What about the prayers of those who loved them? Where was God then?



Overturned powerboat, St. Bernard Parish

2. Central City

The next morning, I fill up with great relief at the Shell on Lee Circle and head on to a meeting of field workers from Catholic Charities. The team assembles weekly at St. John the Baptist Community Center at the edge of Central City, just beyond the Superdome and the financial district. A few months from now, this neighborhood will become notorious for a streak of murders that causes the National Guard to be called back into New Orleans.

Catholic Charities of New Orleans traces its history all the way back to a group of Ursuline nuns who came ashore in 1727. While the organization is still affiliated with the archdiocese, many clients and staff are non-Catholic. The Louisiana Spirit project sends teams of social workers door-to-door through post-Katrina New Orleans, offering assistance with employment, schooling, post-traumatic stress disorder, lack of insurance, medicine, and housing.

"Outreach changed my life," says 31-year-old Burke Beyer, a former bartender, now a team leader with Louisiana Spirit. "It really did. I realized I needed to help people, have some deeper meaning in my work."

Burke and her mother fled the city on a cruise ship—her musician husband had a gig on board. They were the last ship out of the harbor before the storm. "It was a rocky ride," she remembers. Despite eight inches of water in their Metairie home and ongoing insurance disputes, she counts herself lucky. "I had a sort of liberating experience in having a lot of my stuff ruined. It was just stuff."

Burke describes herself as a "spiritual mutt" not identified with any one religion, but adds, "I can't imagine humankind going through something like this and surviving if there isn't a higher power of some sort."

When I ask the ten caseworkers clustered around the table about the spiritual repercussions of Katrina, their impressions are mixed.

"People either don't question, they dig in their beliefs, or else they're questioning everything," says caseworker Jimmy Stuart. "I have a six-year-old boy and he's prayed to God not to let another hurricane come. What do I tell him?"

For Cheniere Thomas, the hurricane led to spiritual renewal. "I'm not the perfect Christian, but when you've gone through something and you're trying to cope, when you're in the church, when you say, I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold, you're really saying it!"

Seth Tuengel sees a more sinister aspect to faith among the hurricane survivors with whom he works. "My perspective is that their faith has made people—I don't want to say it this way—but complacent. People are being very fatalistic. There is an attitude that they can just wait to die. 'I'll meet my maker.'"

If there is one thing that everybody agrees on, it's that things are bad, and they're not getting better any time soon. In some ways, the team believes, the situation in New Orleans is even worse now than it was just after the flood.

"We're at barebones survival level," says Monica. "The initial shock has worn off. Now it's the reality. The reality, quite frankly, sucks."

Six months after the storm, housing costs have skyrocketed, most public schools are still closed, trash is piling up on roads and sidewalks, and frustration with FEMA and

insurance red tape is about what you'd expect. Mardi Gras is over. Another hurricane season is on the way. Mold spores fill the air and "Katrina Cough" is epidemic—after a day or two, it seems strange to be in a public place and *not* hear somebody coughing or gasping for breath.

Add to this the perception that the rest of the country has largely shifted its attention away from New Orleans, and the knowledge that many sources of aid will soon run out. The team is bracing for a wave of hotel evictions on March 15, should the federal government finally carry through on its threat to cease paying for evacuees' rooms.

"Ninety-eight percent of the stories are heartbreaking," says Jimmy Stuart. "This is a hard job. It's hard to keep these stories and keep some sense of hope."

"We are the working wounded," Catholic Charities president Gordon Wadge tells me in a later phone interview. "We are ministering to people and are ourselves affected... my own home got flooded. My family's scattered across the region now, as far away as Missouri."

His accent is not typical Southern. The classic New Orleans accent is closer to what you hear in working-class Boston or Philly, with a handful of gravelly Katharine Hepburn vowels thrown in. It's evidence both of the waves of immigrants who settled in this port city, and of the city's paradoxical isolation from the surrounding region. Gordon's family has been in New Orleans for 150 years, his wife's family for 300 years. The more people I meet in New Orleans, the more I realize that this type of family history is not unusual.

I have an ancestor named Mary Daniels. She was a great beauty, with dark curls and full red lips. We don't know much else about her, except that she got on a steamboat

in New Orleans with all her savings and bought a ticket to the end of line—"as far as the boat would go." That happened to be St. Paul, Minnesota. With her looks she soon found a husband, but never spoke about her past. It seems entirely possible that I might have cousins, both black and white, living in the city—or might have until six months ago.

"Pre-Katrina we talked at Catholic Charities about how we care for the poor and vulnerable," Gordon continues. "Now the poor and vulnerable is a much wider group. If you're poor, you're used to living crisis to crisis. For the middle class, within 24 hours you're in a life-changing situation."

He does not see that change as entirely negative. "You go back to your core," he explains. "In New Orleans our center is our spirituality. People are searching and seeking that greater understanding of existence. I think that's what tragedies do.

Gordon spent time on the front lines of the disaster, working with medically frail evacuees at the Superdome during the first 48 hours of the emergency. He feels that the media overstated the violence there.

"The truth was it was just incredibly difficult living conditions," he says. "[At one point] we staffed the lost children's table. These people were coming in just shell-shocked, literally with just the clothes on their backs. You could tell by the water marks on the clothes how deep the water was. There was a real sense of concern about where people were."

Says Gordon, "The number one thing you could do was just be present to people. There were no answers to give."

Jim Kelly, CEO of Catholic Charities, also chose to stay and work in New Orleans rather than evacuate. After the storm had passed, he left the Superdome to

accompany a caravan of 335 medically fragile senior citizens to Armstrong International Airport. Speaking on a static-filled cell phone, with only a few minutes to spare before he jumps into a meeting with the mayor, he quickly recalls events.

"We'd been turned away before at checkpoints, but this time we got through. When we got to the tarmac, we found out there were over 5,000 people at the airport. At the baggage claim, they were all elderly, as far as the eye can see. We loved them, we held them, we talked to them as we loaded them onto a [shuttle] bus.

"Afterward, I wandered through the security checkpoint upstairs at the gate. I pulled back the tarps, and there on the floor, on stretchers were 33 elderly too frail to make it. So I got down on my knees and prayed with them. I could see that this elderly woman's name was Edna, from the name tags on her blankets.

"I told her that I loved her. I told her that God loved her. I told her that she had a wonderful, beautiful smile. I told her that God was going to take her home. I made the sign of the cross. Then Edna reached up, put her hands on my forehead, and blessed me back. I knew that Edna was blessing me, and I knew that God was blessing me.

"It was a grace-filled moment. That moment has carried me through the next few months."

The cell phone static makes it sound like we are conversing at the bottom of the ocean. I get the feeling Jim has told this story many times before. If I were him, I would need to tell it too, need to reach for meaning, for signs of God's presence in the face of pain and death. Edna's loved ones would surely give thanks that she did not die alone

At this point, Jim has to go in for his meeting, but he calls my cell phone an hour later, to make sure that I have all the information I need. "This is an area of deep faith,"

he tells me at the end our conversation. “We believe in Lent, but we also believe in Easter and resurrection. It’s all about God’s grace. God is going to see us through this.”

3. Riverbend

By this time, it’s Friday evening and I am scribbling down my last few notes while riding the St. Charles Avenue bus, seeking distraction ahead. In better times this would have been a streetcar line, but at least it runs. I don’t know why I thought it would be a good idea to take the bus line instead of my own car. I guess I’m still a little freaked about driving in this city, particularly at night, with traffic lights out and the occasional intersection blocked off with debris. Plus, in one of the city’s sporadic attempts to rebuild tourism, the fare is free.

I get off at Oak Street, past the Tulane and Loyola campuses. According to my pre-Katrina Lonely Planet Guide, Riverbend is supposed to be a hip neighborhood, full of nightclubs and funky boutiques. Some storefronts have reopened, but many more are vacant. The Maple Leaf Bar has a show tonight, but not for a few more hours. I float between the street’s two open coffee shops for a while, debating whether to go back to the tourist-friendly French Quarter before it gets dark.

I decide to give the neighborhood one last try and head to the bar at Jacques-Imo’s Cafe. The girl sitting next to me turns out to be from Massachusetts, although she’s lived in New Orleans for two years, attending graduate school at the Tulane School of Public Health. She introduces me to her friends Joe and Karen, recent U Mass graduates who drove down to New Orleans to volunteer in the cleanup, and invites me to join them for dinner.

To my surprise, we all join hands for a moment of silence before eating. Soon we are gabbing away, fellow expatriates from the North swapping stories of our adventures here in Dixie. The blackened redfish, the cornbread, the fried green tomatoes with shrimp, are all superb, but there's more to our meal than food. With its painted screen porch and rickety tables, Jacques-Imo's is the first place I have been in New Orleans that feels crowded, noisy, and alive. Diners are young, multiracial, and as far as I can tell, mostly local. Do they come here to forget the pall of depression that hangs over their city, or are they immune?

After dinner, I wander around with Joe and Karen in search of live music, first at the Maple Leaf, then eventually ride with them across town to Donna's on Rampart Street.

While we're still standing around at the Maple Leaf, Joe talks about the Quaker meeting he attended last week. "The Spirit filled me," he says. "It was incredible. I can't even describe it. I knew that were all the same, that we were all part of something bigger than ourselves... I just started laughing."

Back in Massachusetts I might have asked Joe if he'd been tripping. But here it's different. People talk about these things, like they are just another part of life. Black folks and white folks, Protestant and Catholic, from all over the socioeconomic spectrum... you hear them reference their spirituality during public radio pledge drives, or in casual sidewalk conversations.

"This isn't America," Joe says and laughs as we're getting in their car.

He's right. This doesn't feel like part of the United States. Too few chains, too many coffee bars, and... oh yeah, the Third World living conditions. New Orleans has

been described as North America's only magic realist city. I wonder, are poverty and despair preconditions for magic realism, or is that just one more exotic illusion that we outsiders project?

There is no air conditioning at Donna's and my beer is warm, but the music turns out to be incredible. It's like the humidity in the air has some extra power to conduct sound. I didn't even think I liked jazz, always thought of it as elevator music for the NPR set. But throw in horns, drums, and tuba, and you get a totally different sound—sassy, insouciant, larger than life.

The Treme Street Brass Band plays old standards ("Mack the Knife," "What a Wonderful World") as well as original compositions. "I lost my PlayStation II," the singer laments in one tragicomic song about Katrina. A middle-aged African-American couple dances next to the stage, twirling a miniature sparkly parasol between them.

Along with the familiar themes of love and bad behavior, the set contains a fair amount of Gospel—"Walking with the King," "I'll Fly Away," and of course, "When the Saints Go Marching In." On Sunday, I will hear many of the same tunes at St. Augustine Catholic Church a few blocks away. Folks will be dancing there, too.

4. Metairie

The next day I drive out to Metairie, where Cheniere Thomas has invited me to attend the youth concert in which her daughter is singing. Cheniere is tall and broad-shouldered with long braids, hipster glasses in heavy frames, and a fondness for the color turquoise. Friday was her last day as a Catholic Charities social worker; she is about to

resume her previous career as a physical education teacher at a newly opened charter school.

Cheniere has an extraordinarily calm demeanor, which must be useful in both lines of work. Friday morning, when she saw me getting flustered and anxious, trying to take down directions, she touched my arm and said, "Just call me."

For her, Katrina's greatest hardship has been family members scattered far away. She recounts the task of enlarging a wallet shot to replace a framed photograph of her Aunt Della May's son and daughter, which had been ruined by the flood. Both children, now adults, moved to Texas and have no plans to move back. Because Cheniere and her husband's home was not severely damaged in the storm, it has become the new seat of family gatherings.

Not everyone in this community escaped so lightly.

Nineveh Baptist Church sits on the far western edge of the suburb of Metairie, about a mile from the airport in Kenner, in a mostly industrial neighborhood. Inside, about 40 kids are on stage, dressed in white, ranging in age from five or six all the way into their teens. Family members are scattered through the pews. It's not a huge crowd, but then again, it is 3 PM on a Saturday. I was expecting to be the only white person here, but in fact there is also a photographer snapping pictures for the Faith section of the Times-Picayune.

It's a long service (almost two hours) and an emotional one. The audience sways and claps to the music, and in between songs, speakers get up and offer personal testimonies. When one woman starts shouting, crying, and waving her arms from the pulpit, everyone rushes to the front for a group prayer. I slowly piece together that a boy

in his teens was murdered the night before—someone from the neighborhood, someone many choir members knew.

"This area and the area where I live have always been considered a suburb of New Orleans, but now that New Orleans is basically shut down, we're becoming the city. And that's driving everything that's related," school counselor Jerry Smith tells me after the service. "We were in prayer service on Thursday night and while we were sitting in prayer service we heard gunshots."

In part, Jerry attributes the violence threatening her community to a generational shift in values. "Our culture, our heritage is in the church. We have been an oppressed people, we have lived without, but we always thank God. And now as we become more educated, as we have more equality—and I thank God for that—but it's almost as though we've replaced God with things and education," she says. "I really look at the peril of our people, and I would have to say, it's because we are no longer raising our children in God."

Says Jerry, "I know that it's the grace of God that kept me and my family and my friends and loved ones safe." When the decision came about whether to evacuate, she recalls, "I really felt the Holy Spirit saying you need to get your child, talk to your husband, you need to go."

Why was she spared when so many others lost far more? Jerry's answer is simple. "I believe that when God blesses us he wants us to bless others."

Choir director Patrick Chatman tells me that Nineveh Baptist Church opened up a food bank from October through December, offering food, clothes, water, and Bibles. The church has also offered workshops teaching parishioners how to file insurance

claims. Nineveh is also providing worship space to churches whose buildings are not yet usable, without charge. Says Chatman, "We're here to help. We're not here to make a profit."

Sister Sherrilon Thomas first caught my attention when she stood up and spoke during the service. A petite woman in her late 30s, wearing a brown suit with white t-shirt, her voice filled up the room. "God has smiled on me. He has set me free," she testified. "The water was up to my head. I am still here for a reason."

I ask Cheniere to introduce us after the service. She and Sherrilon turn out to be good friend. They laugh about everything they have in common—both have daughters of the same age (also good friends) and both are married to men with the last name "Thomas."

Sherrilon works at the cafeteria at Rudolph Matas Elementary School in Metairie, but her passion lies elsewhere. As youth director for Nineveh Baptist Church, she collaborates with other churches, bringing children and teens together for concerts, workshops, and overnight trips to amusement parks and museums.

"Last year we had about eleven churches," she remembers. "There was no standing room up there or anything. But this year I guess due to the hurricane our numbers are less. A lot of people are all spread out, so they weren't able to come back and participate."

Despite these obstacles, Sherrilon remains committed to her mission. "It may not be that many youth, but you've got to take the few that you have and work with them."

Because of her mother's recent surgery, Sherrilon was staying with family near Canal Street when the hurricane hit. "Monday evening, we were able to step out and the

water was at the second or third step. We didn't think nothing of it, but then we woke up in the middle of the night... and the water was at my ankle. When daylight came, the water was rising so fast it came midway up my leg. That's when we decided that we needed to get out of the house.

Her niece had just given birth, so to avoid contamination from the water, the family carried mother and baby out on top of a door they had salvaged from the floodwaters. After reaching Canal, they stayed for several hours in an old police building, then headed for the bus station, where they were turned away.

"Somebody said they were going to have some buses at the bridge waiting for us. But we got to the bridge and there were no buses. And when we tried to walk across that bridge, they wouldn't allow us to cross the bridge. They said it was dangerous. They had policeman and dogs," Sherrilon recalls.

"We stayed there and after about 30 minutes, they came back and said they were going to send buses. So everybody started clapping and smiling, and you could see the smiles on the faces, because we knew West Bank was the only place to go, the only dry land."

However, when they reached the other side of the Crescent City Connection, the welcome was hardly warm. "We had to get off of those buses and wait on more buses to come, but when those buses came, they told us that we [each] had to pay $15. And of course, me and my family, all we had all together was $80," she explains. They stayed with friends that lived on the West Bank for two days, but their house had no food or water.

"We was one of the ones that had to go into a store. Looters?" she laughs ruefully. "We looted, but the only thing we got out of that store was water and Gatorade, stuff like that. What made us do that was we were down to the very little water that was left in the bottle. So we saved that for the baby, because the baby was newborn. For the next two days, all we did was drink Gatorade. We left the water for the newborn baby."

On Thursday they walked back to the mall on the expressway. "We had to wait there in a long line," she says. "It looked like Mardi Gras day, there was so many people out there. And food! We finally got to see food. It was just food that people had, and they were sharing the food. There was this gumbo like we hadn't eaten in days... we stood there for about four to five hours before we actually got up to the bus line and waited our turn."

After the bus dropped them off in Metairie, Sherrilon's husband walked back to their house and retrieved their one remaining vehicle. (The other car had been lost when Canal Street flooded.) The family rushed back to the house, packed in darkness, and headed for Baton Rouge.

"For me, myself, personally, I never ever prayed so hard," says Sherrilon. "I never dreamed that I would be out there in all that water.... I don't know how to swim. One of the girls that was at the house with us, I was able to wade on her back, and she brought me up to Canal where I could walk in the water. When that water was up to here, no way could I have walked in! So I thank God for her being there."

"I give God all the glory," she says. "Because if it wasn't for Him, I know I would have never ever survived what all I went through. I know I wouldn't have."

I say goodbye to Cheniere and Sherrilon and head back along Airline Highway to the New Orleans Arena downtown, where Billy and Franklin Graham will be holding a revival tonight. On the way I pass a convoy of St. Patrick's Day parade floats, giant heads and green glitter unearthly in the gathering dusk.

Parking for the event is beneath the still-ruined Superdome. The garage levels show no visible damage, but we have to walk right past the main dome to get to the arena. Lit from below, glowing faintly orange, the structure has an aura of futuristic menace, like a nuclear reactor or an alien spacecraft.

I have read that the arena holds 16,000 people. It's got to be at least 80 percent full. The crowd is mostly young and white. Some are among the thousands of volunteers working with mission groups to rebuild the Gulf Coast over Spring Break.[1] There is a special level set aside for wheelchairs, and a translator uses American Sign Language on a video screen.

I had been chatting with a nice young mom and her daughter on the walk over. She told me they'd be sitting in Section 107 before we got separated at security. I look around without finding them, and end up sitting between a group of college students and another young mom, who is totally occupied with policing the behavior of her squirmy, restless four-year-old girl.

The two-hour "Celebration of Hope" is exquisitely choreographed, with very few breaks in between Christian music acts and inspirational speakers. I find out that the young man next to me is a volunteer from Pennsylvania, working on roofing projects in Gulfport, Mississippi, but that's about all that I can learn before the programming

resumes at deafening volume. By this point the mom on my other side has managed to obtain some cheesy nachos, which temporarily occupy her child's attention.

Among the performers, we get Dennis Aganjanian, a Christian country star who wears a black hat and sings of Jesus' outlaw past, and Point of Grace, who resemble the less-good Dixie Chicks. The only New Orleans musician on the lineup is American Idol finalist George Huff.

"Let's turn the City That Care Forgot into the city that *cares for God!"* one speaker exhorts. There is an opening clip of St. Bernard Parish police officer who thanks God for saving his life, and another from an NFL player with ties to the city. On the whole, though, I am struck by the lack of connection to place—this could be any sporting arena, in any American city.

We are informed that Billy Graham is in the audience but will not be speaking tonight. Instead his son and heir apparent, Franklin Graham, will be giving the sermon. Silver-haired and in his 50s, Franklin is the president of worldwide evangelical relief and evangelical organization Samaritan's Purse. The organization has raised $38 million for hurricane victims and has helped repair homes for 7,700 families in five states.[1] He is known for speaking out on numerous political issues from which his father stayed aloof (in particular, for his public criticism of Islam). All the same, I am surprised by the tack he takes.

"If there's one thing we can be thankful for tonight, it's a bloodstained cross," he begins, then moves into the kind of apocalyptic talk I would expect from Pat Robertson.

"Are we coming to the end of the age?" Franklin Graham asks. He cites Scripture about "wars and rumors of wars," speaks of AIDS and the threat of bird flu.

"Many people have asked, was the hurricane God's judgment? I think that's an honest question," Franklin Graham declares. His solution is to blame the devil. "He wants to destroy your life. He wants to destroy your soul."

In the end, tonight's vision of salvation and damnation is not collective, but intensely personal. It's all leading up to a climactic altar call, a personal appeal to accept Christ as Savior and receive eternal life.

"Mohammed didn't die for your sins, Buddha didn't die for your sins," Franklin Graham shouts, to huge applause. The young mother next to me slaps her daughter, who is getting fidgety. She starts to cry.

"No one can choose Christ for you," he implores. "If you're still not 100 percent sure that you're saved, come!"

People begin to file forward towards the stage, at first just a few, then hundreds. Soon they cover the arena floor. Signs in different languages direct non-English speakers to their designated areas for prayer. (Meanwhile, a smaller line has formed, of people leaving in the opposite direction. The unhappy mother and child join this line.)

"Some people think you can only talk to God in a church, with candles burning," Franklin Graham remarks when all this is over, just before leaving the stage, in a barely veiled jab at Catholicism. Evangelical Protestants object to what they perceive as barriers that the Catholic Church places between believers and God: priesthood, the doctrine of salvation through works as well as grace, and an overemphasis on ritual in worship.

But I am struck by the ritual element of what happened here tonight—the concern that unless a person is in the right place at the right time, saying just the right words,

salvation might not "take." Some of the basic concepts of Christianity—the bloodstained cross, the theology of substitution and atonement—are pretty ritualistic at the core.

I didn't spend much time looking into voodoo while I was in New Orleans. I saw fortune tellers' booths outside St. Louis Cathedral and once accidentally wandered into a mystical apothecary shop in the French Quarter. (I thought they were selling perfume!) That was about all. I'm no expert on blood sacrifice. But I can tell you that there is nothing rational about the idea that our salvation was bought with the blood of one man two thousand years ago. This is something primal, something old and deep and powerful.

We require an exchange, Christ's death in place of ours. We require ceremonies and prayers, altar call and the rite of Communion. And even after we fulfill our part of the bargain, there is still always a sliver of doubt. Why is it so hard to convince ourselves that we stand in God's chosen circle, protected from the devil and the storm?

5. Treme

After yesterday's five hours of church, the prospect of another service this morning does not thrill me. Still, Jazz Mass at Saint Augustine Catholic Church is not to be missed. Up in front the Marsalis family is playing saxophone, trombone, and piano, but their presence is almost incidental. Today may be the final Sunday for the oldest African-American Catholic parish in the country. People are crowding into the pews to say goodbye, or else to stay and fight.

"All my children were baptized here. My son is buried here," says 78-year-old, silver-haired Mary Ann, who is sitting next to me.

"Before we integrated, we had to sit in the back three rows. All the whites would go up to communion first," her friend adds. That was during the Jim Crow era, when the majority of the congregation was made up of Italian immigrants. Before the Civil War, in Mary Ann's grandmother's time, the church was far more integrated. After its founding in 1842, whites and free blacks in the area began competing to buy up pews. Free people of color won the rivalry, even reserving the side aisles so that slaves attending services would have a place to sit.

The Treme neighborhood is nearly as old as the French Quarter on which it borders, although considerably poorer. The community formed in the late 1700s, when Claude Treme and Julie Moreau subdivided their plantation and sold lots to all takers, creating a haven for free people of color fleeing the bloody Haitian Revolution. The district is steeped in African-American history and heritage, and St. Augustine is its spiritual heart. Jazz funerals leave from the front steps of the church, and on festival days, Mardi Gras Indians march from its doors to Congo Square. It hosts drum circles in the parish hall and an annual festival known as Satchmo, in honor of Louis Armstrong's birthday. Rapper Master P once rented out the parish hall for his father's birthday party.[1] But in recent years, St. Augustine's official membership has declined, as Treme experienced gentrification and a shrinking population of black Catholics.

During Katrina, the church sheltered neighborhood residents from the worst of the flooding. While it suffered external damage to its roof and copper bell tower, St. Augustine was one of the first Catholic churches in the area to reopen its doors. Following the hurricane, it became a center for distribution of clothes, toys, and information. Its food pantry was serving 100 families a day.

Nevertheless, facing millions of dollars in uninsured Katrina-related losses, the Archdiocese of New Orleans accelerated plans to merge the parish with St. Peter Claver, an 8,000-member African-American parish outside the core of Treme. Members were given just over a month's notice of the decision. While the archdiocese promises to keep the historic sanctuary building open for weekly Mass, beloved priest Jerome LeDoux would be dismissed, and members would lose control over finances and missions.

This morning the sanctuary is packed with a mixture of black and white worshippers. Parish council president and retired school system employee Sandra Gordon claims that membership (now at about 350 families) has been growing ever since the hurricane, including many worshippers whose home churches have yet to reopen.

It sure seems like a vibrant place. There are two baptisms today, a ten-minute exchange of the Peace, and a gospel choir singing "This Little Light of Mine," "We Are Standing on Holy Ground," "I'll Fly Away," and "When the Saints Go Marching In." I had been expecting something more like a formal jazz concert, but Branford, Delfeayo, and Ellis Marsalis blend right into the church band. At the end of the service, the little old ladies are dancing in the aisles.

It's impossible to believe that this parish could end in three days. The place feels so *alive.* I can see heaven being a lot like this—black folks and white folks joining hands, joyful, music just bubbling forth. I spot Joe and Karen up in front and wave hello, doing my best to avoid the sight lines of a Swiss documentary team who is busy filming the musicians.

The mood builds steadily as the service continues, to an almost festival intensity. This is an unexpected for Lent, not to mention a parish facing imminent doom, yet it

seems somehow fitting. There is no explicit mention of the conflict during the service, but it is clear that church members are not giving up. An appeal to the Archbishop is underway, and they expect to have their answer within a day's time.

"A parish is family. We have generations here—not just one, two generations. Six or seven generations," Sandra Gordon proclaims after worship is over and the music has finally died down. As people begin to leave she announces a parish meeting on Monday evening and urges everyone to buy the church's fundraising T-shirts.

Father LeDoux with parishioners

I slip outside and join the line of reporters waiting to talk to Father Jerome LeDoux, in between a writer from the L.A. Times and another from the Associated Press. The story has already attracted national media attention and why wouldn't it? It's colorful, picturesque, and it fits well into the post-Mardi Gras wave of New Orleans stories.

The priest explains that he needs to take time to say goodbye to members of his flock before answering our questions, so we wait as old folks and children come up to hug him and take their pictures with him. Jerome LeDoux is a member of the Society of the Divine Word, the first Catholic order to ordain black men as priests in the United States. At age 76, he attributes his continued health to his vegan diet. Clad in a pale blue dashiki, with his white curly hair and slight frame, he looks the part of a holy man.

But this particular holy man has taken an active, even radical stance on worldly matters. Back in 1970 the priest worked to broker a deal between police and the Black Panthers during their showdown at the Desire Housing Project.[1] In recent years, the priest has opened the parish hall to neighborhood groups organizing against police brutality and publicly chastised FEMA and the New Orleans municipal government for their inept post-hurricane response. A parishioner asks the priest to pose with a poster board covered with clippings of his many columns and articles; it takes two people to hold up the display.

"St. Augustine is the first truly multiethnic church in New Orleans," he says. "We want to reach out to everyone, no exceptions. This is a grassroots parish. The people who come here are grassroots people."

He has served in this parish for 15 years and is working on a historical novel about the church's early years. He feels that it would be particularly tragic to close the parish down now, just as it is returning to the ethnic diversity of its founding.

Earlier this morning he told the church that God was everywhere—in the wind, the rain, the fire, and the water—but most of all, God was in us. We were God's own dwelling places, "more precious than that tabernacle up there."

"The seat on which you are sitting is a holy seat," he said. "The floor on which your feet are resting is holy ground. We are standing on holy ground, every one of us."

I ask him if he could feel God's presence while he was preaching today.

"How could you not feel it?" Father Jerome LeDoux responds. "From the beginning, before I even started talking, I could see the people looking up and smiling. When I walked in, the spirit of God was heavily invested here."

Sandra Gordon has emphasized that the priest is not the main reason the parish is fighting closure. They know that he is getting on in years and eventually will retire. Still, it is hard to imagine anyone who could replace him.

Just as I'm leaving, a band of motorcycles comes roaring down the street, led by a youth on a brown and white horse. "Oh, they're doing a second line," I hear somebody say behind me.

I am confused. I had thought that the second line was part of the classic jazz funeral.

"You can have a second line at a funeral. The first line is the family, the second line is your friends and the band," explains a woman in African dress and braids who

introduces herself as Naiama. She evacuated to Atlanta but is back in New Orleans for this Sunday only.

"But we have them just for fun too. It's what you do on the weekends, just to play."

Second Line parade following Sunday service

All through the next two days, as I conduct more interviews, buy pralines and Cafe du Monde coffee for friends and family, and try doggedly to set up an interview with Father Michael Jacques at St. Peter Claver parish, I can't get the church and its people out of my mind. This just seems like kicking folks when they're down, taking away the one thing they knew they could depend on in the months after Katrina.

I know that there are two sides to every story. According to archdiocesan spokesperson Father William Maestri, the decision is not just about money—parishioners will have far better access to religious education and social service offerings as part of St. Peter Claver.[1] The Catholic Church has an excellent reputation in New Orleans, particularly compared to the legendary corruption of the city government and public schools. The archdiocese has educated entire generations of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Through public and private partnerships, the church plans to rebuild and restore 7,000 units of affordable housing over the next five years.[1] The Catholic Church provides moral leadership in New Orleans, far more so than in most American cities.

I cannot understand what the archdiocese is doing here. Granted, I have only attended one Sunday service, but this seems like exactly the kind of community one would strive to preserve at any cost. Particularly since according to the parish council, finances are not actually all that bad. Sandra Gordon claims that the parish is now financial self-sufficient and that a local businessman has pledged to raise $1 million to pay off its long-term debt. Among parishioners, speculation about the true motive for the takeover is running wild; the most popular theories are that the archdiocese hopes to sell St. Augustine's valuable real estate once the neighborhood gentrifies, and that this is

basically an ego booster for Father Michael Jacques, who "wants to be the Pope of Treme."

The mood is much darker at the meeting on Monday night. Church members have learned that their appeal to Archbishop Hughes has been rejected—learned this, not from a personal response, but from a story in the newspaper. In fact, according to the article, members were never really participating in an appeals process, only a "listening session." The 50 or so people occupying folding chairs in the parish basement are hurt, angry, shocked. They had truly expected to win today.

Sandra hands out a press release, but after that, they want the media to leave. First they ask the video cameras to go, and then all of us scribblers as well. We all stand around in the church parking lot for a while, unsure of where the story will go next. There is some anger at the parishioners for excluding us, and a general feeling that it was counterproductive on their part. That may be true, but I understand their reasoning, understand why a community would need to grieve for a little while in private.

A van full of young people pulls up, and they begin to unload sleeping bags and pillows into the church sanctuary. They are college students on Spring Break, one of the documentary makers tells me, sleeping at St. Augustine while they work on service projects in the surrounding neighborhoods. Nothing to do with the story we're following.

I am supposed to leave town the next morning. The check-out slip is under my door at the Sheraton when I wake up. No charge for the room, and they've even agreed to waive the hotel parking fees. Man, is this city desperate for press coverage that will bring the tourists back!

Less than 24 hours from now, on Wednesday, March 15, 2006, St. Augustine Parish will officially cease to exist. I hate to leave things this way, but I don't know what else to do. There is no mention of the story in today's paper and Sandra Gordon is not answering her cell phone. Why didn't I stick around longer last night, until after the meeting ended, to find out the next phase in the parishioners' strategy (if they even have one)?

At least, after numerous phone calls to the Archdiocese public relations office, I have managed to set up one interview on the other side, with Father Michael Jacques, pastor of St. Peter Claver, for 10:30 AM Tuesday morning. I arrive a few minutes early, so I wait. And then I wait some more. The priest is in a meeting, the secretary tells me. He will see me after he gets out. This carpeted office with fake wood paneling must have experienced some mold damage, because my allergies are as bad as they've been any time on this trip. As I rummage for a cough drop, I'm just as glad I don't have to speak to anyone just yet.

I have no idea what the area around St. Peter Claver looked like before Katrina, but right now it makes Treme look like Disneyworld. It's not the patchwork you get with wind damage. Here, every home is destroyed... sagging, gutted buildings, marked with search and rescue graffiti on the corners. I am a little concerned about having all my luggage visible in the rear of my hatchback car, but the streets seem too empty even for crime.

Half an hour goes by, then an hour. I learn about the church's patron saint: a white Jesuit priest born in the 16th century who baptized and ministered to slaves arriving in

South America. I read an article in a church magazine by none other than Father Jerome LeDoux himself, entitled "Do Blacks Still Have a Dream?"

I ask the secretary again if Father Jacques will be able to keep our appointment. She says she does not know. Would I like to reschedule? I explain that I am on my way out of town. When we reach the two-hour mark, she tells me that she is sorry, but the priest has another meeting scheduled, so he won't be available for an interview today.

Father Michael Jacques calls me back at the end of the week and apologizes. We chat for a while about the difficulties of leading a large parish after Katrina, locating displaced members, holding funeral services for those who never made it home. But when I bring up the subject of St. Augustine, he quickly grows defensive—accuses me of tricking him into the interview and refuses to answer any further questions. It is only from his accent that I begin to suspect what no news account has so far disclosed. A quick Internet photo search confirms my hunch: unlike his entire congregation and staff, Michael Jacques is white. Maybe the reporters just didn't know (after all, both LeDoux and Jacques are French surnames) or maybe they just didn't want to make a big deal about race. Given the history of this particular parish, though, it seems like a pretty big elephant in the room to be ignored.

As it turns out, I'm not quite done in New Orleans yet. Driving over to St. Peter Claver, I was listening to community radio station WWOZ when in between jazz sets, someone started talking about a rally and concert at St. Augustine Catholic Church. Looks like it's happening at 2 PM this afternoon, outside the main entrance at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. I don't know whether to thank God for this stroke of luck, or kick

myself for not being a better journalist and having to rely on luck. Anyway, it's enough to go on for now.

Turns out there is no concert at the afternoon rally, but the energy here is still high. People are crowded six, seven deep on the sidewalk, chanting and waving signs. Many appear to be the college students we saw the night before. Every so often, they start to sing and chant. "We shall not be moved," goes the simple refrain. "Like a tree standing by the water, we shall not be moved." It's a protest song I will hear many times over the next few hours.

Toward the front, Sandra Gordon and several of the oldest ladies of the parish answer reporters' questions. They announce the beginning of a ten-hour prayer vigil, lasting from now until midnight, when the parish is scheduled to change hands. Father LeDoux is nowhere to be seen. Rumor has it that he has moved out of the rectory and is under a gag order not to speak about the conflict—even to members of his own parish.

A man in a leather motorcycle jacket holds up a banner bearing the words of Pope John Paul II on his 1987 visit to New Orleans. "All churches should be like Saint Augustine," it reads.

"If this was happening in 1954, I wouldn't be surprised," says parishioner Bob French. "But this is 2006. I've gone through all that. The drinking fountains... I played music, and I had to go through the back door of the club."

John Boutte agrees. "I'm one of the free people of black New Orleans. We've been here seven generations. It's kind of like a slap in our face and a kick in our ass." He defines Treme as the neighborhood bounded by Claiborne, Rampart, Esplanade, and

Orleans. "[St. Peter Claver] is not the Treme," he says. "Outside, the heart feel is different. You don't have that family."

John lists his occupation as "artist, musician, poet, and sometimes I prophesy." He is a frequent participant in Jazz Masses. After our conversation is over, I see him turn to a friend in the crowd to announce an upcoming gig: "Saturday night. DBA, Frenchman Street. Be there."

Inside the sanctuary, the prayer vigil is an oasis of peace and calm. Jazz guitar plays softly, as members bow their heads and clasp their hands. Sunlight slanting through the stained glass window gives the scene the quality of an old master painting—timeless, faintly glowing. I know I should go out and get some more quotes, but I don't want to leave.

"On this holy ground the Holy Spirit touches you, and you don't leave the same," Marlene Charleston tells me just outside the door. I ask her what the parish plans to do when they formally lose control of the property at midnight. Will they accept the authority of the archdiocese? Will there be some form of civil disobedience?

"God is in control," she tells me, and gives no further answer.

I will need to leave soon if I am going to get to Montgomery tonight, or even Mobile. The road through Mississippi was dodgy enough that I don't relish driving it in the dark.

I recognize one of the members of the documentary team walking away from the church. She is the only woman on the crew, and the only one from Louisiana. When I ask her if she has heard anything more about further protest plans or the parishioners' long-

term strategy, she laughs. “I’m learning that in this city you can’t make plans very well,” she tells me. “You just sort of have to go with the flow.”

Flow. The Mississippi flows through this city—widest, longest river on the continent, lazy in some places, swift in others. It shifts and curves back on itself, and sometimes it cuts a new channel.

Flow. Canals overwhelmed, pumps abandoned, flood waters rushing in.

Flow. God in the water, God in the waves. These words have stayed with me, but I’m still not sure what they mean. Is it possible to find God in senseless chaos without sounding insane, or cruel, or both?

So much is at stake for these parishioners and they are running out of time. They don’t seem to have any clear plan. Instead they just shrug and say, “It’s up to God.”

It seems crazy, putting that much faith in God. More to the point, it seems like an excuse for passivity. That’s exactly what that outreach workers at Catholic Charities was complaining about. How can you accept responsibility for an outcome if it’s in God’s hands? Why work to change your situation if it is just God’s will?

Still, the folks at St. Augustine’s don’t seem exactly passive. Maybe their confidence is not misplaced. Maybe I could even learn something from them.

So many things have gone wrong on this trip, and so many things have gone right. I wouldn’t even be here if not for 30 seconds on the radio, just an hour before I was supposed to head out of town. I don’t want to read too much into coincidences, but I am trying to trust that God is leading me. I think I need to stay for one more day.

The hostel where I end up spending the night is a stark contrast to the sleek mahogany furniture and complimentary bathrobes of the Sheraton. The room is actually kind of beautiful, with high ceilings, old brick walls, and a tall balcony window, but the air is barely breathable. Definitely mold contamination. I wonder if the lower level got flooded.

In search of allergy medicine, I head to a Walgreens further down Magazine Street, but the section is stripped bare. Every cold remedy aside from Ny-Quill is sold out. Either there is a crystal meth lab in the vicinity, or an awful lot of people are experiencing the same conditions as me, with no checkout date in sight.

I finally manage to reach Sandra Gordon on her cell phone, and she tells me to come back at 10 PM for a candlelight vigil outside the church. I arrive on schedule. About 100 people are here, many college students among them. Church bells are tolling. A young Asian man and a white woman with curly brown hair play what appear to be traditional African instruments: a long wooden bow with a string and a round wooden gourd attached. Candles are lit and we all file inside. I notice that the Swiss documentary team found out about the vigil as well. One by one, people come up to the purple-draped cypress stump pulpit to speak.

"Let us remember the slaves and free people of color who built this place," says the first speaker, a bearded, middle-aged white man. "We remember them. We ask their presence."

The second speaker is a woman, also white. She calls on the Intercession of Mary and leads the group through the Hail Mary prayer three times.

A black man of late middle years walks up to the pulpit, dressed in dark proletarian clothes. I don't yet know his name or his place in history—his time as a Freedom Rider, his friends murdered by the Klan. But I am moved by the power of his words.

"One day, in the jails of Mississippi," he recalls, "It occurred to me that the message of the cross was not isolated into a single moment in history. In order for us to salvage the indignities before us, we must put ourselves up..."

"In the civil rights movement, we came with a prayer of action, we came with a prayer of love," he tells us. He speaks of sacrificial love and the suffering of innocents, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the four little girls killed by a bomb in a Birmingham church. He tells of his grandson, who has been playing the tuba since he was four years old. Since evacuating away from New Orleans, he has stopped playing music.

He closes by telling us, "If you're going to be true to life, you must stand against Rome," then walks toward the back of the church. It's not a preacher's fiery exhortation, just a matter-of-fact statement. He sounds a little weary, a little bemused. These are the words of someone who has been standing up to Rome all his life, and every now and then the strain has got to show.

The students have begun to sing "Amazing Grace."

I realize that I have got to talk to this man some more. His name is Jerome Smith, I soon learn from the people sitting nearby in the pews. Better talk to him soon, they say, because he looked like he was maybe about to leave.

I find him just outside the church doors, pacing back and forth on the darkened sidewalk. He explains that he can't do an interview now because he's expecting a call to

move a kid to a safe house. But he takes down my information and says he will call tomorrow morning.

We talk for a little while longer while Jerome waits. “Folks are still trying to recover. They need these way stations of prayer. What we’re seeing is the inability of the Catholic Church to provide for these neighborhoods,” he says.

“We stayed in here during the hurricane,” he says, gesturing at the church. “The boys with big pants went out into the water, they brought back food and diapers from Winn-Dixie. They were heroes, just as much as those teenagers in Birmingham in front of the fire hoses. You put your life up to save someone else. The message of deliverance is the same now as then.”

He says the Holy Spirit was his source of strength during and after the civil rights movement. When he calls it the “voice of no sound,” I feel a shock of recognition.

Back inside the church, a blonde woman with a heavy Swedish accent asks us to visualize Father LeDoux, riding his donkey down the aisle for Palm Sunday four weeks from now.

A woman in a bright pink shirt gets up and announces that she learned this afternoon that Father LeDoux has been asked to celebrate Mass for one final Sunday. “We’ve been fasting and praying. Things have been opening up for us,” she says. “[God] may not come when we want him, but he always He always comes right on time.”

The two students begin playing their tribal instruments. After a few minutes, one of the parishioners starts to sing along in an African language. The crowd haltingly repeats the refrain.

There is a tranquility to a prayer vigil absent from most other forms of protest. We have a place to sit. Times of speech are interspersed with silence. The space feels sheltering, protective. I realize that this was literally a place of refuge where people took shelter from the storm.

A young African-American woman sings “Let It Be,” accompanied by violin and guitar. I cannot believe how loudly and clearly the unamplified sound echoes through the space.

“The first time I came here, I knew this was my home,” says a short, middle-aged woman wearing a Spirit Riders of New Orleans motorcycle jacket. “I lost my mother, I lost my father... my family from St. Augustine has helped me through.”

An older, bearded man gets up and asks everyone to get on their knees. “Please, keep our church alive,” he prays with tears in eyes, as the congregation kneels in the darkened sanctuary. “I believe in this church.”

A white man in his twenties with wild corkscrew curls is the next to speak. He introduces himself as a musician who grew up in the French Quarter. His bass teacher lived in Treme, so he would come to the neighborhood for music lessons. He and his wife Sarah started coming to St. Augustine after Carnival Day, he says, and have introduced at least five new members. Sarah is fashionably dressed, wearing a bold scarf that would scream “society lady” if she were just a few years older.

“I’m not from here,” she confesses. “I do yoga and I’ve always tried to be a pretty spiritual person. In New Orleans, it’s just easier... at church last Sunday I felt this thing for the first time—that everybody is one.”

At the stroke of midnight, people start clapping, dancing, and singing, “We Shall Not Be Moved." Next, a young man gets up and introduces himself as Billy from Howard University, the “Voice of the Students.” He explains that the college students have met as a group and decided to support the parish in its fight against closure. A smaller group is willing to engage in civil disobedience.

“This church is a pillar of hope in this community,” says Billy. “We have students who have declared their willingness to remain inside and be jailed—whatever it takes. That is, if you all want us here.”

No formal vote is taken, but the crowd murmurs its assent.

I find out that Billy’s last name is Almo and that he’s from a military family in lower Maryland. He’s not Catholic, “just Christian.” What got him involved in this fight, he says, was seeing how racism contributed to the destruction of the hurricanes. “The levees would be different in the poorer black neighborhoods than in the white ones,” he recalls.

A woman with short, bleached hair and glasses walks up to the students and I overhear excited talk about attorneys, judges, and getting together a list of phone numbers. Her name is Carol Kolincak and she’s a criminal defense attorney.

“We’re really feeling like it’s the birth of a movement,” she tells me. “So many of our members were involved in the civil rights movement. This feels like a passing of the torch.”

On Wednesday morning, Jerome Smith calls me up. I ask him if the kid got to the safe house all right, and he says yes, although it took all night and he hasn’t slept yet.

"At my age, you need less sleep," he says and laughs. We agree to meet at CC's Coffee House, at the intersection of Magazine Street and Jefferson Avenue.

Jerome is 66 years old. He wears a plaid work shirt and a black knit skullcap, but it's his gaze that you notice right away. His eyes are warm, brown, and twinkling. It feels difficult, even uncomfortable, to break away from them.

"Everything I do is an extension of the civil rights movement," he tells me. Since 1968, he has been running a youth organization called Tamborine & Fan.

"We deal with cultural exposure that's unique to New Orleans, namely the music popularized by Louis Armstrong, and the indigenous culture of the Mardi Gras Indian, which is really African ritual using American Indian motifs. All those things are like magic to youngsters. We organize around social things out of that," he explains. "It's an extension of the old Mississippi Freedom Schools."

Jerome and three other students from his high school were among the original Freedom Riders, going from Montgomery, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi. Only later, when I go home and do some research, do I learn that Jerome was beaten so badly on that trip that he nearly died. As an activist for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), he delivered the blue Ford station wagon in which civil rights workers James Earl Chaney, Michael Goodman, and Andrew Schwerner would later be murdered. In 1963, he was invited to the White House alongside James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, and Lena Horne, where he called out Bobby Kennedy in no uncertain terms, pushing the administration to take a stronger stance on civil rights.

"He would have been the greatest American president," Jerome believes, "because he had a sense of tragedy. He would have made a tremendous difference."

His attitude toward George W. Bush is far different. “The most sinister person in the country that speaks to Christianity is the president,” he says. “You cannot kill the innocent.”

Indeed, Jerome is sharply critical of much organized religion.

“You tend to lean on certain dogmas that can compromise you,” he maintains. “You meet God in your mama’s womb. When you embrace life, that’s God.”

Jerome Smith

When he was growing up, he went to church at St. Peter Claver with his mother. “But around the corner the church was segregated, and no one in the church spoke to that,” says Jerome. “They were not Christians. They surrendered to the social dictates. They did not rise above it.”

In today’s New Orleans, he sees a parallel situation. “Most all of the black kids in this city don’t have schools to go to. That’s a sin—and none of the major white religious institutions will speak against it,” he says. I recall that his grandson is one of these exiled children.

“What we call church is so limited in terms of sustaining a movement that’s about deliverance and enhancement of human conditions that it’s embarrassing,” he continues.

But what sounds at times like pessimism is tempered by experience and patience. “The spiritual clock is different than man’s clock,” he adds. “It’s a long struggle.”

Back in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, says Jerome, “the church was very essential. It was a refuge. You’d sleep in the pews and under the pews. It was a network, almost like the underground.”

One night in Canton, Mississippi, the house where he and other organizers were staying was sprayed with bullets. “It was so strange that no one was hit,” he tells me. “These elderly ladies, every now and then, they would stop you on the street and say a prayer. They’d say you need not worry, you was wrapped in prayer.”

At the age of eleven, Jerome boarded a New Orleans city bus and decided to remove the screen that separated whites from blacks. In the midst of the uproar, an old black lady got up and yelled at him for disrespecting white folks, threatened to tell his

parents, and dragged him off the bus. Once they were safely out of sight, she hugged him and told him, never stop.

"She stayed for a while. She was praying and she thanked God for me," he recalls. "That was a tremendous motivator."

Years later, over the course of several months in a Mississippi jail, Jerome made friends with the illiterate, epileptic white man in the cell block next to him. He saved his life during a seizure when the guards would not intervene, and wrote letters for his relatives. He recalls when the Salvation Army would visit in an attempt to convert them.

"I started speaking to them with a quote from 'Amazing Grace' and then something from the 23rd Psalm," says Jerome. "He sort of joined into what I was saying."

The Salvation Army missionaries couldn't abide somebody talking back to them and soon left. "The real Christians were the ones behind the bars probably, me and him," he reflects. "This little bird used to visit us through the broken window in our jail cell and sing for us every day. That was nice too."

We have been talking for just over an hour when Jerome tells me he is out of time. He is trying to get to city hall before heading out to Mississippi later that same day.

"I'm going to visit some folks that were involved in this movement with me," he explains. "Time is passing and sometimes you need just to see certain folks."

He says the students at the vigil last night got him thinking back to the early days of the Mississippi Summer, with Chaney, Goodman, and the rest of his friends. "We were all bright-eyed and innocent back then."

That was why he decided to do the interview, Jerome tells me. "Probably another time I would have said no." And then he is getting up from the table, almost brusquely. I barely get a chance to thank him as he walks away.

After the interview I decide to drive by St. Augustine one more time. For a while I stand around in front, at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, chatting with the Swiss documentary team. Word is that a meeting with the archdiocese is happening at 2 PM. Sandra Gordon walks past on the sidewalk, along with two white men in clerical collars that I don't recognize. The documentary team races after them, only to have the doors of the rectory shut in their faces.

At this point, I know it's time to go. It's a two-day drive back to Charlotte, and I've got a hyperactive Siberian husky at home, not to mention a husband who misses me. Besides, I have a suspicion (which turns out to be correct) that the saga of St. Augustine won't be over for weeks.

Before dawn on Monday, March 20, 2006, ten student activists and two parishioners took over the church rectory. The protesters would occupy the building for nearly three weeks, while parish members held vigil outside. Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and former mayor Marc Morial all visited the church to show support. The conflict reached its low point after a confrontation between sign-carrying protesters and armed plainclothes policemen, requested by Father Michael Jacques for added security during his first Sunday Mass. The archdiocese deconsecrated the sanctuary and removed the tabernacle, claiming that sacrilege had been committed. But in the end, mediation talks led by Ted Quant of Loyola University prevailed; the parish would reopen, on condition

that it meet a series of administrative and financial benchmarks over the next 18 months. The church was re-consecrated, and Archbishop Alfred Hughes, Father Jerome LeDoux, and Father Michael Jacques celebrated Palm Sunday Mass together.

This resolution points to the power that a shared religious narrative can hold. Neither side was willing to let the church stand shuttered and empty for Palm Sunday and Easter, so they found a way to compromise. It also points to the role of faith as an agent and catalyst for change.

I am convinced that parishioners could not have won this battle without their deep belief that God was on their side. Having lost so much already to the hurricane, the people of St. Augustine turned all their energy into preserving this one place. Their faith that their prayers would be answered made it possible to continue when every indication went against them. Failure became inconceivable, and as such, it was always possible to hold out one more day.

I spoke to Sandra Gordon by phone shortly after the parish had reopened. “It has brought our parish together and made our faith stronger,” she says. “It was like God chose us to go through this valley and carry this cross.”

In New Orleans, I have seen ample evidence of the good that religion can do: from the triumphant reconciliation of the archdiocese and St. Augustine, to the social work of Catholic Charities, to the sustaining community of black Baptist churches, to the evangelical Protestant volunteers who came from all over the country to help rebuild the Gulf Coast.

But my original question was about God, not religion. I still don’t have a good answer.

"All too often, none of the popular theological responses to disaster feels anywhere close to right. The ones that don't feel malicious still feel impotent... Can we talk about God after a disaster? Should we?" writes Mark Douglas, a professor at the Columbia Theology Seminar of the Presbyterian Church USA in Decatur, Georgia.[1]

God is all-powerful, caring, and comprehensible. Pick any two—you can't have all three. I have done enough background reading to know that the answer that is comforting to one person may be completely unsatisfying to the next.

This is all part of God's plan.

God is suffering with us.

Our present suffering does not matter, because we look forward to eternal life.

The most popular line of reasoning seems to be that God does not really want any of these bad things to happen to us, but due to the laws of nature and free will, God cannot prevent it. Most contemporary readers reject the argument of Job—that God is just too big and powerful and awe-inducing to understand. I tend to prefer Job's explanation, partly because it keeps God present in the world and partly because it acknowledges the impossibility of ever getting a fully satisfactory response to our questions.

On my way out, I will drive through St. Bernard Parish and the Lower Ninth Ward. There I will see scenes of devastation and absurdity—a powerboat overturned in an alleyway, cleanup volunteers in surgical masks, a neat suburban street with a FEMA trailer in front of every house.

But over the long drive home, what stays with me are the words here on Governor Nicholls Street, above the iron crosses and chains at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave:

> This St. Augustine/Treme shrine honors all slaves buried throughout the United States and those slaves in particular who lie beneath the ground of Treme in unmarked, unknown graves. There is no doubt that the campus of St. Augustine Church sits astride the blood, sweat, tears and some of the mortal remains of unknown slaves from Africa and local American Indian slaves who either met with fatal treachery, and were therefore buried quickly and secretly, or were buried hastily and at random because of yellow fever and other plagues. Even now, some Treme locals have childhood memories of salvage/restoration workers unearthing various human bones, sometimes in concentrated areas such as wells. In other words, the Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a constant reminder that we are walking on holy ground. Thus, we cannot consecrate this tomb, because it is already consecrated by many slaves' inglorious deaths bereft of any acknowledgment, dignity or respect, but ultimately glorious by their blood, sweat, tears, faith, prayers, and deep worship of our creator.

I am beginning to understand that holy is a word for suffering and death, at least as much as for miracles and joy. We have no other language that is adequate.

PART VI: DEEPER

1. Atlanta to Birmingham

After leaving Americus, I head north, to Atlanta. I stay overnight at a friend's house. On Saturday morning, we catch up over waffles and then we drive around for several hours, looking for a cell phone charger to replace the one I left behind at Koinonia. It's always hard for me to believe that Atlanta's this big—you could put six or seven Charlottes down here and still have room for Greensboro and Columbia. I arrive at the King monuments in late afternoon, just as the day's heat begins to fade.

Located downtown in the historic African-American neighborhood of Sweet Auburn, the Martin Luther King Jr. historic site includes a national park service welcome center, museum, a rose garden, the house where King was born, the tomb where Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King are buried, and Ebenezer Baptist Church, as well as a community center and swimming pool. King's words are engraved on plaques throughout the site:

> "Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion."

> "It is evil we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil..."

I am aware that I am seeing an officially sanctioned narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, one that tends to downplay the contributions of people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Fred Shuttlesworth, and James Lawson in favor of the rhetoric and vision of a single charismatic leader. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was just one of several organizations that made essential contributions to the movement. All gained their strength through the bravery and sacrifice of thousands of individuals whose names do not appear on any plaque or monument.

This narrative can be disempowering, as people wait for a messianic figure to lead them instead of making change in their own lives, and it can lead to a form of complacency. Every year around Martin Luther King Jr. Day I see this script play out in its most insipid form, when corporate-sponsored events teach schoolchildren that the Civil Rights Movement was something that happened in the past, its battles safely won. What is needed now, they learn, is not direct action or structural change but community service: paint a school, beautify a park.

I am also really bothered by how few white children are here today—perhaps one for every fifteen children of color. Some of that may have to do with the demographics of the surrounding area, but not to this extent. Greater Atlanta is filled with comfortable, affluent, mostly Caucasian suburbs. Don't those parents realize this is their history, too? Doesn't it ever occur to them that their kids might someday find themselves in need of these lessons, part of an oppressed group themselves or in desperate sympathy with one?

Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement transformed the laws and customs of an entire society, without a violent uprising, with federal and local authorities indifferent or

actively opposed to their cause. What's more, King's rhetoric summoned a new ideal into the nation's popular imagination, a multiracial beloved community with opportunity and dignity for all. He changed many people's vision of what heaven would look like, and what real-life America *could* look like.

I drift through exhibits on segregation, sit-ins, bus boycotts, and the struggle for voting rights. I learn that King was nearly stabbed to death in 1958 while signing books in Harlem; when doctors removed the knife, its tip was touching his aorta. I watch Dr. King deliver the closing words of his speech in Memphis on the night before his assassination:

> "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

The great victories of the Civil Rights Movement—ending legal segregation and securing voting rights throughout the South—have been rightly enshrined in public memory. Yet somehow the unfinished causes for which King spoke at the end of his life—economic justice and an end to the Vietnam War—do not receive quite so much attention.

The King tomb is made of white marble, surrounded by a long and narrow reflecting pool. After some time has passed, I introduce myself to the three African-American men standing next to me and ask what brought them here.

Fred tells me that he is here with his son and grandson, to pay their respects. He is 62 years old, a retired garment worker and a Vietnam veteran, born and raised in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood. As a teenager he went to Ebenezer Baptist Church and participated in sit-ins at McCrory's department store.

"He was an articulate man, and he spoke very well," Fred says of Martin Luther King, Jr. "We had to get someone of intellect, who could speak for us all without a lot of rigmarole. He was the one that was chosen to lead the movement."

Fred remembers a time when Atlanta public parks were segregated, remembers seeing his mother give up her seat on a public bus when he was nine years old. Tomorrow is Father's Day and he is hoping to share a little bit of his past with the generations after him. "We've come a long way, but we still have not reached his full dream," he reflects.

A few minutes later, inside Ebenezer Baptist Church, I run into the three of them again. "Something moved in you when Dr. King spoke," Fred tells me. "It gave you hope. All your fears, all the prejudice and hatred, went out of you when you sat in this sanctuary. It was a place of peace and love. You went out and shared it with other people. So it began to grow."

He remembers his training in nonviolent protest by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. "If you had a quick temper, they wouldn't take you," he says. "People was chosen for these tasks. You had to be willing to wait and not hit back, until they got tired of hitting."

Until now, Fred's adult grandson Nick has been reserved to the point of hostility. He abruptly announces that the real force for change was corporations realizing the buying power of African-Americans. Altruism had nothing to do it. "People learned that black dollars and white dollars were the same thing..." he insists. "That's what led to the change, more than anybody having a guilty conscience."

Fred and I chat for while longer about his experiences in the movement. At the end of the interview, his grandson stops me again. He wants to clarify his earlier comment. Says Nick, "We should never forget the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. We need to respect everything they've done to get us here."

Writing about race and faith is not easy. On one hand, I don't want to set up any one individual or faith community to represent the opinions and beliefs of an entire people. On the other, if I resist the impulse to generalize and present individuals' faith journeys without discussing culture, class, and history, I leave out essential aspects of their stories. Nobody lives inside a vacuum. Context is everything.

White liberals often idealize the black church—its music, its tradition of activism, what they see as its deep and authentic spirituality. That same deep faith becomes a lot more threatening when expressed by white evangelicals. Even positive stereotypes can be pernicious. Traveling through the American South, I found not a single, monolithic black church, but a range of theologies, some progressive and some extremely conservative.

I sometimes wonder whether it is wise for me to talk about these issues at all. Race is a minefield. As a white woman from the North, I will always be an outsider.

I don't presume to speak for the hearts and minds of white Southerners, but I can say that Charlotte, North Carolina is by far the most integrated place I have ever lived. The city has a thriving black middle and professional class and a roster of black-owned businesses and civic leaders. BET named Charlotte its 2007 best city for black families. This is not to say that the South isn't racist, but I'm not sure it's worse than the rest of the country. It may actually have an advantage, because it has begun to acknowledge and come to terms with its past.

To be honest, I have witnessed more overt and ugly racism in the North than in the South. When I was in high school, the KKK marched in front of the town hall in Cheshire, Connecticut my affluent suburban hometown. In elementary school, I still remember the kids on my bus taunting Miriam, the one black child on our route. They would say she was made of chocolate, and they would say a lot of things worse than that. It still bothers me that I never stood up for her. Then again, those were the times when kids took a break from taunting me, for my secondhand clothes and scraggly front yard.

I know what it's like to grow up poor in a wealthy place. (My parents moved us there for the schools.) Financial aid and work study got me through college; since then I have been able to pass as upper middle class. I still haven't let go of all my righteous anger—some of it now comes out as guilt, directed against myself. Of course, none of this means I know what it's like to grow up black. I have my own baggage and my own obsessions, chief among them money and class.

I wonder sometimes whether it makes sense to frame justice issues around race when so many lingering inequalities are tied to generational poverty and the surrounding subculture. Being poor and white sucks too. And in terms of overt bigotry and hate

speech, Latino populations are having a far harder time in this part of the country. In many ways, they are the new scapegoats.

Traveling through the Deep South, I often heard African-Americans describe the Civil Rights Movement as over and done with. It had its triumphs and its failures, but the movement had run its course—-especially when it came to the role of churches. That is too bad because the role of churches was so striking. Not every black church—-and only a very few white churches—-in the South participated in the 1960s movement, but those that did made history.

A few weeks after my trip, I spoke with Isaac Newton Farris Jr., president and CEO of the King Center in Atlanta. He is also a nephew of Martin Luther King Jr.

"He was first and foremost a Baptist preacher," he says of his uncle. "His faith was what sustained and drove him. Had he not been as rooted in faith, I don't think he could have done what he did."

The same is true of the larger movement, Farris argues. "Because of what blacks were going through, you had to have a sense of religion and God in order turn the other cheek. It won the hearts and minds of America. That could not have been accomplished without faith."

Lawrence Carter, professor and chapel dean at Morehouse College, put it a little differently. "Jesus did not come to save us. He came to set us free so that we could save ourselves."

Who is to say what the next great struggle for justice and righteousness will be? Who is to say that it isn't already upon us? Forty years ago, in towns and cities across the American South, organized religion was organizing on behalf of something greater than

its own membership rolls—organizing for freedom, peace, and human dignity. And it got results. That still seems pretty relevant to me.

On the way from Atlanta to Birmingham, I decide to stop at a Juneteenth festival in Anniston, Alabama. Juneteenth is technically June 19, but festivals happen all around the middle of June. The date commemorates June 19, 1865, the day Union General Gordon Granger and 2,000 federal troops arrived on Galveston Island to take possession of the state and enforce the emancipation of its slaves. The oldest celebrations are in Texas and the lower Gulf Coast, but its popularity has spread in recent decades; 14 states now list it as an official holiday.

It's still light when I roll off the interstate, around 7 PM now that I'm on Central Time. Anniston is in the rolling, hilly part of Alabama. It seems to be one of those towns where businesses along the highway compete with ever larger inflatable creatures: blue apes, yellow apes, and a giant yellow cow. I didn't find out until much later that Anniston was where a Greyhound bus was overturned and burned by an angry mob during the Freedom Rides of May 1961.

The small downtown is full of trees. I wonder whether Zinn Park used to be the black park or the white park, in segregated days. Looking for parking I spy a business called the Herb Shop with a cryptic message on it sign: "God is Good, Yellow Root."

Aside from the Juneteenth banner on the front stage and me being almost the only white person here, this could be any festival in the park. People socialize, listen to music at the two live stages, and stroll past various booths. Coach knockoff bags are the most

popular merchandise. Pony rides are a hit with the younger set. I see several tents that seem to belong to private families, perhaps for picnics and reunions.

I spot one dreadlocked guy in a college fraternity t-shirt with a 6-foot long yellow boa constrictor draped around his neck. I ask if it's a pet. He says yes.

Over at the far edge of the festival, I notice a tent that says Kingdom Preparation Ministry. With some trepidation, I approach. When I explain my project, Pastor Pollie Goodman is glad to talk to me. She is the mother of four children and has been saved for over 20 years. Four years ago she started the church. They have 15 members, most of whom seem to be women.

"I was commuting, traveling back and forth to Atlanta," she recalls. "The Lord spoke to me one night and told me the ministry there was over. He told me to step out on my own and obey him. That's where the church came from."

They are here today raising money for 15-year-old Latasha, who is also the pastor's niece. She needs $200 to attend the basketball summer camp at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. That's where she wants to go to college, she tells me, to be either a professional basketball player or a nurse.

The raffle has just finished. One of the winners comes by to pick up her prize: a framed picture of a dark-skinned woman walking across ocean waves in a gauzy white gown.

I ask Pastor Goodman what the Kingdom looks like to her. She pauses. "Words can't describe it. All I can say is what He said. It's a peace that passes all understanding, and the joy of the Lord is my strength. That's been my hope, and my foundation."

We exchange cards. She says she'll be praying for me this week. I thank her. It won't be the last time on this trip that I am grateful for the prayers of an almost total stranger.

Before leaving the festival, I stop for a strawberry milkshake from one of the trucks at the edge of the park. The owner is a good old boy with a red face and thinning white hair, in his sixties at least. He must be old enough to remember the 1960s Civil Rights movemen——as an adult and not a child.

The woman from the neighboring food truck comes over to chat with the owner while I wait in line. At least you're staying cool, she jokes. Business hasn't been easy lately, he replies. Running the freezer takes a lot of electricity. The last three weekends he's lost money, after the cost of gas and motels. I wonder what he thinks about the crowd he is serving today. Does he resent them, begrudge the privilege he has lost? Or are they finally just customers like any other?

On Sunday morning, I make my way to the 11 AM service at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. I know the church only from its place in history—the bombing that took the lives of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley on September 15, 1963. The bomb went off as the girls were walking into a basement assembly room for prayers. The explosion blew a hole in the church's rear wall, destroyed the back steps, and left only one stained-glass window intact. Five cars behind the church were damaged, two of them completely destroyed, while windows in the laundry across the street were blown out.[1] On the east wall's only

surviving stained glass window, the image of Jesus' face was knocked out cleanly.[1] Over 8,000 black and white mourners attended a public funeral for three of the four girls.

The church exterior is under renovation, but indoors the sanctuary is beautiful; two stories of wooden pews and old stained glass windows with wavy patterns in the glass. In the early part of the 20th century, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was a meeting place for Birmingham's entire black community; W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Robeson all spoke here. This morning, about 150 people are present.

Today is Father's Day, and Pastor Arthur Price, Jr. preaches vehemently on that theme. All those white conservatives who like to pontificate on the breakdown of the black family should take note; Price has stolen their best lines:

"The male figure is being reduced in our culture... a mother can't be a father."

"A father is a provider."

"I have never seen the government raise a child right."

"The only safe sex is abstinence."

"The Bible doesn't say anything one way or the other about women working. We've got to lower our expectations for our wives if they're working."

Price ends by speaking the 23rd Psalm, so rhythmically he's almost singing. After a while, music starts up. "I'm so glad I have an earthly father and a heavenly Father," he says in closing. "I can say Amen because I have a good Daddy."

After the service is over, I find Kathleen Bunton, head of the church's tourism department. When we spoke over the phone the previous week, she offered to introduce me to someone who was part of the church during the 1960s.

Armond is an usher and a trustee at the church. He wears a white suit with a salmon-colored shirt and matching striped tie. He is 63 years old and has been at this church for 52 of them.

He says of the church in the civil rights era, “It provided a meeting place. The church was off limits to the police. It was off limits to breaking up any kind of mass meetings. Had you tried in an auditorium or a convention center, it never would have happened.”

He remembers the day of the bombing. “It was quite devastating.” Armond was working the day of the bombing, but he had family members present, including a sister close in age to the four victims.

He says the bombing changed his life. “I immediately got involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I went to jail three times, demonstrating.”

The tragedy is often credited with galvanizing national support for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; Armond saw an effect in Birmingham as well.

“From the time the church was bombed, it seemed to have eased a lot of the hatred that existed in this city. Even though there was still quite a bit left with Bull Connor and the dogs and the leadership. There was a lot of change among Christian people, who actually came to the aid of Sixteenth Street at that time,” he recalls.

When drafted into the army, Armond refused to go to Vietnam, instead returning to Birmingham with an undesirable discharge. Later, he would start a successful pest control business and become the first chairman of the local Minority Business Council.

In the decades following, he says, signs on water fountains and lunch counters came down. “We had a lot of social change. We were able to go to decent restaurants, and go to rest rooms and use those facilities as well.”

He points to the 1979 election of the city’s first black mayor, Richard Arrington, as the first dramatic change. Several African-American vice presidents at Birmingham banks are another example of change, he says.

“Minority businesses are still lagging behind. There are still some few business that have made it—A.G. Gaston was a big time banker—but most of us are still out struggling,” he adds.

“We have a lot black successes in the city of Birmingham. We also have a situation where kids with no fathers or kids who are poor just don’t have the opportunities that other kids have,” says Armond.

In its heyday, the church had 1600 members; today membership is down to about 300. He attributes the drop in the church’s membership to changing demographics, as blacks left downtown Birmingham and to past ministers who “probably did a lot to tear the church apart rather than to build the church.”

I ask Armond if he expects that the church would ever be active on social justice issues again. “That’s history now,” he says. “I don’t think we’ll be moving in that direction again. Our pastor says our number one job is to evangelize.”

He says that the church, now a federally recognized National Historic Landmark, will sometimes have as many as 400 to 500 visitors at one time, here because of the place’s history. “Big groups come through. They’re curious. They’ve read about it or heard about it... We’re quite used to it. We actually look forward to it,” he assures me.

He says that the sermon today reflects the themes the pastor typically preaches on, not just on Father's Day. "It was a black sermon, to be frank with you. It's the type of sermon we expect to hear from him. It is true that we don't have the number of fathers in our churches that we expect to have."

Armond sees a cycle playing out when black youth are incarcerated for small offenses and another generation grows up fatherless. "What can we do to stop black on black crime? What can we do to get kids back in church?"

But he believes the solution requires more than religious conversion and personal morality. Says Armond, "It's one thing to find God but you also need to find a job."

He would like to see more police on the street, and more resources for schools serving minority populations. The criminal justice needs better alternatives for kids who commit minor offenses, he says, "hopefully by getting them involved in things like church and community service."

"Businesses downtown and the white community have a role to play," he insists. "We've got to create opportunities for black kids so they can have a shot at the American dream too. And that's not happening as much as it should."

2. Selma to Montgomery

Driving south from Birmingham, I leave the interstate at Union Grove. I don't have any more interviews scheduled today, which means I can take a little bit of time to explore. I am developing an allegiance to the back roads of the Deep South, a fondness that has nothing to do with politics or creed.

If you never left the freeway, you would think this part of the country was nothing but truck stops, Wal-Marts, and piney woods. But that's not the case at all. Some of the towns look more western than southern. Buildings with false fronts, tin roofs, and wood siding cluster around tiny railroad depots. There is still a trace of a vanished frontier—I realize that I am only two states away from Texas. Like much of the Southeast, Alabama is in drought this year. Fields of golden grass only add to the effect.

Driving a car is a guilty pleasure, like cigarettes, booze, or red meat. It's not so much the turn of the steering wheel or the surge of acceleration as the intrigue of what lies around the next bend, the knowledge that it's in your power to shift course and check it out. In two decades, if gas prices keep rising and we start taking climate change seriously, this mode of travel may seem an unconscionable luxury. Still, I can't imagine any other way to do this trip. Greyhound Bus could get me to the cities but not to places like this.

It's funny. I didn't start out as a very good driver. I failed my first driver's ed test spectacularly, by hitting the car next to me as I was pulling out of my spot. I didn't get a license until I was 20 years old, and I didn't own a car for five more years after that. When I heard girls my age talk about their long solo road trips, I was surprised at their daring. I devoured their stories and began to plan my own adventures.

Women and horses have a storied relationship in Western culture, and I wonder if something of the same isn't true for women and cars. They promise women a degree of freedom and safety they don't have as pedestrians, or even sometimes inside their own homes. That promise is an illusion, of course.

I double back to check out a handmade sign for something called The Bandit Girls (turns out to be a biker rally). Then for a while, I drive along a country lane parallel to the main state route to see what I can see. I spot an old brick service station with the kind of vintage gasoline sign now most often seen at hip restaurants and bars.

Just down the road is a white clapboard church. I am intrigued by the three huge cypress trees in front of it, and by the unusual architecture—the oversized steeple sprouts from the main building like an angular mushroom. The unpaved parking lot is deserted, so I stop for a little while. I see a weathered stone bench and table and realize this place has got to be old. They were carved by hand.

The name of the church is Plantersville Christian Church—no further denomination given. Sunday School at 10 AM. Worship Service at 11 AM. Mike Wyatt is pastor. Jesus saves!

I don't know anything about the church's doctrine or its dogma, its history or its place in the community. It was probably a segregated church. Very likely it still is. I imagine there have been weddings, baptisms, and funerals here, continuity through times of change. It is peaceful here, under these big trees. A few unexpected raindrops fall and I take pictures as the light shifts.

Driving towards Selma I hear a radio station playing excerpts from Dr. King's speeches and accounts of civil rights history from the Wallace era, in between music and ads. Selma is part of the Black Belt, a crescent-shaped band of rural counties stretching from Virginia to Arkansas where African-Americans make up the majority of the population. I notice the difference in commercial radio right away. Country, pop, and

white Christian stations are replaced by soul, R&B, and black Gospel. Even the hip hop stations have more varied playlists than their Charlotte counterparts.

I get to Selma's downtown round about late afternoon. It is sad in that way specifically reserved for historic downtowns that attempt and fail at their own revitalization: wrought iron lampposts, cute shops next to vacant storefronts. I spot an Alabama Historical Commission plaque for Edgar Cayce, The Sleeping Prophet, "internationally accepted as an extremely gifted psychic." The plaque for the Selma voting rights movement is not visible until you cross the street and stand right next to the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

In 1965, civil rights demonstrators tried three times to cross the bridge, the beginning of a 50-mile march to the state capitol in Montgomery. Organized to protest racial barriers to voter registration, the march was also a response to the recent death of Jimmie Lee Johnson from an Alabama state trooper's bullet, as he tried to protect his mother and grandmother after fleeing a civil rights protest. On the first attempt, known as "Bloody Sunday," 600 marchers, including Amelia Boyton Robinson, John Lewis, and Hosea Williams, were repelled by local law enforcement using tear gas, billy clubs, and bullwhips. The brutal beatings received widespread television coverage and horrified the nation; supporters flooded into Selma from across the nation.

A second march led by Martin Luther King Jr. ended in a short prayer session on the bridge. Armed with a federal court order, 3,200 marchers successfully crossed on the third attempt, arriving in Montgomery on March 25, 2005. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Right Act, outlawing literacy tests as a requirement and providing for federal registration of voters in areas with less than 50% of eligible minority voters registered.

The steel and concrete bridge over the Alabama River is unremarkable—-shorter than I would have imagined, for all the history surrounding it. On the other side of the river is the small Civil Rights Memorial Park. At the front is a carved boulder and monuments to leaders of the march. I think about walking down to the river, but then I notice a man sleeping on a bench near the steps. Otherwise, the park is deserted.

Route 80 is a National Historic Trail from Selma to Montgomery. It takes me about an hour to drive. It took the marchers five days, camping every night. Mostly it looks like any other country road, except for an interpretive center and markers along the way.

I notice the gated entrance for Bois d' Arc Plantation, established in 1957. Who could possibly still take pride in owning a plantation, on this stretch of road?

Not far away is a hilltop monument surrounded by a wrought iron fence. "In memory of Viola Liuzzo, who gave her life for the right to vote," it reads. A pink wreath frames a black-and-white photo of a pretty woman with her hair in glamorous waves.

When I return home, I look up her story. She was a housewife with five children who drove down from Michigan after seeing the marchers on television. The night after the march ended she had been shuttling marchers back to Selma in her green Oldsmobile. KKK members chased her car down and shot her twice in the head. After her death, news reports cast her as interfering white Northerner who left her proper place at home, abandoning her children to pursue sexual relations with African American men in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite eyewitness testimony, the three Klan members in the car were acquitted of murder. Eventually, they were jailed on lesser charges.

Montgomery's downtown is a collection of historic buildings and mid-rise office towers, surrounded by what seem like miles of squat brick housing projects. It's an ugly, unpleasant place.

A friend who had visited a few years ago warned me, "You can definitely see why the Montgomery bus boycotts happened where they did. You feel oppressed just being here."

I walk through downtown for a little while, see Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. was pastor during the Montgomery bus boycotts, and the Civil Rights Memorial in front of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Maya Lin's design is both soothing and haunting. Water flows over a black stone circle inscribed with the names of 40 people killed in the movement between 1954 and 1968. I notice that the phrase about justice rolling down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream is attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. and not to Amos 5:24 in the King James Bible. I wonder if that bothers black evangelicals (or white ones, for that matter).

A plaque marks the spot where Rosa Parks began her bus boycott. The reverse side honors Hank Williams Sr., who began his career in Montgomery. No offense to the country music legend, but couldn't they have sprung for two plaques?

A panhandler stops me across from the state capitol and hands me a rose out of a plastic bucket. We talk for a little while. I am embarrassed to say I give him some money in return.

"You be careful," he warns me. "This is a dangerous town."

I get back in my car, but before I get on the freeway I decide to get some water for the rose. I'm thirsty, too. Earlier in the day the water in my Nalgene bottle was the temperature of hot tea, but somehow I managed to drink it all up.

I stop at the only gas station I see coming up to the on-ramp for I-65. The place looks a little rough but it's still daylight and there are plenty of people around. I notice a kid in a white head rag looking at me. I get a bad vibe, but dismissed it as paranoia. The cashier is friendly when I buy my water—maybe I've misjudged this place, I think. As I'm leaving, a teenager comes up to my car and starts pounding on my window.

"You have a flat tire," he says. "Get out and see."

I know from past experience that it's possible to drive on a flat tire and not notice for quite some time. And I did drive on a dirt road for a while, back near Plantersville. If I get on the freeway with a flat, I could do some real damage.

On the other hand, I am sure as hell not getting out of the car to see. I back out of the space and drive up the hill, out of sight of the guy who approached me. I quickly get out of the car and kick all four tires. None are flat. Then I merge onto I-65 as fast I can, not looking back.

I still don't know how to feel about this incident, if incident is even the right way to describe it. Was this an attempted mugging? Or just some kid trying to mess with me? It felt like one of those cautionary email forwards you get from friends—you know, "Ladies beware, you could get chloroformed in a shopping mall parking lot."

I havenever considered myself a particularly easy target. At 5'9" I am as tall as the average man. I spent three months traveling on my own in Central America. I always

thought the greatest risk on the highway would be an SUV or tractor-trailing plowing into me, not a violent attacker. But you know, I could be wrong.

I'll admit it. I was rattled. But more at myself that at any lurking unknown danger. If I can't trust my own judgment, who can I trust on the road? I say a quiet prayer.

4. Mobile, Alabama

Mobile isn't really on the Civil Rights sightseeing trail, but it's only five hours out of my way. I am here to meet with a federal judge and possibly find some good seafood. After that I'll head up into Mississippi through Hattiesburg.

I arrive at the Hampton Inn in Daphne around 10:30 PM, so I don't see the view of Mobile Bay until next morning. It's gorgeous. Green marshes, blue water, and those big tropical clouds you only get when you reach the Gulf of Mexico. The breakfast lobby is full of moms, grandmoms, and tow-headed children on summer vacation. I feel a twinge of regret. By now I could have kids that age, too, if I wasn't off traveling and gallivanting and writing a book.

Judge Bert W. Milling, Jr. is a federal magistrate. We got in contact through a friend of the assistant pastor at my church in Charlotte. They had attended private school together here in Mobile. From our few phone conversations, I knew he was politically and theologically conservative. I suspected he was part of the group of Episcopalians who had left the United States denomination in the schism over same-sex unions, accepting the authority of African bishops instead.

I couldn't wait to meet him. It was like snagging an interview with the Antichrist—of course, you're going to take it. White, male, and heterosexual, a conservative Christian in a position of authority... here was The Man, at last.

The United States has more people incarcerated than any other country in the world—about 2.2 million.[1] For most of the past two decades the American South has had higher incarceration rates than any other part of the country.[1] Although the majority of drug users in the United States are white, African-Americans comprise 62.7% of drug

offenders admitted to state prisons.[1] In Alabama, nonviolent drug and alcohol offenses account for more than one third of the prison population.[1]

These numbers really jump out when you consider that in most states, a felony conviction means losing the right to vote. I have a whole list of questions ready for Judge Milling, mostly about sentencing disparities and whether he considered the current legal framework to be just.

We end up talking for over three hours. The judge's chambers are spacious and lined with books, with a view of Mobile Bay from the desk. Pictures of his seven grandchildren adorn most horizontal surfaces. Milling was born in 1946 but looks younger—his curly hair is mostly still brown. He wears a crisp gray suit and a baby blue tie.

The judge's manners are courtly and impeccable. Maybe he is only being nice to me because I don't seem very threatening in my Ann Taylor blazer and foundation makeup. Or maybe he treats criminals in handcuffs the same way, I can't say.

"I grew up Southern Baptist, but I was agnostic from the age of 15 or 16 until the age of 30," he says. "We had sword drills and all those things but it never made much impression. I'm very strong-headed and independent. I wasn't interested in religion and absolutes."

At that point in the late 1970s, he was in private practice doing insurance defense for a local law firm. His marriage was crumbling, he says. "My wife and I were both agnostic. At the age of 30, God brought me to the end of my rope. I thought I was basically a good person and had the strength within myself to live a good life. I was

confronted with some situations and choices I had made, and realized very clearly that I did not."

Bert and wife Priss already had three children. "I was not going to be a weekend father. I loved my children," he recalls. "I thought, here I am a lawyer. I've got a bunch of crazy friends that talk about God. I decided to just explore. I felt like if it wasn't true, there wasn't much hope.

"We probably would have stuck together until the kids were grown and all that," he speculates, "but I wanted more than that. My wife wanted more.

"In a very objective way, I shook my first at Him and said if you're up there, you show me. I had to be able to talk straight with Him.

"So I started to read the Bible, I said I'd be nice to my secretary. I'd get on my knees and pray..."

Bert says that he talked to anyone who seemed to have strong faith, regardless of denomination. "I wanted to know, was there a God who created all this and has a way for us to live. That's what I was after.

"I'd always been alone," he reflects. "I'd always lived in a lot of fear. It's a male thing, maybe. You can't let people know you're afraid."

I ask what finally convinced him. "Coincidences," he says. "There were events, just one little thing after another. I just started to feel better. Maybe hope welled up. I read books. I talked to people. I'd stay up late...

"He revealed to me that He really was who He said he was. He said, if you want, I'll give you your heart's desire. My heart's desire was always to be the person He created me to be. It was not about religion. It was about relationship."

The judge says that his wife noticed the difference too. “I used to be kind of serious and uptight. Now there was a joy to life. She said that I’d come home and instead of reading the paper, I’d say, ‘Can I help you with the children?’”

He continues. “I’d been introduced to these people called Charismatics. I didn’t know anything about them. But they were people that had light in their eyes.”

At the time he was attending a Methodist church that included a small group of Charismatic believers. Two of them became his mentors. He asked them to pray with him for a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit.

“We went up into the Sunday School classroom and prayed for about 45 minutes. Nothing happened.” So Bert went home.

The next morning he woke up at 6 AM. “I’m lying in bed. There was this bubbling of joy. A guy that I had hated since high school, I loved. I said, what is going on? I sang on my way to work. The hatred and bitterness I had was lifted.”

After prayer and reflection, Bert left private practice and took a job as a youth prosecutor, although it was a step backwards from a career perspective. The move would eventually lead to his current appointment as a magistrate judge.

“God will meet you in a way that is unique for you,” Bert insists. “Four months after that, my wife had seen such a change in me that she committed her life to Christ as well. We’ve been trying to walk it out ever since.”

I look at my watch and realize that my parking meter is about to expire. I rush downstairs, trying to feed bills through the change machine at the rear entrance of the courthouse. Judge Milling comes up with a handful of quarters from his own car.

After we resume our interview, I learn that the Millings attended Methodist, nondenominational, and Presbyterian churches before joining Christ Episcopal Church in 1993. Bert was Senior Warden at the time of the July 2000 General Convention. "We called our congregation to a time of prayer," he recalls. "We had the bishops in the same room together and they spoke. We had the parish meet at 1 o' clock. Ninety-six percent of the people voted to leave."

So the oldest Episcopal church in Alabama became part of the Anglican Mission in America, overseen by the Episcopal Province of Rwanda. "It was incredibly painful this side too," says Bert. "It's really all about the infallibility of scripture. We had to ask, 'What's an option for orthodox Episcopalians?'"

Bert has since visited Rwanda with members of his church. Archbishops Henry Orombi of Uganda and Emmanuel Kolini of Rwanda have stayed at his house.

"When Henry Orombi walks down the aisle you can just feel the presence of God," he says. There is an irony to a white Episcopalian parish in Alabama accepting the authority of black Africans, in order to escape any appearance of tolerance for same-sex unions. But then I think of the stories of people like Brooke in Louisville, who left the church where her son is buried over this very same issue, and it doesn't seem so funny. The congregation may have voted overwhelmingly for schism, but what about gay or lesbian teens growing up in that same church, now cut off from any religious teaching that accepts them?

I ask Bert if he thinks there will ever be an opportunity for dialogue with members of the denomination he has left.

"We have to draw healthy boundaries," he says. "I think we're called to that. It's hard."

He pauses, then continues. "A Christian is one who is a believer in Christ and tries to do his teaching. It is a relationship. It is not a set of rules...

"Restoration is about the reconnecting of the head and the heart. The analytic and the intuitive. They're different ways of perceiving reality. I don't think you can give an answer for every situation."

Bert was at The College of William & Mary in Virginia during the worst of Alabama's civil unrest. "I was upset that it was happening, having to explain George Wallace and all of that," he says. "I grew up in a culture where you knew certain things didn't seem right."

I ask Bert what he would have done had he been a judge while segregation laws were on the books. He says he honestly does not know.

I ask about racial disparities in sentencing.

"From my experience, I believe the problem is the lack of fathers in the black families and the breakdown of the African- American families," says Bert. "A high proportion of the black community are violating the law and until we are honest in seeking an answer to that, we won't find a solution."

He claims that his prosecutor's office is both color blind and party blind. He says that he prays silently before each hearing. As a magistrate judge, he handles the pre-trial phase of a case, determining whether defendants will be detained or released on bail. If he sees that drug use is part of their criminal history, he can refer them to a 90-day residential treatment center prior to the trial.

I ask how much space is available at these alternative facilities. “We could always use more,” he answers.

I realize that my attempt to hold him accountable for the entire Alabama penal system is not getting anywhere. (For one thing, the Habitual Offender Act at the root of so many mandatory sentences is a state law.) For all the power and authority vested in him, Judge Milling is just a man. He seems decent and honorable. His conversion took him out of an arrogant, self-destructive lifestyle and gave him purpose and higher calling. Probably, it saved his marriage.

After I have stopped recording, as I am putting away my notebook, Bert asks if I would mind if he prays for me. I say yes, not realizing he means right then and there. I am surprised when he sits down in the chair next to me and puts his hand on my arm. The gesture doesn’t feel creepy, just foreign.

He prays a thoughtful, articulate prayer. He prays for my marriage and my husband, prays that I will ask the right questions and meet the right people through the rest of my trip.

This interview won’t bridge the gap between liberals and conservatives. Maybe Bert and Brooke could have that conversation, if they ever were to meet, but I can’t have it for them. The judge’s definition of Christianity includes me, so I will extend him the same courtesy.

Did God actually speak to Bert back when he was searching and seeking? I believe it’s entirely possible. But that doesn’t mean he has all the answers, not any more than I do.

I suspect that if God communicates with us at all, then God speaks to everyone in a different way. Which makes sense, because we're all individuals. It's like an ID code and a password. A song, a sign on the road, a chance conversation with a stranger, or a Bible verse... all these things could have meaning to you, or to me, but they might have a completely different meaning to someone else. Or no meaning at all. The hard part is learning how to listen.

After the interview, I drive out on the causeway, to Ed's, a seafood restaurant the judge has recommended. Since leaving Georgia I have been subsisting mostly on peanuts, dried apricots, M&Ms and hotel continental breakfasts, so I am eager for a real meal. I sit outside on a wide porch painted bright yellow. The fried fish, coleslaw, and hush puppies are not especially memorable, but the view of the storm sweeping over the bay makes up for it.

Unfortunately, the storm breaks and then I have to drive in it. I sit in the parking lot for a good 10 minutes, but the storm shows no sign of letting up. It's one of those tropical downpours, like a hurricane without the wind, and I can see the road filling up with water. I worry about my little car skidding and hydroplaning, but it's already after three in the afternoon. I have no choice except to get going and drive slow.

The water tapers off as I head inland. I don't really remember that much of the drive through Mississippi—tall pines, rest stops advertising Confederate flags for sale, and a sky that gets bigger as the land gets flatter. I take US 98 out of Alabama on a big northwest diagonal, hop on I-55 for a little while near Jackson, but mostly stay on the

back roads. For once, my satellite navigator doesn't let me down and I make it to my hotel in about six hours.

4. Belzoni, Mississippi

All night long I hear thunder outside the room, like a series of rapid-fire explosions. In the morning, the rain is coming down in horizontal sheets. The trenches between buildings are filled with fast-moving tan water. I get breakfast downstairs, check my email, and wait to head out until the storm appears to have subsided.

No such luck. I have just turned off Highway 82 when the Emergency Broadcast Signal interrupts my radio station. Severe thunderstorm warning for Leflore and Humphreys Counties. High wind, possible tornadoes, risk of injury or death. Avoid unnecessary travel; stay indoors if possible. I see lightning fork across the darkening sky, as the wind lifts tree branches and debris. Almost halfway there, I think to myself. Probably just as risky to turn back as keep on going.

Sylvia Holmes-Myers lives just north of Belzoni, not far from where her husband founded his first Delta medical clinic. Originally, he was the one I had hoped to talk to. A physician, ordained minister, and accomplished jazz musician, Ronald Myers has practiced medicine among the poorest of the Delta poor for 19 years. He seemed like exactly the sort of person I should be profiling on this trip, but when I called his office it turned out that he would be in Washington D.C. this week, advocating for recognition of Juneteenth as a national holiday.

"You should really speak to my wife," Ron told me when I explained the topic of my book. "She's the expert on faith."

I turn off the highway onto a narrow dirt lane. Just as Sylvia had described it over the phone, her bright blue roof—installed after Hurricane Katrina—is impossible to miss. A carport is attached to the family's trailer. I am grateful for a moment to collect myself under its shelter.

Sylvia wears her dark gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. She has manicured hands and toenails, but her light brown skin is devoid of makeup. She just got back this morning from seeing family in Louisiana.

"When I first moved to Belzoni, there wasn't even a theater in town," Sylvia remembers. "Every time my husband would leave for the hospital, I would get back in the car and want to drive to Louisiana. I had a whole list of things we would be doing, classes my children would be in...

"And God said, when would you have time for me? Instead, they saw God work in our lives. Sometimes He does have to take you out of a comfortable place. I thank God for being in the Delta. He brought me out to get closer to Him."

After all of these hotel rooms in strange cities it feels good to be in a private home again. The trailer's floor plan is similar to your average ranch house; its peaked ceiling is ten feet tall at its highest point. One living room wall is covered in trophies, medals, and pictures of the family's five children and three grandchildren. At the center of the display is an open Bible.

As we talk, a grey tabby cat comes up in search of attention, then darts away in the schizoid manner of cats. A small dog named Roxy barks outside until the family relents and lets her in. Sylvia gets a call on her cell phone about every 20 minutes, as far as I can tell. Throughout our interview, she dispatches her two teenaged children and her

sister Amy to handle various budding crises—provide rides, make further phone calls—with an ease that can only come from years of experience.

Sylvia grew up just over the state line in Bogalusa, about four hours south of Belzoni. Her husband is originally from Wisconsin. They met in church, while Ron was doing his residency in her hometown.

"At first I could not stand him," she recalls. "I was 26 years old. I liked guys that were real snappy dressers. He would come in wearing these wrinkled scrubs and tennis shoes... he was not the type of person that I would date."

She was secretary at Greater Ebenezer Baptist Church when Dr. Myers asked her to work with him on planning a Juneteenth celebration for Bogalusa. Over the next year, they became friends. Sylvia remembers their first date.

"He asked me out to dinner. I had on my pinstriped Liz Claiborne tangerine and cream dress, with matching purse and shoes. Well, he shows up in a wrinkled green dashiki with a big red fuzzy heart where his belly was! He used to wear that all the time. My mom said, 'Sylvia, Dr. Myers is here and by the looks of it you need to change.' I said, 'Oh no, we're going to dinner.' So we got in the car and drove to McDonald's. I thought he was just going in to see somebody. But then he want up to the counter and ordered. He said, 'Are you sure you don't want anything?' So we shared fries and a soda and we talked for about an hour..." she laughs. "He was not the norm."

We page through her wedding album. It is an elaborate church wedding. Sylvia wears a lacy white dress with a veil that stands out from her head like a halo. They were married in 1987. Ron finished his residency the next year. They have been in the Delta ever since.

"The government paid for Ron's medical school, and he had to repay by doing National Health Service Corps," she recalls. "He was first matched in north Benton County. I'm going to put it the way they put it.

"When they found out Dr. Myers was a big black man who advocated for those that are downtrodden and underserved, the chairman of the board said 'We don't want that big n—- messing with our little n—-s.' They reneged on the deal."

Ron eventually found work in the Delta, through the Madison Yazoo Leake health center. She recalls the real estate agent in Belzoni telling them that he couldn't show certain houses with For Sale signs, because they had already been sold. When Sylvia called the office and used her maiden name, she was told those same houses were still available.

Instead, the Myers bought the tract of land and the doublewide trailer where they live today. "All this used to be cotton fields," she says. "There were no trees. I was pregnant. He showed me this field and he said this was where we was going to be living. I started crying."

In 1989 the couple used credit cards to renovate an abandoned restaurant in Tchula, 22 miles from Belzoni. Prior to the opening of their clinic, Tchula had no local doctor.

"We were able to give healthcare to the patients. We worked together side by side," she remembers. Sylvia had studied accounting and social services at Southeastern Louisiana University. Now she helped administer the clinic.

"Sometimes we'd stay until 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning, seeing patients. I saw ringworm that had gone into impetigo. I never saw ringworm like that before," she says.

Back then husband was essentially working three jobs—regular office hours at the health center in Belzoni, seeing patients at his own clinic in Tchula after hours, then working emergency room shifts on the weekend.

"During this time my husband developed a cough," she recalls. Sylvia told him he needed to slow down. "We were tired. We were weary. We needed to rest."

Still, she was unprepared when her husband collapsed on his own clinic floor. "My nurse had left for the day because her mother was ill," Sylvia recalls. "I was the only person there beside the patients. I didn't know how to take blood pressure. I didn't know how to do anything. He said, 'I coughed and I think I broke my rib.'"

They went to the hospital in Greenwood. He was discharged, but the pain and cough continued. A few days later, Sylvia drove her husband to the hospital in Jackson. "I got him checked in and everything. The next day, the doctor called and said, 'There may be cancer.' For someone to cough and break five ribs, that was just unheard of.

"At the time, all I had was Joshua. I didn't even have a daughter. I wanted a little girl. You know, the Lord will give you the desires of your heart. I said, let him be well enough. Let him come back out of there. Let us have one more child.

"My family had always been concerned about us living here. My uncle said, 'Why do you want to go to the Delta? It's a godforsaken place.' I called my mother and told her, the Lord led us here to do a work. If something happens to Ron, I'm going to stay here and finish the work that God has sent us to do."

The bone marrow scan revealed no cancer; however, Ron had missed three weeks of work. The clinic bills were piling up.

"One night I had this dream," says Sylvia. "I dreamed that I went to the clinic and I opened up this envelope. It was a check for ten thousand dollars. But there was a note with the check that said before you could sign it, you have to make three copies. I gave the check to Bernetta, Ron's secretary, but every time she pushed the button the paper would come out black."

She remembers going into the office in Tchula a few weeks later. "It seemed like everything I was doing was familiar. So I'm sitting there opening the mail, and I get to this piece of mail, and I ask, does Paul Newman have a foundation? Is it called Newman's Own?

"I open this envelope. There was this green check for ten thousand dollars. Not thinking, I gave the check to Bernetta and she made three copies, and the copier broke down. And the vision came back. I broke down and started crying, because God was showing himself to me."

She believes that the foundation learned of their ministry through a news story or television appearance by Ron—at the time, Tchula had the highest infant mortality rate in America, and several months earlier, Dr. Myers had been invited onto Ted Koppel's Nightline to talk about the issue.

"Because of that check, we were able to pay the bills and keep the clinic open," she says. "But that was just the beginning of God taking care of us. He sent people to us to teach us how to pray and how to fight the spiritual battles."

I wonder what exactly Sylvia means. Earlier in the interview, she had mentioned anointing her father's pillow with healing oil while he was recovering from surgery in the hospital. Soon after, his condition improved dramatically.

All right, I thought, yet another story of prayer and miraculous healing. Funny how we never hear about the times when the prayers don't work. I know for a fact that the friends and relatives of godly people are not immune from death.

I didn't say anything. Then Sylvia began to tell me the story of her mother's passing.

"While we were living in the Delta, I had visions of my mother passing away. I would be standing in her kitchen, and I would see her fall back into my arms. It was like a movie with no sound. It always scared me. I started rebuking the devil in the name of Jesus," she said. "Well in '94 we came down to Bogalusa. Even though it was still light outside, when I walked in the house seemed dark. My mother had lost a lot of weight.

"I had a little cut on my foot that wouldn't heal. We had a podiatrist friend that lived in town, Dr. Gerrin—he's Apostolic. He came by the house with his assistant to see us. It was a beautiful day. The sun was so bright. My mother turned around and looked at me. Her eyes glazed over and she made a sound and started falling.

"Ron and Dr. Gerrin took my mother out of my arms. Ron started doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Dr. Gerrin was pumping. His assistant was checking her pulse. It seemed like 911 took a long time to come.

"Dr. Smith, who trained my husband, was there with his associate. When she arrived in the emergency room, she had not one but two cardiologists waiting on her. They immediately took her and began working on her. We went to the chapel and started praying. They revived her once, but she went back. Dr. Gerrin and my husband were in the chapel praying. Dr. Gerrin took authority over the death angel and he prayed and

asked God to allow my mother more time. My mother was revived three times, and it was three times that they prayed.

"God had already taken my feelings out, so that I could do what I needed to do. I had to call all the other relatives. I was the last one in the room with Mom."

After a cross disappeared from her mother's neck in transit from the hospital, Sylvia did not trust the local funeral home director. "I did my mother's hair. I did my mother's makeup. We were back there singing praises and talking to her just like she was still with us. I did Mary Kay back then. I gave my mother a facial. Her skin began to glow. During the funeral, I was able to minister to my brothers. He will give you peace in the midst of the storm."

Sylvia's mother was 68 years old. She died from congestive heart failure. Three months later, Sylvia and her husband were at a conference in Mississippi. "A nun was showing slides of an older gentleman patient. She said he was sad because his wife had just died. And it was like my heart was sliced right open. I hate for people to see me cry. I had to excuse myself and I went into the bathroom... It was like my mother had just died. My best friend said, 'You're grieving, because now is your time.' I couldn't understand why, but it was just a floodgate.

"The door was unlocked and the door flew open. That vision, I thought it was from the devil, but it was from the Lord."

Although both Sylvia and Ron were raised Baptist, they now worship with the Agape Storge Christian Center in Greenville, Mississippi. "Growing up I didn't hear about this business of tongues," she says. "There was a Holiness street across the street from us and we used to mock them."

Over time, Sylvia's spiritual outlook shifted. "My family thought I had been brainwashed with all this Bible stuff. It was a little farfetched for them to believe."

Living in the Delta was another world. "People here still see witch doctors," she reports. "Two-headed men, they call them. One time when the reporters from People Magazine came this elderly woman said, 'Don't you take my picture! I'm Creole.'"

"We came up against witchcraft," says Sylvia. "The things that I have seen, working in this clinic... we've seen a patient come in bit by a snake, that could only have been placed there by the woman who lived there, doing hoodoo. There was another patient, every time she came in, her face would be different. My husband didn't see it, but I knew I wasn't crazy. We both started experiencing things there was no sound reason for. I'm from Louisiana, and I know that people do voodoo on you, and you don't have to believe in it for it to work."

She continues. "Another time I dreamt a woman was trying to poison me. We went to her house for dinner one night and she got real upset when I tried to fix my own plate. Earlier this woman had said, 'Well, if something ever happens to you, we've got somebody picked out for your husband.'"

Sylvia says that her husband thought she was being superstitious. "I remember Reverend Bozeman telling us, 'Do you know where you are? You're in the heart of witchcraft country.'"

She recounts another tale. "I was in the office, typing claims on the computer. I look up. A woman with dark glasses was sitting in the lobby, rubbing a five-pointed emblem. I'm just pecking stuff. I really wasn't typing. I began to pray. She started

looking very uncomfortable. I said, 'You don't look too well. Do you want to see the doctor?' She said, 'No, I got to leave.'

"Later that night I had this feeling that something was outside the trailer. I told Ron about it and he told me not to worry. Just then we got a call from Reverend Arlen Best in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He was a friend. He used to live in Mississippi. He taught us a song." She sings softly. "'*All night, and all day, angels watching over me, my Lord.'*

"He said the Holy Spirit had asked him to call when he did. He said, 'Ron, they're going to step up their game and we've got to step our ours.' Within that same week, the whole back side of my house and both of my kitchen windows was covered with flies. It's never happened since then."

This is only one story out of many.

"We've had angel visitations," she claims. "We used to have blue GMC van. It broke down in the rain, in North Carolina. The door wouldn't close. My arm had gotten wet, trying to fix the door. I saw this man walking toward us from a distance. He just stuck his finger on the lock and the door was fixed. I saw the man walk in the door at the gas station and go into the bathroom. I went in to try to thank him and the woman said, no one had come in."

Says Sylvia, "When Ron and I were first coming down here, you didn't dare pray. You couldn't have prayer in a federally funded clinic. But we treat the spirit as well as the body. Sometimes you do have to go to that home. I don't care how dilapidated it is. You have to put all that aside and get to the root of the problem."

She tells the story of a patient who came into the clinic because she wasn't getting any sleep. "She had been to see a two-headed man. It hadn't helped. He told her to take

some of his money and put it up under her furniture. She would wake up and the furniture would be moved around," says Sylvia.

"We went on a vegetable fast for three days straight. Next day, Monday, we went to her place. Doc starts praying. The light starts to flicker on and off. There was no storm, no wind. He starts to praise the Lord and the lights turn out altogether. A wind came up all the way from the back of the shop to the front of the shop. He keeps praying, and the chain is shaking. You can clearly see outside the door, nobody was there," she insists.

"That's how it's been here all these years. Has it been lonely? Yes it has. But whenever it's been lonely, he's always sent someone. We have to remind the devil he is a defeated foe. The victory is won, but we still have casualties of war."

The pictures on the living room wall show three young men in uniform. These are Sylvia's son Eric and Ron's two children from a previous marriage, Michael and Vinny. Eric is an Army captain, Michael is an Air Force second lieutenant, and Vinny is training to be an Army sergeant. Sylvia says she did not want her children to join the armed forces, but she admits it has given them focus and discipline. She says she tries not to worry about them—even when Eric is in Iraq finding land mines. However, she believes that the war has run its course.

"Our boys and women have done all they possibly could do. I believe now is the time to bring them back home," Sylvia. "We have places like New Orleans, that need rebuilding... When my grandson Caleb sees his dad, his eyes just light up. But that's another year his son won't see him. Vinny was allowed home for two weeks for the birth of his first son. He had to leave four days after he was born."

The Myers' youngest son, Joshua, will start at Louisiana Tech this fall. He plans to study nano-engineering. Fifteen-year-old Neoma, the Myers' youngest child and only daughter, is about to start her sophomore year at Humphreys County High School. Last year her science fair project on aspartame went to the state finals. She is already talking about purchasing lab mice to continue the project this year.

"C's are unacceptable in this household," says their mother, who also happens to be president of the PTA. "I feel that parents should be held accountable. If you're child knows that you don't care, they're going to act out."

Sylvia says that in Humphreys County there are two high schools. The public high school is all black and Humphreys Academy is all white. "When we moved here, there were restaurants where it was understood that blacks didn't go there," she says. "Ninety-eight percent of all the churches are still segregated. We've got Methodists, Baptists, Catholics. We all go our separate ways on Sunday morning, serving separate gods, I assume. But I know there is only one God."

She recalls a time when her husband had started to organize catfish workers who were getting carpal tunnel syndrome on the job. They planned a festival to honor the contributions of African-American workers in the catfish industry.

"It was the Catfish Festival versus the Buffalo Festival," Sylvia recalls. "And we were refused permission to hold our festival on the same day. If the town too small to split the police force, how could they have two separate school systems?"

Around 7:30 PM, Sylvia gets a call from her husband, who is still in Washington, D.C. From the look on her face I know that it's good news. Earlier that day, she tells me,

20 members of Congress and a well-known presidential candidate praised and recognized Dr. Myers for the work he has done publicizing Juneteenth.

"It's been a long road," she says. "For all the work he has done, this means so much."

The Tchula clinic closed in 2005. Although Myers has never had a malpractice claim filed against him, the state's only medical malpractice insurer declined to renew his coverage, citing high case settlements from area juries as the reason.

"They called Tchula a judicial hellhole," says Sylvia. She believes Dr. Myer's testimony on behalf of plaintiffs in other medical cases may also have been a factor. The Myers are fighting the decision in court; meanwhile, Ron works as chief physician at the public Delta Health Center in Greenville.

"We are still here until God releases us," says Sylvia.

"Did you tell her about the time we came home from Milwaukee and there was a goat foot at our door?" Joshua wants to know.

"This wasn't the first time," his mother recalls. "This thing was soaked in oil."

"There was no blood at all," says Joshua.

Neoma wants to tell me about a black dog with red eyes, but Joshua still has the floor. "Another time we came home and there was blood on the door. There was a spot about six feet up."

"The police said it was from dogs fighting," says Sylvia, with characteristic disdain. "Now how did dogs jump six feet in the air?"

We go on telling stories long into the night. Neoma sits at her mother's feet. Their aunt sits across from us. Somehow we forget to stop and eat. My voice recorder has long since run out. Many of the stories strain credibility—the one about a lady werewolf back in Bogalusa sounds like classic folklore—but I listen eagerly all the same. I never get to hear story of the black dog with the red eyes, though. Perhaps another time.

The trailer feels safe and sheltering in the Mississippi night. I find that I don't want to leave. Sylvia worries about young people driving in the Delta at night. She wants me to stay on their couch. It's tempting, but I have an interview scheduled the next morning.

It is past eleven when I finally gathering up my notes and belongings. Before I go, I ask for a caffeinated beverage, and I ask if she will pray with me. We all stand in a circle—Sylvia, her two children, her sister, and me—holding hands. Sylvia asks angels to protect me on the road. She prays that God grant me wisdom. She prays for my husband and my family. She *knew* things about my parents when we prayed, things that I didn't tell her.

We sing the angel song, still holding hands. It's an easy tune. I could sing it today. Sylvia asks me to call when I get back to the hotel in Greenwood, even though it will be late.

There is a blood red crescent moon rising over the Delta. Mist lies so thick on the fields I can barely see the road ahead of me. It's easy to believe that Robert Johnson sold his soul to play the devil's own blues at a crossroads in these parts. Perhaps it was this very same crossroads where he died an untimely death, murdered by poison.

For all its bugs and quirks I have never been more glad for my satellite navigator device, my uplink to the modern world, confirming that I'm still on the map. I am glad for the gospel music on the radio. I rejoice with the on-air preacher when the young college student calls up and prays to be saved, just as midnight blinks onto my clock radio and I cross back into Leflore County.

6. Greenwood, Mississippi

For all its mythic resonance, the landscape we know as the Mississippi Delta did not exist until after Reconstruction, when white settlers built levees and drained swamps in order to farm cotton under the sharecropper system.[1]Greenwood, where I am staying, was built as a trading post on the banks of the Yazoo River. It is one of the few settlements in the region that predates the Civil War.

The town has tree-shaded streets lined with elegant mansions, a cotton museum, and the remains of a civil war fort, but no museum dedicated to civil rights. That is unfortunate, since Greenwood has history to match many movement sites remembered as hallowed ground. Greenwood was the site of a massive voter registration campaign by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the organization's headquarters during Freedom Summer, 1964.[1] And Greenwood was the place where the phrase "black power" was first coined—in speech by Stokely Carmichael, now chairman of an increasingly radical and nationalist SNCC—during a 1966 march through the Delta to Jackson. Martin Luther King Jr. of SCLC and Floyd McKissick of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) were part of the same march, and Carmichael's speech came to symbolize the widening fissures within the national movement.[1]

What Greenwood lacks are clear and resounding movement victories. SNCC's "Greenwood Movement" involved thousands of local black residents attempting to register. It included heroic resistance to violent white intimidation and airlifts of food and medical supplies for Delta residents suffering economic retaliation.[1] But the movement yielded few names on the voter rolls prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[1] Mississippi will always be remembered more for its casualties than its triumphs during the 1960s movement. As in so much of this state, Greenwood's civil rights history is fractured and ambiguous, full of old sorrow and half-won battles.

I offered to meet Bishop Milton Glass at his church office, but he said he didn't mind stopping by my hotel. So at 10:30 AM, after I have checked out, we sit down in the lobby of the Greenwood Hampton Inn. Bishop Glass is a large man with glasses, a mustache, and hair parted straight down the middle. In addition to being pastor and founder of Greenwood's New Green Grove Church of Faith, he is a radio DJ on WKXG, a daytime-only AM station. He has been on the radio for 28 years. "We play inspirational songs throughout the day. Normally, we're led to play the right songs at the right time, for the right people," says Glass.

He says that in 1993, "My ministry just came. It was just the divine call from God. It's been an uphill journey." Glass says he started with just 25 members in a rundown building in the woods. Now membership is close to 700 people, with an average attendance of 450 at services.

"We believe in ministering to the whole man," says Glass. "For example, helping our people get out of the debt trap."

When I ask what churches in the Delta can do to help their surrounding community, he has few suggestions.

"We could go out and feed the hungry, but what would do for them spiritually?" he muses.

"One thing I always hoped would come to pass is citywide revivals. The churches could have a major impact, but the problem is we've all got our little corners. We don't come together to do anything. Our leaders are insecure."

During the 1960s, SNCC activists in Greenwood never had particularly robust support from local African-American churches. In the beginning, only one church, Reverend Aaron Johnson's First Christian Church, would let them meet inside its doors. Although important exceptions exist, this cautious reaction appears to be fairly typical of the black church in Mississippi. White planters made financial donations to black churches and had a hand in selecting their leadership well into the 20th century. Recognizing that they could (and did) lose their lives and social standing by supporting the cause of equality, the majority of black pastors in Mississippi stayed out of the movement in the 1950s and 60s. When I think about why campaigns like Greenwood faltered and stalled, I wonder if their absence was a cause or just a related effect.

The Wal-Mart in Greenwood is integrated, at any rate. Black and white customers joke with each other while walking through the automatic doors. It is clean and modern and vast. I get myself some more peanut M&Ms and Gatorade, and gawk for a little while at a six-foot-tall display of pickled eggs, pickled pigs' feet, and other pickled items that I cannot quite name.

Our family left South Texas when I was seven years old. I don't really remember it very well, but the Delta reminds me more of that place than anywhere east of the Mississippi. I suspect that the pictures I take will not convey the immensity of sky and land, the majesty of water and heat. Tropical green fields tremble under baking skies. Low buildings and trees only emphasize the vastness of it all. Let's admit it—poverty is picturesque. We find a broken-down, weathered barn more interesting than an intact, freshly painted one. A tin roof has more aesthetic value than one made of asphalt—when it's inside a framed photograph and not on your own house. I knew about the Delta's reputation for Third World living conditions before I arrived, so I don't find the poverty particularly shocking. I have seen houses as dilapidated in West Virginia, even a few blocks away from my own neighborhood in central Charlotte.

More troubling is the ratio of poverty to everything else. I didn't spend too long in Greenwood. Maybe it does have acres of newly minted subdivisions with cul-de-sacs and two-car garages hidden somewhere outside downtown. Based on what I saw, the mansions with pillars and even the tidy 1950s ranch homes with gardens and mowed lawns were far outnumbered by dwellings of corrugated metal and peeling paint. A quick online look at the city's demographics will bear me out. This is a bigger issue than aesthetics, and a bigger issue even than race. I don't think you can have real democracy when economic power rests in the hands of a tiny elite.

There is a cautionary tale here. This distribution of wealth and poverty may seem unusual in America today, but such arrangements were far closer to the norm before World War II. How can we know that the broad middle class that flourished in the 1950s is not a historical anomaly? If the rich in this country continue to get richer and the poor

poorer, this landscape may not actually be so backward as it first appears. It might look a lot like our own future.

Before heading on to Memphis I stop by Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Benna, a few miles west of Greenwood. One of my college professors had recommended that I get in touch with Rick Hill, dean of graduate studies and a political science professor at Valley State. He is one of 15 members of a statewide commission charged with planning a civil rights curriculum to be implemented in Mississippi public schools. Hill wears a closely trimmed gray beard and a red and green Hawaiian shirt. He describes himself as an "activist scholar."

"This place, where we're sitting right now, was a cotton plantation," he says, referring to the university campus. "Mississippi by any measure has come a long way."

Although legal segregation has ended and many African-Americans have been elected to local government, he is far from satisfied.

"A lot of things have changed in a cosmetic sense," says Hill. "While the Civil Rights Movement brought legislative changes, there is still a major disparity in everyday life. These things have not changed. In fact, they've gotten worse. Forty percent of students don't get a high school diploma. We've had an increase in infant mortality rates. There was an article that was written, I think it was April 22, in the *New York Times.* Just up the road in a place called Hollandale, one woman had had five kids. Two of them are dead. And they're buried in the no-name cemetery."

Professor Hill is from Bogalusa and grew up attending Ebenezer Baptist Church, the same church that Sylvia Myers called home. "I came up in an era when the black

church was very instrumental," says Hill. "I've always seen the church more as a social institution than as a religious one. They got involved in registering people to vote, getting out the vote... the black church has historically been the institution that taught civic values."

But he is sharply critical of the shift he has seen within the church since that era. "I have no illusions that the church will again become what it once was. Black ministers historically have been leaders. Their role as community leaders lessened," he says. "The transformation of the media has played a major role. The message has become less and less about social transformation and more about personal aggrandizement."

He recalls a recent visit to a friend's church. "One thing that immediately struck me is this moment when everybody gets up—the collective prayer. The preachers have these same kinds of theatrics. They don't have very much to say, so they preach in catch phrases."

Hill says that whenever there is public outcry over a shooting or violent incident, "There's always a preacher somewhere around. He arguing not for change in the system, but that people ought to simply pray."

He has harsh words for white Republican fundamentalists at the national level. Meanwhile, he feels that black churches have grown more socially conservative since the 1960s. He criticizes black preachers for their preoccupation with sexual politics and their attacks on gays and lesbians.

Hill argues that the civil rights movement made progress in the 1960s because women pushed it forward. "The church now is more evidently gender imbalanced," he

says. “You have a male preacher, preaching for large numbers of women. The voices in the congregation are often not heard.”

I ask him if he believes the church should still have social role. Hill believes that it should, if only because the region’s problems are so great.

“I think that something quite radical has to happen in these churches,” he continues. “I think that women need to take over.”

I ask him where he believes activists need to focus their energy. “There are people here who operate with a mentality that might be called 19th century. Blacks are still deferential to whites,” he says. “In the Deep South, the inner citadel of power has yet to be penetrated. We have to develop economic bases. We have to look to more than just the government. We have to talk about the redistribution of wealth and power.”

Overall, Professor Hill has deep reservations about the likelihood of achieving meaningful change.

“You have pockets of progress in the state—-the Nissan plant in Jackson, Tunica, the northeast Memphis corridor—but they are few and far between,” he says. “The Civil Rights Movement as we would think of it has had its moment. Black elected leaders have become quite institutionalized. While they are plenty of things to find consensus on, not enough people are interested... one can hold out for hope and possibility, but it’s going to be a long time coming.”

Driving north on Highway 49, I switch from gospel stations to public radio, in time for the tail end of an interview with a famous author who argues that environmental and community organizations across the globe have inadvertently created the largest

social change movement in world history. I hope that he's right. We sure need something new. If these groups can get a sympathetic subset of organized religion on their side and actually address the divide between rich and poor, they might have a prayer of succeeding.

6. Memphis, Tennessee

Other than casino lights near Tunica, there's not much to see at night between Clarksdale and the I-55/240 loop. I take surface roads nearly the whole way.

South Memphis looks rough. Neon restaurants, pawn shops, and abandoned buildings—surplus locations for *Hustle and Flow*.

The Marriott Residence Inn downtown, on the other hand, is nice. Its marble art deco lobby is so nice, in fact, that I feel uncomfortable standing there with all my bags and layers of grime. Despite the late hour, an older mom and three kids are checking in ahead of me. The teenaged girls have flawless tans and shiny pedicures.

I can rationalize choosing a business-class hotel because I need the Internet access, yet I cannot say that my booking decision was entirely uninfluenced by the amenities—location near museums, shopping, and trolley stop, rooftop deck with Jacuzzi, and a waffle bar every morning. The "studio apartment" has a full kitchen and is larger than some actual apartments I have lived in.

Do I feel a little guilty staying here after witnessing the poverty and deprivations of the Delta? Of course. But man, it feels good to be in a city again. Not just any city, but an actual tourist destination. BBQ and Beale Street. Stax Records and Graceland. The Peabody Marching Ducks.

Blake is flying in on Friday, and we're going to celebrate our fifth wedding anniversary in Memphis before driving the ten hours back to Charlotte. I am about to resume a normal life, something akin to the lives of the other people staying in this hotel—the tourists, the business travelers, their wives and children.

Despite my relief that the trip is nearly over, I don't sleep well that night in the hotel. The thin blinds don't shut out much of the city lights visible out my sixth floor window. I can't turn off the air conditioning, either, except for one time when I accidentally turn on the gas heat. I don't remember much of my dreams, once I finally drift off—just a sense of hot, oppressive malice lingering from the road.

The schedule for my final day of research is an easy one. I don't even have to drive anywhere.

Five days before leaving, I got a call from Dr. Thomas Moore, the piano player at my old church, asking for help on a design project. I hadn't spoken with him in three years or more. I asked if Dr. Moore if he knew anyone in Memphis who might be interested in talking to me. Sandy was the first name on his list.

I know that Sandra Brown Turner is the director of the early childhood education school at the University of Memphis, and has a flexible schedule during the summer. Actually, I don't know a whole lot more than that.

When I called and told her about my project, she got excited right away. "Why don't I just take the day off work and show you around town?" she proposed. "I'll pick you up at the hotel, first thing in the morning."

Sandy turns out to be a middle-aged white woman with shoulder length brown hair. The first place we go is the Arcade Restaurant, established in 1919, oldest continuously operating restaurant in Memphis, hangout of Elvis, featured in Mystery Train and numerous other movies. Vintage tan and turquoise vinyl booths ooze authenticity. I order sweet potato pancakes and fresh-squeezed orange juice. We say grace over breakfast.

"My husband and I are both native Memphians," Sandy tells me. "To use the religious term, we were convicted that we needed to stay here and work on social justice."

Sandy was born in December 1951, which makes her five months older than my own mother. She grew up in a working class neighborhood on the east side of Memphis. Her father was a professional fireman and a deacon at Lee Clair Baptist Church. Her mother taught Sunday school.

"We started that church in an old farmhouse," she recalls. "My fondest memory was how we built community. Everybody came together to build the church. A church should build community. A church should help you on your journey. A church is not for entertainment."

At the age of 16, she felt a call to the ministry, but as girl she could not act on it. At college she joined the Baptist Student Union, where she met her husband, Larry. "We stayed very good little Baptist kids," she recalls.

But over the years, a series of events jolted her out of certainty. Sandy learned of a pastor's affair and watched as the incident was covered up. She taught for 13 years at a historically black state college—a life-changing experience. She and her husband found

Cherokee and Choctaw ancestors in their family trees and began to incorporate Native American traditions into their spiritual practice. For a number of years, they were part of a Baptist church with a female pastor.

"Growing up I had never thought of God as being anything more than a Heavenly Father. We were trying to find something true and authentic," says Sandy. "You want your children to know who they are and live comfortably in their own skin. You realize that God has many places and many names."

She calls herself "a nontraditional traditionalist," quoting Deepak Chopra and the Apostle Paul in the same breath.

"There are times when I am fairly psychic," she states. "As I have opened up my faith and spirituality, there are times when I get very clear messages from people on the other side."

I ask if she can provide examples of how these gifts operate. "I love to go junk shopping," Sandy says. I wait for her to continue.

"I went to this one junk store where I'd been going for years. On this one day the woman behind the counter looked profoundly sad to me. I began to get this buzzing inside my ear, like a bug was there. I told the woman she didn't look like her usual self. She burst into tears, and I knew immediately what was going on. Then I looked at her and said, 'Your daughter's fine. She wants you to know that she's fine and you need to stop grieving.'"

Sandy says that before that conversation, she did not even know the woman had a daughter, much less that she had died. "Her daughter was killed in a car wreck at 19. This was a very lively, spirited young woman who was in the throes of a love affair that was

really bad for her. As a result of that love affair, she was killed and he survived. The daughter just would whisper things clearly to me. She talked about a dog she had had as a little girl. She told me to tell her mother that the dog was there with her, and gave me the name of the dog. She told me that they were fine and doing okay, and for her mother to stop being angry at her boyfriend.

"I was able to use my ability to hear and channel to relieve her pain. The next time I came into the store was about a month later and she said, 'You have no idea how much you helped me.' I said it wasn't me, it was your daughter.

"That scared me so badly because I realized what a powerful thing that was. When you truly open yourself up and ask God to use you as an instrument of peace and love and hope in this world, the things that can happen are stretching way beyond what the human mind and heart can conceive," she says.

Sandy says that she was so shaken that she did not have another experience like that one for more than a year. "I am still very reserved about it. There are times when I just flat out ignore the buzzing in my ear, because I just can't deal with it that day."

She cites the writings of Norman Grubb and Carolyn Myss as influences and sources of guidance. "My personal journey was to not be afraid of it. I can be a presence for some people to relieve suffering."

She continues. "Once you open yourself up spiritually, you will know when you encounter someone who is a charlatan. You must meditate, always. Begin your day and end your day with meditation and prayer. You ask that your gift only be used in His love and light, for healing the world. You start the day by opening yourself up and asking to be of service, but you ask God to be mindful of your energy, so you don't drain yourself.

When you sleep at night, thank God for any opportunities that you had that and ask God to cleanse you of all that energy."

At one point, Sandy was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. After she adopted her practice of daily prayer and meditation, she was able to return to work.

"It can physically harm your body, if you do not work with it appropriately," she cautions. "Always seek God's guidance in this, and ask for His protection, sometimes even from yourself."

After breakfast we stop in front of the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was shot on April 4, 1968. The building is now part of the Memphis Civil Right museum.

"I was 16. I remember very well the day that Dr. King was killed. It was a horrible dark, dark day," says Sandy. "I wanted to march when he came to Memphis, but my parents wouldn't let me. But at the 35th anniversary of the march my husband, my daughter, and I participated."

She takes me around the historic churches of Memphis: Beale Street Baptist Church, Clayborn Temple, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, and the burned-out ruins of the First Methodist Church. "The churches here in Memphis were just a bastion of strength and support for the Civil Rights Movement," says Sandy, naming two Southern Baptist churches as well as Catholic and Episcopalian congregations. "The Jewish community was also very involved. When segregated hotels would fill up, many churches would open their homes to people who were coming for the protests."

She points out the tomb where Danny Thomas, founder of Saint Jude Children's Research Hospital, is buried, along with the fireman's museum, and the housing project where Elvis Presley lived as a teenager. This is better than a duck tour! When we approach the Mississippi River, I have to ask about the giant metal-sheathed pyramid on its bank. I learn that it was designed to be a basketball arena. Now abandoned by the Memphis Grizzlies, the structure is slowly sinking into the mud.

"Fifteen years ago everybody was moving east to Germantown and Cordova... now people are beginning to move back downtown, especially young folks," Sandy tells me. She says that she and her husband chose to stay in the center city during the time when white middle class Memphians were moving out. Their house is in a neighborhood called Highland Heights. "It's paid for. We love it. Everything we want to do is here."

Late in the morning we make our way to a park on the banks of the Mississippi River to perform a solstice ritual. It looks like the same river I saw in New Orleans, although not quite so wide up here. Calling on Uriel, the angel of justice, for protection and guidance, we affirm our good intentions for the season to come. Then we carry our hydrangeas and day lilies to the shoreline and place them in the river. I am surprised by how swiftly they float away in the blue-brown water.

Sandy says she has been doing this ritual every day on the summer solstice for years. It is her way of honoring the earth and the passage of time. Sandy is a lot more down to earth than I would expect from someone who is into angels and New Age rituals; she has a wonderful laugh and a knack for making strangers feel like old friends. I complement her on her flowing pale green tunic with iridescent beadwork and she quips, "Yes, this is my middle-aged fat lady outfit."

I ask if she and her husband ever saw Elvis here in Memphis, and she says yes, but not recently. “We’re not that metaphysical!”

We stop by the Burkle Estate, also known as Slave Haven, believed to be a stop on the Underground Railroad, then make our way to the Little Tea Shop for lunch. It is a classic Southern “meat and three” restaurant, its pale pink walls hung with sepia photographs of famous patrons from years before. I opt for the “three” part of the menu, choosing a vegetable plate made up of three side dishes: greens, tomatoes with onion, and mashed potatoes. The food is familiar and comforting, yet I also notice differences, 600 miles west of Charlotte, North Carolina—corn sticks have replaced corn bread.

“I would always find a way for my classes to sit down and eat together,” Sandy remarks. “It’s a sacred thing. In the South, if somebody dies, you bring food. If somebody is born, you bring food... I don’t know anyone who has a sense of home like Southerners.”

Sandy uses Cherokee terms to describe her vision of a righteous and ethical life: the bright red road, the rainbow path, living life on the turtle’s back. “Ultimately, the only truth that exists is God’s love.”

Even though her personal spiritual practice has broadened outside traditional Christianity, she and her husband are still members of the First Baptist Church here in Memphis. I ask where she sees her primary ministry.

“Being an educator is my ministry... A child comes to you and offers up their little morsels of truth about who they are and the things that they’re thinking about, and it is your sacred trust as a teacher to listen respectfully. You are a teacher of people, not a teacher of a class. That’s important to me.”

She continues. “I never doubted God. At the age of six, I felt a very strong connection to God. There was never a time that I doubted God’s existence. It was God’s love that I fell into, and it holds you... when you have a precious earthly father and mother, you can conceive better of a heavenly Father and Mother.”

Sandy paid for breakfast, so I insist on getting the tab for lunch. Then we’re off across town for more sightseeing: the W.C. Handy Museum, Mason Temple, and a 30-foot-tall replica of the Statue of the Liberty holding up a cross in place of a torch, emblazoned with the words, “America, return to Christ.”

Mason Temple, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous final speech, is not a Masonic lodge, but the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ, an African-American denomination founded in the 1890s by Bishop C.H. Mason, born as a slave near Bartlett, Tennessee. Even though the building is not a museum open to the public, Sandy manages to finagle us a tour, not only of the sanctuary, but of the temple library and Bishop Mason’s tomb. The wooden seats of the main worship hall look identical to the black-and-white footage from 49 years ago. Perhaps it is just the hush of any vast gathering space empty and unused on a weekday afternoon, but it is easy to believe that momentous events have happened here.

The Southern expression “never met a stranger” might have been invented to describe Sandra Brown Turner. Everywhere we go, it seems, she makes a friend, stops and engages people in conversation for five minutes, ten minutes, half an hour at a time, no matter their skin color or occupation. Even people who are initially hostile or indifferent are drawn into conversation as she asks questions and seems genuinely

interested in what they have to say. We stop at a corner market to pick up fresh cherries and farmer's cheese for my hotel kitchen. Naturally, she makes friends there too.

"You are only seeing one side of Memphis," she confides. "This is a tough, tough town to do good work in. There are so many people who will come at you in a territorial, mean way. Everything in this city comes down to race... one of the reasons Larry and I stayed downtown was to try to move that conversation forward."

The plan is to meet up with Sandy's husband at her office at the end of the day. Around five o' clock, we arrive at the university. She stops and chats with students and young children as we walk inside. At the end of the hallway, is a large American flag made out of paper and paint. Children's handprints form its stars and stripes.

"After 9-11, we decided that the best to combat evil in the world was to talk about peace," Sandy explains. "We had the children make this flag. With every little handprint, the children said, 'I believe in peace.'"

Sandy's office is filled with hats, scarves, cushions, books, fairy dolls, feathers, stones, and shells. I notice a bumper sticker that reads "The Goddess Is Alive and Magic is Afoot," amidst numerous other framed humorous and motivational sayings.

When Larry Turner walks in the door, he kisses his wife of 38 years on the lips. He has silver hair and beard, glasses, and dark twinkling eyes. They point proudly to a photograph of their daughter and only child, now a reporter for the Associated Press in Atlanta. She looks beautiful and confident.

Larry talks about how he and his wife first met, about their early years together, about the people who influenced his childhood. "My roots are from Mississippi. Pontotoc was the capital of the old Chickasaw nation," he says. "I always new something was

different about my grandmother Turner. I was a curious kid and I would find all kinds of critters—snakes, frogs, turtles—and bring them inside.

"My grandmother Nolan would chase me out of the house with a broom.

"Mama Turner would say, 'Where did you find your new friend?' We would go out on the back porch and talk. She would ask, 'Do you know the name of your new friend?' And she would tell me. Then she would say, 'When you get through playing, take them home to the creek. Their family will miss them if you don't take them back.'"

"My grandmother Turner was creative, resourceful, and joyful. She taught me to care for the Earth," says Larry. He believes that she was part Choctaw. He had another great-grandmother who was Black Cherokee. "It became a family secret. They always said she had a good tan."

Larry says of his paternal grandmother, "My Mama Turner wove native traditions through her Christianity, through her faith. It was a very practical Christianity, very down-to-earth. She taught me everything goes in circles, sunrise, day, sunset, night, and seasons. There was a rat snake out in the barn. She said, don't you dare hurt the rat snake because it keeps the rats out of the corn, which feeds the cows, which feeds us. I learned to have a great respect for everything. She was developing the little naturalist in me. I would ask her all the time, 'What is this?' She never got tired of answering.

"My dad came back from World War II a broken person. He was never really there for me emotionally. My Mama Turner filled that void. The barn was a sacred place. It was almost my little church. The pigeons and the critters, that's where I would go when the world didn't make sense.

"As I got older, I was listening to this conservative God in a box. In that box was a bunch of pat answers. Somewhere in my own personal journey, I said, okay God, you're bigger than this box. Native American tradition has never altered my belief in Jesus Christ. It all seemed to be part of a larger picture. I realized God was a God of awe."

Larry goes on. "God is not God the Father. God is God. God has to be both male and female. I guess it's about knowing that the natural world and the spiritual world are linked together. Just because I don't have all the answers doesn't mean that I have to go back to the box."

Sandy laughs. "We were very prim and proper back then. We would witness to people, thump Bibles..."

Larry agrees ruefully. "We were pretty obnoxious. If I had met me today the way I was then, I would not have liked me."

Sandy points out that their Southern Baptist past still provides an important connection point with other believers. "When we were ministering to a friend with breast cancer, we found ourselves moving back to a very traditional modus operandi, using very traditional vocabulary. Now that we're liberal, we can move back and forth."

I ask what caused their worldview to shift. "I started asking a lot of questions after my brother's suicide," says Larry. "A minister basically said that my brother was in Hell. Another one said that this had been the Lord's will. Well, how can suicide be the Lord's will? I went back to the scriptures, where Paul says, 'Neither heights nor depths, nothing can separate us from the love of God...' Then I really started questioning everything I had been taught."

After Clarence Jordan's death in 1969, Koinonia would become known as the birthplace and incubator for Habitat for Humanity and a number of other influential social justice ministries.

Chapel is at 8:15 AM, which is a bit of a struggle given when I got in the night before. Once I'm up, I don't regret it. The heat of the day is not yet upon us and the fields have a luminous, mystical quality. A faint humming sound hovers on the edge of hearing. You only get this in wide open spaces, I've noticed. The sound is the buzzing of insects yet it seems to emanate from the earth itself, the pulse of life made audible. Tall pecan trees and live oaks provide shade for scattered outbuildings. Irrigation equipment gleams in the morning sun. This place has both harmony and beauty. I find myself wanting to stay longer.

At chapel, I see a lot of people in their 20s and early 30s, perhaps the majority of the crowd. There are also a fair number of seniors, but not as many baby boomers as I would have expected. This morning's chapel theme is nonviolence in a time of war. A white-haired woman tells us that nonviolence always gets back to doing our inner work, and that she can sometimes see energy auras around people and trees. Then she has us listen to Chopin on a boom box as our closing meditation.

After chapel, we get assigned our chores. Along with most of the other short-term visitors, I have asked to participate in work projects as well as interview people. I introduce myself to Ann, the hospitality coordinator. It appears my first task will be making the salad for lunch. We walk over to the kitchen and then to community organic garden. Even though it's June, there are not many ripe vegetables in the garden—-Ann suggests using basil from the herb garden and edible flower petals to augment the peppers, carrots, and iceberg lettuce in the big refrigerator.

What impresses me most about the Turners is that they seem so grounded and whole. They are doing good work in the world and are somehow not killing themselves in the process. I ask how they avoid the burnout endemic to the helping professions.

"We've learned to say no," says Sandy. "I try to live by the words, 'nothing without joy.' We have a lake house in Arkansas. We take people with us who also need to rest. We do a lot of body work, chiropractory and massage. It's important to recognize when your energy is gone."

Says Larry, "For me, it's the creative world and the natural world. I am dyslexic. In school I was the problem kid. At five or six years old, I started drawing. The creative world has been a safe place for me, always... As an adult, photography is one of my passions. So is the natural world. We sit outside on our porch in Arkansas and watch turkeys, box turtles, and hummingbirds."

Larry continues. "In the psychiatric world, I learned not to be a sponge. I learned to be a mirror. You don't deny what they're going through and what they're feeling, but you reflect back to them their world and you give them a chance to look at it. I could go home after a long day in the psych unit and not be crazy myself. Somebody didn't teach me that. In the quiet whispers of my self, something greater than myself was teaching me that."

It is past six P.M. by now. Larry invites me to join them for dinner, perhaps at the Cupboard Restaurant?

I sense that the invitation is genuine. I genuinely enjoyed the day. Part of me would like to sit at their feet and learn everything I can from them. But I think I have

experienced about as much as my tired brain can hold. My short night is catching up to me. I thank them for the invitation and ask for a ride back to the hotel instead.

I have laundry to do tonight, and Graceland to see on Saturday.

AFTERWORD

Writing an ending to this book seems an impossible task, as impossible, in its own way, as the project itself. How can you ever encapsulate an entire religion and region in a couple hundred pages? How can you do justice to even one person's life story in a single interview? I worry that I end up sounding like a Christian apologist—even though in my view, Christian institutions are the ones that should do most of the apologizing.

The years when I wrote *Southern Cross* were not particularly easy ones. They took their toll on me, and on those closest to me.

In my research I met people who inspired me, renewed me spiritually, and filled me with passion and confidence in God. Other times I just wanted to shake my head and walk away, frustrated by the right and left alike. I expected that this project would test my faith, but I had always thought I would pass with flying colors. By the time I left for my final road trip, I was just ready to be done.

It wasn't a particularly well-planned itinerary. It wore me out. But looking back on that last trip, I see a common thread in nearly every conversation. Faith was what had pulled the people I met out of their comfort zones. It gave them the courage to leave behind material success and financial security, to question the assumptions and dogmas on which they had built their lives, to break laws and go to jail, to stare down death itself. These stories are not unique to the South. They represent a way of thinking about reality that transcends place, time, culture, and creed.

God is not somewhere far away. God is all around us. I learned that from the people I met along the way, even those with whom I disagreed. Some had been to seminary, some were members of the clergy, but many more were not. Wisdom comes through lived experience. It's all around us if we take the time to seek it out.

There is a popular bumper sticker that says that God is bigger than any one religion. I tend to also think that God is also bigger than liberal Christianity. At the end of six years, I don't have a complete set of answers. I don't think anyone does. We have all lived such different lives. Personal experience is powerful and sacred. We can learn more from each other than from any higher authority.

For what it's worth, I believe the supernatural stories as well. Or at least, I believe that people like Sylvia Holmes-Myers and Sandra Brown Turner aren't lying or crazy. And at this point, I am fairly convinced that there is something out there bigger and wiser than myself. I also recognize that I want this too much to entirely trust my own conclusions. My experience of the divine may be nothing more than a structure in my brain, allowing me to draw on reserves of strength and hope beyond my conscious ego.

I believe in the God who came to set the captives free.

I'm not here to tell you what to believe. Go and ask your neighbor. Better yet, ask two or three of them. Pay attention to where they disagree.