

Preface

Do you need to go? Can you talk to me?" Bai Meng looked very much the *artiste*, with his very cool coat and cravat. But the words were weighty, and came from his heart; that was plain to see. In the blink of an eye, I thought about how late I'd been out the previous night speaking at St. John's College in Annapolis, talking late into the night with students there, and wondered—but I knew I needed to stay.

So I told him that I was glad to talk with him. His next words surprised me: "I feel so guilty to be alive." For the next three hours we talked about his guilt, and at the same time, with unusual candor, about the possibility of grace.

That evening, in the company of twenty-five young Chinese ex-patriots, I had reflected on a question that has become the core of my own calling, namely, why is it, in the face of situations that seem too complex, too broken, that human beings sometimes still choose to enter in—knowing that they will suffer, knowing that it will cost them—that for love's sake they still choose responsibility?

I did so telling the tale of Tolstoy's *Two Old Men*. In a short story the great Russian novelist recounts the pilgrimage of two friends who decide that before they die they must make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Gathering supplies, they begin their journey—and they walk and walk and walk. At the end of a long day they enter a small village but see no one. Wondering where the villagers are, they knock on a nearby hut. No one answers, and one of the pilgrims, Elisha, steps in. In the dark he hears a groan, and smells death. He returns to his friend, gets water and food, and goes back into the hut, offering his gifts to the family that he has found.

What he discovers is that the family is starving, but even more starkly

that the village is too. With great insight into what it means to have "eyes that see," Tolstoy allows us to ponder what it is that connects what Elisha knows with what Elisha does, that allows him to understand that he is implicated in what he sees and hears and smells. I finished by commending these young Chinese for the courage of their convictions, for understanding that they too had been implicated in history—as had Tolstoy's Elisha.

When we broke for the evening, my conversation with Bai Meng began. Rarely have I entered so deeply into someone's hopes and dreams, griefs and sorrows, as I did with him. But it is also rare to spend hours like I did that night, and other nights like it, listening to the leaders of the Tiananmen Square protest, gathered together to wonder about the past and the future in light of the deepest questions that human beings ask and answer.

Bai Meng had been the leader of the student journalist association of China during the spring of 1989, and had been one of three carrying a banner leading thousands of students into Tiananmen Square for the initial demonstration in April. As he told me his tale, I winced in my heart, hearing about the unusual cruelty of the Chinese government as they suppressed the students in what we now call the Tiananmen Square massacre. His best friend had died, bloodied, in his arms. It took him two years to "crawl out of China" as he put it; several years later, when I met him, he was studying film at Columbia University.

This was my second time meeting with a group like this; a year earlier I had been asked by a noted China specialist to spend an evening with "the Havelis of China," as she described them. They were the intellectual leaders of the Tiananmen generation, a diaspora, scattered across North America—from Vancouver to Boston. Not allowed to return because of the public character of their protest, some were working in journalism and business while others were studying in relevant disciplines that would enable them to return someday to China. One of them gave me his card, which included all of the needed information, with these words in italics on the bottom: *China for the 21st-century*. Since Tiananmen, he had already finished a first Ph.D. at UC Berkeley, and was working on a second at Harvard.

As I sat there listening to their stories, I was overwhelmed. On the one hand, they had suffered so much. The depth of their sadness ate away at my

heart. But at the same time, the seriousness of their desire to return home, and its motivation, was amazing. They simply said: "We love China—and we want to go home and be part of the rebuilding of our culture." I heard that again and again.

But they had a question that brought them to Washington: "We have been reading the philosophers of the world, and are not satisfied. We want to return to China, and know that we might be imprisoned or die if we do. But we love China, and so we will go home. The more we read it seems to us that the Christian vision of human nature and history might give us a basis to return, a *raison d'être* that makes sense to us philosophically—what do you think?"

Nothing cheap could be said.

As I pondered their question, I thought back one week to the previous Thursday night, when I had taken my two older sons, Elliott and David, and some of their friends to a Smashing Pumpkins concert, during the "Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness" tour. It was stunning, in many ways. The pulsing of the red/black/purple/green light show behind the stage, the energy of thousands of Virginia adolescents pressed together waiting to hear what was the biggest music in the world that year, and the skillful lyricism of the band feeling the feelings of their audience with incredible ability—all in all it was quite a show.

When we got home I asked my sons about the concert, particularly wondering what they thought was the "climax"—the high point of the playlist of songs. In different rooms, so neither knew what the other had said, they quickly offered, "Zero." I had thought the same thing. With lines like, "I'm in love with my sadness," Billy Corgan and his band had tapped into the melancholy of the human heart at the end of the century—but with almost Pentecostal fervor. No song that night had as much energy as that one.

Much of Walker Percy's work reflects that same reality, namely, that we are a surprisingly sad people, "lost in the cosmos" as we are, with Prozac being the cultural drug-of-choice. Through pop culture eyes, the Pumpkins were seeing "the homeless mind" of the sociologist Peter Berger, not being scholars but singers, and rock stars at that, they were shouting their critique across the arenas and auditoriums of America. I understood that part of their gift, and honored it.

What bothered me was that they were making so much money doing so. I told my sons, "The nihilism may be honest; I don't know them well enough to know. But it doesn't seem right that they should make a fortune off of sadness. If they really believe that 'God is empty just like me' (another line in the song 'Zero'), then they should stop celebrating the sadness in huge concert venues—and live with its starkness."

That evening was still rumbling through my heart a week later when I sat in the room with the young Chinese. Sadness? Yes, again. But it seemed so very different from the "million collic and infinite sadness" of the Smashing Pumpkins, full of adolescent angst as it was.

Those Thursday nights still ripple across my soul, almost ten years later. A few weeks ago a friend invited me to a dinner with a group of Chinese visitors. A former politician, he still has global interests, with China leading the way. He described them as leaders, and because of my history with the Tiananmen students, I was intrigued. Over a feast, I listened to their stories. It soon became clear that these were "Havel's" too; in fact, one was the translator of Havel's work into Chinese.

Each one had literally put his life on the line for the sake of the future of China. One was an attorney, another a professor, still another a human rights activist. In the literal handful, two had been named "Person of the Year in Asia" by *Newsweek*. Over dinner I sat next to Yu Jie, the translator of Havel and one of China's bestselling novelists whose work, ironically, is banned in his own country, and a pastor of an underground church in Beijing. Described in the *International Herald Tribune* as "the most courageous writer in China," he seemed so young to have such a reputation.

But the longer I listened, the more sure I was that I wanted to contact a journalist friend, one of the most respected voices in foreign affairs in Washington, D.C., and have him meet this group of leaders. A couple years earlier I had written him, wondering about his "Havel-like" vision. Unlike almost every other writer who is predictably conservative or liberal, this man seems to have a different compass, a "north star" informed by notions like good and evil, truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, and therefore refuses to be put in a partisan box.

He invited us to meet him at his home in Georgetown later that week. For

almost two hours he listened to them, asking clarifying questions that drew them out even more fully. Their central thesis was this: after the devastating disillusionment of Tiananmen, their generation had two choices, either to return to Communism or to embrace Confucianism. Neither seemed sufficient, given the yearning they had to engage history, to take up both the suffering and responsibility that was their common vocation. And overwhelmingly, these young intellectual and cultural leaders had come to believe in the gospel of the kingdom, embracing the Christian faith. It had given them a place to stand.

Given the question that I had been asked years earlier (did I think the Christian vision of human nature and history could provide a sufficient basis to return to China?), hearing the testimony of these men was astounding. They were the incarnation of the answer to the question: it was being embodied in their lives. And I felt as if I was in the presence of saints.

Having known personal and political heartache, and knowing that any honest account of the present and future implicated them more, they had found in their faith a way forward. For the sake of love—in imitation of Christ—they could suffer, even as they acted responsibly in and for history, hoping for the way the world ought to be.

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It has been almost ten years since *The Fabric of Faithfulness* was published. By God's grace it has had a wide reading, in this country and beyond. I have traveled from corner to corner of the United States—San Diego to Boston, Seattle to Miami—speaking about the book and its themes. I have traveled to Latin America, to Great Britain, to Central and Eastern Europe, talking about the challenge of deepening one's vocation over a lifetime. I have watched professors gather on the historic lawn of Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia, in the hallowed halls of MIT and the University of California at Berkeley (where as a boy I spent many happy days), and in the medical school of the University of Florida, as well as in the auditoriums and classrooms of scores of liberal arts colleges across the country, each time pondering the book's vision for life and learning.

But as I have followed the response over the years, listening to people

who have indwelt its thesis, this has struck me: men and women who sustain visions of faith over a lifetime learn to take into their hearts the disappointments and sorrows that come to them, finding a deeper, truer faith as they do so. Rather than being shipwrecked by the brokenness of the world, they learn to navigate their way through, holding onto the integrity of their vocations through life. Indeed, they have woven together belief and behavior into a fabric of faithfulness that has kept their hearts alive in the face of evil and injustice, grief and pain. And in this now-but-not-yet world, no one is exempt. As Bob Dylan once lamented, everything is broken—and everyone is broken. These are younger people and older people, men and women, students and professors, young professionals and senior executives, craftsmen and farmers, doctors and lawyers. I have had almost countless conversations and correspondence with people who have wanted more after reading the book.

When I wrote it I was a professor myself, teaching undergraduates semester by semester at the American Studies Program on Capitol Hill. As interest grew for interaction over the book, I was asked by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities to become its scholar-in-residence, a position I held for several years. In that time I spent weeks of my life on university and college campuses—many deeply Christian and some profoundly secular—and had hours of conversation with administrators, faculty and students. In many ways, their cares became my cares.

As I listened, I found that my own vocation was becoming clearer—perhaps deeper and more embodied in the practices of my own labor of love as I journeyed among students and among those who taught them. This question began to emerge, becoming the thread I followed in all that I read, in every presentation I made: is there a spirituality of learning that grows out of the gospel of the kingdom? Or to press the point: if the Christian vision of life and the world is true, what ought learning to be like?

To see it in those terms made the ideas and issues that the book explored seem broader. Yes, the pilgrimage into adulthood begins in late adolescence, but its meaning is only understood as our loves are lived out over time. People whose vocations were beyond the university found their way to me, wondering about the book's argument for their own lives—as butchers, bak-

ers and candlestick-makers . . . and as musicians and politicians, as businessmen and women, as mothers and fathers, as pastors and journalists. *What do you think it means for me in the situation I am in? What ought our institution be like, if we take the thesis to heart?*

Eventually these questions grew into relationships that over time have given birth to The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, the setting of my life and work today. Embedded in a community of good friends with diverse vocations, we have committed ourselves to a common calling. As we care for the culture and the world through our vocations, we care for each other. Our worship and work take us to different places—some of us are neighbors, some are scattered across the city—but we are bound up with each other in common loves.

And in a proximate way, we are able to be what I have longed for: a community that invites people in. I have traveled a lot, and spoken in many places. I do not disdain that life, primarily because I have met so many good people wherever the planes, trains and automobiles have taken me. But it is deficient as a way of learning. "Come and see" was the pedagogy of Jesus. The truest learning is incarnational; we learn the deepest lessons looking "over the shoulder" and "through the heart," seeing that a worldview can become a way of life.

We are not perfect, and what we are doing is not perfect; but we are serious, and we welcome conversations about things that matter. And best of all we have wonderfully imagined rocking chairs, and beautiful places to walk. *Come and see.*



Even as I write, my engagement with the Chinese dissidents continues. This morning the Washington journalist called, wanting clarification on two points, as he plans to write his weekend column on the conversation. Of course he's exploring its political implications for the United States and China, even as he attends to the plight of the men whose commitments and cares have given them eyes to see their responsibility for the way China is and ought to be.

Their convictions have cost them, and continue to put them and their families at risk. Seeing that strain, the question I was asked that Thursday

night—do you think there is something different about the Christian vision that might give us a sufficient basis to return to China, giving ourselves to its rebuilding?—seems all the more sobering, all the more important. It was not a cheap question, and there are no cheap answers.

What did I say to those gathered around the living room, wondering whether the Christian faith might answer their deepest hopes? I told them of a conversation I once had with the theologian and bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who spent forty years of his life in India. He had a friendship over many years with a Hindu scholar who, after reading the Bible, wondered aloud to Newbigin, "Why is it that Christian missionaries have given us this book, saying, 'Read it and add it to your supply'? I have finished it and it is a completely unique book. Its vision of universal history, of a story that makes sense of life from beginning to end, is unique. But also unique is its understanding of the human person as a responsible actor in history. And the two go together, don't they?" I told those Chinese leaders that their intuitions were right, that the Christian vision does give people the contours for genuine human flourishing, from the most personal areas to the most public of arenas of life. That at the heart of the Christian understanding of human nature and history is the possibility of a life of responsibility marked by love, "of gladness and singleness of heart," as the Book of Common Prayer puts it:

And China for the twenty-first century? And the young man, eschewing education as a passport to privilege, with longings so profound that his post-Tiananmen years were spent in Ph.D. programs wanting to prepare for the renewing of his culture? The last I heard he did return, and was imprisoned—a finite sadness, but a very real sadness.

But like the rest of life and the world, history is full of tensions: past, present and future. For people who care about the globalizing political economy of the twenty-first century it is virtually impossible to ignore China—even with its record of oppression. It is a messy world, and Tolstoy's tale continues to teach us. Remote villages with darkened huts on the steppes of Russia become a metaphor for China in the twenty-first century—a place with hurts and wounds and suffering, and yet with the potential for becoming a nation of unparalleled opportunity. Experienced world-watchers wonder aloud, "Will this century belong to China?"

A very good friend of mine is the CEO of a corporation that does substantial business with China, and for twenty years he has chosen to enter into its life with the social, political and economic complexities that are there. Determined to "tear a little corner off of the darkness"—to quote Bono of U2, as he reflects on his own vocation as a musician—through his company's involvements across China, my friend is passionate about the renewal of its culture, and prays and works toward that end. Over the last several years I have done work for his company, joining him in that hope. Another friend is a senior executive in a firm with extensive responsibility for the Beijing Olympics, which will give the world a window into a China that could not have been imagined in the spring of 1989. She serves on our board, and now her life and labor is bound up with mine. The challenges of acting responsibly in our globalizing world are very real for my friends, but they take up that task with unusual integrity, living day by day with the implications of that for both personal and public life—and remembering Tolstoy as they do. And finally, implicating myself even more in the contemporary complexity that China is, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* has been translated into Chinese, at the request of Chinese students who have wanted a different paradigm for understanding life and learning.

Worldviews are not abstractions; they become ideas with legs that have metaphysical and moral muscle, enabling real people to make the hardest choices possible. Mentors are not an interesting idea; rather they become the primary means by which beliefs are interpreted and understood, especially when what one believes is a matter of life and death, when what one believes has consequences for the way the world is and ought to be. Community then becomes the laboratory in which our hopes and dreams become real; we do not keep on keeping on without people of kindred heart and mind pledging their own lives toward the same end, holding us up when the world, the flesh and the devil call into question our core commitments and cares.

To say it plainly: in the concreteness of their choices over time, each one of these young Chinese men and women is an incarnation of the thesis set forth in the book. A worldview, a mentor, a community—these are the habits of heart that grow and sustain a faithful life, that so nourish a soul that a career can become a calling that gives coherence to the whole of life. Not by

happenstance, but because, as gifted scholar and friend Stanley Gaede observed in his early review of the book, the truths are palpable. The embodied beliefs of these men and women instruct all of us. They become our teachers as we learn from them where the lines in the sand are.

For integrity's sake—philosophically, politically, psychologically—we hunger for beliefs that can make sense of life. Every son of Adam, every daughter of Eve, longs for that kind of coherence. In despair or frustration, most give up on the possibility.

A year ago I had a conversation with Billy Corgan, no longer with his band, as not long after their "Mellon Collie" album they broke up. In fact, on their last tour they made a surprising decision: to give away all their profits to charities. Now traveling on his own as a poet and songwriter, he came through Washington, and we had a conversation at a beautiful, historic home in Georgetown called Evermay, a place offering itself as "a living room in the nation's capital."

I found him to be a remarkably thoughtful man, able and willing to engage the most serious questions about politics and faith, art and culture. My intuitions about why the Pumpkins had disbanded proved right: mainly, they could not sustain the nihilism and make so much money at the same time. (And of course personalities and egos were all bound up in that decision, making it quite complex.) As he left I gave him a copy of *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, and he said that he hoped we could talk again. I hope so too.

Whether one's calling is to music or to the marketplace, to the academy or to the pulpit, to the gallery or to the construction site, to the city or to the plains and the mountains, these questions—which I first asked on the pages of the book ten years ago—are there for each of us, waiting for a response: do I have a *telos* that is sufficient to meaningfully orient my *praxis* over the course of life? Or in the language of the street, and therefore a little more playful: why do I get up in the morning?

They are questions for the Bai Mengs and the Billy Corgans, and for every one of us.

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Acknowledgments

Like all good work in a fallen world, this book has had its pleasures and pains. When it became specially hard, I found these words from a Puritan sermon to be a great grace: "Weakness with watchfulness will stand out, when strength with too much confidence faileth. Weakness, with acknowledging of it, is the fittest seat and subject for God to perfect his strength in; for consciousness of our infirmities driveth us out of ourselves to him in whom our strength lieth." So said Richard Sibbes in "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax" in 1630. Thanks be to God.

Among his servants whose commitment and care have been sustaining, my wife, Meg Elliott, stands first. She is the woman whom I love to love.

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