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Rainy weather this week, so it is a good time to sit here at home and write a NewesLetter. Some big changes since January. One thing that has been fun for us here this year is that we are paying closer attention to creation. We watch (and record) when and where the moon rises and sets. We notice which spring flowers begin to blossom when. When and how the ants emerge. Bird migrations. We feel like we are getting to know our neighbors. Last week we made our first trip up to the ranch and saw just how low the snow pack is. This winter has been one of the driest ever. We suspect this will seriously affect the ranching industry. We traveled up to the ranch in a new (to us) truck. The ranch truck we have used since we came here (we called it the “ox”) finally died and now we are driving in “Babe the Blue Ox.”

Another big change recently is that I have stepped down from my position on the board of directors at The Shepherd’s Hand, the unhoused resource center here in Montrose. Events surrounding this change have not been easy and I have needed the spiritual discipline of interpersonal conflict that I wrote about in the book on John Wololman. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the time I have been able to contribute to this ministry and to be freer now to explore some new ventures to help unhoused people in our region. A couple months ago I facilitated a fascinating conversation around what it means to be “enabling” people.



In February I took a trip to Georgia to visit two different communities. At Flintstone, Georgia I visited a young community, shared life for a few days, and led a gathering titled “Deep and Wide: A Workshop in Life-Giving Socio-Political Engagement,” based on my book. Then, after an unpleasant drive in a rental car through a storm across the state I attended the 2026 conference of the North

American Network of Charismatic Covenant Communities, and visited friends at the Alleluia community. It was a delight to both give and receive in very different community settings.



Part of my work—no change here— involves reading manuscripts before they are published. For academic journals I evaluate whether they are worth publishing in a particular journal. For some books, I offer feedback to authors who want my thoughts along the way. For other books, I am asked to provide a formal endorsement for the back of the book or on a website. I have done a few of these recently. And along with this I (or Cheri and I) have also been meeting with a few people to provide encouragement and accompaniment.

Another “change” – I have finally submitted my article for *Spiritus* journal. As I mentioned in the previous NewsLetter, I have been a little intimidated by this project and now it is off to the editor. Someone else is probably reading it now, evaluating whether it is worth publishing. I have been working toward this article for over a year now, playing with one idea or another and I think I have something to say. We shall see. In fact, let’s see if I can say it right here – only not using seven thousand words.

Reflections – In Praise of Musicians

I have always been drawn to Christians who choose to live a bit unconventionally. I was led to Christ back in 1971 by “Jesus People,” some of whom lived in a Christian commune near town. The next year Cheri and I watched the movie “Brother Sun, Sister Moon” together, captivated by the model of Francis of Assisi and his band of Christ-followers. In college we learned about Christian groups that moved together into inner-cities, lived simply, and helped people. There are the “ordinary radicals” of the new monastic movement. And more.



And more, indeed. Over the years I have become intrigued by the fact that this kind of thing—where people declare some radical “yes” to Jesus and choose to live different than most of us—happens everywhere with all kinds of Christians through all of history.

A woman named Macrina in 4th century Greece chose to remain single. She convinced her mother and brothers to break with the conventional life and to join her in a life of simplicity, hospitality, equality and prayer. By 365 they had established a fully ordered Christian community, and in time were involved in founding the first hospital in history.

In 1201 an Italian group called the Humiliati received approval by the pope to live an unconventional “way of life.” They were families who wanted to live in common, to pray together, and to preach to their neighbors. They were not nuns or monks, but *families*. They pioneered the idea of a Third Order, families who wanted to live kind-of like monks and nuns, but in the world and without the vows of complete poverty and celibacy.



In 1625 Nicholas Ferrar, a respected member of the Church of England moved his extended family to Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire to seek God by means of a unique way of life together. The family—and guests—practiced a pattern of common and personal prayer, incorporating regular use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, hourly recitation of Psalms, and night vigils. Yet theirs was not simply a contemplative, but rather a “mixt life”: including manual labor, the maintenance of an almshouse for a few needy widows, the printing of biblical harmonies, and the translation of spiritual classics.

In 1727 the German (Protestant) count “Zinzendorf” welcomed religious refugees of all stripes (including Catholics) onto his property. All were expected to hold personal possessions lightly and a few members lived in common. Some made commitments to celibacy. Prayer meetings were pervasive, to the extreme of fostering a round-the-clock prayer watch that lasted one hundred years. They welcomed the weak and sent missionaries to sell themselves as slaves to share the gospel of Christ with other slaves.

In the early 20th century Amy Carmichael declared her own radical “yes” and took off for Japan and India. She ultimately founded a community of prayerful servants, The Sisters of the Common Life.

The sisters lived according to a written summary of the principles and practices of the community. Over time, she found herself overseeing a male division of the ministry. Thousands of children were cared for by their orphanages or hospitals. Furthermore, by the time she died in 1951, Amy Carmichael had written about 35 books. The community (known now as the Dohnavur Fellowship) continues to this day.

And this is just a drop in the bucket. American Shaker communities take vows of celibacy, while Amish seek to live an unconventional life in families. Benedictine monasteries, Bruderhof communities and new monastic households choose to share their income and possessions in common. Medieval convents, Orthodox monasteries, Anabaptist settlements, and modern new monastic experiments all employ some form of Rule, typikon, Ordnung, or covenant to order their common life. And then there are the commitments Christians make regarding unconventional forms of clothing, residence, travel, social relations and more.

What's going on here? Is this a "call" from God? ["Jonah's Call" medieval woodcut]

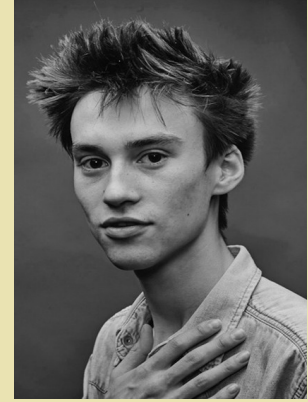
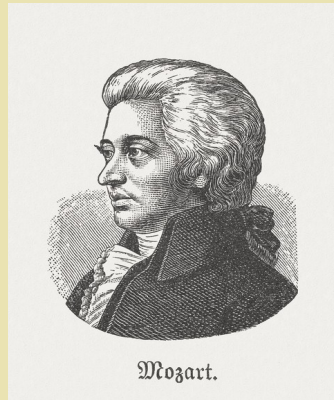
Is is spiritual pride? What if a few chose to do something like this today? What would we say? Roman Catholics would call it a *vocation*, joining a monastery or a religious order. But what do Protestants call it?



Or perhaps it is just something human. There are always a few people who will declare a radical "yes" everywhere and at all times. Max Weber (1864–1920) thought so.

Weber, like me, was fascinated with people who lived differently. He spent his time studying the way societies work. In his examination of religious history, Weber noticed that while were some people who wielded authority by their position (priests, popes, brahmin class, etc.), there were others who earned authority by their religious expertise (mystics, nuns, visionaries, shamans, etc.). He called this second group religious "virtuosi."

You know the term “virtuosi,” right? We have all known—or at least heard of—virtuosi musicians, individuals who possess outstanding abilities (Hildegard of Bingen, Mozart, Jacob Collier). Virtuosi often blend interest, talent, and practice, along with training in special communities (like The Juilliard School) to become models and shapers of society. But are there *religious* virtuosi, individuals who possess exceptional talent in the spiritual life, who frequent monasteries and become religious models? Is that what “saints” are? Are those the people I described above?



It would take too long for me to develop my argument here, but actually I think that Weber’s idea needs some adjustment. While I think Weber’s idea sheds some light on the pervasive habit of Christians declaring a radical “yes,” I think it is possible to imagine a more adequate concept. Think about music. Yes, within the world of music there are indeed a few virtuosi who are exceptional in their mastery and who, for that reason, carry a degree of authority in their field. Yet there are also a class of “musicians” who, while not attaining the level of perfection or achievement of the virtuosi, learn how to read musical notation, are often talented, practice their instrument regularly, gather in orchestras or bands, and just love music. People might even call certain musicians “gifted.” Yet, while not virtuosi, musicians are also not like ordinary folks. Their interests, talents, schedules, and to some extent even identity are associated with being a musician. Furthermore, as a group, these non-virtuosi musicians make music, share it with others, and shape the life of society in general.

I think we can identify something similar in the world of religion. Yes, there are a few saints around, but we can also identify a class of devout believers who choose to make a religious lifestyle a meaningful part of their identity. They might sell their possessions and live in common. They may choose to pray seven times a day, or even wear different clothing. But you must understand – this is not about some folks being *better* Christians. It is about how we each choose to follow Christ, or perhaps how Christ chooses us. The apostle Paul speaks of the “gifts” that the Holy Spirit distributes to the body of Christ: teaching, healing, tongues, administration, and so on (see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). Each gift contributes something unique and important to the community of Christ. What if the Spirit distributes not merely “skills” but “roles” or even “forms of life” as gifts to the body? What if some of those prayerful widows mentioned in 1 Timothy serve the church not simply by virtue of their circumstances, but also by the empowerment of God? What if Paul’s missionary companions choose a unique lifestyle as an expression of God’s call on their hearts? What if the community sharing of Acts 2 is not a “norm for all today?” but an “invitation to some today?”? What if God’s Spirit draws

some of us to live crazy lives for the sake of the gospel? My conviction, a bit like Weber, is that a range of Christians will always make the choice to live an unconventional life. My further conviction, unlike Weber however, is that an important influence—a gift from God’s Spirit to the church and the world—is not just from the few virtuosi, but from the mass of religious “musicians” who while not necessarily the *best* Christians, choose to devote their lives to Christ in ways that most of us find a bit unusual just because they find themselves drawn to it.

The question then becomes how we will acknowledge, accompany, and empower such individuals and communities to be a gift to the Christian church today.

Art notes:

- Writing Desk – Medieval Woodcut
- Saint Francis of Assisi – 1920s woodcut illustration by Italian artist
- “Jonah’s Call” medieval woodcut
- The Chapel at Little Gidding, Cambridgeshire, England, Illustration Circa 1885
- Hildegard of Bingen, circa 1098 - 19.9.1179, German saint, nun, mystic, woodcut, 1524
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), Austrian composer, wood engraving, published 1881
- Jacob Collier - photo
- Mouse – Indie Sketching: Unconventional Art Ideas | Sketches, Medieval Woodcut tattoo

