WEEK 2, 2021

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

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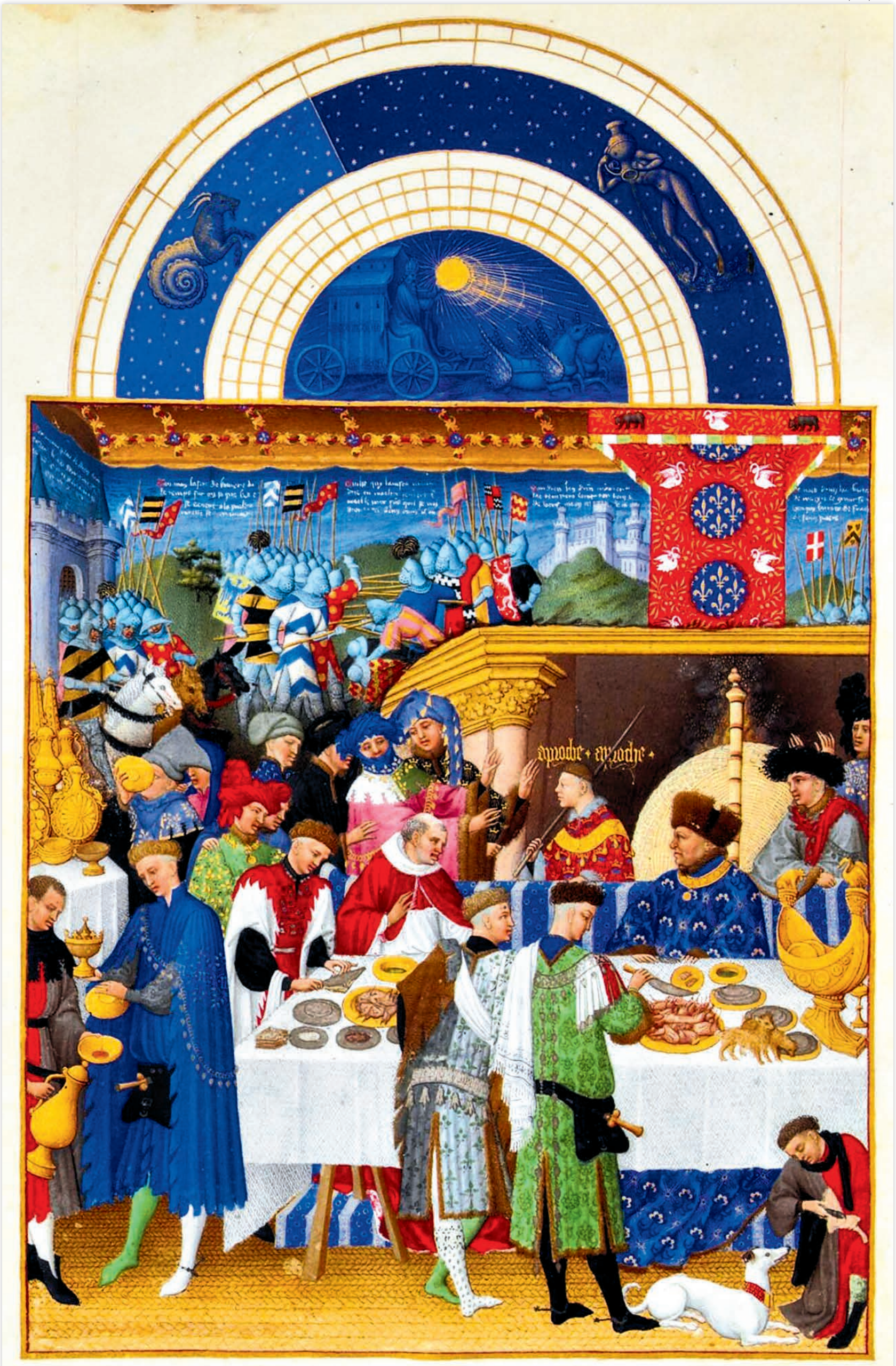

January, from "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry," Folio 1, back; between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers. Tempera on vellum; 8.8 inches by 5.3 inches. Condé Museum, France.

An Illuminating Calendar From 'The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry'

LORRAINE FERRIER

In the first half of the 15th century, Western Europe was at the tail end of the Hundred Years' War, a series of conflicts between France and England to win the powerful kingdom of France. War and plague were rife. Turmoil, heartache, and despair were the mainstay for many medieval Europeans.

No one was left unscathed.

During such tumultuous times, strong faith and a mustering of some form of hope is necessary for day-to-day survival. As sure as the ebb and flow of night and day, the only constant in such challenging times is time itself. As such, a calendar helps us to move forward and to hope for both regularity and something better—the future.

In Western art, one of the most exquisite calendars to be found is at the beginning of the 15th-century devotional manuscript "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry." The calendar contains lavishly decorated, idyllic scenes of medieval courtly and pastoral life alongside stunning medieval architecture—all painted in rich and often rare colors, embellished in gold.

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LITERATURE

A Play for Our Time

Some lessons from Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town'

JEFF MINICK

Around the age of 55, I discovered I could no longer trust myself to read certain poems to my students without the risk of tears.

I don't recollect what poem I was reading aloud to the class on that day of revelation. What I knew at the time was that my voice was cracking and my eyes were filling up with saltwater. Deciding that the last thing these young people needed to see was an old guy with tears streaming down his time-roughened cheeks, I halted the reading, declared a five-minute break, washed my face in the restroom, and returned to a class of students still amazed—or perhaps disconcerted—that a poem could so affect their teacher.

Which brings me to Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town."

Several of my classes over the years read this play aloud, and merely listening to parts of it, especially the ending, threatened to bring on the waterworks. Even this morning, sitting alone at my desk and reading the last few pages of "Our Town" to prepare to write this piece, the resultant mist meant grabbing a handful of tissues and dabbing away at my eyes before my daughter came downstairs, saw me, and wondered if Dad was cracking up.

Probable Causes

I suspect that part of my reaction this morning derives from my age. My 69-year-old self is both stronger and weaker than the man of 30 who disappeared so long ago in the mists of time. The deaths of my spouse, my parents, and other relatives and friends; the precious regard I have for my children and grandchildren; the blows delivered over the decades; the blows I have delivered to my self: These have toughened my spirit while at the same time making me more aware of the pain and suffering of being human and simply drawing breath on this planet, and so more vulnerable to ocular leakage.

I wonder, too, if the virus and the pandemic helped draw those tears. "Our Town" takes place in Grover's Corners, a small village in New Hampshire, and those who live there intimately know their neighbors. In our time of social distancing, lockdowns, and orders to stay at home, the contrast between the play and our lives at the present moment is glaring.

Mostly, though, "Our Town" so powerfully affects its audiences and me because it reminds us of what it means to be human: the joy and the sadness, the courage and the fear, the strength and the fragility found in each of us.

A Celebration of the Ordinary

Like the old television series "The Andy Griffith Show," Wilder creates an idyllic vision of small-town life. The folksy Stage Manager acts as a guide throughout the play, introducing us first to the buildings and businesses in the town, and then to various villagers and families. He has the ability to weave back and forth through time so that, for example, when we meet Doc Gibbs in May of 1901, we learn a few lines later that he dies in 1930.

At one point, when the town's newspaper editor, Mr. Webb, is being interviewed about the town, the Stage Manager asks if anyone in the audience has questions for him. A Woman in the Balcony asks if there's much drinking in Grover's Corners, to which Mr. Webb responds:

"Well, ma'am, I wouldn't know what you'd call much. Satiddy nights the farmhands meet down in Ellery Greenough's stable and holler some. We've got one or two town drunks, but they're always having remorses every time an evangelist comes to town. No, ma'am, I'd say likker ain't a regular thing in the home here, except in the medicine chest. Right good for snake bite, y'know—always was."

In those few lines, we find the essence of this small town.

Common Sense and Cultural Artifacts

In this same scene, when a Belligerent Man asks why the town doesn't address "social injustice and industrial inequality," Webb responds:

"Well, I dunno ... I guess we're all hunting like everybody else for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom. But it ain't easy to find. Meanwhile, we do all we can to help those that can't help themselves and those that can we leave alone."

We learn more about the town when the Stage Manager describes what's going into a time capsule in the cornerstone of a bank under construction: a copy of The New York Times and of Mr. Webb's Sentinel, a Bible, the Constitution of the United States, a copy of Shakespeare's plays and of "this play," so that "people a thousand years from now'll know a few simple facts about us. ... This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying."

How times have changed.

What We Forget

By the play's end, Emily Webb has married the boy next door, George Gibbs, and then dies in childbirth. In the cemetery, she speaks with those who have preceded her in death and learns that she can return to the land of the living for a visit if she so wishes. Against the advice of these deceased souls, she chooses her 12th birthday for her visitation and soon finds herself in her family's kitchen.

Her mother is busy making breakfast and idly chatting to her about birthday plans and gifts. Realizing how little the living pay attention to the miraculous world around them, Emily cries out, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another," and then breaks down sobbing.

A few lines later, she asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?"

He answers "No," pauses, and then says, "The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

By the time she returns to the cemetery, where she talks with the others, Emily has realized how we humans so often overlook the important things in life, how much we miss by being so overwhelmed by worldly duties and events, and how our earth is "straining away all the time to make something of itself. The strain's so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest."

A Play for Our Time

"Our Town" first opened on the stage in 1938. Since then, we've lived through wars hot and cold, we've seen times of turbulence and relative peace, we've undergone economic ups and downs, and we've witnessed enormous and sometimes ugly changes in our society and the arts. In the past year alone, we've seen ongoing attacks on our culture, suffered a pandemic, experienced a summer of rioting and arson in some of our cities, and are now in the middle of a constitutional crisis stemming from the recent national election.

Because of so many transformations, some readers and theatergoers—the play remains popular even today, at least when theaters are open—may regard "Our Town" as a quaint piece of Americana depicting a country and its values now lost to the mists of time.

Not so.

"Our Town" should inspire us to resurrect and reclaim tradition, common sense, and neighborliness, to become more aware of the rhythms of time and nature, and to remember, too, those who came before us. When the Stage Manager acts as the preacher at George and Emily's wedding, he encapsulates these ideas in his brief sermon, ending with these thoughts: "And don't forget all the other witnesses at this wedding,—the ancestors. Millions of them. Most of them set out to live two-by-two, also. Millions of them."

We can also take to heart the lesson learned by Emily after her death. We may not be saints or poets, but we can pause from time to time during our hectic lives, open our eyes, and apprehend the mysterious beauty that is the beating heart of this world.

At the very end of "Our Town," the Stage Manager looks at his watch, and then says, "Hm—Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners.—You get a good rest, too. Good night."

Let's heed that advice and get some rest. We're going to need all the strength we can muster in the days ahead.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

'Our Town' should inspire us to resurrect and reclaim tradition, common sense, and neighborliness.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

A scene from the original Broadway production of "Our Town" with Frank Craven as the Stage Manager, Martha Scott as Emily Webb, and John Craven as George Gibbs.

JOAN MARCUS/GETTY IMAGES

The cast of the 2002–03 Broadway revival of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." The play debuted in 1938.

JOAN MARCUS/GETTY IMAGES

Paul Newman (C) as the Stage Manager performing the wedding ceremony of Emily (Maggie Lacey) and George (Ben Fox).

February, between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers.

March, between 1412 and 1416 and then circa 1440, by the Limbourg brothers and Barthélemy van Eyck.

April, between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers.

May, between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers.

June, between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers, Barthélemy van Eyck, and Jean Colombe.

July, between 1412 and 1416 or circa 1440, by the Limbourg brothers or Barthélemy van Eyck.

An Illuminating Calendar From 'The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry'

Continued from ***Page 1***

The entire 15th-century masterpiece by the Limbourg brothers is lauded as one of the best surviving examples of the late International Gothic style of illumination. As such, the illuminations had a huge impact not only on the style of illuminated manuscripts thereafter but also on the process of painting.

For instance, art historian E.H. Gombrich in his book "The Story of Art" said of the preeminent 15th-century Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck, "He rather pursued the methods of the brothers Limbourg, and brought them to such a pitch of perfection that he left the ideas of medieval art behind."

Van Eyck may have left medieval art behind, but the Limbourg brothers' art continued to inspire artists. For instance, 16th-century Flemish artists copied the figures and sometimes whole compositions found in the calendar.

The Book of Hours

In Europe, books of hours were most popular between 1350 and 1480. In France, the manuscripts became popular in 1400 when pious patrons commissioned artists to create their personal book of hours: a lay version of the breviary used by clergy that consists of prayers and readings to be read at certain times of the day and night (the canonical hours of the liturgical day).

Generally, each book of hours contains, at the beginning, a calendar of church feasts and saints' days, often illuminated with the Labors of the Months. The order of the prayers and devotional practices differs in each book depending on the book's owner and home region. Of all the illuminations, the Hours of the Virgin were deemed most important and were often the most opulently decorated.

'The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry'

Commonly known as the Limbourg brothers, who were three Flemish miniature painters and brothers, Paul, Herman, and Jean created "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry."

"The Coronation of the Virgin," from "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry," Folio 60, back; between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers. Tempera on vellum; 8.8 inches by 5.3 inches. Condé Museum, France.

The brothers' uncle Jean Malouel was the court painter for Philip the Bold (the Duke of Burgundy). For two years, Paul and Jean worked for the duke as well, and when the duke died in 1404, all three brothers began working for the duke's brother Prince Jean, the Duke of Berry, the third son of King Charles V of France.

The duke was an extravagant art collector. He compiled a vast collection of illuminated manuscripts and a library of astronomical treatises, cartographical folios, Bibles, psalters, missals, and breviaries, including 15 books of hours.

The duke commissioned the brothers to create two illuminated manuscripts. The first was "The Beautiful Hours of Jean of France, the Duke of Berry," now held at The Met Cloisters in New York. Then between around 1412 and 1416, the brothers created "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry" in France, now held at the Condé Museum in Chantilly, France.

Production of the book halted in 1416 when the three brothers (all under 30 years old) and their patron, the Duke of Berry, died, many presume of the plague. The book was described as "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry" in an inventory after the Duke of Berry's death, in honor of its very ornate decoration and to distinguish the unbound, unfinished book from the 15 other books of hours in the duke's collection.

Many unknown experts such as calligraphers, gilders, and artists specializing in decorative borders made their mark on "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry."

Besides the Limbourg brothers, two other illumination artists are known to have contributed to the manuscript. The first artist is thought to be the Netherlandish artist Barthélemy van Eyck, although some scholars disagree and call him the "intermediate painter" who, around 1440, finished some of the incomplete illuminations. Then between 1485 and 1489, the Duke of Savoy commissioned French miniature painter Jean Colombe to complete certain illuminations for the hours. Scholars have distinguished the different artists by the styles and costumes the figures wear.

Pioneering Illuminations

The Limbourg brothers' style of illuminating was pioneering. Their illuminations are important in the development of the Northern traditions of landscape and genre painting. Of the 206 leaves that "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry" contains, there is an unusually large number of illuminations: 66 larger miniatures and 65 smaller ones.

According to the Visual Arts Cork website, when Paul visited Italy, he was inspired by the frescoes of the Italian painters Taddeo Gaddi (Giotto's godson) and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. After his trip, Paul's illuminations imitated and surpassed the Italian painters' naturalistic renderings and simple linear perspective. In addition, all three brothers were influenced by Byzantine art, which they observed in the Sienese School of painting that upheld the Byzantine tradition.

The brothers painted using perspective, and they painted truer to life by incorporating solid figures, architecture, and even introducing shadows. But the figures still took on the more elongated look that was characteristic of the International Gothic style of painting.

In addition, rather than incorporating the calendar's illuminations into the text, as per tradition, the brothers included standalone miniatures that were set apart from the calligraphy.

The Calendar

At the top of each calendar illumination are the solar chariot, the days of the month, and the sign of the zodiac.

Winter

Normally, December would show a pig being hunted in readiness for the duke's Christmas feast. Instead, Barthélemy van Eyck's illumination is a scene deep in the forest, where hounds skin a wild boar. Vincennes Castle, the duke's birthplace, peeks out above the trees.

An abundant feast is underway in January, for which the Limbourg brothers have depicted a sumptuous meal with expensive food, drink, and tableware. The Duke of Berry sits at the table to the right in a distinctive fur hat and deep-blue cloak with gold motifs. Fleur de lis and swans are depicted up high on a tapestry. And the tapestry at the back indicates past battles won.

February shows the duke's servants working his land in the height of winter. The farmers have tended the sheep, and there are beehives on the land too. One man is goading a donkey up the hill to deliver goods to the village, another is chopping a tree for firewood, and others are inside warming themselves by a fire.

Spring

Farmers prepare the land in March in readiness to plant grapevines. A man steers two oxen pulling a plow, another readies himself with seed, and others seem to be tending the previous year's grapevines. And in another field, a shepherd tends his sheep.

In the top right corner of the illumination, a winged dragon, flying above the Duke of Berry's Castle of Lusignan (Poitou), represents the fairy Mélusine. Mélusine is featured in folklore in France, the Low Countries, and Cyprus, as a lady with her lower body as either a fish or a serpent.

In April, a couple exchange rings as they get engaged in front of witnesses. The scene is full of graceful figures in both their dress and mannerisms, accentuated by their elongated limbs. The castle in the background could be Dourdan Castle, that still survives, or Pierrefonds Castle.

Continuing April's gaiety, trumpeters in May lead a party of youths into the forest to collect twigs and leaves to wear as crowns or necklaces, a spring tradition. The architecture in the background could be the City Palace in Paris, where the kings of France lived from the sixth to the 14th centuries.

Summer

In June, peasants on the banks of the river Seine can be seen making hay in a harmonious composition. The men to the right rhythmically scythe the grass, and the women rake the hay. More people can be spotted in a boat, complete with their shadows, and to the right of the boat on the castle walkway, people can be seen ascending the stairs in the distance.

June's backdrop is the City Palace in Paris (also seen in the April illumination). The church tower to the right is the palace chapel, St. Chapelle, a Gothic masterpiece.

Pleasant and productive pastoral scenes continue in July, where peasants shear sheep and cut the harvest, with Poitiers Palace in the background.

In August, a group on horseback, led by a falconer on foot, go out for a hunt. The falconer holds a stick that he will use to beat the bushes and encourage the game to take flight. Hunting dogs are there to encourage the birds to come out of hiding and to capture a bird once it's been shot.

Étampes Castle is in the background, and the middle ground shows peasants working the fields, harvesting the sheaves of what may be wheat.

Fall

The Limbourg brothers, Barthélemy van Eyck, and Jean Colombe all contributed to the September illumination. In the foreground, farmers harvest the land. These figures are thought to have been painted by Colombe and don't appear as elegant as those painted by the Limbourg brothers or van Eyck. Indeed, some of Colombe's figures bring a humorous air to the calendar, but always at the farmers' expense.

Saumur Castle in Anjou is depicted in the September illumination in exquisite detail right down to the lily flower weathervanes seen on the castle's turrets.

For October, farmers on the banks of the Seine in Paris are plowing the land and sowing seed. Attention has been given to every little detail: The man sowing seed on the right has made footprints in the wet mud and the three boats further back behind him cast shadows. Louvre Castle is pictured in the background. The castle no longer exists, but Louvre Palace now stands on the site.

Colombe painted the November illumination, which again contrasts with the more dainty illuminations by the other artists. Colombe depicted a peasant with his dog tending his swine. The swineherd is beating the oak trees with his stick to feed acorns to his pigs.

The Limbourg brothers' style of illuminating was pioneering.

August, between 1412 and 1416, by the Limbourg brothers.

September, between 1412 and 1416, circa 1440, and between 1485 and 1486, by the Limbourg brothers, Barthélemy van Eyck, and Jean Colombe.

October, between 1412 and 1416 or circa 1440, by the Limbourg brothers or Barthélemy van Eyck.

November, between 1485 and 1486, by Jean Colombe.

December, circa 1440, by Barthélemy van Eyck.

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LITERATURE

More Dante Now, Please! (Part 4): The Road of Repentance

JAMES SALE

ALL IMAGES IN PUBLIC DOMAIN

Dante and Beatrice gazing at Empyrean, in Canto 31 of Dante's "Paradise," illustrated by Gustave Doré.

Cunizza da Romano in an illustration of Dante's "Paradise," Canto 9, by John Flaxman, 1793.

On Venus, Dante learns that sin is not as important as understanding the divine order. Canto 8, as illustrated by Gustave Doré.

This is the fourth and final article in this particular Dante series. We remember that we read Dante because he addresses the big questions of truth and reality, and we saw how in Hell the issue of free will is of paramount importance. Subsequently, we discovered that although Purgatory and Hell seem similar in that they are both places of suffering, they differ fundamentally. In the former, there is hope and ultimately beauty, whereas in the latter, there is only despair and profound ugliness. These differences reflect the choices that individuals make in their lifetimes, and these choices are themselves all part of a psychological mind-set or disposition.

But what of Heaven, the third and final stage of Dante's upward ascent toward God? Is that some boring place where we are destined to sit around listlessly singing hymns? How is it different from the other two psychological and spiritual places?

First, of course, we see that Heaven is a place where there is no pain or suffering, no psychological angst or guilt, and none of the three major psychological problems humans experience of blame, projection, and denial. It's Paradise, in fact!

Yet the peculiar factor in all this is that all the people in Heaven are sinners just like everybody else in Purgatory and in Hell. How can that be? And perhaps even more trenchantly for the modern mind: How can that be fair or seen as equal treatment?

Venus Ruling

Heaven, in fact, is full of great sinners! An example that especially illustrates this point can be found in Canto 9. As Dante ascends the levels of Heaven, the occupants are at first grouped according to their ruling planet: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, and so on. Each planet deals with a certain disposition.

Unsurprisingly, Venus is where we find individuals preoccupied in their earthly life with passion, sex, and love; and here we meet a noblewoman, Cunizza da Romano.

What is surprising is that Cunizza first married a Guelph leader for political advantage. Then she had the poet Sordello as a lover for several years, and then later had a love affair with the knight Enrico da Bovio. Following Enrico's death, Cunizza married (at her brother's command) Count Aimerio. Then if that were not enough "love," it is believed that she married a nobleman from Verona, and on his death, married her brother Ezzelino's astrologer from Padua! The point is, she certainly had—for the time and her station—an exceptional love life.

We might recall at this point arguably the most famous canto in all of the "Divine Comedy," that of the love affair between Paolo and Francesca, in Canto 5 of Hell. This canto is justly famous for many reasons, but not least is the fact that Dante himself faints with pity at the end of the scene. (Virgil upbraids him about this in the next canto because such a response to the sufferings of Francesca suggests, albeit obliquely, that God has got his judgment wrong in this case.)

How can it be that Francesca is in Hell for one affair or transgression only, whereas Cunizza is in Heaven despite having had many lovers? To give just one answer is, possibly, to oversimplify the situation, but it has to do with the fact that, as Dante scholar Guy Raffa puts it (citing ancient sources), "Cunizza knew love during each stage of her life."

As Cunizza herself says (in Mark Musa's translation), facing Dante, "But gladly I myself forgive in me/ what caused my fate." Notice those critical words there: "Gladly I myself forgive in me." There is in them what we would nowadays call self-acceptance. She had no wrong intentions, although her passions may have been excessive. For example, there is something of the true medieval concept of chivalry and gallantry in the occupations of two of her lovers: Sordello was a troubadour poet, and Enrico da Bovio, with whom Cunizza traveled widely, was a knight.

In short, she was led from one love to another, but always in the spirit of love itself. It was likely more spiritual or more in accordance with the mores of her time to have entered a nunnery and renounced the flesh altogether, but that—under the sway, as it were, of Venus, her guiding planetary influence—wasn't her way. She was destined to enjoy the flesh fully—"gladly" as she says—even though there may have been excess in it.

As a short sidebar, it is worth commenting here that we are not to understand this position as being Dante's endorsing astrology as we understand it now: that is, as predicting the future in some Christmas cracker kind of way. Rather, the ancients understood that there was a profound connection between what was below (the Earth) and what was above (the heavens and the stars): One mirrored the other, and not least in our understanding of who we are.

Dante himself proudly mentions that he was born under the Gemini star sign, and regards this as significant as to the kind of person he is. In this sense, then, we can interpret the planetary signs as being analogous to personality types. If Myers-Briggs delineates 16 types of personality, well, with astrology we have 12.

Again, to be clear, these are not fixed determinations but rather predispositions to certain traits. Free will is always operative, and humans are always responsible for their actions and choices.

In Heaven, the soul is not neglected but cherished.

Entering Life via the Narrow Gate

But to return to Cunizza, she has done that very difficult thing, which is to enter life via the narrow gate, for the broad gate through which most people go leads to not-life, or more dramatically, to destruction. Her path reflects what former vicar and British Member of Parliament Christopher Bryant talks about when he says, "One of the rewards of the journey will be that of becoming more and more completely what one essentially is." If we put this in modern, Jungian terms, what it means is accepting the shadow side of one's personality. It is the integration of the whole self or soul.

To unpack this a little, Freud referred to a dark side of the ego, or alter ego, which he called the id. This is equivalent to Jung's idea of the shadow: complexes, disordered tendencies, repressed energies that we do not like or even accept or acknowledge in ourselves. On the contrary, this shadow exposes the ideal self-image, the one we like to present to the world, as false: We are not just this nice person, this successful professional, or this I-have-it-all on Instagram personality.

No, within us there is something deeply disruptive and disturbing, and it is better, so our ego continually reasons, if other people don't see it. Eventually, of course, if we repress the shadow long enough, we begin to believe it isn't there. At that point, the only inkling of its existence left to us will be through our dreams, often nightmares.

Writer Thomas Moore observed, "When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning." In other words, in Christian terms, this leads to sin. We fail to take responsibility for our own soul, and this leads to its own loss.

In Heaven, the reverse occurs. Here, the soul is not neglected but cherished and loved through the conscious process of integration. John Monbourquette, the Canadian psychologist, expressed it this way: "Jung considered the reintegration of the shadow to be the ultimate moral challenge. This work consists of recognizing our shadow, accepting it as part of ourselves and reintegrating it into the whole personality. Those persons who can welcome and embrace their shadow become whole and unique individuals." Furthermore, he adds, "This process brings to mind the Taoist vision of the real: the universe results from the constant and invisible harmonizing of its fundamental polarity, the yin-yang."

Accepting Our Paths Graciously

This, then, is not just a Christian understanding, although Dante explicitly links it to Christian revelation, but the process of becoming who one truly is runs through all wisdom literature. Monbourquette says, "The mystics [called it] the night of faith; the myths of Osiris and of Dionysus described it through images of dismemberment of the person ... More familiar to some is Christianity's comparison of it to the death of the old person and to a crucifixion."

It's remarkable that science, through Jung, some 600 or so years later, discovers what Dante reveals in his poem. And we need to grasp just how comprehensive that vision of human nature and its frailties is. There are nine levels of heaven before we reach the Heaven of heavens at level ten, or what is called the Empyrean. At each level, the astrological order is followed. So first, at the Moon, we find the sinners who broke their vows (the inconstant moon of popular romantic songs!), sometimes unintentionally, but nevertheless they were at fault.

Then at volatile Mercury, we find the swift seekers after fame and glory. Venus we've met—the excess of passion or love. After Venus, the Sun, and as is appropriate with its association with light, we find the wise spirits, among them the wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon. But as we know (1 Kings 11:4), he was a deep sinner too.

From the Sun we move to Mars, the warlike planet. It is worth commenting here how all-embracing the scope of the sins are: Venus for love, and Mars for war—opposite tendencies yet both leading to sin as well as redemption. Here Dante meets his own great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, an old warrior who died fighting in the Second Crusade.

Jupiter holds the spirits of those rulers and kings who led the world. But above them, at Saturn, are the contemplatives—those who devoted their lives to asceticism and devotion to God.

Beyond Saturn, we reach the Fixed Stars where we find Adam and the three major Apostles; it need hardly be noted that Adam was a sinner, or that the apostle Peter was, given all his gaffes recorded in the Gospels. And so on, to the final vision.

In short, we have the whole array of failed human beings, who sinned some way or other according to their predilections, but who became self-aware, acknowledged their faults, and repented. British writer Alan W. Watts expressed this in a very stark way: "The choice is between paranoia, being beside yourself, and metanoia, being with yourself—ordinarily translated as repentance."

Finally, then, poet and translator A.S. Kline comments, "Free will is misused in Hell, re-aligned in Purgatory, and correctly applied to earthly and heavenly existence in Paradise." In Dante's final stanza, this becomes: "But already my desire and my will/ Were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed,/ By the love which moves the sun and the other stars" (C.H. Sisson translation). At this moment, what we really want and what we really decide to do coincide; there is no more frustration as we fail to live up to our highest ideals. Instead, we have—helped through reading Dante's poem, reenacting his journey to Paradise—begun to understand what is truly involved.

To see the earlier articles in the series, please visit our website.

James Sale is an English businessman whose company, Motivational Maps Ltd., operates in 15 countries. He is the author of over 40 books on management and education. As a poet, he has performed for The Society of Classical Poets' symposium at New York's Princeton Club in June 2019. His most recent collection, "HellWard," follows Dante's journey and is available on Amazon.com

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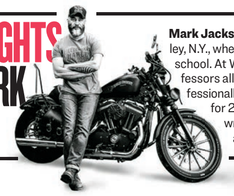
Joe Gardner (Jamie Foxx) living his dream, in "Soul."

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Consistent Pixar Quality But Not Entirely Harmless for Kids

MARK JACKSON

'Soul'

Directors
Pete Docter, Kemp Powers

Starring
Tina Fey, Jamie Foxx, Angela Bassett

Rated
PG

Running Time
1 hour, 40 minutes

Release Date
Dec. 25, 2020

★★★★☆

Pixar would appear to have knocked another one out of the park. It's nice in this day and age to have a product that doesn't decline quality-wise, but maintains its standards or even evolves. "Soul" maintains Pixar's integrity of quality, while pushing the envelope on two fronts.

One might define Pixar's brand as kid cartoons that explore the profoundly philosophical, theological, ontological, metaphysical, and spiritual. What a concept—who does that? Pixar does. The company provides a cornucopia of food for thought. However, attempting to explain the mysteries of the universe is not without a certain risk, which I'll talk about in a minute.

2 Fronts

"Soul," as most Americans can likely intuit from the title, is the first Pixar film to feature a predominantly black cast, much like the predominantly Mexican world of "Coco," before it. So that's front number one.

And while the inclusivity is nice, and it's a fun idea to have different cultures step up and tell a tale from their own unique perspectives, Pixar's subject matter always transcends and is ultimately, just, you know, about humans. And again, not just physical reality stuff, but the huge, gigantic questions.

"Soul" gets even more philosophical, theological, ontological, metaphysical, and spiritual than ever before, so that would be pushing the envelope on front number two.

However, I submit that Pixar's overstepping its usual thoughtful considerations of the big questions, and that there's something more subversive, if unintentional, going on here. "Soul" paves the way to atheism; it makes an atheistic interpretation of the cosmos comfortable, and I have a problem with that when it comes to children. Again, more on this later.

What Goes On

Pixar debuted "Soul," it's 23rd film, on Christmas day 2020 (streamed on Disney+). It opens with the usual Disney castle, except the theme music is hilariously out of whack, like it's being played by a grade school orchestra—much woodwind tweedling, string-section scraping, and brass-section honking.

'Soul' needed more content about good and evil, right and wrong, and the real reason for human existence.

Aaand ... the curtain rises on Joe Gardner (Jamie Foxx), a well-intentioned, somewhat goofy middle school orchestra teacher, conducting his young would-be musicians. The setting is a cozy, highly detailed cartoon rendering of Manhattan.

Turns out, the teaching gig is Joe's day job; he's also an aspiring and extremely talented jazz pianist. After years of unsuccessful auditioning, Joe finally gets his big break: a shot at playing with famous jazz-sax diva Dorothea Williams (Angela Bassett) and her quartet.

Joe's audition for Dorothea, when he utterly loses himself in his music, might be the best scene in the whole movie. Anyway, Joe—absent-minded professor that he is—rushes home euphorically with his head in the clouds, all the while nearly getting hit by cars and run over by buses. Joe's luck, however, eventually runs out, and he plummets down an open manhole and gets knocked the heck out.

The Great Beyond

He wakes up a mere ghost of himself. (It's a little bit funny that somebody wrote a black character that spends most of the movie as a Casper-like white ghost, but in this age of insane finger-pointing and cancel culture, let's not think too deeply on that one, shall we? Let's just chalk it up to an amusing irony.) Anyway, there's ghostly Joe with a bunch of other human souls on a conveyor belt to ... "The Great Beyond."

Joe's physical body is now in a coma in the hospital, but Joe's soul's not having any of that Great Beyond stuff and takes a swan dive off the edge of the escalator. He lands in a plush, gently hilly, pastel-blue-colored place. This is a pre-birth area, where souls prepare for their next human incarnation.

It's called "The Great Before," and it's peopled by strange, graceful, two-dimensional, er ... gods? Maybe? Mentors, they're called, whose appearance was likely assigned by the Creator to Picasso. They're sort of camp counselors in charge of helping souls discover their "spark." What's a spark? It's the quality that will make a new soul appreciate life. I would have called that a "talent" myself, but OK—let's go with spark.

Joe, posing as a Swedish psychologist (to hide the fact that he doesn't belong in The Great Before), ends up in a Mentor position and is assigned soul number 22 (Tina Fey). She's still up here because she can't find her spark even after having been mentored by the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, all of whom she frustrated greatly with her annoying, noncommittal dithering.

Does Joe get out alive? Does he reincarnate? Like, does he reincarnate haphazardly? Like tumbling down to earth together with 22 in such a fashion that she ends up in Joe's body in the hospital, and Joe's soul ends up in ... well, I can't say. That would be a spoiler.

So Many Hefty Spiritual Themes!

The moral of the story is that Joe was so hyperfocused on his jazz career that he neglected his students, missed the life lessons from his common-sense-laden mom (Phylicia Rashad), and bored his barber silly with his nonstop nerd-yakking about jazz.

Joe just wants his time in the spotlight; he doesn't want to end up like poet Thomas Gray's line: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen." Joe's a lot like Burt Lancaster's "Moonlight" Graham in "Field of Dreams," a baseball player who just wanted to step to the plate and look that major league pitcher in the eye and see if he had what it takes to swat one outta the park. Moonlight wanted it so bad that he came back from beyond to the Field of Dreams to do just that.

And that's why Joe puts up such a fuss about dying unfulfilled. But isn't that the case with all highly talented people? Talent will out. Or at least it wants to die trying, to the exclusion of all else in life. So that's your one extreme.

At the other extreme, you've got 22 who doesn't know what she wants. She won't pick one thing but flits about like a butterfly, only touching down for a couple of seconds here and there. Very unfulfilling too.

Ultimately, this presentation of extremes is a lesson in learning to achieve balance and walking the path of the middle way. How's that done? It's a Capra-esque message. In the end, we should cherish every waking moment because then it's a wonderful life. And then it doesn't matter if you're supertalented or are having a dilettante-type incarnation; you can live in the moment and enjoy life regardless.

Loads of Fun, But ...

"Soul" talks about The Great Before and The Great Beyond, which ultimately is a setup to talk about the concept of the true bliss of existence being found only on earth. In other words—heaven on earth. Which happens to be, in my opinion, a conceptual rotten fruit born of modern times.

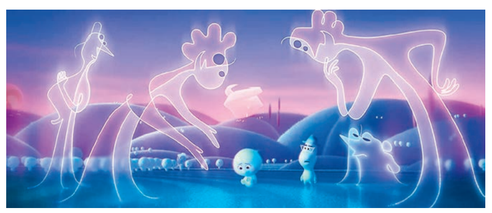
The problem with all this world-building, or concept-building, or attempting to blithely explain away the massive questions of life with an amalgamation and eclectic hodgepodge of clever ideas gleaned from various spiritual and philosophical paths, is that only adults can shake this kind of thing off as mere entertainment. This kind of entertainment goes deep for children, and that's a problem.

"Soul" focuses on some other dimensions and shows some otherworldly scenes, and there's a slight sense of wonder and fun, but there's no sense of sacredness or divinity. The Picasso "gods" are cutesy, but this is probably harmful for children. I'm guessing that Christian crowds will have a problem with "Soul."

My understanding is that all true art is uplifting to the soul and meant to portray the divine with the intent of getting humans to stop focusing on earthly existence and motivate them to get back up out of here and back to heaven. So one could make the case for "Soul" (again, most likely unintentionally) planting seeds of atheism; it could conceivably root atheism subconsciously in a child's soul, early. "Soul" makes an atheistic interpretation of the cosmos comfortable.

To be really helpful for kids, "Soul" needed more content about good and evil, right and wrong, and the real reason for human existence, which is not about finding a "spark," but which many traditions define as doing what's right in this life, and dealing with the repercussions of what we ourselves do wrong.

Divinity doesn't need to mean heavy-handed religiosity. But some redemption and some reverence is a more healing and wholesome approach for children, to my mind. There is no heaven on earth, although many would beg to differ. Heaven exists only in heaven, and enjoying fame, fortune, the thrill of being the best, or even the satisfaction of realizing one's talent potential is not the purpose of human life. Unless it's used in service for a cause greater than oneself, it becomes merely the current American major distraction to finding the true meaning of life.



(Below) Joe Gardner (Jamie Foxx, R) appreciates a street musician, in "Soul." **(Bottom)** Mentors give advice to 22 (Tina Fey) in "The Great Before," in "Soul."

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Martyrdom of Saint Christina," 1895, by Vicente Palmaroli. Oil on Canvas, 71.5 inches by 118.5 inches. Prado Museum, Spain.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

The Miracles of Faith: 'The Martyrdom of Saint Christina'

ERIC BESS

I'm sometimes left wondering about this thing we call faith, a thing the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard celebrated as a paradox in which we, as individuals, have an absolute relationship with the Absolute, that is, God.

There is power in faith, in the doubtless belief in something without the need for physical evidence. Those who do have faith might cite spiritual evidence: a power within themselves that confirms the legitimacy of their belief, and sometimes this power cannot only save us from our own limitations but also produce miracles.

Many of the spiritual exemplars we've come to know and love don't possess this type of doubtless faith. Actually, many doubt and question their faith but do so in a way that allows their faith to eventually grow and strengthen, and doubt becomes part of their paths.

One of those few who seem to have doubtless faith, however, was St. Christina.

Saint Christina

Christina lived in the third century. Her father, Urbain, a magistrate, worshiped idols that represented the tenets of a hedonistic spirituality. Urbain wanted his daughter to become a priestess of this hedonism, so he locked her in a room and ordered her to worship the idols.

Christina, however, was able to look out her window, and the grand, organized universe she saw daily caused her to understand that there must be a Creator beyond the manmade idols locked in her room with her.

She fasted and began to pray that she could come to know God, and she began to experience a deep love inside her. She continued to fast and pray, and an angel came to her and taught her about Christian faith but told her that she would suffer for it.

Undeterred, Christina immediately destroyed the idols. When her father visited her and noticed the missing idols, he began to question her. She refused to speak to him. He instead told his servants to speak to her to find out what was going on, and to them she revealed her new faith.

Urbain was upset upon hearing about his daughter's faith and decided to make sure she would suffer for it. He had her servants executed and beat her before throwing her into prison.

Urbain tried to beat and torture Christina's faith out of her, but nothing he did worked. Every time Urbain hurt her, angels appeared, saved her, and healed her wounds. Finally, Urbain decided to execute her but died the night before he could carry out his plan.

A new governor, even more evil than her father, began to torture Christina, but she never lost faith and survived nearly everything thrown at her. Her faith and resolve inspired others' interest in God. The new governor recognized that she would never relinquish her faith and finally executed her.

She puts her hands together, closes her eyes, and slightly bows her head in prayer as the wind blows through her amber hair.

'The Martyrdom of Saint Christina'

In 1895, over 1500 years later, Spanish painter Vicente Palmaroli created "The Martyrdom of Saint Christina." He depicted one of Urbain's attempts to kill his daughter: Urbain ordered Christina to be thrown into a lake with a heavy stone tied to her. However, angels appeared, untied her, and kept her afloat.

Palmaroli depicted our focal point, St. Christina, just right of center. She wears a plain, white gown representing her purity. A rope fastens her to the rock on which she sits. She puts her hands together, closes her eyes, and slightly bows her head in prayer as the wind blows through her amber hair.

An angel is seen immediately to the right of St. Christina. This angel looks at her, and with the touch of its fingers, effortlessly keeps afloat the heavy rock to which she is tied. A group of ethereal angels follow behind the first, and they all sing and play music to celebrate her faith.

To the left of St. Christina, another angel is floating above her and holds high in the air a palm frond, which traditionally represents the martyr's strength of spirit to resist temptations of the flesh.

Here, the palm frond is also a celebration of the power of St. Christina's faith, an unwavering power that enabled her to not only endure immense suffering but also access a world of angels and miracles.

The Miracles of Faith

Palmaroli showed us a grand scene of angels assisting and celebrating St. Christina. Without the angels, she would sink to the bottom of the lake and drown. The angels make the impossible happen: They make what is heavy light so that the load cannot pull her down.

Indeed, the angels save Christina from her own limitations. She lacks the physical strength to carry the heavy rock to which she's attached; she needs the assistance of the angels, or she would die.

We sometimes take on heavy loads that prove to be too much for us. These loads may not only consist of work, relationships, finances, and so on, but also might include inappropriate things that infiltrate our lives and compete with our spiritual lives. These may prove too difficult and overwhelming for us to handle by ourselves, and we find we need help.

The angels, however, assist Christina only because of her strong faith. Despite her father who, believing differently than she does, tries to force her into a set of beliefs that she finds false, she remains steadfast and unmoved in her belief.

Without faith, she would have lived a completely different life. Faith seems to not only have deepened the love she experienced but also opened up an ethereal world beyond the physical one, a world of angels and miracles.

But what is the nature of St. Christina's faith? Did she ask for help from the angels? Would asking for help to avoid her hardships constitute a doubtless faith? Or does her faith consist of an unshakeable belief and constant praise of God despite the hardships?

Herein lies the significance of these questions: Questions allow us to explore and see exactly where we stand in these matters. Asking questions presumes that we mere humans don't have all of the answers; this is an undeniable truth.

So, what is faith? How faithful are we, really? Not everyone can be as immediately and doubtlessly faithful as St. Christina, but is faith something that can be practiced and strengthened?

How might we examine, practice, and strengthen this thing we call faith? Can we have an unshakeable faith in God, so pure and so doubtless that we can be assisted in carrying our heavy loads, and once again, allow miracles to return to our world?

Art has an incredible ability to point to what can't be seen so that we may ask "What does this mean for me and for everyone who sees it?" "How has it influenced the past and how might it influence the future?" "What does it suggest about the human experience?" These are some of the questions I explore in my series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart."

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

ALL PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

COMMUNITY

The Neighborhood Stands Between Us and Totalitarianism

ANNIE HOLMQUIST

The string of bonfires my neighbors hosted last fall were a departure from the norm in more ways than one.

Anticipating the bleak prospect of a Minnesota winter with limited social gatherings, my neighbors decided to rally those around them for a time of encouragement. Neighbors who have waved at each other for years came together for a few evenings to actually solidify each other's names in the recesses of memory.

Totalitarianism seeks to destroy traditions and cultures because 'a sense of the past is far more basic to the maintenance of freedom than hope for the future.'

Huddled around the fire, my neighbors dove beyond names, and began to tell about their pasts and how they reached their present states in life. Soon these perfect strangers were having deep, meaningful conversations with each other.

"For better and for worse, it was the year of the neighborhood," writes Henry Grabar over at Slate. He believes the neighborhood trend will continue in upcoming months, and if what's happening in my own community is any indication, he seems to be making a reasonable prediction.

Grabar focuses on the negative aspect of this development, emphasizing the economic segregation of American neighborhoods. I, however, prefer to focus on the positive. The fact that this last year was the year of the neighborhood signals that all is not yet lost in the fight against totalitarian government.

To explain this connection between neighborhoods and the fight against totalitarianism I turn to Robert Nisbet's classic work, "The Quest for Community." Getting rid of the individual is one of the most visible goals of totalitarianism, Nisbet explains. In actuality, the undermining of the individual starts earlier with the dissolving of community structures (such as neighborhoods) and relationships:

"We may regard totalitarianism as a process of the annihilation of individuality, but, in more fundamental terms, it is the annihilation, first, of those social relationships within which individuality develops. It is not the extermination of individuals that is ultimately desired by totalitarian rulers, for individuals in the largest number are needed by the new order. What is desired is the extermination of those social relationships which, by their autonomous existence, must always constitute a barrier to the achievement of the absolute political community."

Breaking up small social groups removes an individual's support structure, causing them to forget the God-given rights that keep freedom alive, Nisbet writes. Totalitarianism seeks to destroy traditions and cultures because "a sense of the past is far more basic to the maintenance of freedom than hope for the future." He continues by saying, "The former is concrete and real," while the latter is "more easily guided by those who can manipulate human actions and beliefs."

We live in a time when many of our traditions and cultural associations are quickly vanishing. Politicians and bureaucrats have stripped them from us in the name of keeping us safe, telling us to stay at home, and to avoid church, school, and family gatherings. We accept these dictates, believing that we will regain our cultural associations and traditions sometime in the future. But will we? Nisbet suggests that eliminating these is one of the first steps in our enslavement to a totalitarian government:

"Totalitarianism has been well described as the ultimate invasion of human privacy. But this invasion of privacy is possible only after the social contexts of privacy—family, church, association—have been atomized. The political enslavement of man requires the emancipation of man from all the authorities and memberships…."

Thus, the fact that the neighborhood is seeing something of a resurgence during these strange times offers hope that the trend toward totalitarianism will not become completely entrenched. As long as some form of association exists, where individuals can get together and talk about their lives and ideas, it is much harder for isolation to set in and for individuals to easily capitulate to the whims of a few totalitarian-minded elites.

The neighborhood, it appears, is the last acceptable bastion of association with others … so why not take advantage of that?

Join forces with other neighbor families by forming a type of community school with a learning pod until schools and their activities are again running at full steam.

Hold a bonfire like my neighbors did, where a handful of people can get together and discuss ideas or needs.

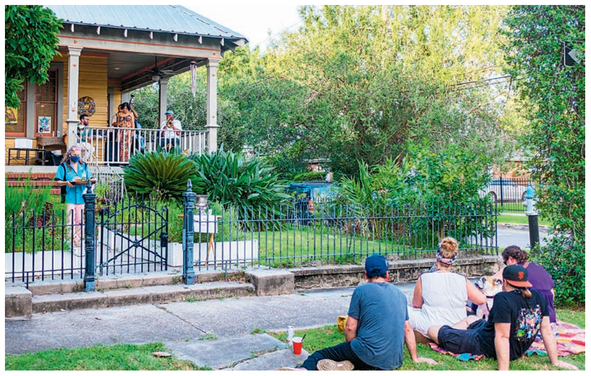
Make religion and faith part of the conversation. It was once impolite to discuss issues of faith in public society, but the game has changed everywhere, and the closure of many churches has left many people without an outlet to consider the all-important topic of God and our purpose in this world.

Above all, strive to make every situation one of warmth and kindness. This doesn't mean that difficult topics should be avoided; rather, they should be embraced and discussed freely, for doing so will reveal that not all thought is as uniform as the elites in media and politics would have us believe.

The neighborhood is making a comeback. Hold on to it while you can. It may be the last remaining thing standing between average citizens like ourselves and the totalitarians who seek to enslave us.

Annie Holmquist is the editor of Intellectual Takeout. This article was originally published on Intellectual Takeout.

Some families have formed "learning pods" until schools run at full steam again.



Neighbors enjoy a front porch concert in New Orleans in July 2020.

FAMILY

The Endgame of Transgender Ideology Is to Dismantle the Family

The stage is being set for the legal marginalization of mothers, fathers, and families by force of law

KIMBERLY ELLS

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and her fellow gender-inclusive enthusiasts have taken a bold and much-disparaged move to erase language that expresses the reality of familial relationships.

In the name of inclusivity, words such as "father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, nephew, niece, husband, wife, son-in-law, and daughter-in-law" might be erased from House proceedings.

If pursued, this scrubbing of gendered words from public communications, in concert with other trans-inclusive initiatives, will prove seismic in its effect on society.

If we are to avoid the destruction of the family and the domination of the state that necessarily follows, we must resist efforts to cancel biological sex.

Pelosi and her associates are echoing the socialist-feminist ideology articulated by Shulamith Firestone in the 1970s: "It has become necessary to free humanity from the tyranny of its biology" and "eliminate the sex distinction itself [so that] genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally."

At its core, that means that male and female manifestations of the human body should no longer be legally recognized or culturally valued. We have been marching down this road for decades and are now approaching the endgame: a genderless society. The vilification of gendered language in public settings is a significant leap toward "freeing humanity from the tyranny of its biology" and undoing the significance of biological sex.

Mothers on the Trash Heap of History

Firestone made a stunning prediction. She jubilantly declared that when biology was subdued and "transsexuality" became the legal and cultural norm, "the blood tie of the mother to the child would eventually be severed" and the triumphal "disappearance of motherhood" would follow. And she was right. Legal movements surrounding transgenderism are setting the stage for the legal marginalization of mothers, fathers, and families by force of law.

While Firestone's astute prediction has been largely overlooked in the debate about transgenderism, the fact remains that when women legally disappear, so do mothers because "mother" is a sex-specific designation. The same goes for fathers. If there aren't two specific, perceivable sexes that can be definitively recognized by law, then it becomes difficult to define or defend mothers and fathers—along with their parental rights—in legal terms. Therefore, the belonging of children to their parents is increasingly thrown into question and the family stands on trembling legal legs—which is precisely the point.

When parents' ties to their children are obscured or weakened, it creates an environment hospitable to government intervention and socialist-communist revolution. That is why Marx's Communist Manifesto openly called for the "abolition of the family." Dethroning the family creates a void that can and must be filled—though it's impossible to adequately fill it. If we are to avoid the destruction of the family and the domination of the state that necessarily follows, we must resist efforts to cancel biological sex.

Rejection of Anatomy

The push for gender abolition seems to be accelerating. Last year, a California state Senate committee attempted to ban the words "he" and "she" during committee hearings. The "rainbow voting agreement" in the Netherlands calls for "the registration of gender to be abolished wherever possible." A recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine, arguably the world's most prestigious medical journal, asserted that sex demarcations on birth certificates should be reconsidered because "assigning sex at birth perpetuates a view that sex, as defined by a binary variable, is natural, essential, and immutable."

It's becoming difficult to keep up with the myriad initiatives being rolled out to forcibly suppress biological sex distinctions.

The legal and social embracing of transgenderism encapsulates rejection of the human body as inherently manifested in two distinct and complementary forms. This rebellion against anatomy isn't only tragic for individuals, who wage war against their own bodies, but it also undercuts the inherent, two-pronged voltage of male and female that propels, balances, and drives the world.

If it becomes legally inappropriate to recognize the two bodily sexes or to articulate how the interplay of those sexes forges and perpetuates the basic relationships by which we fundamentally define ourselves (mother, father, son, daughter) then the core of civilized society is in peril.

What started out masquerading as a celebration of gender turns out to be an edict for the elimination of the sex distinction itself, which, in turn, erodes the family—the essential cradle of humanity. If we are to salvage the family and civilization with it, we must protect and defend the "gendered language" that is now on the chopping block.

Kimberly Ells is the author of "The Invincible Family: Why the Global Campaign to Crush Motherhood and Fatherhood Can't Win" and is a policy adviser for Family Watch International, where she works to protect children from early sexualization, defend parental rights, and promote the family as the fundamental unit of society. Kimberly is an avid researcher and writer on family issues and has authored policy briefs for international distribution. She graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in English. She is married and is the mother of five children. Contact her at kimberlyells@hotmail.com and InvincibleFamily.com

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ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES

1. Jim Carrey plays a man who thinks he's an insurance salesman but really the star of a reality TV show.

2. Ed Harris in "The Truman Show."

3. Laura Linney in "The Truman Show."

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

A Fascinating Look at Privacy and Reality

IAN KANE

I've never been a huge fan of exaggerated or outrageous forms of comedy, not even of the screwball variety that was so popular in the 1930s and '40s. I feel that if something is funny enough, it should be able to stand on its own and be subtle in its delivery, instead of relying on showy or overblown antics.

Therefore, while I have enjoyed watching Jim Carrey in some of his dramatic roles, such as the character Tim Carter in 1992's TV drama "Doing Time on Maple Drive," I was never fond of his outlandish films: "Ace Ventura: Pet Detective" (1994), "The Mask" (also 1994), or the absolutely dreadful (in my opinion) "The Cable Guy" (1996).

However, there is another thought-provoking drama that Carrey starred in, "The Truman Show," which was produced in 1998. Penned by the gifted writer and filmmaker Andrew Niccol ("Gattaca"), this film is that rare high-concept effort that came out of Hollywood and actually succeeded.

Much of that success comes from the unusual pairing of visionary director Peter Weir and Carrey, who toned down his normally over-the-top comedic antics and cranked the drama dial up to 10.

Similar in timbre to 1993's comedy-romance "Groundhog Day" (which starred Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell), this film is about a man whose entire life has been one big reality show—literally. Although, on one hand, it can be viewed as a scathing indictment of the lengths to which media conglomerates will go in order to sell a television program, it also delves a little deeper into the meaning of what is real and what isn't, and who controls our "reality."

Truman's entire life has been one big fabrication.

And if there's a film director with the cinematic chops to pull off lofty ambitions, Weir is just the person to deliver the goods. After all, he brought us the excellent life-changing drama "Fearless" (1993), as well as one of the greatest swashbuckling adventures I've ever seen, "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World" (2003).

Carrey stars as the titular character, an insurance salesman named Truman Burbank. Truman's entire life has been one big fabrication called ... you guessed it: "The Truman Show." In order to keep the whole hoax going through the years, hundreds of actors have been in and out of Truman's life, with some, of course, such as his wife, Meryl (Laura Linney), playing more prominent roles than others.

During this grand experiment (and incredible invasion of one human being's privacy), thousands of cameras have been placed at key spots on each of the show's elaborate and vast sets. Not surprisingly, throughout Truman's life, there have been some pretty close calls as far as his almost discovering the monumental charade.

The film also touches on the lives of some of the other characters, such as former "Truman Show" cast member Lauren (Natascha McElhone), his parents (Holland Taylor and Brian Delate), and the person who considers himself to be Truman's real father, deep-thinking showrunner Christof (Ed Harris).

Speaking of deep thoughts, the film's snappy writing keeps things moving at a pretty steady pace during its entire one-hour, 43-minute runtime. Therefore, one never feels bogged down by its more existential questions for long.

Meanwhile, Weir's incredible directing skills and the solid acting performances by the cast make the lives of the characters seem believable (even if most of them are playing thespian con artists).

Since January is a great month for contemplation, "The Truman Show" is an enticing and thought-provoking tool to that end. It's a fascinating exploration of the nature of invasive technology, celebrity-obsessed culture, and the lengths to which the media will go to deliver a product for ever-increasing ratings. Accomplishing all of these elements without coming off as preachy or overly moralizing is a testament to the efforts of the incredible cast and crew.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To learn more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

'The Truman Show'

Director
Peter Weir

Starring
Jim Carrey, Ed Harris, Laura Linney

Running Time
1 hour, 43 minutes

Rated
PG

Release Date
June 5, 1998 (USA)

★★★★☆