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# The Coastlander

USC'S STUDENT JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

READING THE BODY  
IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

# The Coastlander

*The Coastlander* is an ecumenical student journal of Christian thought at the University of Southern California. We welcome contributors who represent the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions of Christianity and seek to support their intellectual growth and written witness. We hope our journal will start conversations about what it looks like to be a Christian on campus and will be a vehicle for different Christian communities to collaborate. Our mission is to inspire and encourage the Trojan community through essays, poetry, writing, and art that embraces readers of different backgrounds, reflects the ideas of our entire team, and bears witness to our shared Christian experience.

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# From the Editors

Dear Reader,

This spring, *The Coastlander* has paired up with a faculty-led seminar group, Nova Forum, combining the experience of textual engagement with the craft of expression. We have spent the year formed not only by these endeavors, but by doing so as a community. Together, we're reading the body.

It is perhaps prudent to admit only this—that the “body” is under discussion; not men, nor women, nor sex; neither aging, suffering, maturing, nor eating. We are limited neither by avenue nor creed—united instead by an effort to understand what the body is for all Christians. The breadth that comes of our conversation has led to screenplays, short stories, essays, and poetry, inviting consideration of intimacy, of worship, of institutions, of education, of friendship. Less about the body, and more about what we do with the body. For Christians, this is everything; when we live, and love, we manifest the incarnation, bringing God back to earth again.

*The Coastlander* has become a place to ponder revelation and engage our peers, inviting the growth that is the increase of wisdom. We write because doing so instantiates the truth, integrating it into our own lives and making it accessible to others. This articulation is the glamour of holiness—approachable, irresistible evangelization that has always drawn souls to the truth. *The Coastlander* is reading the body, and by doing so, quickening the soul.

We wanted this issue of *The Coastlander* to parallel the architecture of the body. Our journey begins in the brain—the “command center” where we cultivate such intricate ideas displayed in this issue—and descends throughout the rest of the body. The issue culminates at the feet, the connection between the body and the world and, likewise, a reminder of Jesus' call to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

With this thematic structure, we have been able to explore what some aspects of the human experience mean to believers in the most intimate of ways. We hope that these articles will enlighten and inspire you to join us in this exploration as we continue seeking deeper insights into the wonders of the body, mind, and soul.

Anna Goodwin and Max Burlew  
Co-editors, *The Coastlander*

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# AI and the Human Soul

JOHN PAUL MORELAND

There's a threat that's not so tangible about artificial intelligence. ChatGPT, a software capable of doing anything from writing essays to taking standardized tests, is not an end to the exponential technological advancement of the twenty-first century. Instead, it signifies the inevitable: autonomous computers are capable of supplanting non-repetitive human tasks, leaving our economic and political existence seemingly meaningless.

People are panicking. ChatGPT embodies a change we knew was near, but the arrival of complex artificial intelligence (AI) has hit society and reestablished questions we've faced since the original industrial revolution. Professors scramble to ensure their students are writing with original thought, courtrooms contemplate a future where justice is served from robotic arguments, and tech executives penned an open letter advocating for AI projects to slam the brakes. These prospects may scare us; a computerized form of thought outthinking the human brain may have once seemed impossible, but now it is very much real. Christians ought to engage hastily and address the benefits and risks of artificial intelligence.

Simply saying we must "pump the brakes" is not enough. We must ask the right questions and focus on engaging with exactly what scares us about robotic tech in a way that's theological, not bioethical, political, or economic. We must examine the murky future through our shared human perspective under God. We must understand why it is paramount that we use AI for its tangible benefit without it interfering with the human autonomy enshrined in the Bible.

Ideas formerly endowed by human potential have now been transformed. As AI exhibits originally human ideas as its own, it by turn dwindles our own ability to create our own sentiments, which will ultimately limit human thought. Labor-saving technology is a tale old as time. Karl Marx alluded to the capitalist's tendency to use innovations to further submit the laborer to worse working conditions. The West has continuously found ways to create different jobs as agricultural tasks became mechanized and goods could be produced in rapid assembly lines. The tech boom has allowed us to have virtually any good shipped to our doorstep by clicking a few buttons. Our lives increasingly revolve around our

phones, with meetings ever-virtual and face-to-face interactions at a premium. On its face, ChatGPT seems a simple, new, labor-saving (or thought-saving) technology. But it may be much more insidious in fact.

Many believe that robots would never be able to develop so much that they would inhabit a soul. Why, though? As Augustine says, the Christian conception of the soul is somewhat ambiguous in the Bible. Clones seem likely to have souls. So why not AI? The answer probably lies within embodiment. Regardless of its overall intelligence, artificial intelligence can never be embodied, and therefore it cannot host a soul or truly overcome human existence. In other words, God alone is the Creator, thus purely human creations in the form of software cannot supplant that reality. A human clone, while an entirely new bioethical conundrum, still goes through a process of biological multiplication with its original roots in Creation. But while AI can copy already-held values of virtue, morals, and ethics, it cannot independently hold such values or conscience of its own.

AI bots are certainly capable of synthesizing information from the internet through its algorithm. But it seems unlikely to ever clear the bar that human intelligence has set, one of creation and free will, an intelligence endowed by God in his image. For it is within our shared incarnation with Jesus that we can be joined together with God by Christ's death and resurrection, a status purely unique to humanness.

I won't pretend to have the right answers to all the questions that artificial intelligence's development asks. But at the core, AI's unembodied-ness stands as why it is an affront to us to imagine AI as a mere replacement for human thinking abilities. A headline I read recently said that the magazine *ClarksWorld* had stopped taking submissions after it was swarmed by AI-written short stories. The automation of such creative processes is scary, but *ClarksWorld* seems to know: the ideas that come from computers will not engage audiences in the same ways as ones from people. AI does not have to

contend with limited time, facts, or resources, it simply regurgitates information it rapidly finds online. The toil of creative processes and the contention of ideas within our heads is something any human can relate to, and the shocking beauty of works as old as time stand the test of it.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." This verse is a reminder that only God has the power to create a soul. AI is a collection of computer algorithms and software that can be programmed to think and act in specific ways, but it cannot be programmed to possess a soul. A soul is a spiritual being that can think, feel, and experience life in ways that AI cannot. It can only replicate certain aspects of life, but it cannot possess the essential qualities that a soul can only possess.

College students will likely grapple with the impacts of artificial intelligence as they enter adulthood. Repetitive thinking tasks and their automation may slim the job market, leading to very real economic and political consequences. But there are deep theological impacts to AI as well. Should we replace work with robots, we might as well believe that human relationships can be replaced with unconditional love from computers. Our innate mandate to work—derived from the man in the garden—is existentially threatened by robotic capability. The same can be said for our mandate to love. If we give even more of our lives to computers, we endanger our souls' own growth. Gen Z will need to grapple with advanced artificial intelligence as it graduates from higher education, the way that millennials graduated with phones. We must tread forward with care, emphasizing both the promise of the Gospels and the sanctity of human relationships to work and others.

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# Podcasts Can Save the World But Not Yet

PATRICK G. CONNORS

The most famous public intellectual in contemporary Western society, Dr. Jordan Peterson, has famously proclaimed that “podcasts are as revolutionary as the printing press.” This is potentially true, but not yet. Most of us are not creating podcasts, but instead, consuming them. This is the problem. If podcasts are to change the world, it requires that we all become producers, not mere consumers, of podcasts. Podcasts possess the unique feature of long forum conversation. The most popular podcast on the planet, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, famously features a three hour standard. The potential for podcasts to change the world does not necessarily entail recording episodes in a studio. Instead, it entails embodying the spirit of dialogue intrinsic to podcasts. As Pope Francis outlines in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the best way to heal this broken world is through friendship and understanding, which stem from dialogue. If we all develop a practice of engaging in conversation with our fellow humans, especially those with whom we disagree, podcasts will truly

be revolutionary. They will create, as Pope Francis calls it, a “culture of encounter” which leads to lasting peace.

Podcast, a neologism combining “iPod” and “broadcast,” was officially launched in 2004. It first flirted with mainstream popularity around 2004, after Libsyn became the first podcast syndicator and Adam Curry and his team developed the software *iPodder* which allowed audio blogs to be downloaded to iPods. In the years following, the popularity of podcasts increased only slightly until plateauing in 2009. It would not be until 2014 that this plateau was ruptured by a surge unforeseen by even the most shrewd analysts. In 2014, the podcast *Serial* was released, the first mainstream hit. It won a Peabody award and became the first podcast to receive what many argue is the highest honor in American culture: to be parodied on *Saturday Night Live*. This led to a deluge of podcasts. President Obama and major corporations such as the *New York Times* began launching podcasts of their own, as podcasts soon became ubiquitous. From 2014 to 2019, the

number of Americans who said they listen to podcasts jumped from around 39 million to around 90 million. By 2019, it was reported that 165 million people had listened to a podcast, and 90 million Americans listened to a podcast monthly. All of this led to the watershed year of 2020.

As we are all painfully aware, this was the year when the Covid-19 global pandemic forced the entire world to stay at home and our electronic devices served as our sole lifeline to the outside world. Unsurprisingly, we listened to more podcasts. This led to some major

and 19 minutes. As of April 2023, there are over 5,720 total hours of Rogan's podcast on the internet.

As Rogan often explains, mainstream media is a broken form of communication. The structure of brief segments, sound bites, and crowded panels with people talking over each other is neither an organic nor fruitful medium for dialogue. However, sitting down for upwards of three hours and having a conversation is. This is most evident when celebrities appear on Rogan's podcast. After some of the most famous people on the planet, such as Elon Musk, Miley Cyrus, Kanye West,

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## The pandemic forced the entire world to stay at home and our electronic devices served as our lifeline to the outside world.

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business transactions in the podcasting world. The Swedish streaming company Spotify purchased numerous top podcasts that year, most notably *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which had accumulated roughly 2 billion views and 8.5 million subscribers, and over 190 million monthly downloads. To put this level of reach into perspective, the average episode receives roughly 11 million views, while an average day of news for the mainstream networks Fox and CNN receives between 1-2 million views.

The revolutionary component of podcasts is long forum conversation. Although there are exceptions, particularly podcasts owned by large corporations like NPR News which opt for a shorter, edited format, most podcasts are long form. *The Joe Rogan Experience* features a three-hour standard for each episode, with many running for much longer. The longest podcast to date was recorded on August 31, 2020 with Duncan Trussel, which ran for five hours

or Dave Chappelle, appeared on the podcast, many listeners revealed that it was the first time they were able to see the true person behind the celebrity. This is the power of dialogue: to cut through the facade we present to the world, deep to the core of the human person lying beneath. It is the very reason why dialogue is deeply ingrained in Christianity.

Pope Francis' third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is arguably the best Catholic source on the importance of dialogue in the modern world. Published in October of 2020 amidst the global pandemic, this encyclical proclaims that the cure for this broken world is friendship and understanding, which stem from dialogue. In this encyclical (imbued with such poetic brilliance that one truly feels the power of the Holy Spirit working through His Holiness), the word "dialogue" appears nearly 50 times. Pope Francis defines dialogue as, "approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground... Unlike disagreement and conflict, per-



sistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine” (*FT* 198). Francis goes on to diagnose numerous illnesses in modern society that prevent us from engaging in dialogue. He then offers a path of hope to change. The ultimate goal is to create a “culture of encounter” in which dialogue permeates all aspects of life.

Pope Francis diagnoses individualism as a virus spread by globalism and social media that has robbed society of authentic dialogue. He explains that globalism “makes us neighbors, but it does not make us brothers... we are more alone in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life” (*FT* 12). Although we seem to be more connected than ever before, we are in fact more disconnected. As members of society, we look out for our own needs and pursue our own goals, without care for the common good of the human family. This individualism is compounded by social media. The technology of social media often breeds narcissism and presents a blemished image of true dialogue. With social media, “Dialogue is often confused with something quite different... the media’s noisy potpourri of facts and opinions is often an obstacle to dialogue, since it lets everyone cling stubbornly to his or her own ideas... with the excuse that everyone else is wrong” (*FT* 200-201). The inundation of short, sensationalized content that confirms our biases thanks to the curation of personalized algorithms has robbed us of our ability to engage in authentic dialogue. We have lost our ability to sit, listen, and respect another person in dialogue. Communication often becomes, “a frenzy of texting” (*FT* 49) that seeks to shut down opponents,

rather than understand friends with differing views.

Although society is broken and lacks a culture of dialogue, there is hope. Ironically, the very medium that is dividing us is the same that can heal us. Pope Francis emphasizes that the internet is good! It is a tremendous feat of human intellect and ingenuity. This technology has the potential to create a world in which we are more connected than ever before. But only if we use it correctly.

For most of us, our experience of podcasts is consumptive, not creative. We will gladly listen to a three hour podcast, but we never bother to sit down and have a three-hour conversation with someone in our own life. This is the problem. If podcasts are to be as revolutionary as the printing press and create a “culture of encounter,” we must take initiative. We must reach out to those around us and engage in dialogue. Not merely for the sake of views or sponsorships, but for the benefit of dialogue itself.

Taking initiative in podcasts does not necessarily mean buying a studio and publishing episodes to the internet. Jesus did not have a podcast. But He did embody that spirit of dialogue intrinsic to podcasts. Whether it be with tax collectors, lepers, or the Samaritan woman, Jesus talked with people. We must emulate

His example of dialogue.

To take a large swath of time out of our inordinately busy lives and be fully present to our neighbor in dialogue. We do not need to completely eradicate the consumptive dimension of podcasts. Instead, we need to blend the consumptive

and creative dimensions. Viewing a podcast can grant us insight into how to hone our abilities of dialogue. We can observe valuable skills that we subsequently implement into our own conversations. Such skills are most

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Although society is broken and lacks a culture of dialogue, there is hope.

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A genuine desire for fellowship is a desire to know the real person we are in conversation with, and to love them. It is what we are called to do as Christians.

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essential during dialogue with those who hold differing views.

True dialogue brings us out of our selves and into an encounter with those who view the world differently from us. Algorithms place us into echo chambers. Our feeds are filled with people who look, think, and act like us. This is dangerous. Although it is important to find community with like-minded individuals, it is more important to get out of this comfortable bubble and engage in dialogue with those who do not agree with us. This is terrifying. Navigating dialogue with people of different views without slipping into the extreme of relativism—the fallacy that ultimately everything is the same so do whatever you feel is best—or exclusivism—the fallacy that my way is the only way and everyone else is damned—is no easy feat. But it is possible. The very act of being willing to engage in this difficult feat is the key to successfully creating a culture of encounter. As Pope Francis states, “in a true spirit of dialogue, we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction” (*FT* 203). Although we must not shy away from distinct theological differences between religions, we also must not revert to proselytization that attempts to simply impose our own religion on the other. This balance is possible with a genuine desire for fellowship. A desire to know the real person we

are in conversation with, and to love them. This is what we are called to do as Christians.

If we all make our experience of podcasts creative, not merely consumptive, this will lead to what Pope Francis calls a “culture of encounter” which can help heal our broken world. We can overcome the virus of individualism that has spread through globalism and social media. The spirit of dialogue intrinsic to podcasts need not be confined to the podcast studio, but instead, should be enacted in all areas of our life. It is particularly important that we engage in dialogue with those who have differing views—and although we must not shy away from addressing these differences, we must also not impose our views on one another. This is made possible though following the example of Jesus and entering into dialogue with love. If we do this, podcasts will truly be as revolutionary as the printing press.

*Patrick G. Connors is majoring in Psychology with a minor in Contemplative Studies at USC.*

# Transhumanism and the Image of God

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JACOB SHATZER

MAX BURLEW



At Union University, a small Christian university in West Tennessee, Dr. Jacob Shatzer takes a seat in his office. Shatzer, the Associate Dean for the university's School of Theology & Missions, takes a moment to think of three images: a young girl getting her first prescription for her insulin pump to treat Type 1 Diabetes, artist Neil Harbisson implanting an antenna into his skull, and the possibility of one day having robotic tails attached to the human body. Though seemingly distinct from each other, each of these scenes constitute areas of a very particular network of ideas that Dr. Shatzer has found morally and ethically engaging: transhumanism.

According to Dr. Shatzer, the word "transhumanism" is an umbrella term that "covers all sorts of different approaches centered on moving beyond what are typically considered human limitations and 'human' altogether." Likewise, the aim of his studies into this philosophy is "to help people see that their lives are shaped by technology more than they might initially

think, that it might not always be in ways that they want to be shaped, and that they should be more proactive about reflecting on and reacting to that formation." And he certainly does not claim to be exempt from this reality. As an avid runner, Dr. Shatzer often wears a Garmin watch to track his runs and basic health metrics. This connection to transhumanism—Dr. Shatzer's trust in the digital technology of the watch to both record and relay information he would otherwise be unaware of—is clear enough, and he explains it further through the image of a "hybronaut," which he explains as a person "persistently connected via some sort of interface to a digital device. It could be something as simple as augmented reality goggles, but typically refers to more permanent connections via implants or other technologies." Yet Dr. Shatzer considers wearable technology a lower-level form of transhumanism, explaining in his book that "wearables still seem to be separate from us, and while they do provide cognitive enhancement via the information that they

relay, they do not change our sense of reality to the same degree that others do” (86). There is, however, a surprising addition of the transhumanist philosophy to Dr. Shatzer’s running habits: the optimization of his diet and sleep schedule.

Avid users of modern technology may be surprised to see that Dr. Shatzer includes the concept of diet and sleep optimization within—or at least close to—the process of transhumanism. Yet the connection nevertheless remains true in the simple fact that these actions are carried out with the intent to ultimately yield a better human experience. In response to this idea, Dr. Shatzer says, “I think most people assume [transhumanism] is something far off and something that they’re not very interested in. But as I try to show in the book, transhumanist values are very similar to the values we’re all tempted to hold about the promise of technology.” That is, technology promises its users that they will be able to enhance nearly every aspect of their lives through its usage.

It is here where Dr. Shatzer interjects with what he believes to be the key point of conflict with transhumanism and Christianity: therapy vs. enhancement. In a chapter dedicated to the concept of morphological freedom—the ability to augment the human body through the use of technology—he provides a helpful example:

When my wife had a baby tooth that decayed, the dentist recommended removing the tooth and putting an implant in to fix the problem and prevent her remaining teeth from shifting into the gap left by the decayed tooth. This example of therapy fixes a problem. Enhancement, on the other hand, refers to actions taken to add on to or alter what is within the range of normal human life. These are the changes that advocates of morphological freedom are after. Not the ability to wear glasses or have surgery, but to have a tail if you want to. (56)

Likewise, Dr. Shatzer concluded in our interview that “one of the values of transhumanism is centered on self-direction, the idea that there is really no limit on what a person can choose for themselves to be. The only limit is the personal will, and I guess the technological possibility.” When asked on how Christianity plays into this view of personal will in contrast with maintaining the Image of God we were created with, he continued on this train of thought by adding that Christians need to first ask themselves “whether [they think] there is anything created and unchanging about being human, or whether [they] think ‘human’ is a purely evolving, culturally defined, ever-changing category. If there is something to ‘being human’ beyond what the human will asserts, then we can pursue creativity, design, managing the garden in a way that serves what our Creator has made us to be. If we think we are our own creators, then we have a very different set of conversations. Most transhumanists (though not all) believe we are our own creators.”

This seems to paint a picture establishing transhumanism as a more secular worldview that supports the choice of our own power, and the issue therefore arises of how Christians are supposed to take steps to ensure a God-centered perspective of transhumanism. Dr. Shatzer believes that this can only be accomplished through a practical examination of ourselves. He said, “we need to question our frustrations and hopes. Why do the things that we want to overcome really bother us? When we want speed and convenience, why is that? What are we really after? Do we really need that?” Moreover, these questions need to be applied directly to what we expect out of biological enhancement in the first place. “Why do we really think that, say, extending the human lifespan by a significant amount would help us? If we are alienated from God because of our sin, how does a longer life of alienation help that? I think those sorts of questions are a practical way to expose to ourselves the assumptions we make day to day that we might not realize we’re making.”

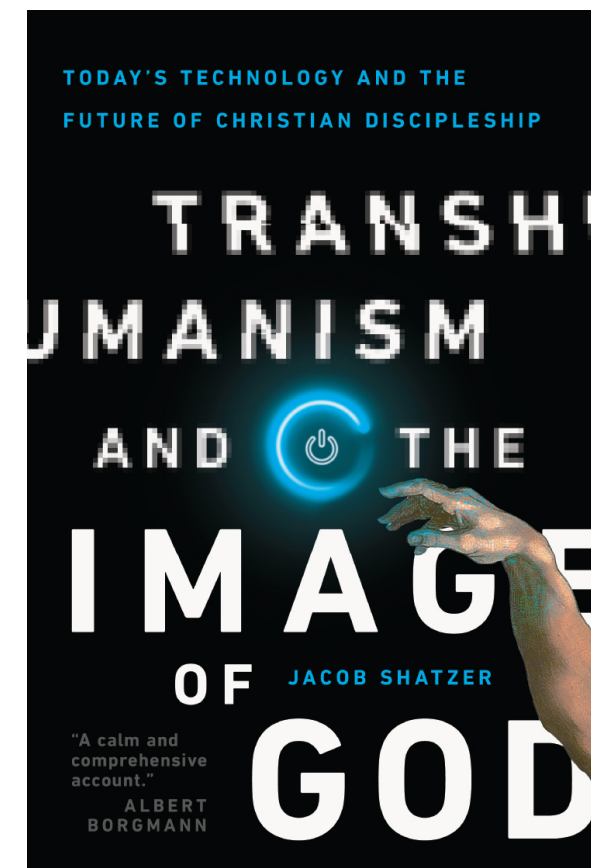
He ultimately concludes, “I think we serve our Creator as the limited human beings that we are, not by seeking to create ourselves as something different.” Exactly how Dr. Shatzer arrives at this conclusion is a long journey that unfolds throughout the course of his book, which he explains comes from a long process of drawing on “theological anthropology, incarnation, eschatology, and other related doctrines, which grow out of the whole ecosystem of the Bible’s text and the church’s historical understanding of it.”

Transhumanism for Dr. Shatzer, then, is a complex topic that exists as neither explicitly good nor bad, but as one of the concepts he first introduced in his book: a tool. With this perspective, the tool of digital technology and morphological freedom under

the pretext of transhumanism is ultimately left up for us, the Christian collective, to discern the extent to which we can use technology to serve our Creator without risking a denial of our Creator’s initial image of us altogether. To read more of Dr. Shatzer’s intricately woven analysis and discussion on morphological freedom and other ideas relating to transhumanism, read his book:

Jacob Schatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today’s Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship*, InterVarsity Press, 2019.

Max Burlew is co-editor-in-chief for The Coastlander. This piece was originally written for a Nova Forum Institute at the University of Southern California.





# The Kiss

ANNA GOODWIN

Shall I consign you to a summer's night?  
Or if I loved you, would I call you temperate?  
You: admire, are pressed, impressed, and I  
Must bandy with Lucretia as I wait.

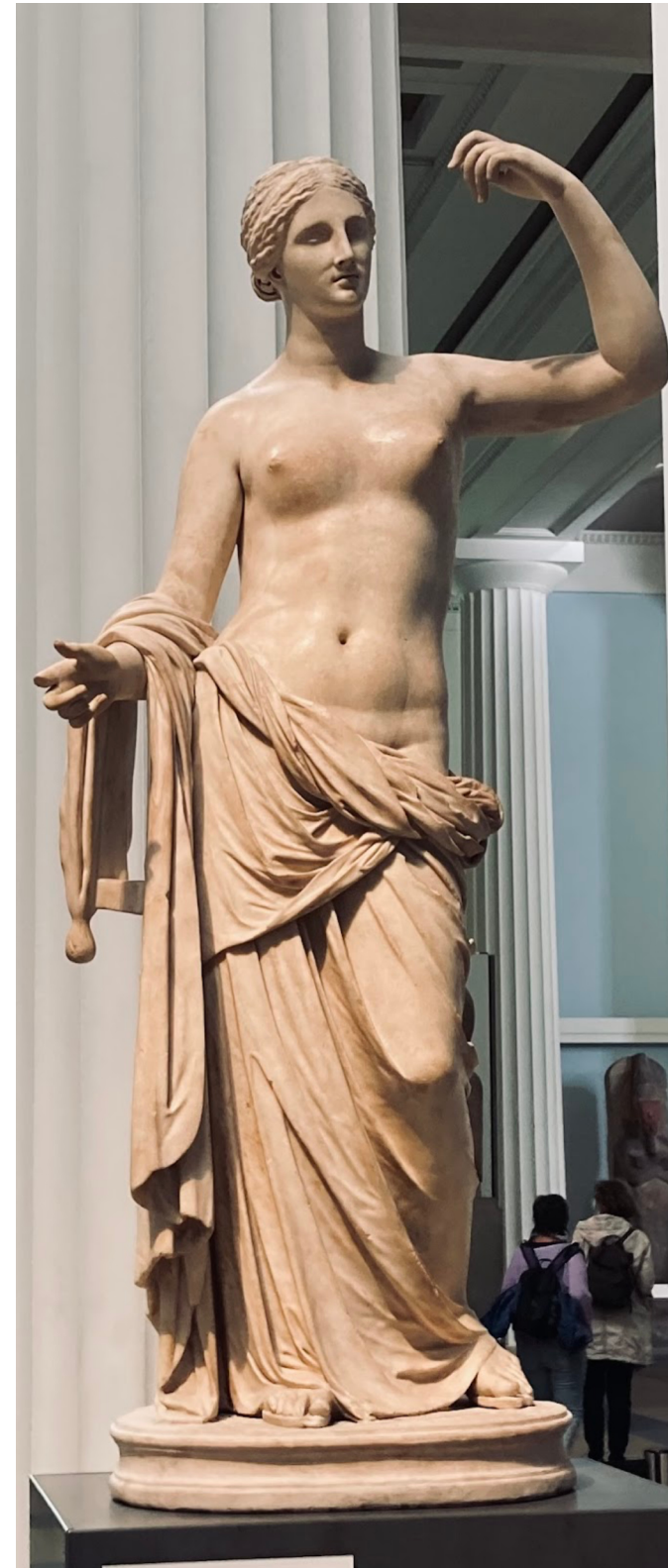
Some say that hearts unbridled beat as one—  
Is it because they lie there, side-by-side?  
For when they rise and look, and dark is gone  
Gone, too, the wordless nods, consent, and sighs.

It's such a trap will slice a chest in two;  
Inside out they find where she has hidden.  
Once she hid but now shame's fled, the fool  
Believes a romance springs from outside in.

How sweet the nods and sighs of en-souled lovers  
How sweet a kiss with one you love, discover'd.

*Anna Goodwin is co-editor-in-chief for The Coastlander. She is a senior studying Spanish and her writing is inspired by the work of Alice von Hildebrand.*

*Right: Townley Venus at the British Museum. Photo Credit Anna Goodwin*



# The Old River's Current

LARRY HARDNETT

**I** Elian Martez smirked defiantly as sweat streamed down his face amidst the damp mugginess of a late spring day. Across from him, yellow eyes, bigger and brighter than the sun, shone down on him. In all the world existed only him and the monster and he convinced himself that he knew he wasn't afraid.

"Come on big guy, show me what you got! I'm down to play if you are!"

An alligator's roar was akin to a car engine knocking on death's door. It shook the bones to the marrow and would have silenced Elian if his shouting hadn't been louder. He ran up to the beast, flailing limbs and screeching obscenities. One look at that oncoming storm was all the signal the gator needed to turn tail back into the safety of the waters of the nearby river. The crowd cheered his triumph, running up to him and wreathing him with Laurels of Victory crafted from nearby Horsetails. Olivia Vidal, however, knew of the unseen danger stalking up right beside them. She

slipped through the throng of raucous boys and desperately tried to get their attention. They had absolutely no idea what was about to happen. If she didn't do something soon, not a single one of them would be making it out of that glade intact. If only they would listen!

"Elian Martez! What have I told you about agitating the gators? I said you would be meeting with Principal Gloriosa the next time I caught you out here and I meant it!"

Like so many snakes, the hissing rustle of the brush was all that remained of the former triumphal procession. Elian and Olivia were left alone to stare down the stern countenance of their teacher, Mr. Dominic Guzman.

"Come on, let's go then. I want you to explain to her yourself why you're so insistent on ignoring every lesson we try to teach you about keeping yourself safe from these dangerous predators."

Elian was stunned, already anticipating the dreadful admonishments that he would receive. Fortunately

for him, Olivia confidently strode forward, addressing the educator with a calm look of dismissal on her face.

"We weren't messing with the gators, sir. They were just acting up cause they managed to get Elian to bet a kiss off me. Those dumb boys'll do anything on a dare even if it means messing with a poor young girl's heart."

The young man wasn't sure if the sudden warmth he felt was from the embarrassment pooling in his chest or the uncharacteristic flush of Mr. Guzman's cheeks as he was suddenly thrown off balance by Olivia's smooth lie. Despite his misgivings he dared not contradict her. The lifeline she had just thrown them was something he would have to cling to no matter how deeply the sharp twine dug into his hands. Luckily, they didn't need to wait for their instructor's response. The blissful sound of the echoing bell of salvation rang a short distance away. He turned to face the noise and then shifted his attention back to the exasperating sources of his concern.

"We'll talk about this later. I expect to see you back in class before I step foot in the room, understand?"

They were off without another word.

**II** Elian Martez startled himself awake, desperately groping for his textbook to find the answer to the question he was just asked. The only reward he received for his hasty diligence was a bruised cheek as he abruptly fell out of his bed at home. That terrible school's repetitive monotony was stopping him from escaping it even in his deepest dreams. Before he could fruitlessly fume about it, his agitation was assuaged by the sound of terse knocking. First one tap, then two; then exactly seven in rapid succession. He hurried to throw on his clothes. If Olivia was sounding her signature knock that meant he was terribly late—though what else was new? Either way, suffering the wrath of Principal Gloriosa would be preferable to making the heron at his

door wait one more minute than she had to. That he knew from deeply ingrained experience.

"And then they'll throw us in detention, and then they revoke our rec letters, and then they'll tell the city to not bother letting us in the door and I know, I know, I know, let's go!"

"Don't think you're smart putting words in my mouth. We have to keep cutting through the swamp because of your laziness you know. My boots can't take any more of this awful mud!"

"You've got to learn how do take it barefoot like me, Livvy. Those chicken legs of yours are long enough to skate on this goop! Oh! Watch your head!"

"Ah! Don't flick ferns back at me on purpose you idiot! I swear, it's a wonder that you're capable of learning anything. How did you manage to get accepted to the same college as me? It's obvious you don't care about actually getting up and getting to school in the first place."

"By cheating off your tests, that's how. Now don't slow us down. I don't want you to make me late!"

"Elian Martez!"

Olivia's burst of indignation as she lunged at him was met with the peal of Elian's evasive laughter. Tall trees and untamed bush hung in dense tangles as they navigated their way through the thick swamp. The active chatter of the two companions was the only thing that kept the silence of the area at bay. Nimble feet, habitually sure of their way, carried them forward. Still, that made it no easier to unstick their feet from the sucking flytrap of the ground consistently trying to drag them under. Elian wasn't afraid. Neither was Olivia. However, the sound of rushing water as they drew deeper into the shortcut caused a familiar sense of vertigo to overwhelm the two. The place where the marsh met the shallows of the river was fairly obscured. Brush grew up all around it so that even the alligators prowling the area couldn't lay their eyes on them. It was just shallow enough slip in, drop a few feet, and wade their way across the river to the school.

They did so today. Submerged hip-deep, they sank into the softening ground a bit more than they were accustomed to. Elian's breathing picked up with the effort and he glanced at the greenery of their surroundings. There was silence. Silence and rustling. The result of the waves they made as they dragged one foot in front of the other. He would have found it annoying if his heartbeat weren't racing with the effort. Unfortunately, the water shifted and a patch of weeds in front of them collapsed, barring their way to the bank. In order to quickly leave the churning mire, Olivia was forced to hurry to his side and help him clear the downed brush. The sound of rustling grew louder as they splashed around in the water more forcefully than usual. It hastened the pair's movements. Handful by sharp handful they managed to clear the brush and scramble onto the bank just as a loud snap cracked right behind them. Olivia's head swiveled in alarm and she blushed as Elian huffed a breathless chuckle at her expense.

"What? Jumping at old logs now? Maybe one day you'll see a real-life bush and actually fly away."

Olivia grimaced at his joke. She paused and truly

pondered whether or not to tell him where exactly he could shove his crude jokes. Instead, she managed to bite her tongue and retain her dignified standing, much to Elian's dismay.

"We made it before the bell rang, and that's what matters. Dry off or Mr. Guzman will ask questions. Again."

"Hey, they're the ones who made this place so boring that it's a chore to rush over here every day. I can't help it if we're running behind a few times every now and then."

A comforting hand found Elian's shoulder. The weight of the world falling out from under him was made even heavier with the sincere sweetness of the familiar voice that addressed them.

"Ah, forgive me for founding such a boring school Mr. Martez. I'll be sure to update the curriculum to your exacting standards once you've laid them all out for me. In detention. You'll be able to assist him Ms. Vidal. I'm sure you'll have quite the list for me to peruse when you're finally finished."

Olivia tightly closed her eyes in frustration and Elian

stared up dumbly at the warm, heartfelt smile of the woman standing over them. Principal Rosaria Gloriosa herself had caught them making the forbidden crossing. Elian's heart plummeted when he realized that this was truly going to be one of the longest, most awful days of his life. Not because of the inevitable punishment, but because his loyal compatriot was already puffing up her feathers and preparing the never-ending swan song that would spell the end of his peace and ultimately, his care-free mortal life.

And so, they wrote. They wrote of the things they had written a thousand times before, and this dark day a thousand times more. On and on it went, with the sun laying down to rest long before the last period was placed. The stack of blank papers they were given before they left sealed the fate of the rest of their nights. They crossed the bridge of the river and finally parted from each other, with only the ringing in his ears from her sharp, continual chirping throughout their detainment to serve as any kind of friendly goodbye.

**III.** Elian Martez was alone as he plodded through the mud the next morning. Principal Gloriosa was serious about drilling the dumb tenets of swamp safety into his soul. His arm ached; his eyes were blurry and, worst of all, the burning rays of the rising sun glared mockingly at his back. He had stayed up all night attempting to complete the mandatory work he was assigned. Not only did he not manage that herculean feat, he would have been late had he not opted to take the shortcut this one last time. His heart pounded as he rounded the bend of the marsh near the river.

Taking the trip without Olivia had made the oppressive silence of the swamp nigh-unbearable. Had she been there, perhaps he would have had the good sense not to take this route at all. As it was now, every twitching fern raised the hairs on his neck and each fallen vine grated on his nerves. By the time he was

hip-deep in the water of the riverbed, he was exhausted enough to call it a day and simply fall asleep. He must have dozed briefly because his eyes, that he hadn't realized closed, shot open when he suddenly sank up to his thigh into a sinkhole.

He couldn't help but splash about as he des-

perately tried to recover his footing. The waves of the water were constantly coasting over his head, barely giving him any time to catch his breath. He abandoned his backpack and boots. He had to focus all of his energy on swimming or he knew he wouldn't make it out of this alive. He pulled with all of his might, straining against the intransigent mud. His head went under again. His strength was sapped. His ears were ringing, echoing his name over and over. Why?

"Elian! Oh God, Elian!"

Then there was a resounding crash of water which was the last thing he heard before being submerged beneath the suffocating surface of the river. His lungs burned from lack of air, but it wasn't the cloying muck sealing his demise or the murky liquid entombing him that captured his full attention. No, it was a pair of eyes. Eyes that were big, bright, and yellow; hotter and brighter than the scorching sun, barreling straight for him. His scream escaped in a burst of bubbles that obscured his attacker from his vision. Then all he saw red. Strangely enough, there was no pain.

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## His loyal compatriot was already puffing up her feathers and preparing the never- ending swan song.

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His blood ran ice cold all the same. Unexpectedly, Olivia was in front of him, her arm caught in the mouth of the alligator. Thousands of thoughts raced through his mind as his eyes locked onto first Olivia's pained expression, then the body of the gator as it began to turn into a roll. There would be no better chance to get away from this encounter unscathed than right that instant. It was a chance he had to take. His best friend had given everything to provide it to him, so he had no choice but to abandon her for deep down, Elian was afraid.

His body moved on its own. It slid free from the sticking mud and launched into an unthinking, full body undulation that propelled him through the water like a torpedo. His hands reached out, fingers grasping for purchase. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself on top of the alligator and was gouging out its hideous yellow eyes with all the strength his fingers could muster. The beast convulsed in agony. It tossed Elian from its back and despite being in excruciating pain its grip on Olivia's arm only loosened a tiny bit. It was more than enough, however. Olivia felt the release of pressure and reflexively twisted her body, putting every bit of weight her slender form could carry behind one desperate punch. It landed dead center in the back of the gator's throat. The monster gagged and fully released her. Elian swam through the blood and water unable to comprehend what had just occurred. His mind was zipping with adrenaline and the only thing that kept bolting through every synapse of his overheating brain was getting Olivia to safety.

**IV** Elian Martez kneeled on the bank, panicking. He was on autopilot as he tightly wrapped his soaked shirt several times around Olivia's arm and leaned his weight on it. Visibly, that had only served to dye the once white garment a brilliant, sickening red. His breathing was short and shallow. He wanted to scream, but that would only

draw more attention. But wasn't attention good? He needed someone who knew what they were doing. He needed help!

"I heard it over here, by the marsh! That's where I saw her run!"

His body locked up. Elation waged an active war with terror in his heart. The consequences for his actions this time around would be dire beyond all imagining. He didn't want to face this down, not alone. Not with his only lifeline half conscious and her blood all over his hands. The canary was down for the count, so he did the only sensible thing he could do. He ran out of the mine. Another student shouted in confusion as Elian rushed out of the brush and jostled past him. Another person strangely similar in shape to Mr. Guzman attempted to grab him but he deftly evaded the phantom. When his feet hit the main bridge, the hollow pounding of the wood roared in his ears. The sounds of a thousand horse drawn carriages echoed on the wind as they galloped after him. He had to run faster or he was positive that he would be crushed under hoof into a bloody paste in an instant.

There was no turning back for him now. He felt that he had screwed up in a truly unforgivable way and everyone had to have known it. He defied all of the warnings and cast every possible care to the wind. He had played with fire and he didn't even have the decency to be the one who got burned by it. And now they were on him; the spirits of vengeance. As long as he ran, they were on his heels. When he ran harder, so did they. When he ran further, they gained on him by leaps and bounds. The world slowly began to melt into mush as his exhaustion weighed down on him. He didn't know how long he had been running. He only wanted to see Olivia again; to say sorry and beg her forgiveness. But he reasoned that she would never forgive him—not after this. Her spirit flew among the agitated, alighting on warped branches and singing out the secret of his location with the crisp tones of an avenging Nightingale. Among the sweat and fear and

soul-wearing fatigue a cool, easterly wind blew. In a bright moment of brief lucidity, he found himself teetering on the edge of a cliff that tumbled into the lowlands. He fought to regain his balance, knowing he would break his neck if he fell into that desolate waste.

"Elian —huff! Please! Stop right there! Don't you move another inch!"

Principal Rosaria Gloriosa. He knew it was her just by the clear sound of her matronly voice, full of desperate concern. There were many things he could have done that day, none of which he chose to do. All he had to do was freeze. He would have been able to catch his balance; to turn back and face her. Her tone was stern but not accusatory. He could have trusted her. He could have found it in his heart for a single, critical instance the belief that there might be one more chance waiting out there for him. Finally, the flutter of fear that had been welling up in his heart made him lose his balance.

He tipped over. Then he was tumbling, cascading into the deep black below. That fateful evening, amidst a horrifying scream that echoes throughout the swamp to this day, Elian Martez fell to his death.

**V** Olivia Vidal absentmindedly stroked the scars that weaved a gruesome web down her right arm as she was waiting for her coffee. It was a nasty habit that she swore to herself she would stop. One day; perhaps right after this next cup of joe. She sighed with exhaustion. She was coming to the end of the road and there was still nothing but endless reams of work in sight. Who knew that learning how to teach others to learn could be such an overwhelming endeavor? Even then, making sure that students knew ev-

erything that it was they needed to know made the effort worth it, at least for her. Her heart pulsed with a renewed sympathy for the teachers who went through the trouble of educating her and her peers. Then her heart ached. It ached with the burning wound of a scar that would never heal. She clamped down on it and locked it away, just as she had each and every time it decided to rear its ugly head. She had gotten better at managing her feelings regarding that Incident. Today it was further helped along by an understanding hand resting on her shoulder.

Gabriella was a LVN who was studying to obtain her Registered Nurse License. If ever there was a kind-

dred spirit it was the rock that rested in this woman. They had become fast friends on her first day in college in this very coffee shop. Ever since, not a single day had gone by, despite them being constantly busy with their various obligations, where they

didn't have their routine morning chats. She carried her standard tray of two lattes, extra foam, and gave Olivia that sympathetic smile that told her she knew her friend was struggling and could use a few kind words.

"I told you, Tweety, the next time I see that look on your face I'm taking you out to the theme park. Now, how do you like your funnel cakes? Extra crispy or double fruit?"

"Ahaha, You're too much, girl. I think we'd both be better off saving what little money we have left. I'm fine, really. You didn't have to bring me tissues this time so I think that my case has seen marked improvement, nurse!"

"Oh, I don't know about that. I might have to ask the doctor if he can renew your Kleenex prescriptions."

The girls shared an easy laugh. Gabriella always knew

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Then her heart ached. It ached with the burning wound of a scar that would never heal.

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how to make light of a situation in just the right way. Olivia loved her for it and pessimistically wondered if she could do more to be a better friend and less of a burden to this wonderful woman. As if seeing into her mind, Gabriella smiled and squeezed her shoulder gently before urging Olivia to get up and follow her.

“The line was long this morning and you could use some company. Come sit with us.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t. You know I have to leave right after and—”

“No buts. You’re mine for the next ten minutes. Plus, it’s about time you met sweet Mr. Sorrel anyway. He’s a lovely patient and I’m sure he’s been dying to meet you since I love to chat you up so much.”

Olivia’s cheeks flushed as she imagined Gabriella talking with her over the phone long into the night right next to her patients. She made a mental note to be more discreet in the topics she chose to discuss as she was unceremoniously dragged over to their table. Mr. Sorrel was a nice enough man. Bald, hunched over, and confined to a wheelchair. Gabriella had told her that he was in an awful accident that ultimately left him with only the ability to say his own name. Despite the struggles that came with caring for him, he was her star patient and she always made sure that they came to his favorite coffee shop together. As she sat down to truly meet him for the first time, she realized that she most likely had him to thank for her and Gabriella being able to connect in the first place.

She kept that fact in mind as her friend introduced them. A warm smile was on her lips as she gently placed her right hand over his.

“Hello, Mr. Sorrel. It is very nice to meet you. Thank you for taking care of Gabbi for me. I know she can be a handful sometimes, but trust me when I say she’s a good girl at heart.”

Gabriella scoffed as she set up Mr. Sorrel’s Latte for him. At first, he didn’t respond. This went on for a few uncomfortably long seconds before he at last turned his twisted hand over to clasp hers. When he

did, Olivia was surprised by how strong his grip still was.

“Mmm... Sorrel...”

Olivia looked up at Gabriella with a half nervous smile. The nurse in training gave her a quiet urging forward with an enthusiastic set of thumbs up.

“Umm... of course. I—er, just wanted to thank you for helping Gabbi and I meet and...”

Olivia’s eyebrows furrowed as Mr. Sorrel’s hand began to shake and his grip tightened even further. Her insides twisted and she immediately started to worry that something was terribly wrong. She glanced over to Gabriella who was looking just as perplexed as she felt.

“Mmmmm... Sorrel.”

Mr. Sorrel’s grip was painful now. Olivia attempted to pull away but she couldn’t dislodge herself from his clutches without flinging his frail body right out of the wheelchair. Gabriella immediately hurried over to the two while other patrons around the shop noticed the commotion. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the bowed man slowly lifted his head and locked eyes with Olivia. His stiff lips pursed and a noise like shredded sandpaper emanated from his throat as he cleared it. In that short, timeless moment, he said two words that shook Olivia Vidal down to the core of her foundation.

“I’m... Sorry... Livvy”

Just like that, a light bulb shattered, and in the glinting rain of its residue a connection was made. Familiar eyes filled with tears sliced her heart into chunks of meat and Olivia was forced to confront the recognition of something she hadn’t seen in four years. Someone she never thought she would have the chance to see ever again. It was him, and she rocketed to her feet, screeching a name that had been locked in the very depths of her soul with all of the force of a mortally wounded dove.

“ELIAN! MARTEEEEEZ!”

*Larry Hardnett is an Art and Design student at Santa Monica College with a passion for all things expressive.*



# THE BUILDING

J.W. LEE

## EXT. THE DOME

This gathered  
Sanctuary faces Jerusalem.  
Here God's people take refuge to remember the Body is an us, not an it.

All in all here is One Body of Saints, for a body has many organs in one reticulum, ribosomes, glands, and cells, varying in function, strengths, and abilities yet all united in one common function and Being. We are all Who belong to One God the Holy Trinity in Jesus Christ's Name.

## EXT. AND INT. THE TABERNACLE

There builds MOSES every inch of the tabernacle which travels through the wilderness, by the command of Adonai the Father for the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Father gave the Word, and the Word built, and this was accomplished by the

Spirit. The walls and the linen are made of the finest materials. Royal and expensive hues of royal scarlet and pricey blues, a purple curtain of royal reflection. The great riches used by God's people to build the tabernacle are also the very gifts from God. Thus we were given and then we build by giving. A great and complete whole, a unified building, a breathtaking work of art. And within this shelter lived God in the raw. Likewise, we are the new tabernacle, as we have the Spirit living within us in the raw. The Father has given us the riches and the gift of the robe of Jesus Christ, the washing blue waters and the royal linen of His blood, adding up to the wonders and power of His Name, the victorious ribbon of violet. We then wander through the wilderness, calling others to be born again, to become tabernacles, a great work of art that glorifies Moses' God. We are called to be tabernacles, temples of God, treated with truth and grace, honor and care. Our bodies are freed from our abuse, the flesh, the piece of skin that thinks it's the whole body. Yet by the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are both our unique tabernacles and a gathered whole which creates a whole palace built of tabernacles, a celestial place of presence and communion. The Church is the Body which bleeds for others, as Jesus Christ has bled to give us life and as we are to be imitators of the Incarnate Lord Who is the Image of God. Jesus gave His body and blood, His life, which is purity, righteousness, atonement, healing, truth, love, rebuke, victory. The blood we bleed is a mere reflection of the life Jesus gave us, sharing in this eternal life, witnessing to the eternal life which God gave to the young ones. Jesus still is giving and serving today, as He is with us tabernacles. He continues through His children, giving His blood to those who ask.

## EXT. AND INT. THE FOUNDATION

The most crucial stone is Jesus Christ our foundation stable through trials of disease and death, for His Incarnation brought us to the Father and allowed us the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And by the Rock are less crucial yet important pebbles, the bricks, the Paschal Witnesses who bring the word of God given to them:

THE PROPHETS from whom the Law, our tutor, and the Passover Lamb and His glorious arrival was proclaimed to the people. There they bow on their knees with hot coals in their mouths in calm peace knowing the promises are kept.

THE APOSTLES from whom the Good News was preached to the ends of the earth to proclaim and preach the Passover Lamb. There their arms spread apart like planks of wood, faces in calm peace, flames of authority over their heads.

This is the foundation of the Family Home where people may meet the Holy Gladdening Light.

**THE READING**

Then enter the many FAITHFUL OF THE CENTURIES who God had appointed in order that His word is known to both the learned scribe and to the plow-boy.

We hold copies of the written word, traced  
from the mouth of Abraham  
to the keyboard of the printing press.

FOLK OF ALL LANGUAGES AND CULTURES don't speak Hebrew or Greek yet are pensive in the language of the Word. As a letter is the symbol of a sound, the cross is the syllable of joy.

**INT. LECTERN**

SCRIPTURA, the sanctuary's old reader, eyes worn with reading yet mind still sharp, comes up to the lectern with a huge copy, speaking in tongues of the person listening, and proclaims:

**SCRIPTURA**

The Father speaks, the Son carries, the Spirit quickens.  
Come, let us read, mark, learn, to the Word of God listen.  
The Old Testament gives purpose for the New Testament  
And the New Testament gives hope for the Old Testament.  
Let us read and feed on the majestic Law, Histories,  
Psalms and Wisdom, Gospel Reports, Letters, and Prophecies  
Let us remember this as we read the strengthening Word of God  
And feed on this our daily bread of the heart 'gainst all odds.

And with that A YOUNG LAD comes and holds up the first scroll, the Law, embroidered in gold and jewels as RECITA reads and the Congregation remembers the story:

The books that present us with God and the Genesis of His deep promises of  
**O**rphans to be adopted, foretold to father Abraham, and to Adam a  
**R**edeemer Who will trample down the serpent's head.  
**A**braham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph's histories we remember,  
**H**earing and remembering the faithfulness of God.

Prophet Moses has wrote these five scrolls, in this the story of  
**E**xodus, the great liberation of God's people from pharaoh and sin.  
**N**evertheless, we see the great unfaithfulness of our hearts,  
**T**en turning to a Levitical six hundred and thirteen, yet all of them the same.  
**A**ll that the law requires is that we love God and neighbor.  
**T**his is made more clear, somehow, through the long Numbered instructions of  
**E**ngraving His beauty to the tabernacle and the institution of feasts.  
**U**nderstand and meditate on these five scrolls in your mind, see God's heart,  
**C**ommunicating as a community the greatness of the Lord God's standards,  
**H**is Image to be imitated by the Israelites, repeated in the Deuter Law.

Then a second book is brought by a SCRIBE, this time looking something akin to a thick notebook, which contains the Prophets and the History of the Israelites and Judahites.

**N**ow when the Israelites went to the Promised Land with the direction of Joshua,  
**E**ven after this great triumph we see the depravity of the golden calf.  
**V**irtues were blinded and trimmed by the Judges of Israel, and all went amok.  
**I**n the middle of the chaos came the romance of Ruth, who brought about the lineage  
**I**n which came the arrival of King David of Israel, one of the greater kings, but that  
**M**eaning not much as we see this man's calamity and that of the many Kings.  
**P**rophets in these Chronicles keep presenting us the need of a Divine King.  
**R**edeemer Messiah is prophesied by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Micah,  
Malachi,  
**O**badiah, Hosea, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Nahum, and  
Habakkuk,  
**P**rince of Peace Who would come for the redemption of the people who sing  
Lamentations.  
**H**esed is God's heart, the Prophets remind us, even though we keep failing.  
**E**zra and Nehemiah tells us of the restoration of the Temple and the Torah,  
**T**hough the nation of Israel had collapsed into ruin and captivity.  
**S**o likewise, though the people of God have sinned greatly, He will restore dry bones  
to flesh.  
**H**ere is a history told through the Prophets that tell us of a Son of Man Who will sit  
**I**n the presence of the throned LORD, He Who has no equal, while others stand.  
**S**ee here the faithful presence of God Who will be with us.  
**T**he Queen Esther, though in her book we don't see God's Name, we see His touch,  
**O**rphans and widows, then need not to be afraid in waiting for His hand.  
**R**edeemer Messiah is awaited in these words, showing us our dire need of  
redemption.  
**Y**ou read these words, remembering the New Covenant given to us and the Law  
living in us.

And then came a pocket sized book from a PILGRIM, simple yet worn from pilgrimage, containing the literature of Psalms and Wisdom for pilgrims to read together.

**K**iss the presence of the Lord our God, like the Groom to a Bride in that Song of Songs,  
**E**njoy the words of beauty and honesty in the Psalms as we cry out to the Omnipotent Ear.  
**T**hen weep with Job, weep with him and read the arguments of sinful and broken hearts in  
**U**z, for in this oldest book God gives us words to understand the nature of our pain  
**V**erily study the Proverbs of Solomon and the wise Kings and Mothers,  
**I**nterrogate and introspect on the nature of Truth and meaning with the Teacher Koheleth  
**M**ining for the deep riches of Wisdom and to live an upright life.  
**P**onder on these things, ponder on the Psalms, thus the heart of the Saints,  
**S**inging the song of a relationship with God, words imprinted to  
**A**dorn a heart with beauty and reminders of the embraces of the Lord.  
**L**ove comes to us in these passages as we recite the verses.  
**M**ay the Lord meet you in these words of personal relationship  
**S**o that you will be convicted and comforted.

Then comes a book embroidered in gold and jewels, with the presence of four living creatures on the front, and even brought by said FOUR LIVING CREATURES.

**E**mmanuel Messiah has arrived in the manger say the witnesses Matthew and Luke,  
**V**alued treasures laid at His feet by wise men and worship by humble shepherds.  
**A**lmighty God has come to us, writes beloved John, in the form of a body,  
**N**o blemishes nor sins was on this our Atonement for sins.  
**G**od has worked through this Jesus many miracles and wonders,  
**E**valuated by Mark and the other three witnesses and written on history.  
**L**ord Christ's teachings are also in these letters, the commentary of the Law,  
**I**nstructions for those who long for the Kingdom of God.  
**O**n the solid rock, Jesus teaches us, we must build our house.  
**G**olgotha and the tomb can't be ignored by any reader, big or small, as it is written  
**O**n the third day He was risen again from the dead, and then sent His disciples to  
**S**pread about and make disciples of all nations, sending them to their Acts.  
**P**eople come to believe in the Lord Jesus and the church spreads across nations  
 and hearts  
**E**specially to this man named Saul of Tarsus, and all this after Jesus ascended to  
 Heaven.  
**L**et us rest on these words of Good News.

Then walk in LAYPEOPLE with a book of compiled Epistles and a copy of the Apocalypse, holding on to them like precious gems though they appeared rather simple.

**E**pistles were sent many to the Churches around the world and across time.  
**P**aul wrote so much in way of instructions of the New Covenant to all churches, travelling  
**I**n letters and words to many churches, some he was even afraid of not ever going.  
**S**acred greetings were sent to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians,  
**T**hessalonians, Colossians, and later to his disciples Titus and Timothy.  
**L**ove and justice are emphasized, the heart of the Torah, yet now lived to fullness  
**E**njoying the righteousness and blessings as imputed on and in the children of God,  
**S**uch joys communicated by John, Peter, Jude, James, and the anonymous Hebrew.  
**L**o from the island of Patmos wrote John one more book, that of an Apocalypse.  
**E**pistles seven did he write to churches then and us, with many strange and wondrous  
**T**ypes of things did he see, or perhaps allegorized, or perhaps prophesied.  
**T**his much is sure: that John sees the promise of the Promised Land, the  
**E**nd of sin and death, where every tear is wiped and rejoicing in the pearly gates  
**R**epent and believe are the words of the Apostles and Disciples, repent and believe  
 to be  
**S**aved! Read on and be encouraged by these letters from God.

#### SCRIPTURA

The word of the Lord!

#### CONGREGATION

Thanks be to God!

#### SCRIPTURA

Behold the apocalypse!  
 That is, the revelation!  
 That is, the reality!

**J**ust as we admire the volume which contains  
**E**ternal gems as portrayed by jots and letters,  
**S**o we approach the appointed reading of today  
**U**tterly excited for the sweet honey that awaits us,  
**S**cented-flowers, memories that we enjoy as one.



**C**apitulate O our mind and soul to this library, O Word,  
**H**ow the many books have taught and proven  
**R**eady hearts that God is Who He is,  
**I**mmaculate in His character, immortal and incarnate,  
**S**aving the world with His story and invites us minors  
**T**o walk with His guiding path, the Wind turning the pages.  
**T**riumphant this big story for the mourning audience,  
**H**ow it is great yet also known by us and lived by us  
**E**ven us who know not how to walk a sentence.  
**W**ill you read and join the story of ours  
**O**rdained to us to tell to the whole world,  
**R**esting in its glorious finale that has no end and  
**D**oing what is challenging yet good til it arrives?

*Jang Woo "JW" Lee studies Film and Television Production at USC School of Cinematic Arts, emphasis on writing, directing, editing. When he's not writing, directing, editing, or making sound effects, he's writing poetry, short stories, essays, or stageplays, or possibly sculpting, drawing, performing, and attempts at cooking. He loves having tea parties, smoking cigars and pipes, going to the theatre and cinema, attempting to read books, and socializing (if you hear a large laugh, it could be him). If you're interested, he's a Korean-American once New Yorker, though he feels close to the Brits (whether or not that's justified is up to you). Theologically he is currently a Lutheran-leaning Anglican, focusing on showing the love of the Triune God in things good, true, and beautiful and the remembrance of Jesus Christ in all things.*





# On Friendship and Intimacy

LINGAIRE OFOSUHENE

**P***eople will fail you in life, and I've been there. You seem like a really caring and kind person. It seems like your friend wasn't seeing it from your perspective. You probably expect people to treat you the same way you would treat them if you were in their shoes. Can I ask why you felt the need to go on so many dates in such a short period of time? Remember you are a person too and you don't have to do anything you don't want to do.*

I'm sitting in the chair across from an RA in one of my dormitory's lounge. She is naively sweet. Her name is "Ava"; and as she proceeds with her winding speech, I stare at her partly trying to pay attention and partly itching to go back to my dorm and sink myself into bed. She believes what she says, and I'm swallowing it, too. This may be my problem.

Everybody has met a "Ava." She is the kind of person that is just too wholesome. The first person you ask for a pencil when you lose yours. No social consequence. Shy, kind, and reliable. The holy trinity for abuse. Ya see they are too good for human. And I say

that with the utmost poetry. You can never picture them having sex. They have a *heart of gold*. Oh, *she wouldn't hurt a fly*. (She lights up when you talk about Manga comics.) Of course, you'd never be mean to them...that's *like kicking a puppy*. No, you wouldn't, but they will always be that kid with a spare pencil and never more. Perhaps, that does more harm than good. You don't ever think to get to know them.

I know "Ava" for many reasons. In my life I have two "Ava"s, and I adore them dearly. One is my longest-standing friendship, and the other will probably be my longest-standing friendship from college. But honestly, I used to be "Ava." From elementary school to middle school, I would occasionally garner the pity of one of the popular girls in my grade. They tried to turn the timid black girl into someone who could say "no" and stand up for themselves. After a week, they'd usually lose interest and I was free from pretending like their efforts were not in vain. For me, I dreaded the act of being more assertive. Saying "no" felt like poison, which

would kill both me and the receiving party. But I can't say I didn't enjoy the company; nothing is worse than being the kid who doesn't have a partner for class activities. Shy, kind, and reliable is always that kid. Being the third wheel attached to any couplet always leaves you with the resounding feeling that you are lonely. When I was nine I was lonely for friends, now I'm lonely for family.

Lately, I find myself going back to "Ava." But, the more I consider it, I guess I never truly left her. I find myself just as lonely. I find myself looking for family these days and I see there is none. My mom used to warn me saying that *all you have in this world is family*, but I wanted not to believe her. Yet, I see now that a lot of sayings are sayings for a reason. When you finally understand... you feel it... and life sucks temporarily, forever.

I heard once that the demise of most relationships is resentment. This is true. But, do we ever consider the root of resentment? That maybe we don't address things because we know it will never be received. Secretly, we know that the other person isn't willing or capable of change. A few weeks ago, I lost my closest friend from high school for this same reason. She would fondly call me her emotional pillowcase. It took five years for me to realize that pillowcase and friend weren't exactly synonymous. When you finally stop agreeing to things that aren't fair to you, it feels like poison. She said she didn't know how to come to me about anything anymore. What she meant is she didn't know how to be my friend anymore. Eventually you stop wanting to be the emotional sewage for someone and you just want

to be a friend. It sucks when you can't talk it out—when communication only leads to more constipation. *Friends come and go... but family is forever.*

I write this next part for my little sister, or really, any little sister. For those that find themselves a big sister, whether in poetry or in truth, instill confidence and self-assurance in them. If you want to give them a fighting chance, they need to have it. I pride myself on being principled. Perhaps this is my problem. I only recently found true confidence in my beauty—a gift I owe to two things. One, the outside

world recognizes and appreciates my exterior. It does so in a way that goes beyond cheap male validation, something so much more genuinely complimentary that I, at times, consider whether I may be a beneficiary of the highly problematic "pretty privilege."

Two, I owe my confidence to a very dear friend, someone I no longer know who once told me "you are your own standard of beauty." She also taught me how to accept the natural body. In many ways, she was my big sister. I owe the entirety of my newfound confidence to her. External validation is fluffy and fleeting, like a chocolate cupcake. But her wisdom was sustenance to which I owe the sturdiness of my own outward perception of myself.

I can say with conviction that I value my own unique beauty and have a strong sense of self. And yet the sequence of these next events still leaves me silent. And so, I stress once more, teach her confidence, in her beauty, and in herself...it's the only way to give her a fighting chance.

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## But her wisdom was sustenance to which I owe the sturdiness of my own outward perception of myself.

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I spent my Thursday getting fingered on Manhattan Beach by a man I generously say I met two hours before. If my lack of sexual experience didn't preclude me from knowing that I hated beach sex, I knew now. Ask me how I got in this. I won't know how to respond. But, I believe "absorbed" would be the right word. You meet a new person and your expectations are non-existent. You're filled with the same curiosity and eagerness to form kinship, as any stupid girl who has never seen a Jeffrey Dahmer documentary. For a while, it's playful as you pretend to enjoy learning how to surf. (You'll soon pretend to enjoy other things). Then you're watching the waves from afar. He suggests you both lay down together. He suggests covering you both with a beach towel. He suggests...he suggests...he suggests. Until you finally realize what this is. He suggests...he suggests...he suggests. Until you finally craft, in your head, a socially graceful exit. It's kinda like the frog in boiling water. You don't really think anything of it in the moment. A kind of sexual osmosis.

This next event is far more understated, and yet is the precursor for my silence. On Friday, I get coffee with a guy on campus who seems nice. He is nice. The faulty kind, the one that is harmless because he has to be, but under the right conditions, when liberated with a slice of anarchy, is the most despicable of them all. Lately, I don't think he is a minority. Afterward, he invited me over to his place to hang out and smoke weed; I foolishly took it at face value. It felt abrupt when he tried to kiss me, but then making out with him was pleasant. My newness to these types of experiences confines me to stay in the present; my mind can't handle much else. I didn't have an end goal, as I'm realizing they all have. *Boys only want one thing* When he gestures to go get a condom, he is met with my polite refusal; then I am met with a display of confusion and frustration. I watch him battle himself trying not to pressure me, which manifests as "it's just that—" "I just thought—" "well, I—." Layers of

fragmented statements he knows he can never finish due to society's new awareness about rape culture. When he realizes that I won't fill in the fragmented open-air of guilt he set up by offering part of myself, disappointment settles like a cloud. Of course, he would never be mean to me. That's *like kicking a puppy*. I am shy. I am kind. But, I am no longer reliable. Therefore, I am useless.

I've gone on four dates in the past five months, including the aforementioned two. The furthest I've gotten is heavy petting, and there is a reason for that. I only allow myself to be absorbed so much into this sexual osmosis until a hydrophobic layer surrounds me. This hydrophobic layer, the grounded notion that when I do have sex I want to be with someone who cares and respects me, has been my only fighting chance. And so, I am discarded promptly and prematurely. They don't ever think to get to know me. *Perhaps, this does more harm than good.*

As I walk to my dorm on Friday, early in the evening, I am crying. I am viscerally crying. There is this epiphany that every romantic experience I've ever encountered has been emotional violence. There is pity that I was naive enough to still render them decent until now. I'm thinking and I'm thinking. I'm thinking about "Ava." I'm thinking about what it means to be soft spoken, to be kind, to be genuine. I'm thinking about friendship. I am thinking about sisterhood. And, I'm thinking that I am alone. I'm thinking that I am alone and that is a magnificent thing to be.

*Lingaire Ofusuhene is a graduating senior at USC, majoring in international relations and narrative studies with a minor in thematic approaches to the humanities and society.*

# Benevolence in the City of Angels

MIA THOMPSON

Every Sunday morning, a public high school in Hollywood becomes a church. Churchgoers young and old pass by hallway trophy cases and painted posters advertising school dances to fill auditorium seats, standing for worship and sitting for the sermon.

Maggy Wong drives about an hour to be there. Wong has held many roles and titles: a believer, a mother and a wife, a Dutch immigrant, a UCLA alumna, an L.A. foodie and kimchi connoisseur and a former business owner.

She currently holds the titles of both deacon and “Benevolence Coordinator” for the Reality Church of Los Angeles, a young non-denominational church that faithfully gathers each Sunday at Helen Bernstein High School.

For some, the steps in the school courtyard may be recognizable from the hit television show “Glee,” but on Sunday mornings, people congregate there to discuss messages and catch up on life after church service.

It’s here where the Benevolence Coordinator goes to work.

In the city, over 41,980 people are experiencing homelessness, while the poverty rate of 13.7% is among the highest in the state as of 2022, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

Wong came out of retirement at age 70 when she was sought after by the church, where she now ensures that the financial needs of her community are met with generosity and dignity.

“I was just praying like, ‘Lord, show me where to go,’” Wong said. “One day I got a phone call and they said, ‘I think we have the perfect job for you. And it actually did end up being just the perfect job for me.’”

When people come to her for needs, Wong makes sure that they have a roof over their head and food on the table. Support can look like anything from a grocery or gas card to making car payments and connecting women and youth to shelters. She facilitates this by

appealing to the church for funds through a guided application process.

“I work through a lot of community group leaders,” she said when asked how she reaches such a wide population in limited bursts of time. “They know where the needs are and what needs to be done.”

Community groups are a vital part of the relational aspect of the Church, explained Wong. And they’re not just concentrated in Hollywood; the small groups spread all across L.A. in every region. Outside of Sunday mornings, they’re a tangible way for people to gather as a community in their home regions.

When community group leaders recognize a need, they contact Wong, who reaches out to the individual to fill out a “benevolence application.” She also advises budgeting during the process, describing the application as “a mirror for [the groups] to see what’s happening with their finances.”

From there, they devise a plan that community groups help pay for so that “the church isn’t burdened as a whole.”

“It’s about people coming together to support others financially,” Wong said.

Wong emphasized that it’s important that those in need never feel ashamed about their situation.

“The key in benevolence is always dignity for the person,” Wong said. “The last thing I ever want to do is make someone feel like they should have shame. I want them to know that it’s a gift from God and we have nothing to do with it. It’s just the Lord prompting us to be able to provide for them.”

This is demonstrated most tangibly through Serve L.A., a nonprofit organization that partners with Reality to serve those experiencing homelessness.

“Through the presence of Serve L.A., we’re actu-

ally showing people that we’re loving our city,” Wong said. She said she believes that this ministry is the heart of her job.

The building next door to Wong’s office is the Hope Center, a 90-year-old church that operates as the headquarters where guests are served at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., seven days a week.

The dining room, adjacent to a chapel illuminated by stained glass windows, is filled with tables, chairs and soft lighting. Colorful prayer cards hang above guests who are served a meal complete with a salad, fresh fruit, proteins and carbs, and a choice of beverage.

“All the different services we provide tag along with that spirit of generosity,” Kyle Mueller, the on-site director for Serve L.A. said.

Mueller, who works closely with Wong in benevolence, said that they both have the opportunity to be “faithful stewards” with what they’ve been given, including over \$3 million in food donations from Trader Joes and Whole

Foods. Anything left over is distributed to other shelters throughout the city.

“We have to be creative sometimes,” Mueller said. “So I’m really grateful for Maggy and the way that she partners with us.”

That often looks like teaming up and making connections, referring people, having conversations and “really trying to work together to meet whatever need that is on the table,” he said.

For Wong, her position as Benevolence Coordinator is the culmination of past life experiences.

Speaking on the impact of Reality Church on her life, she said that “their pursuit of me led me to believe

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They know where  
the needs are and what  
needs to be done.

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it was God that was leading me in this direction, but also the kind of work that I do that bleeds in so much with all of my past experiences,” Wong said.

It started when Wong immigrated to the United States from Holland at age seven, when her family was sponsored by a church in 1960. They settled in Long Beach, California, where Wong adjusted to a new culture and a new language.

She earned a degree in economics at UCLA, which landed her in the hospitality industry as a director of Procurement for the Hilton and Sheraton hotels.

Her husband, Terry Wong, worked 15 hours a day, seven days a week managing his own Chinese restaurant. With a newborn baby at the time, the couple decided to transition into the insurance business where they could work on their own schedules. Wong eventually took over the family business herself when her husband passed away from cancer 13 years ago.

“When you’re in the insurance business, you want to take care of people,” Wong said. “You always want to bring them back to the position where they can actually survive. That was a precedent for me when I got into this job.”

Eventually, selling the business helped Wong move forward.

“It was very overwhelming for me. I felt like for this season of my life, I needed to sell it and move on. And that’s how I ended up here at Reality,” she said.

But before Reality, Wong regularly attended Calvary Chapel church as a young woman in the ‘70s. Around the same time, a countercultural phenomenon took the West Coast by storm.

It was known as ‘the Jesus Movement,’ an evangelical Christian youth revolution that emerged during the era of hippies and social upheaval. During this time, many young people broke out of the norms of institutional religious expression in pursuit of a ‘spiritual awakening.’

“I was a part of that revival in 1971,” Wong said. “That was my church. I was one of those people.”

Church services were made available every single night and Wong went to every single one.

“I kid you not, 300 to 400 people would accept Jesus that night,” she said. “That’s how much was going on.”

A movie depicting this movement was recently released in theaters. “The Jesus Revolution,” which came out in late February, follows several fundamental figures during the movement as it took place in Southern California.

For the most part, Wong said, the movie included some of the most important aspects of the movement.

“But I wish they had shown more of the hundreds of people that would come to know Jesus every night,” she said.

Six decades later, Wong hopes to see two revivals in her lifetime. In light of ‘revivals’ emerging across college campuses like Asbury University in Kentucky and the Jesus March in Santa Monica, Wong said she hopes that young people will change the culture yet again.

“We are in a cancel culture kind of thing,” she said. “Everything is culture, but no one’s defining what they should be following except for the churches, right?”

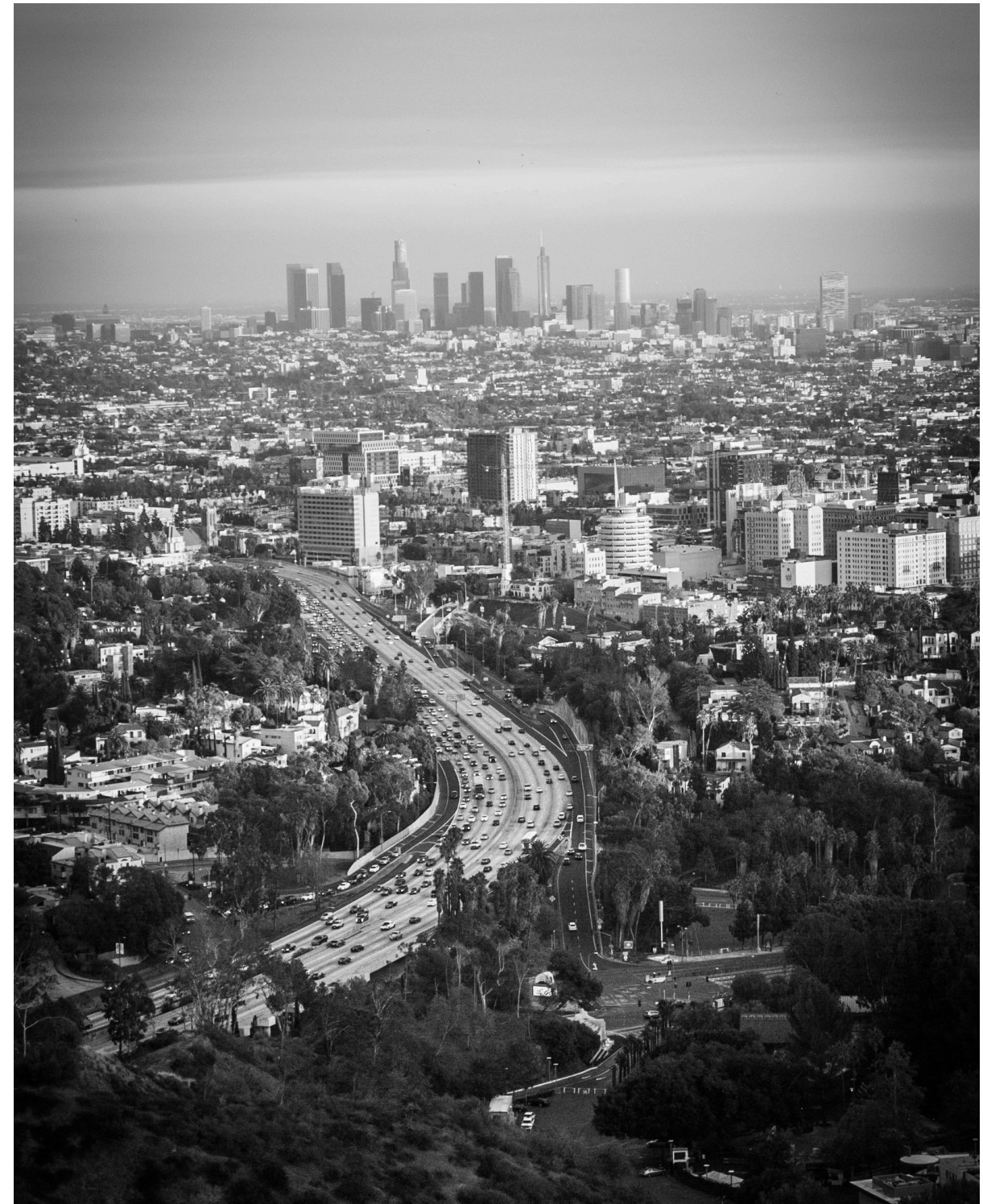
What that looks like, she said, is to “really get to know the heart, mind and character of the Lord.” The way to do this is by “staying in the word of God.”

“Sometimes we’ll read scripture and look at scripture. And then what we do is we beat people over the head with scripture. But that’s not really it,” Wong said.

She says it’s about setting an example. In other words, practicing what you preach.

“It’s actually embracing it, living it out and being able to impart it to others in such a way that you’re saying, ‘I’ve lived it. Watch me; look at me; I have lived it,’” she said.

*Mia Thompson is studying journalism and environmental studies at USC. She has a passion for longform storytelling and is a senior producer for Impact, a student-run documentary series at USC Annenberg.*



# **2023 Contributors**

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