

Introduction

Seeds of Awareness

This book is inspired by an undergraduate course called “Music, Art, and Theology,” one of the most popular classes I teach and probably the course I’ve most enjoyed teaching. The reasons for this may be as straightforward as they are worthy of lament. In an era when study of the arts has become a practical afterthought, a “luxury” squeezed out of tight education budgets and shrinking liberal arts curricula, people intuitively yearn for spaces where they can explore together the landscape of the human heart opened up by music and, more generally, the arts.

All kinds of people are attracted to the arts, but I have found that young adults especially, seeking something deeper and more worthy of their questions than what they find in highly quantitative and STEM-oriented curricula, are drawn into the horizon of the ineffable where the arts take us. Across some twenty-five years in the classroom, over and over again it has been my experience that young people of diverse religious, racial, and economic backgrounds, when given the opportunity, are eager to plumb the wellsprings of spirit where art commingles with the divine-human drama of faith.

From my childhood to the present day, my own spirituality¹ or way of being in the world has been profoundly shaped by music, not least its capacity to carry me beyond myself and into communion with the mysterious, transcendent dimension of reality. From high school to undergraduate and graduate school classrooms, I’ve also marveled at the impact of engaging the arts with students as a doorway into life’s most enduring human, spiritual, and theological questions.

Can the so-called “secular” music of artists like Pink Floyd, Joni Mitchell, Lady Gaga, and Bruce Springsteen bear us into realms of the holy and sacred? Can the social and racial critique embedded in Stevie Wonder’s music disturb our personal and collective consciences, perhaps even opening the eyes of the “blind” to see? To what extent do songwriters, painters, filmmakers, and other artists play a prophetic role in society and church? Can art be a vehicle of hope,

1. By *spirituality* I mean broadly the everyday way of life flowing from one’s deepest beliefs, desires, and values; it is a way of living into our calling and identity as human beings. Everyone “has” a spirituality insofar as every person’s self-understanding and behavior flow from core beliefs and values. *Christian spirituality* flows from faith in Jesus Christ, marked by openness to the love of God, self, neighbor, and the world through the power of grace or the Spirit who dwells in the community. There is no single normative Christian spirituality but there are many ways, unique to the gifts of persons and cultures, of following Jesus.

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stirring that wondrous if elusive capacity in human beings to imagine a more just, humane, and joyful future? Such questions are implicitly theological insofar as they engage us in the search for answers to the deepest yearnings of human experience, and are attentive to moments in which that search confronts us with mysteries beyond understanding, not least, the ineffable reality believers name “God.”²

This book is an invitation to explore some of the deepest questions rising from the human spiritual and social journey as mediated by artistic voices in both popular and religious culture. By facilitating engagement with classic works in music and the arts, both “secular” and “sacred,” and by offering a contemplative framework for doing so, I hope this book might help you discover, or perhaps rediscover, as I have my whole life long, the wonder of the arts as a doorway into the life of spirit and sacred presence, the strange and beautiful interweaving of the human and divine. Rather than proposing clear or fixed “answers” it invites you into a process, a way of seeing, hearing, and praying through some of life’s most enduring spiritual and theological questions.

With gratitude for all I have learned from my students through the years, I hope this book might provide to other students, teachers, and seekers an exemplar, and perhaps a dose of inspiration, for embarking on a similar journey. More broadly, I dare to hope this book will contribute something original and adventuresome to the flourishing body of discourse today on theology and the arts.³

From the outset one has to acknowledge formidable obstacles to such a project. In the first place, words like “wonder,” “mystery,” “faith,” “God,” “transcendence,” and “the divine” are freighted with difficulties today in academic circles, and may not resonate favorably or intelligibly in the minds and hearts of many people. Is there room left in our classrooms to cultivate what once was called “art appreciation,” even as prevailing models of education take their cues from the utilitarian presumptions and dictates of the marketplace? Are there adult mentors and professional educators in our hyperactive society prepared to share with young people the wisdom-practices of slowing down, the unpredictable delights of contemplating a classic album, a religious icon, a film scene, an epic poem?

2. By *theology* I mean, in the classic formulation of Saint Anselm, “faith seeking understanding.” I also appreciate Jesuit Fr. Anthony De Mello’s two-fold description of theology: “The art of telling stories about the Divine. And the art of listening to them.” See Anthony De Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), xvi. Both Anselm and De Mello underscore the active, dynamic, searching dimension of theological inquiry, a task that never ends because its final “object” is no object at all but the transcendent mystery of God, who lies beyond all grasp. In this sense I would describe theology as a lifelong conversation with wonder and mystery, a searching (and, at times, a being found) that is both personal and communal, discursive and poetical, all at once. The point to emphasize here is that spirituality and theology, while distinct, are inseparable. Both find their root in the experience of grace or holy Mystery as it breaks into human consciousness in historical time and space, and which ultimately lies beyond all attempts to define, contain, or manage it.

3. See “Additional Resources” at the end of the introduction.

I believe that the answer is a resounding yes. Long ago my students convinced me that the rewards of doing so are far and away worth the effort, notwithstanding some obstacles in the prevailing culture of higher education.⁴

A Contemplative, Case Studies Approach

The title of this book, *The Artist Alive*, takes its inspiration from the American painter and teacher Robert Henri (1865–1929), best known as the founder of the



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Robert Henri

Ashcan School of American realism. I knew nothing of Henri (pronounced “HEN-rye”) until a few years ago, when a dear friend, the iconographer Fr. Bill McNichols, suggested I read Henri’s classic work of 1923, *The Art Spirit*.⁵ Eagerly I did, and as Fr. Bill predicted, I was deeply moved by the book. Its lengthy subtitle describes it as a compendium of “Notes, Articles, and Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture-Making, the Study of Art Generally, and on Appreciation.” In truth, the book is about *seeing*, or the art and discipline of perception. In Henri I seem to have stumbled upon a kindred spirit, someone who intuitively describes what I

struggle to do each day in the theology classroom: namely, to open the doors of perception, imagination, contemplation, and critical thought.

4. One of the more prominent critics of higher education today is Yale professor William Deresiewicz, who laments its “toxic” atmosphere for the humanities and the loss of values traditionally served by a liberal arts education. See *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014); see also the thoughtful review by Jackson Lears, “The Liberal Arts vs. Neoliberalism,” *Commonweal* (Apr. 20, 2015).

5. Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (1923; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2007).

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What intrigues me most is the image of “fragments” in Henri’s subtitle. It suggests an image of the teacher not as a dispenser of fixed or predetermined truths but rather as a guide toward insight, as one who listens and responds, offering hints and gestures based on “fragments” or “found materials” of experience and latent wisdom in the students themselves. These can only be surfaced gradually and patiently, through an encounter from person to person that is at once structured, spontaneous, and free. Above all, Henri insists that “the art spirit” lives in everyone. “Art when really understood is the province of every human being,” he writes. “It is not an outside, extra thing. When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressing creature.”⁶

Thus the image of the “artist alive,” as I hope to convey in these pages, is intentionally expansive, signaling as inclusive an understanding of the arts as possible. What Henri calls “the art spirit” points to a creative and spiritual dynamism that dwells in everyone, but which requires nurturing, encouraging, drawing out.⁷ I’ve titled the book in homage to Henri and to artists and teachers everywhere who nurture in the human spirit something essential. What that “something” is eludes easy definition, but it is my hope that this book helps to awaken it within you, the reader, and to offer a common framework from which to explore it.

The Artist Alive invokes an alternative spirituality or way of orienting oneself in the world, more humane than the ubiquitous, globalized marketplace vision of reality that bears down on so many people, an alienating way of life in which not a few people feel themselves herded together, numbered, and ranked as mere consumers—little more than a “name on the door,” to cite Joni Mitchell, or “just another brick in the wall,” as Pink Floyd famously has it. Beginning with my own experiences of music as a child, chapter 1 attempts to paint a mosaic of the artistic sensibility—in religious terms, akin to a mystical-prophetic spirituality—that grounds the epistemological framework or contemplative “way of knowing” for the rest of the book. Drawing especially from Henri and from Jewish poet, mystic, and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, chapter 1 charts a number of qualities or “seeds of awareness” that broadly characterize the artistic disposition—once again, *seeds that dwell in every person but that must be cultivated*. These include a capacity for wonder, amazement, and mystery; multi-sensory awareness, or synaesthesia; a quality of presence or heightened attunement to the gifts of the present moment; and critical resistance to conventional, predetermined, or culturally imposed ways of perceiving.⁸

6. Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 11.

7. It is not incidental that the word “education” comes from the Latin *educere*, “to draw out.”

8. The epistemological-metaphysical framework established in chapter 1 is resonant with George Steiner’s classic study, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Steiner reinforces the contemplative and participatory dimension of the arts, where the best “criticism” is not didactic or reasoned analysis of a work but wholesale immersion via performance and contemplative appreciation.

Chapters 2 through 9 each take their inspiration from a single artistic work or the juxtaposition of several, evoking images and themes from the complex web of human life in relationship with self, others, the earth, and divine mystery. Art thus serves as a common “text” or “doorway” into shared reflection on our lives in public society, spiritual formation and discernment, ethics, race relations, environmental awareness, sexuality, justice, the question of God, and the life of faith. These chapters present case studies that aim to do the following:

- attend to evocative tonal, visual, and lyrical details in the artistic work at hand (the world *within* the text)
- reflect on the artist’s historical and social location (the world *behind* the text)
- invite you, the reader, through deep listening, contemplation, and journaling, to respond to the work and its possible “surplus of meanings” in your own life’s journey in society, and for some of us, in communities of faith (the world *in front of* the text)⁹

The conclusion steps back to ponder the whole mosaic, offering a number of summary insights and working conclusions at the intersection of music, art, and theology.

It should not surprise that people of all ages and backgrounds would relish the invitation to linger deeply, unhurriedly, in a single work of art, and to do so with others in a serious way. To immerse oneself in Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*, for example (the subject of chapter 2), as a whole work of art—by contrast to the downloading and consumption of single songs—and further to explore the creative processes of the band that gave birth to the album in its social and historical context, is both fascinating and potentially transforming. Beneath the complex synaesthetic or “psychedelic” landscape of *Dark Side of the Moon* are timeless, penetrating questions: Are human beings really capable of empathy, and if so, what empowers us to practice it? Does money, and the shiny perks that go with *lots of it*, promise happiness? What does it mean to be “sane” or “well-adjusted” in a hyperactive, technological, war-soaked environment? Has language itself been drained of meaning, tied inextricably to power and self-interest? Can primal wordless expression “speak,” and touch the mystery of God, more directly and truthfully than words, doctrines, formal theology?

The tools of critical and contemplative appreciation practiced in this book invite the reader to develop more intentional habits of consuming music and other art forms. In truth I hope to persuade the reader that the arts at their most authentic and empowering have far less to do with “production” and

9. The “experimental” and contemplative approach I recommend in these chapters shares much with Roger I. Simon’s recommendations in *Teaching against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992).

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“consumption” than with personal and social transformation. Indeed, one of the most compelling qualities that joins Pink Floyd with the other artists considered in this book is the degree to which they recognize and frequently resist in their work the unholy alliance between the arts and commerce—or, for that matter, the often very thin line between the adoration of their fans and idol worship. Indeed the “culture industry” itself, with its genius for co-opting and homogenizing even the most subversive artists under the lure of money and the banner of popular acclaim, will also have to be taken into account in the pages that follow.

It is important to note from the outset that many art forms—e.g., dance, pottery, photography, sculpture—do not serve as exemplars in my analysis. While chapters 4, 5, and 7 explore works from film, literature, and the Bible, and chapter 8 is centered on religious iconography, the balance leans decidedly toward music. Poetry also takes pride of place to the extent that song lyrics, the voices of poets as such, and the poetical texture of the Bible are integral to my method and voice as a theologian. In no way do I wish to imply that the arts not represented here are somehow inferior as portals to the divine. Indeed, my students across the years—including not a few dancers, sculptors, photographers, and the like—have taught me that insights arising from a deep engagement with music can resonate powerfully, if distinctly, across a wide range of art forms. The lean toward music in this book is simply a reflection of my own expertise and inevitable limitations.

While the works explored in these chapters reflect my own social location, artistic tastes, and biases—e.g., classic rock and folk music more than country, rap, or classical; North American artists more than Latin American, Asian, or African; Eastern iconography more than Western religious art—I have been careful to choose works representing a wide array of gender, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Each has attained the status of “classic” in its genre, and each, I have found, resonates widely with students of diverse backgrounds. Of course this will not always be the case for every reader. Catholic theologian David Tracy describes the “classic” as any truly significant book, person, work of art, or piece of music that bears a certain “excess of meaning” as well as a certain timelessness.¹⁰ I will say much more about what makes a classic in chapter 2, but my point here is that even works of art that do not delight or move one personally can dramatically enlarge and even transform one’s personal, spiritual, social, and theological horizons. This is especially so when the work is engaged in conversation with others.¹¹

10. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 102.

11. In this sense the particular works I present are less important than the tools of appreciation at play. In other words, my aim is not to offer a fixed method or content to be adopted rigidly by others in considering a work, but rather a framework or model with which to experiment in ways fitting to the particular context and community at hand.

Along the way I introduce principles of hermeneutical theory (rules of interpretation) and insights from seminal figures in philosophy, theology, and art criticism from a range of religious and philosophical viewpoints: Roman Catholic (my tradition), Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, humanist, atheist, and others. In keeping with the spirit of the artists themselves, I have tried to avoid academic jargon and to write in a key true to my own experiential and sometimes poetic voice.

For all of this, the greatest potential value of this book resides not in what I have written but in your engagement with the works at hand, or even better, reflection with others in the context of a class or group study. Because the power of art ultimately resides in the eye and ear of the beholder, that is, in the *whole person* who sees and listens, appendices A, B, and C provide guidelines for personal and classroom engagement, contemplative listening, seeing, and journaling, as well as practical suggestions for the teacher or group moderator, all intended to help you slow down and deepen your engagement with the material. As much as possible in group or classroom settings, ample time and space should be built into each session in ways that free both students and teacher to work (and play!) with the material at hand, developing tools of appreciation and insight together.

Appendix D details guidelines for a team project in which students have the opportunity to research and present to their peers a work of art or music of special significance to them. As with the journaling, this team project aims to reinforce the practice of interdisciplinary, communal learning from which this book rises. Appendix E offers guidelines for a final “Art and Spirituality” paper that aims to give free play to the art spirit itself as a creative capacity within each person. In everything that follows, facilitators should feel free to use and adapt what is most helpful or resonant in their particular context and pass over what is not.

Imagination and Sacred Mystery: Unbuffering the Buffered Self

Much of the terrain this book covers is “prereligious” or “pretheological,” probing experiences, images, and narratives from ordinary and sometimes extraordinary human experience that give rise to artistic and theological expression. Indeed the discipline of theology comes into play the moment we seek *to communicate* our most formative life experiences with others, seeking meaning through the manifold languages and practices of faith, and indeed through the arts, as human beings and cultures give shape and direction to their experiences and beliefs, hopes and desires. In other words, as I hope the following chapters will bear out, the image- and language-worlds of the arts, theology, and spirituality share far more than what may be evident at first glance—and this is true, I suggest, whether or not you identify yourself as a “religious” or “spiritual” person. To put

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it another way, the religious or spiritual quest faces its greatest challenge today not on the level of specific theological concepts or beliefs so much as in the more hidden or subterranean realm of human freedom and imagination. This crucial point bears some explanation.

In his magisterial work on the challenges confronting religious faith in “a secular age,” philosopher Charles Taylor suggests that what has shifted dramatically for religion in the postmodern era is not really the faith-vision itself or the explicit *content* of religious belief so much as the *context* within which people decide for or against faith, what Taylor calls the “social imaginary.”¹² In the face of a social imaginary characterized by a seemingly endless pluralism of life-options and possible commitments, the question of faith is no longer simply “Do you believe in God?”—where “God” implies certain shared assumptions and ideas about the divine. Today the more apt question is this: “In *which* ‘god’ (or gods) do you believe?” In whom or what do you place your ultimate security and trust? To what or whom do you commit your fundamental freedom?

Taylor worries in particular about the retreat of the modern secular self into a sort of solipsistic or self-enclosed bubble—what he calls the “buffered self”¹³—a self that suffers from a deep sense of instability, anxiety, and loss of meaning while at the same time doing everything it can to reflexively protect itself from vulnerability and pain over that loss. Against a cultural horizon of rapidly shifting, multiplying, and clashing worldviews, the buffered self takes refuge in a highly individualistic “therapeutic culture,” in consumerism, and in various forms of “soft relativism.”¹⁴ While apathy reigns among the privileged, hopelessness takes hold of the poor and marginalized.

The notion of a social contract or common good that binds different groups together and to which “we” are all mutually beholden disappears in such a culture. Individual self-realization becomes the main agenda of life. As Jesuit theologian Michael Paul Gallagher remarks, “The question of God can seem to have gone asleep. The drama of decision is lost in a postmodern fragmentation of life-style.”¹⁵ If Taylor’s sobering prognosis is accurate—it certainly resonates from where I stand—how can religious traditions respond to the existential isolation and rootlessness he describes?

Gallagher suggests that religion must strive to meet people, especially young people, at the “prereligious” levels of desire and imagination. On this frontier “the worlds of imagination—including art, poetry, music, and the new media—are more needed than a communication of theological content.” Facing a social imaginary in which the very question of God “can seem to have gone asleep,”

12. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

14. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 484, 618.

15. Michael Paul Gallagher, “What Are We Doing When We Do Theology?,” *Landas* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1–12.

theology needs to “create languages of attraction and of invitation,” insists Gallagher. “It needs to be aware of the distance from explicit faith experienced by many people today, and indeed their allergy to many perceived forms of religion. We need a creative and less austere version of John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord today.”¹⁶

Of course John the Baptist is the wilderness prophet who “prepared the way” for Jesus through his dramatic preaching and baptizing—confronting, challenging, and opening the minds, hearts, and imaginations of his hearers. Art, poetry, music, and new media can (and do) serve analogously today, Gallagher provocatively suggests, by addressing the desires of a people lost in the “wilderness” of postmodern culture. Like John the Baptist, the arts can “prepare the way” in our hearts for the experience and language of grace, the mystery of the divine, no matter a person’s formal religious or spiritual background.

“Music, poetry, religion—they all initiate in the soul’s encounter with an aspect of reality for which reason has no concepts and language has no names.”¹⁷ How might the arts serve as a kind of doorway to provoke and stir a deeper sense of divine presence, and therefore of hope, in people living, working, and surviving at street level, people in classrooms and coffee shops, sports arenas and shopping malls, synagogues and mosques, cathedrals and storefront churches—people who hunger for meaning, direction, and joy in their lives no less than the restless and anonymous crowds of Jesus’ day? Might the tools of artistic appreciation cultivated in this book help to prepare the way for more sensitive, hopeful, and even joyful practices of shared theological reflection and vocational discernment?

“The theologian is a translator,” notes Gallagher, “standing at the crossroads of cultures, receiving a vision within a tradition, and reimagining it so as to incarnate its transformative potential for now.”¹⁸ Gallagher, I believe, has it exactly right. Whether Christianity or Judaism, Islam or Hinduism, Buddhism or secular humanism, so much of the appeal and transformative potential of religious faith and practice takes place in “the zones of human freedom and of imagination.” In Christian terms, this is the realm of grace, the Holy Spirit, “the creative artist of our freedom as we move into the flow of life. This is the zone of the inner word, the prereligious presence of God in each of us.”¹⁹ More important

16. Gallagher, “What Are We Doing When We Do Theology?,” 3–4.

17. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 36.

18. Gallagher, “What Are We Doing When We Do Theology?,” 11. To emphasize the pre-religious realm is not to neglect the importance of doctrine but to frame doctrine within a larger operational map, “as dealing with theology as truth, which then has to be understood (systematic theology) for today and also inculturated in different worlds” (p. 11, n. 16). See also Michael Paul Gallagher, *Faith Maps: Ten Religious Explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), following Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972).

19. Michael Paul Gallagher, *The Human Poetry of Faith: A Spiritual Guide to Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 134.

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than clarity of ideas, doctrinal precision, or even ethical and moral norms—all crucial, to be sure—people “need to feel themselves part of a larger Story. Like the parables of Jesus, what is needed are . . . moments of human poetry that give voice to the language of desire. And this would be a response on the level of prereligious spiritual imagination.”²⁰

In sum, where the cultural ethos of a secular age tends to mesmerize the imagination (the realm of desire) with technological over-stimulation and flights of fantasy—or starve it through superficiality and deadening consumer-culture sameness—an approach to faith and the life of spirit that addresses the prereligious realm “of searching, of struggling to live genuinely, of being slowly transformed by the adventure of life”²¹ can begin to reshape our impoverished hearts *as lovers*. Approaching theology through the arts can break open our hardened hearts to wonder and mystery, to the subtle movements of grace in silence, in solitude, in vital webs of relationship with the earth, with nonhuman creatures, and with other cultures. Theology “cannot remain merely cognitive.” It needs “to develop existential and affective wavelengths” that can soften and break open the fearful or complacent shell of the buffered self. Theology, as Gallagher sums up beautifully, is called “to reach people’s freedom through their imagination.”²²

To speak of theology openly and without embarrassment as a language of love is to imply a fierce commitment to love’s possibilities amid a host of other possible responses: apathy, cynicism, loneliness, despair. This book is about the option for faith, hope, and love, “the Love that guides the sun and the other stars,” in the words of the poet Dante, not in spite of the darkness that engulfs the larger human story but precisely in and through the darkness. Moreover, to speak of the formation of “lovers” in the context of the classroom is to risk a holistic and person-centered approach to education *as* spiritual formation that is well-suited to the arts, and surely no less to theology. I take theology here as that art and discipline in which human beings are invited and set free to think, question, pray, reason, and speak with one another of God, the loving Mystery who finally eludes all categories of speech—including theological ones! To speak *about* God in human words, of course, is to attempt what is logically not possible. To speak *from* God, if haltingly, in the language of the poets and mystics, is

20. Gallagher, *The Human Poetry of Faith*, 136.

21. Gallagher, *The Human Poetry of Faith*, 134.

22. Gallagher here cites Newman: “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination” (“What Are We Doing When We Do Theology?,” 12, n. 17, citing Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909], 92). By imagination Newman does not mean the realm of make-believe or fantasy but rather that dynamic, holistic, and cumulative faculty of human cognition that enlarges reason, which orders the data of experience and seeks to make sense of the whole. The act of faith depends on the imagination’s capacity to hold together multiple and sometimes apparently conflicting experiences, perceptions, or “antecedent possibilities, those attitudinal preambles that make faith either existentially credible or incredible” (*The Human Poetry of Faith*, 133).

quite another matter. For Love yearns to speak, is diffusive of Itself, and cannot remain silent. Both the artist and the theologian who have come to trust in Love are compelled to sing for a silent yet everywhere symphonic God.²³

All of this is to finally confess that my interest in these pages is neither neutral nor pedagogically “innocent.” As a whole person myself—scholar, teacher, musician, husband, father, person of faith—I write from the desire to deepen my own sense of God’s friendship in the midst of my stumbling journey while also trying, in the somewhat archaic phrase of Saint Ignatius, “to help souls”—by which I mean, in all humility, to help others discern God’s hidden presence in their lives, especially those who live under the shadow of doubt, apathy, loneliness, or looming despair. The painting by Italian artist Pasquale Rapicano that graces the cover of this book—*Rust (David Gilmour Live at Pompeii)*—somehow captures for me this human yearning for transcendence and grace that I have discovered in music since my childhood, not least in the artistry of Pink Floyd’s David Gilmour. There is a swirl of shadow and light, motion and color, in Gilmour’s luminescent solo guitar-work, instantly recognizable, which centers me down bodily and carries me skyward even to this day. I am very grateful to Rapicano for the permission to share his beautiful work.

Much more will be said along the way about resonances across the arts, spirituality, and the language of faith. For now perhaps it is enough to make clear that it is from within this space of gratitude and commitment to a community of faith that I write, and invite you to join with me in this exploration of the arts as a doorway into a lifelong journey toward greater empathy and wonder, solidarity, and new being in grace. I ask in advance your pardon wherever my efforts to speak may offend, assume too much of the reader, or fall well short of their subject. I trust and urge you to fill in the gaps with your own poetry, your own images, your own music, your own silence.

Additional Resources

Groundbreaking studies at the intersection of the arts and theology include the following:

Begbie, Jeremy, ed. *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

23. Drawing from Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan and Pope Benedict XVI, Gallagher suggests that theology today, insofar as it seeks to meet people where they live, should stop attempting to be falsely “objective” and pay more attention to the living context or “spiritual adventure” of theologians and ordinary people of faith. “The foundation of theology has shifted from texts and authorities to interiority. The old foundations for theology were externalist, logical, a question of conclusions drawn from premises. The lived horizon of the theologian was often forgotten but in fact is central. All this emphasis challenges theologians not to imitate a neutral model of academic work, one that is so naively and universally accepted in university culture today.” Gallagher, “What Are We Doing When We Do Theology?,” 10.

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- . *Theology, Music and Time*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- González-Andrieu, Cecelia. *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012.
- O'Connell, Maureen. *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012.
- Robinson, David C., ed. *God's Grandeur: The Arts and Imagination in Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.
- Saliers, Don E. *Music and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.
- Viladesau, Richard. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Vrudny, Kimberly. *Beauty's Vineyard: A Theological Aesthetic of Anguish and Anticipation*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016.
- , ed. *Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009.

Other titles with emphasis on music include the following:

- Beaudoin, Tom, ed. *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.
- Hodge, Daniel White. *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity, 2010.
- Keuss, Jeffrey F. *Your Neighbor's Hymnal: What Popular Music Teaches Us about Faith, Hope, and Love*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011.
- Marsh, Clive, and Vaughan S. Roberts. *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.
- Nantais, David. *Rock-A My Soul: An Invitation to Rock Your Religion*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Scharen, Christian. *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011.

An enormous body of literature expounds the benefits and methods of integrating the arts into the classroom. Studies with an emphasis on teaching as formation of the whole person include the following:

- Edwards, Linda Carol. *The Creative Arts: A Process Approach for Teachers and Children*. 2nd ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. New York: Basic Books, 2007. First published 1923 by J. B. Lippincott (Philadelphia).
- Knippers, Edward. "Toward a Christian Pedagogy of Art." In *Teaching as an Act of Faith: Theory and Practice in Church-Related Higher Education*, edited by Arlin Migliazzo, 188–209. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.

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CHAPTER

“Joy inside My Tears”

Stevie Wonder and John H. Griffin: Celebration and Resistance Down at Street Level

Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.

—James Baldwin

Much of the real germinating action in the world, the real leavening, is among the immobilized, the outsiders. . . . Where the good may come from is perhaps where evil is feared. The streets. The ghettos.

—Thomas Merton

Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.”

—Mark 10:51

In 1976 Motown recording artist Stevie Wonder released a double-album masterpiece called *Songs in the Key of Life*, giving voice to the joys and struggles of life in inner-city America. With an original working title of “Let’s see life the way it is,” the album’s seventeen songs reveal a world largely hidden from suburban, middle-class, white America. I was twelve years old when *Songs In the Key of Life* debuted at number one on the pop music charts. I remember listening to the record for the first time with my older brother in our bedroom. Though I was too young and far too insulated to grasp the social and racial complexity of the songs, I was mesmerized by the music. Forty years later, I am still mesmerized,

CASE STUDIES

Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*
John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*

ized, and the full genius of Wonder’s artistry still eludes me. Today, when I introduce his music to my students, I never cease to wonder at the ways the encounter with such



Stevie Wonder

an artist opens their social horizons, much as mine were broken open as a child. Track three, for example, “Village Ghetto Land,” layers images of “life the way it is” for the poor in the inner city over the serene and cultured instrumentation of a chamber quartet:

Would you like to go with me / Down my dead end street
Would you like to come with me / To Village Ghetto Land
Children play with rusted cars / Sores cover their hands
Beggars watch and eat their meals / From garbage cans¹

Two tracks later, as if to say, *Don't think you understand me or my people now*, Wonder delivers “Sir Duke,” an infectiously funky tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington and other black artists, followed by “I Wish,” a joyful remembrance of growing up on the streets of Detroit, “Knocks Me Off My Feet,” an exuberant love poem, and “Pastime Paradise,” a symphonically mesmerizing cautionary tale about the search for meaning and hope in history. “Isn't She Lovely” celebrates the birth of Wonder's daughter, Aisha, followed by “Joy Inside My Tears” and “Black Man,” all hymns to what it *feels like* to be alive, black, and proud, in America. Like turning a many-faceted diamond, now this way, now that, Stevie refracts the mosaic colors of life as it is for many in inner-city America, life held down to street level.

1. Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*, Motown Records, 1976. The original vinyl release included seventeen songs. An additional four songs were released with the special edition version of the original LP, and are included on most CD versions of the album.

Listening to the album today, one might be tempted to celebrate just how much things have changed in a so-called post-racial America. Or, to the contrary, one might lament how far too little has changed at street level for peoples of color in the United States. In any case, what most interests me is not the insight into so-called “ghetto life” that Stevie Wonder’s music gives us, gives me, as a middle-class white person in America. What interests me is the critique of the *racially unconscious white listener* embedded in his music, an aspect of his legacy I didn’t really notice, much less appreciate, until I was much older.

For white listeners like myself, Wonder’s artistry facilitates a potentially painful realization: namely, my own nearly complete social isolation from black experience in America, my own “confinement in the prison built by racism,”² and the degree to which my own white habitus or groupthink conditions my very manner of seeing and judging reality. In other words, the opening of “Village Ghetto Land”—*Would you like to go with me, down my dead end street?*—still resonates today as both an accusation and an invitation: an accusation of social blindness but also an invitation to come and see life in these United States of America more intimately and clearly than I may have seen it before. To say yes to the invitation is to discover that what is at stake is not my grasp of so-called “black experience”—as if all such experience were monolithic (it certainly is not)—so much as the music of life itself, life in the key of humanity: black, white, brown, red, yellow. It is about the dance of human relationships, sorrowful and joyful, broken and redeemed. I’ve often wondered, how strange, sad, and beautiful, that Stevie Wonder, a blind man, would be teaching me how to see.

“The lamp of the body is the eye,” says Jesus. “If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be” (Matt. 6:22–23). Repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus is seen healing the blind, both literally and figuratively. Yet, for me, the most compelling of all these miracles is the one that did not “take” the first time: his encounter with the blind man of Bethsaida. “Putting spittle on his eyes [Jesus] laid his hands on him and asked, ‘Do you see anything?’ Looking up he replied, ‘I see people looking like trees and walking’” (Mark 8:23–24). Of course Jesus finishes the healing and sends the man on his way. But it is the man’s shadowy, in-between state of partial sight and partial blindness that seems to me an almost perfect metaphor for our human condition. Slow the story down and stretch it out over the course of a lifetime, generations, and then centuries, and the blind man of Bethsaida, *before* Jesus finishes the job, becomes a fitting parable for race relations in America. We are all still on the way, each of us stumbling forward in partial blindness, seeing people “looking like trees and walking.” Yet through

2. The phrase is borrowed from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

the eyes of faith, Christ is there, hidden in light and shadow, calling us forward into our freedom—freedom for love, for transformation, for solidarity.

In the second part of this chapter, we’ll turn the clock back fifteen years from *Songs in the Key of Life* to consider *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin’s classic autobiographical narrative of 1961 that details his experiment in “becoming black” in the Deep South during the late 1950s.³ I am always surprised by how few students have heard of Griffin before reading *Black Like Me*, yet they are nearly always, to a person, enthralled by his story. Though Wonder and Griffin are artists of a very different kind, what links them is their remarkable capacity to open our imaginations to the life-worlds of people and places well beyond our habitual comfort zones. As we shall also see, it is not incidental that Griffin, a white journalist, musician, soldier, and farmer from Texas, also suffered a ten-year period of blindness before he wrote *Black Like Me*.

In a certain sense, through their respective artistry, both Stevie Wonder and John Howard Griffin issue the same challenge as Jesus and the prophets: “You have eyes, but do you really see? You have ears, but do you really hear?” Both invite us to grasp the world anew, through eyes of empathy, understanding, and love. With respect to race relations in America, past and present, that is no small thing. We begin with the musical genius of Stevie Wonder, a daunting task for any writer.

“You’ll Cause Your Own Country to Fall”: Songs in the Key of Resistance

Race is but one of many lenses through which we might explore the kaleidoscopic palette of *Songs in the Key of Life*, but given the world behind the text that was Stevie’s childhood in Detroit and the social situation for many African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s, it is a fitting place to start.

After an extraordinary ten-year run with Motown Records as “Little Stevie Wonder”—he had his first Billboard number one hit at age thirteen—Wonder negotiated a new contract with Berry Gordy of Motown that gave him an unprecedented advance and full artistic control of his music. Gordy’s calculated risk proved wise, as three groundbreaking albums followed: *Talking Book* (1972), including the number one hits “Superstition” and “You Are the Sunshine of My Life”; *Innervisions* (1973), featuring “Higher Ground” and “Living for the City,” which both reached number one on the R&B charts; and *Fulfillingness’ First Finale* (1973), including the hits “You Haven’t Done Nothin’” and “Boogie On Reggae Woman.” Each album earned Stevie three Grammy Awards,

3. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*, 50th anniversary ed. (San Antonio: Wings, 2011). The documentary *Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin*, dir. Morgan Atkinson (Duckworks, 2010), offers a fascinating biographical, spiritual, and artistic portrait of Griffin’s story within the broad tapestry of twentieth-century events.

the latter two taking consecutive Albums of the Year. (*Songs in the Key of Life* would add another three Grammys, including his third Album of the Year.) By 1973, Wonder had become the most influential and acclaimed black artist of the 1970s.⁴ Many tracks from this classic period still enjoy regular radio play nearly five decades later. But with trenchantly social-political tracks like “Big Brother” (*Talking Book*), “Living for the City” (*Innervisions*), and “You Haven’t Done Nothin’” (*Fulfillingness’ First Finale*), Wonder had also emerged as one of the most compelling voices on race in America.

In “Big Brother,” to my mind one of the finest protest songs of the era, Stevie plays with the metaphor of sight, mocking the objectifying “outsider gaze” of the (white) listener.

*Your name is big brother / You say that you're watching me on the tele / Seeing
me go nowhere
Your name is big brother / You say that you're tired of me protesting / Children
dying everyday
My name is nobody / But I can't wait to see your face inside my door*⁵

Some four decades ahead of the smart phone and the now-ubiquitous rants of talk radio and cable TV “news” pundits, Wonder lays bare the dehumanizing tendency to see and judge “the other” primarily through the lens of a TV screen. Turning the objectifying lens around like a mirror, he delivers the lyric with just enough restraint—or is it sass?—to suggest that he, and the (black) community of his intimate devotion—*My name is secluded / we live in a house the size of a matchbox / roaches live with us wall to wall*—may yet have the last word. The song closes with one of the most pointed indictments of the “land of the free” I’ve ever heard: *You’ve killed all my leaders / I don’t even have to do nothin’ to you / You’ll cause your own country to fall*.⁶

Gary Byrd, Wonder’s cowriter on “Village Ghetto Land” and “Black Man,” locates Stevie’s evolution as a social poet in the same vital stream as black artists who had come before:

When he got to *Songs in the Key of Life*, [we see] not only his own evolution as a creative artist but the evolution of what was going on from, let’s say, 1969–1970, where Curtis Mayfield begins to do a range of concept albums, and Isaac Hayes is coming with a concept [album], and then

4. Internet resources detailing Stevie Wonder’s biography and discography include Stevie Wonder, <http://www.steviewonder.net/>, and “The Life and Times of Stevie Wonder,” Stevie Wonder, <http://www.steviewonder.org.uk/bio/biography.html>.

5. Stevie Wonder, *Talking Book*, Tamla Motown, 1972; multiple versions, including live video recordings, are accessible online.

6. Much like “Village Ghetto Land,” the buoyant major key melody of “Big Brother,” sung over an infectious rhythm guitar, keyboard, and harmonica arrangement, belies the defiant imagery of the lyrics.

Marvin Gaye drops “What’s Going On.” I think those projects are very pivotal to understanding the point at which Stevie is doing *Songs in the Key of Life*. [He] took the idea of a concept album and laid perhaps the most massive canvas of creativity that had ever been done at that point.⁷

It is important to keep in mind that when *Songs in the Key of Life* was released, just eight years had passed since the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Indeed that fact, and the justified rage, frustration, and political cynicism that those events and others—Vietnam, Kent State, Watergate—had provoked in the African American community and well beyond, makes the infectiously celebratory tenor of *Songs in the Key of Life* all the more remarkable.

“Knocks Me Off My Feet”: Singing the Power of Love

The album’s plaintive opening song, “Love’s in Need of Love Today”—“Good morn or evening friends / Here’s your friendly announcer / I have serious news to pass on to everybody”—lays out the stakes for everything that follows.⁸ The personified invocation of Love itself as both giver and receiver, strong and vulnerable, generous but ever threatened by hate, draws the listener immediately into the circle of reflection. Like the imagined radio announcer who narrates the song, Wonder wants to invite the listener into a conversation, or better, a call and response, like a preacher feeding on his congregation’s, “Amen, pastor, preach it now.”

In Track 7, “Knocks Me Off My Feet,” Stevie lets go, painting a vivid picture of love, seeming to stumble half-embarrassed in the effort to find words usually “told only to the wind / felt without being said.” Love is a simultaneous turning inward and outward—“I don’t want to bore you with my trouble / but there’s somethin’ ‘bout your love.” The one who has given and received love cannot keep silent. Love spills over and is diffusive of Itself. It wants to sing. Again, we hear the call and response that marks the loveliest of human relationships: the woman’s voice entering in to affirm the male’s trepidation. “I don’t wanna bore you with it,” sings Wonder. “Oh but I love you, I love you, I love you,” she responds. As a piano player, I find it hard to find words for Wonder’s sublime playing on “Knocks Me Off My Feet,” from the opening riff to the elegant jazz stylings throughout. The same extends to the rhythm tracks, all performed by

7. Cited in *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*, dir. David Heffernan (Rhino, 1999). To be sure, Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” was a breakthrough not just for Gaye but for Berry Gordy, whom Gaye had to persuade to let him address social issues in his music, risking the alienation of Motown’s white audience.

8. This and subsequent citations from Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*.

Wonder himself on drums, synth bass, and Fender Rhodes.⁹ “Knocks Me Off My Feet” celebrates the primordial Love that keeps the world centered on its axis, even (especially) when the world seems to be spinning out of control.

Weaving their way through and rising high above the instrumentation, the astonishing melodies that saturate *Songs in the Key of Life* are easy to take for granted. There is an art and grace to writing a good melody that can elude even the most practiced songwriters. “I think melodies, you know, are like angels from heaven expressing a place for the heart to follow,” Wonder says in a 2005 interview, mentioning Sam Cooke as an early influence in his songwriting.¹⁰ Even the bleak lyrical content of “Village Ghetto Land” is rendered beautiful via a deceptively sophisticated melody. Of course the melodies that distinguish Wonder’s songs are made ever more angelic by the extraordinary range and quality of his voice. The late great poet Maya Angelou had a lot to say about the human voice, and hers was one of the most beautiful and resonant I have ever heard. As a poet she deeply understood the power of language to move the soul. Yet she also understood that human words “mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning.”¹¹ The warmth and quality of soul that infuses Stevie Wonder’s voice makes a welcoming and beautiful “place for the heart to follow.”

“The artist is a creator of emphasized, clarified beauty, designed to make us see,” writes the late Catholic priest and novelist Andrew Greeley. We live surrounded by beauty, Greeley notes. “Sometimes we notice it, sometimes, all too rarely perhaps, the beauty all around us invades us, stops us in our tracks, explodes within us.”¹² Nearly every track on *Songs in the Key of Life* invokes the power of the divine-human spirit to do and make happen “what no one thought could be” (“Joy Inside My Tears”): to coax beauty from ugliness, joy from sorrow, light from darkness, fellowship from loneliness. “I think the voice has a lot to do with your spirit,” Wonder says. “If your spirit feels right, then your voice will stay pretty consistently the same, from that point of maturity.”¹³ Like a painter choosing from a palette of infinite hues, the range of colors reflected in Stevie’s singing, often in the same song, is marvelous to behold. Listen to the tender falsetto at the opening of “Summer Soft,” then follow the emotional tenor of the

9. Much as we saw with Pink Floyd in chapter 2, Stevie pioneered the use of synthesizers in the early 1970s, incorporating electronic sounds seamlessly with acoustic instruments, hugely influencing the musical palette of popular music and the development of electronic musical genres.

10. Interview with British journalist Barney Hoskyns in 2005, cited from a wonderfully animated version, Stevie Wonder, “On Keys of Life,” directed and animated by Pat Smith, Blank on Blank, PBS, <https://blankonblank.org/interviews/stevie-wonder-on-keys-of-life-motown-singing-lyrics-racism-god-religion-detroit/>.

11. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969; repr., New York: Random House, 2015), 82.

12. Andrew Greeley, “The Apologetics of Beauty,” *America* (Sept. 16, 2000): 8–14.

13. Interview with Barney Hoskyns, 2005.

melody as it mellows down into the verse, builds torch-like into the chorus, back to falsetto, and then lets loose with blues-funk improvisation up and down the scales to take the song out. “Ngiculela—Es Una Historia—I Am Singing,” soars in Zulu, Spanish, and English, the melody lyrically uniting all three languages.¹⁴ For me and innumerable listeners through the years, Wonder’s vocal artistry “stops us in our tracks, explodes within us,” knocks us off our feet.

“In Love with the Discovery of Life Itself”: Ways of Seeing (and Not Seeing)

In our brief discussion of Stevie Wonder’s childhood at the beginning of chapter 1, we considered the strangely paradoxical truth that a blind person might “see” reality better than many people with working eyes. As Wonder himself put it in an interview with Larry King, “If your vision gives you preconceptions then you’ve got a problem with yourself.” Once again, hearkening to the prenatal environment of the womb, Stevie noted that “we really feel before we see. We really hear before we see.”¹⁵

To remember that we “feel before we see” is also to affirm our innate capacity for *empathy*, the capacity to feel deeply the life-situation of another. But because we do not and cannot literally inhabit another person’s skin—save in the womb!—empathy becomes more and more, as we learn to navigate the adult world, the function of a healthy and generous imagination. Empathy is not just the *capacity* to open myself to the life-world of another, it is also the *willingness* to do so, irrespective of whether doing so benefits me or my interests directly. To act from empathy may be easier when another’s life-world looks and feels something like one’s own. But then think how the imagination must extend itself that much further for a blind person.

Recall that when Larry King asked him about his blindness, Stevie replied, “I think I’ve got a pretty good imagination.”¹⁶ Watching him behind the piano, playing the harmonica, or even during an interview, the point becomes strikingly clear as his head and upper body move constantly in rhythmic circles, like an antenna, attuning himself to the environment. By contrast, the person or community without empathy, sighted or blind, is the person or community trapped inside their own captive imagination. What strikes me most in Wonder’s music

14. Alan Light, review of *Songs in the Key of Life*, by Stevie Wonder, Pitchfork, August 21, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22174-songs-in-the-key-of-life/>. The first verse, in Zulu, says, “I am singing / for tomorrow / I sing of love / I sing that someday / love will reign / all around this world of ours.”

15. Stevie Wonder, interview by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, December 5, 2010, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1012/05/lkl.01.html>.

16. Interview by Larry King; see chapter 1.

and in his witness throughout his life as a public figure is the way he poses the question of empathy precisely as a question, that is, as challenge and invitation to his (white) audience—*Would you like to go with me / to Village Ghetto Land?*—far more than as a broadside or categorical accusation. Again, Gary Byrd, on the period leading up to *Songs in the Key of Life*:

He also had become a master of how to express those social ideas through music, and how, in effect, to communicate past the kind of human biases that especially operate in the territory and framework of the United States. And to actually reach past those and to reach people who otherwise might not want to listen to that kind of message, but through his musical genius would not only listen, but would digest it, and understand it.¹⁷

I recognize Wonder's impact on me, my indebtedness to his music, in Byrd's observation.

To be sure, critics have sometimes faulted Wonder for being too sanguine or racially conciliatory in his music—in a word, for putting too much faith in his white audience's capacity for empathy, much less, solidarity with the black community.¹⁸ Yet his general refusal to play the "angry black prophet" or much less the race cynic might also be commended as a careful refusal to reduce any person or community, including whites, to the categorical abstraction, however expedient, of race. No matter what your racial identity or history, Wonder's legacy seems to suggest that to the extent your vision gives you "preconceptions" that *preempt the possibility of love*, however justified those preconceptions may seem to be, "then you've got a problem with yourself."¹⁹

The American rap star Coolio—who in 1995 transformed Wonder's "Pastime Paradise" into his own social-political classic, "Gangsta's Paradise"—attributes Stevie's hopefulness if not optimism around race relations to two things: his generation, and his blindness.

Stevie is from . . . that old mode of black people [who] really believe that anybody can do anything they want to do. I don't think that he's ever felt limited in his life. He always felt that he could do anything

17. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*.

18. For example, the mixed reaction to "Ebony and Ivory," written by Paul McCartney and recorded as a duet with Wonder. Though a number one hit in the United States and Britain, the song was panned by many critics as too "saccharine" to be taken seriously. On the other hand, the fact that "Ebony and Ivory" was banned by the apartheid government of South Africa suggests that its simple appeal to racial harmony may be more radical than is apparent at first glance.

19. This is a complex and subtle point and could be easily misconstrued, but I offer it provisionally here as a prompt for thought and discussion. I hope the remainder of the chapter bears out the spirit if not the substance of these observations to some degree.

that he wanted. See because, because he can't see, it gave him an advantage over a lot of people, because color really, *really didn't mean shit to him*, because he never saw color anyway.²⁰

Notice that Coolio speaks not with contempt on this point but with evident awe: “You know, he's blind, and you sit there and you wonder, ‘This man can't even see,’ but he sees so many more things than people with sight can see. It's like he sees things of the soul more than the world of ‘reality.’ I would place him right alongside all the greats: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Marvin Gaye.”²¹

In a 2005 interview, asked how he dealt with the hardships of his childhood growing up in Detroit in the 1950s, Stevie reflected on his experiences of racism and racial identity:

I think that I really didn't understand the severity of the situation or the circumstances. I think I was so in love with my mother, and my brothers, my sister, my friends—just in love with the discovery of life itself—that my focus was not on those things. I think I discovered the whole thing of color when I went down South once when my grandmother passed away. There were some kids, some white kids that lived nearby, or whatever, and the kids said, “Hey Nigger!” And I said, “What? I'm from Detroit.” (laughter) I started throwing rocks over, and they said, “Oh, you better not do that, you'll get in trouble.” I said, “I don't care.” I hit the kid and I kept throwing stuff. I just—I have never accepted stupidity and ignorance as making me then determine how good I was, or how less I was.²²

Perhaps Coolio is right. To some degree the inability to see has kept Wonder relatively free from the internal and external torments of race prejudice. Yet above all, as Wonder himself confesses, it was love, the love of family and friends, and “being in love with the discovery of life itself,” which has grounded his vision of reality—and animated his musical genius—his whole life long. It would seem that such a love, like a spark drawing near to dry kindling, is irrepressible.

“Looking Back on When I”: A Child's-Eye View of Reality

Two of the most recognizable tracks on *Songs in the Key of Life* celebrate the wonders of childhood and joys of family life, topics rarely treated in the pop

20. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*.

21. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*.

22. Interview with Barney Hoskyns.

music world.²³ The iconic bass-line groove that opens “I Wish” reminds me of the popping of an old reel-to-reel projector just before the black-and-white images hit the screen, and then—*boom!*—we are plunged into the joyful landscape of Stevie’s life-world as a child. Berry Gordy remembers the first time he heard “I Wish”: “When I heard ‘I Wish,’ you know, it was incredible. . . . I thought, like so many other people in the world, when they heard the record, ‘I wish I could be back in those days again.’ . . . And not only did he express it, he did it in a rhythm that was so unique.”²⁴ Likewise “Isn’t She Lovely,” introduced by the universally resonant sound of a baby crying, celebrates childbirth—in this case Wonder’s daughter Aisha—and the simple pleasures of parenting. While Nathan Watts’ hard-driving bassline and an uber-tight horn section charges every scene with youthful energy, Stevie’s improvisations on the harmonica carry “Isn’t She Lovely” into the sky, a wordless letter of gratitude spiraling toward the heavens. The name “Aisha,” not incidentally, simply means “Life,” life “made from love.”

There is a magic that limns the memories of a happy childhood that is surely worth celebrating. To the thought of becoming a child again, our first reaction might be, like Berry Gordy’s, how great that would be! No responsibilities, no battling with schedules, every day stretched out like a blank canvas of possibility. On the other hand, if one’s childhood was marked by trauma, loss, abuse, or loneliness, the thought of reliving such days is the last thing one would wish. In any case, I want to suggest something in Wonder’s vision of childhood that is much deeper than nostalgia or sentimentality, something hard to pin down, paradoxical, ineffable.

Buddhism calls it Child Mind, a term that invokes the capacity for wonder and amazement that lives in all of us. Child Mind, sometimes called Beginner’s Mind, has nothing to do with childish self-absorption or a kind of narcissistic return to an innocent past. Rather it speaks to a (lifelong) process of spiritual renewal, of seeking to cultivate what one author calls “the early mysticism known to every small child—a state of heightened experience and amazement.”²⁵ It is something like what I see in my nine-year-old son Henry, who wakes up every morning and greets the world as if a switch has flipped inside his whole being, proclaiming, “Hey Life, what have you got for me today?!” From moment to supercharged moment, Henry emanates wakefulness to “the life force within all

23. Nor are such positive images of the ordinary, day-to-day lives of many African American families the norm in film, TV, and media. In this sense, “I Wish” and “Isn’t She Lovely” comprise important counter-narratives to the imagery of “Village Ghetto Land,” reminding the (white) listener that “black experience” is neither monolithic nor ontologically inscribed, as it were, by poverty, victimization, suffering, violence.

24. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*.

25. Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 5.

creation.”²⁶ And if I am half-present to his wakefulness it reverberates *in me*, potentially enlightening my day from within.

As noted in chapter 1, Christianity, too, has a venerable tradition of celebrating childlike wonder following from Jesus’ words in the Gospel: “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3) But what can it mean to become like a child when you are an adult living in the twenty-first century?

Both Buddhism and Christianity describe Child Mind without sentimentality as a kind of coming home to our “true self” as adults, the cultivation of an integrated spirituality in which each of us seeks to discover our way in the world not through heroic self-determination or calculated self-interest, but rather through a deepening awareness of our connectedness to others and mutual interdependence with all things, here, now, in each new moment. As emphasized in chapters 3 and 4, those “others” with whom we are always linked in the web of life include plants, wind, water, soil, trees, and nonhuman creatures.²⁷ To be clear, Child Mind is not solely or foremost an intellectual realization; it is a felt attunement and disciplined practice of awakening one’s whole person to the sacredness of the world in which we “live, move, and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Every great religion gives testimony that those persons who have “come home” into such awareness seem to approach life with both more *and* less seriousness than most, and a great deal more spontaneity, creativity, joy, and laughter. *Songs in the Key of Life* seems to me the expression of an artist who, consciously or not, has found an infectiously powerful way to express the wisdom of Child Mind such that the whole world has heard and become the better for it.

Yet what can be said for those millions of children whose daily lives are marked by trauma and abuse, loss and loneliness? The critically acclaimed 2016 film *Moonlight* follows the life of a young African American boy as he navigates the bleak inner-city environment of Miami, where the meaning of manhood is circumscribed by violence, control, and domination. “I built myself back up from the ground to be hard,” the central character laments late in the film.²⁸ As culture writer Bill McGarvey notes, for far too many boys the code of the street demands that “the very phrase ‘Be a man’ means, ‘Don’t feel it.’”²⁹ Yet as

26. Gardner, *The Only Mind*, 4. It seems worth noting that Henry’s full name is Henry David, which means, “beloved ruler of the household.”

27. Wonder’s much-anticipated Motown follow-up to *Songs in the Key of Life* was the double-album *Journey through ‘The Secret Life of Plants’* (1979), which sold very well but had a mixed critical reception. Wonder was introduced to transcendental meditation, a major influence for this album, through his marriage to Syreeta Wright. Consistent with that spiritual vision, he became vegetarian, and later vegan.

28. *Moonlight*, dir. Barry Jenkins (A24, 2016).

29. See Bill McGarvey, “When ‘Being a Man’ Means Hiding your Depression. What ‘Moonlight’ Teaches Us about Masculinity,” *America* (Dec. 15, 2016), <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/15/when-being-man-means-hiding-your-depression-what-moonlight-teaches-us-about>.”

McGarvey also notes, that same spirit of toxic masculinity “is just as pervasive on Wall Street and suburban Main Street—not to mention in the tone of our politics.” Regardless of the setting, he concludes, “the consequences of this distortion are deadly.” In other words, the difference between hardness and tenderness for all of us hinges considerably on whether or not we have been blessed with love, social nurturing, and physical and emotional safety during our childhood, and certainly well beyond. Whether on the streets of Miami or Detroit, on Main Street or Wall Street, Stevie Wonder’s artistry stands in contrast to a reductive vision of masculinity that leaves little room for vulnerability, tenderness, mercy.

All of this serves to reiterate that the heightened amazement characteristic of Child Mind includes sensitivity not just to the beautiful but also to the hard, the painful, the unjust. Perhaps above all, to see through the eyes of the heart is to make oneself vulnerable to the joy and suffering, the dreams and hopes, *of others*. “Would you like to come with me / down my dead-end street?” As I have emphasized throughout this book, authentic spirituality is not about escaping reality but involves cultivating a more direct and truthful engagement with what is concretely real—a “long loving look at the real,”³⁰ to recall chapter 3. It is the loving part, I expect, that so many of us struggle with from day to day, and here Stevie Wonder’s witness shines forth as truly remarkable.

“This Is the Sound of Political Theology”: Music That Moves the Social Body

This brings us to one last dimension of Wonder’s legacy often overlooked in reviews of *Songs in the Key of Life*: his religious faith. Could Stevie Wonder *be* Stevie Wonder without the inspiration and strength that comes from his elemental faith that anytime, anywhere, he could communicate directly “with the one who lives within,” as he sings in “Have a Talk with God”? To put it differently, how might Wonder’s musical genius have been expressed differently, if at all, had he not been raised in the womb of the black church? In repeated interviews he suggests that all of it—how new songs come to him, his commitment to social issues, memories of his childhood in Detroit—is inseparable from God’s sustaining presence in his life, a kind of palpable friendship with the divine.

Since I can best remember, I’ve had a great relationship with God. For me, God was like a father. It was always someone I could touch, and that he had me in his arms. I always felt that way. I always felt that God was about good. But, for instance, when I was in church, I was in

30. Walter Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George Traub (Chicago: Loyola, 2008), 89–98.

a Pentecostal Church as a little boy, and back then it was a little different than now. They said, “*You know, you’re singing that worldly music,*” and they were criticizing what I was doing. Listen, we live in a society where black music at one time was called race music. Where jazz was considered something nasty, you know? (laughs) I don’t know. I felt that if God didn’t want me to sing it, he wouldn’t have given me the talent to do it.³¹

As for so many black artists of his generation—as perhaps for many of us—the church was clearly both foundational and sometimes problematic for Wonder. God, however, is another story. One hears no ambivalence in his conviction that God was always near, always nurturing, always good.

Songs in the Key of Life resounds with celebratory faith. Not a buttoned-down, begrudging, obligatory, fearful *caricature* of religious faith, but an intimate, joyful, grateful, ecstatic *celebration* of faith. Joyful, it seems, because Wonder’s sense of God is so intimately relational, “someone that I could touch.” And his gratitude is such that he clearly wants to share it. “Have a Talk with God” gets at this most explicitly, but even here the invitation to consider faith never, to my ears, feels obnoxious or overbearing, perhaps because it *feels like* an invitation, a delightfully funky one at that, and far from a threat or warning.

Less explicitly “theological” but no less gesturing to the divine are “If It’s Magic,” “Joy Inside My Tears,” and “As.” Listen to “As” and ask yourself, who is addressing whom in the song? Is Wonder singing of his love for his wife? his children? a friend going through hard times? Or is “As” an imagined love song from God to the whole human race? *Just as hate knows love’s the cure / you can rest your mind assured / that I’ll be loving you always.* The song works, I think, on all of these levels simultaneously. Why? Because Wonder’s music draws no sharp line between human and divine love; in the artist’s telling, both flow from a single wellspring and are inseparable. Listen again to “As” and let your ears follow closely the bass line, the keyboard, and then the choir backing Stevie’s increasingly ecstatic vocal. *Did you know you’re loved by somebody / always.* It seems to me that “As” is as near-to-perfect an ensemble creation as any orchestral performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

Again, what seldom surfaces in commentaries on Wonder’s artistic legacy is the link between his faith and his social concerns, his race consciousness, his politics. One critic comes close by half:

The year 1976 was, of course, America’s Bicentennial year, and especially at a time of such frustration and distrust surrounding the government and the country’s institutions, U.S. residents were bombarded with stories of our history and heroics. *Songs in the Key of Life* functioned as a corrective, a counter-narrative, alongside such other radical, groundbreaking

31. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life.*

statements as Richard Pryor's *Bicentennial Nigger* and Alex Haley's *Roots*, both of which were released just a few weeks before the album.³²

To describe *Songs in the Key of Life* as a “corrective” and “counter-narrative” to jingoistic American patriotism is exactly right. Listen to “Pastime Paradise” and hear the rising chorus of “We Shall Overcome” that carries the last chorus out.³³ See the marchers moving across the Edmund Pettis Bridge together, one and diverse, straight into the swarm of dogs and police descending on horseback. What hides in that terrifying scene—as in so much of Wonder's music—are the seeds of a deep-rooted faith that can face every trial with courage, trusting that somehow even death, even *my* death by state-sanctioned violence, will not have the final word.³⁴

In one of the best treatments of the relationship among music, theology, and social resistance I've seen, Emory University theologian Don Saliers demonstrates “how singing itself can be considered an engagement with the political order that calls the *polis* to its own best being and practices—that is, singing that aims at restoring the commonweal of social and civic life.”³⁵ Surveying hymns and psalms from the biblical tradition to the Negro spirituals to the Civil Rights Movement, Saliers traces the ways in which the act of singing in the face of oppression “becomes a political act of resistance to idols, and a prophetic call for the transformation of the order of things.”

This music comes out of struggle, pain, and courage in the face of enormous economic and social hardships. We might call music that sustained hope in difficult times a “survival art.” [These were songs] of protest and affirmation rooted in a religious and moral tradition born of Christian faith. [These are songs] that “move the soul” and hence the social body. This is the sound of political theology. . . . Not the words only, but the power of the melodies and the way the whole body of the community sang the words, sounded the deep religious passion of such a theology.³⁶

32. Alan Light, review of Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*, Pitchfork, August 21, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22174-songs-in-the-key-of-life/>.

33. In fact, as studio engineer Gary Olazabal explains, alongside the gospel choir Wonder recorded a group of Hare Krishna devotees chanting prayers. Thus “you get the quality of the Hare Krishna against a very large gospel choir singing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ which makes it a very haunting song. It's Stevie's view of the whole album, which is that people should be together and take care of each other.” *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder, Songs in the Key of Life*.

34. I can think of no more memorable expression of such faith than Martin Luther King Jr.'s electrifying “mountaintop speech,” delivered the night before his assassination, in which he spoke openly of the many death threats he had faced. We will consider the speech in some detail in chapter 6.

35. Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 49.

36. Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 47, 49.

As Saliers explains so effectively here, for people of faith, music itself “becomes a theologically relevant action” insofar as it galvanizes freedom and gives us courage to raise our voices against the false idols of our culture. It was not for nothing that civil rights marchers sang “I Shall Not Be Moved” as club-brandishing policemen bore down on them. When you hear five or ten or fifty brothers and sisters singing alongside you, the words settle down deep into the bones and you feel, you *become*, their meaning. *Like a tree planted by the water / I shall not be moved*. To paraphrase the great Jewish poet and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, in marching and singing we join our voices with God’s own pathos, God’s own dreams for the world, God’s own cry for justice.³⁷

In other words, to be set free in the gift of Love—divine and human—is at once to willingly bear responsibility for all those suffering the blows of injustice *on our watch*, people cut off from “the commonweal of social and civic life.”³⁸ Listen again to “Love’s in Need of Love Today,” and hear the poignant urgency in Wonder’s plea to stop the hate “before it’s gone too far.” Like the Negro spirituals, Stevie’s music stands in the breach between *what is* and *what is yet possible*, daring us to imagine another possible future, a Reign of compassion, peace, justice.

But vision alone will not serve. The gap between what is and what might yet be remains unbridged, Wonder suggests, wherever people of faith do not join vision with sustained action for justice. “For as much as we know and learn,” says Stevie, “is as much as we become liable for what we do and do not do—all of us we have that responsibility.”³⁹ Stevie’s witness on this point accords with the public witness and public sacrifice of the churches during the Civil Rights Movement.

In short, it is not enough for the Christian to spiritualize the struggle, much less to “build a little chapel for [ourselves] inside the Church to make things more tolerable.”⁴⁰ One cannot listen to Stevie Wonder or Kanye West records in the suburbs, pray for peace “down there” in the city, and consider oneself sanctified. For a Christian, love means risking the kinds of attachments to people that may very well bear a personal cost.⁴¹

37. See chapter 1.

38. Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 43.

39. *Classic Albums: Stevie Wonder: Songs in the Key of Life*.

40. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, *Journals of Thomas Merton* 6: 1966–1967 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 147, citing theologian Karl Rahner.

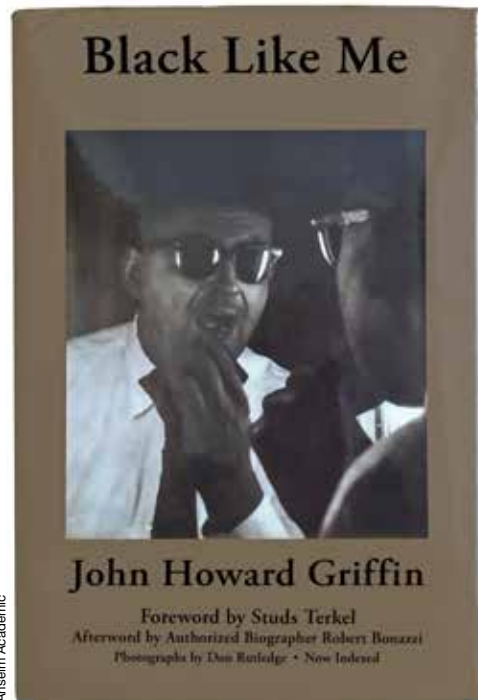
41. Innumerable Gospel passages leap to mind: Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the judgment scene of Matt. 25, and so on. The term *love* as I use it here is analogous to solidarity and the “preferential option for the poor,” persistent themes of Catholic social teaching. Solidarity for Christians is not simply an ethical commandment so much as it is a *response* that flows from the gift of life itself and God’s love for all creation. We love because we have come to know God’s love and companionship most intimately through Jesus (1 John 4:19).

A few years ago I heard black Catholic theologian Sr. Jamie Phelps frame the question quite simply this way: “What work are we doing to help reestablish a sense of the image of God in people of color?”⁴² In other words, what are we doing to reposition ourselves so as to hear and be transformed by the joys and hopes, the dreams and struggles, of those fellow human beings who, by virtue of their skin color and their zip codes, have been structured out of the common good? We must dare to “wade in the water,” as the Negro spiritual commands, for “God’s gonna’ trouble the water.”

Piercing the Race Veil: The Witness of John Howard Griffin

We turn now to the remarkable story of a white man who dramatically repositioned himself so as to be transformed by his encounter with the African American “Other.” Many older Americans will remember reading *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin’s riveting account of his experiment in “becoming black” in the Deep South during the late 1950s. Once required reading in many high school and college classrooms, Griffin’s story today remains one of the most compelling yet strangely forgotten narratives of cross-racial solidarity during the Civil Rights era.

Griffin, like me, was a Catholic writer and lifelong student of music. Born and raised in Texas, he had a deep interest in race relations and the civil rights struggle. At age thirty-nine, he had a wife and kids, a good job, a career. He had a lot to lose. Yet, incalculably more than me, his desire to “bridge



Cover of fiftieth anniversary edition of *Black Like Me*, first published in 1961

42. See *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), for Phelps’s seminal essay on Catholic identity and mission with respect to social and racial justice.

the gap” between himself and the reality of inhabiting a black body in America transcended his fears about the extreme physical and emotional costs of such a radical experiment. On the book’s opening page, in a few jarringly direct lines, Griffin explains why he decided to disguise himself as a black man and travel through the Deep South:

How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? The southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white would make life miserable for him. The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro. I decided I would do this.⁴³

Some fifty years earlier, in his classic essay *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois had described the “double consciousness” that drains the life-spirit of African Americans in their daily struggle to survive.⁴⁴ The history of the American Negro, Du Bois wrote, is the history of the unreconciled longing “to rise above the Veil,” the veil of race separation and black nothingness. Griffin’s story dramatizes a strange act of *reverse longing*: the desire as a white man to taste the hard truth of life behind the Veil, or “beyond Otherness,”⁴⁵ as he would later write of his experience.

And so in late 1959, with the support of his wife and under the care of a dermatologist in New Orleans, Griffin began taking large doses of a pigment-darkening drug and spending long hours under an ultraviolet lamp. He shaved his head and darkened his scalp with shoe polish. At last, when he could pass as an African American, he began traveling by bus and on foot through the virulently Jim Crow states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Of course, as a white man, he had an escape route, and Griffin was acutely aware of that fact. Nevertheless for six weeks he went all in—body, mind, and spirit—surrendering his own skin privilege and social capital in an attempt to realize a new level of solidarity with his African American brothers and sisters.

What finally makes *Black Like Me* a classic in the canon of civil rights literature is Griffin’s extraordinary gift for language. Griffin writes like an impressionist painter, evoking the inner truth of things by blending colors judiciously, and in his case, quite sparingly, on the canvas. One of my students wrote about a scene in the book that seems to have burned itself into her consciousness:

At one point in the book Griffin splits candy bars among a black family he is staying with for the night. One of the children was salivating

43. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Signet, 2010), 2.

44. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 8.

45. John Howard Griffin, “Beyond Otherness, 1979,” in *Black Like Me*, 191.

so much from the chocolate that her mother unconsciously wiped the saliva off the child's face with her finger and put it in her own mouth. As the family went to bed, they closely embraced each other to escape the dark cold night, nights that often brought mosquitoes. This love and sense of family holds no racial boundary. Race literally is the surface of one's true being. Griffin found God that night while sleeping on the floor. He was black, but most importantly, he was human.⁴⁶

I think my student gets it exactly right. By drawing near to the strange “other” and not pulling away, by piercing the *Veil of his own race privilege* bodily, intellectually, emotionally, Griffin became, as it were, more human. And in becoming more human—that is, more open, more vulnerable, more present to the other—he “found God that night while sleeping on the floor.”

From Intellectual to Emotional Conversion: Beyond the “Prison of Culture”

In fact the seeds for Griffin's dramatic journey across the color line were cultivated many years before the *Black Like Me* experiment. His mother, a concert pianist, taught him a deep love of music as a child. Awarded a musical scholarship in France, Griffin spent his high school years studying French language and literature at the University of Poitiers. He was only nineteen, just beginning medical studies, when the Nazis invaded Paris. He joined the French resistance as a medic, using a pirated ambulance to smuggle Austrian Jews to the coast and ultimately to safety in England.

After being placed on a Nazi watch-list, Griffin returned to the United States and enlisted in the Army Air Corps. From 1943–1944, he was stationed on Nuni, a tiny island in the South Pacific. The only white person on the island, his assignment was to learn the language and study the native culture. He was good at it, though he later admitted to being ashamed of his initial prejudices regarding the “primitive” natives. Griffin had always assumed “that mine was a superior culture.”⁴⁷

But here his story takes an especially dramatic turn, a turn which draws him nearer to *Black Like Me* and, as it happens, the life-world of Stevie Wonder. In 1945, assigned to guard a munitions store on another Pacific island, Griffin was wounded during a Japanese air raid, an injury that eventually left him blind. When

46. Rachel Patterson; used with permission. The intimacy of this scene and of so many others in *Black Like Me* reflects Griffin's remarkable literary artistry, a kind of poetic or musical sensibility that plays between the lines of his spare prose. In the last decade of his life he would become a celebrated photographer, his favored subject being human faces.

47. Bruce Watson, “*Black Like Me*, 50 Years Later,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2011, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/black-like-me-50-years-later-74543463/?all>.

the war ended, he returned to Texas, and for ten years he would navigate the world as a blind man, forced to relearn how to do everything, as it were, in the dark. He gave piano lessons, eventually falling in love with one of his students. (“It was the way she played Chopin,” he wrote.⁴⁸) They would marry and have four children. He became a farmer, raising champion livestock. He wrote books about his years in France and essays about his blindness. Finding consolation in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Griffin became a Catholic, giving lectures at local colleges on musicology and Gregorian chant.

One day in 1955, while working in his backyard, he suddenly saw a vision of “swirling red” amid a kaleidoscope of other colors. Inexplicably, over the next few months, his sight completely returned. For the first time he could begin to make out the faces of his wife and children. And again, he felt ashamed of prejudices that had once crippled his vision as a sighted man. Paradoxically, his years without sight had taught him to “see the heart and intelligence of a man,” and to realize that “nothing in these things indicates in the slightest whether a man is white or black.”⁴⁹ It was this realization of his own ignorance and complicity in white supremacy that set Griffin on the path to *Black Like Me*. In 1979, a year before his death, Griffin made an accounting of the personal transformation he had described with such harrowing detail in *Black Like Me*:

Having recognized the depths of my own prejudices when I first saw my black face in the mirror, I was grateful to discover that within a week as a black man the old wounds were healed and all the emotional prejudice was gone. It had disappeared for the simple reason that I was staying in the homes of black families and I was experiencing at the emotional level, for the first time in thirty-nine years, what I had known intellectually for a long time. I was seeing that in families everything is the same for all people. . . . I was experiencing all this as a *human* parent and it was exactly as I experienced my own children.⁵⁰

Notice the distinction Griffin draws here between knowing something intellectually and experiencing it at the emotional level. The insight calls to mind Stevie Wonder’s observation that “we really *feel* before we see,” implying that our capacity for empathy is at least as foundational as cognition and intellect with respect to what makes human beings *human*. Griffin continues,

I believe that before we can truly dialogue with one another we must first perceive intellectually, and then at the profoundest emotional level, that there is no *Other*—that the *Other* is simply *Oneself* in all the significant essentials. This alone is the key that can unlock the prison of

48. *Uncommon Vision*.

49. *Uncommon Vision*.

50. Griffin, “Beyond Otherness,” 192.

culture. It will neutralize the poisons of the stereotype that allow men to go on benevolently justifying their abuses against humanity.⁵¹

Both musicians and both students of physical blindness, Stevie Wonder and John Howard Griffin witness to a different kind of perception than that which lay on the empirical surface of things. Both call us beyond hatreds and fears nurtured and codified within the “prison of culture.”⁵²

Becoming the Stranger: Breaking Free of Cultural Comfort Zones

Fifty years ago the face of white supremacy was epitomized in openly racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, in men like Bull Connor, the bigoted public safety commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, and in horrific tragedies like the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Then it seemed quite clear what racism meant: it meant to will the nonexistence of black people, to seek their *erasure*. But institutionalized racism, then and now, has another subtler and more hidden face, though its effects are no less oppressive or potentially violent. In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, white supremacy’s implicit strategy has not been the erasure of the feared and marginal other so much as their *eclipse* from meaningful participation in society. To eclipse is to ignore, to refuse to deal with a person as a person, a somebody—a Child of God, as we say—who matters. To “eclipse” is to blot out the light. As Howard Thurman often noted, to destroy a people I don’t have to kill them, I only have to convince them that they are not worth anything, or, to borrow Jesus’ vivid imagery, to hold a bushel basket relentlessly over their light (Matt. 5:15). It is this form of violence, violence by systematic neglect and creeping despair, which Stevie Wonder laments in “Living for the City,” “Big Brother,” and “Village Ghetto Land.” For many children of color the ghetto is *the place where I submit, where I give in, where I quit*.⁵³

Two authors have especially opened my eyes to the scope of systemic racial injustice in the United States today. The first is Jewish educator and activist

51. Griffin, “Beyond Otherness,” 192.

52. In a 2016 interview about his film *Silence*, filmmaker Martin Scorsese expresses concern that we might soon “be in a world where younger people won’t even *consider* that which is not material, that which one can’t see, taste, or feel. And ultimately, when everything is stripped away, . . . that’s really what’s left. It is the spiritual.” Martin Scorsese, “Exclusive: Martin Scorsese Discusses His Faith, His Struggles, and *Silence*,” interview with James Martin, *America* (Dec. 8, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbYiGdinejU>.

53. See Thomas Merton, “The Street Is for Celebration,” in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 46–53, an essay inspired by Merton’s experiences as a young man in Harlem. The pioneering “gangsta rap” band N.W.A. wrote from their experiences of living in fear of gangs and police, and artists from Iced T, Tupac Shakur, and many others have followed. See additional resources at the end of the chapter.

Jonathan Kozol, whose books have long cast an ominous spotlight onto the plight of children of color and the state of public education in our cities. The titles of Kozol’s books—*Death at An Early Age*; *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*; *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*—tell the story of whole populations of children, disproportionately black and Latino, whose presence in America is so provisional they might as well be absent. The second is legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose critically acclaimed study, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, details the devastating effects of mass incarceration and systematic disenfranchisement on communities of color in the United States. Like Kozol, Alexander’s painstaking scholarship unmasks patterns of injustice directed against whole populations that most of us would rather not see, and many simply choose to deny.⁵⁴ Their work confronts us once again with the prophetic challenge: You have eyes to see, but do you see? You have ears to hear, but do you hear the cry of the marginalized?

In some ways *Black Like Me* is inevitably bound to and limited by its historical moment. It is nearly impossible to imagine today, for example, any well-intentioned white person adopting Griffin’s radical method of crossing the color line—physically disguising himself as a black man—and being able to defend such an act in the court of public opinion. Griffin himself, as noted above, acknowledged the morally problematic aspects of his experiment, yet he felt that the urgency of the “race problem” as it confronted him in the late 1950s demanded of him a radical option for solidarity. As we might describe his experiment today, the privilege of his whiteness in the milieu of white supremacy, and the painful recognition of his own social blindness, compelled him to act. But even if we grant *Black Like Me* the status of a classic in the canon of civil rights literature, a book that is still sadly resonant in an age of xenophobia and Black Lives Matter, the skeptic today might counter that Griffin’s experiment in crossing the color line failed before it even started.

In a word, no white man, being white, can know or experience at the deepest emotional level what it *is* to “be black” in America. Race is more than “the surface” of one’s true being. If, for historical and cultural factors beyond our control, whites and blacks are *essentially* closed off from one another, then no appeal to human kinship or deepest principles of religious faith—for example, that every human being is a Child of God—can penetrate the Veil, much less remove it, not even for a moment. To the cynic, sociologist, or even the theological realist, for whom there is no “reality” that can exist outside the social dynamics of power and race privilege, *because* Griffin is white, his perception of “black experience” could only be apparent. It was not real. And therefore, his account is not

54. Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Harper, 1996); also, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Random House, 2005); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

trustworthy. Intellectually this is a compelling argument, and I might be inclined to agree if it weren't for elements of Griffin's story that extend beyond rational argument and resonate with my own experiences of cross-racial and cross-cultural encounter over the course of a lifetime.

I grew up in a white suburban neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky, and had little contact with any peoples of color until my mid-twenties. Less than three miles from my childhood parish there was and still is a thriving predominantly African American Catholic church. For almost three decades of my life, I'm sad to say, I had no clue there was such a thing as black Catholics. There are some four million Catholics of African descent in the United States, more than the membership of many Protestant denominations. I did not know them. Nor was I ever taught the extraordinary history of black Catholic sisters, priests, and lay parishioners who kept the faith so often in the face of breathtaking racism and segregation in their own church. Yet when my family joined a black Catholic community in Denver, the relationships we formed there transformed our whole way of experiencing the church, of being Christian—I daresay, of being human. We were part of that community for eight years. Our first child was born there, and the church became for us, and certainly for our son, a surrogate family. Two decades later he still remembers it like a lost family.

When one feels oneself a total stranger—even if believing and hoping otherwise—it is a remarkable thing to be welcomed like a brother. It is no small grace to approach a community of strangers and, as W. E. B. Du Bois writes, “They come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.”⁵⁵ Such graced encounters, such human encounters, occur all the time, to be sure. But are they not still rare, altogether too rare, between the races? Why should it seem so remarkable when whites and blacks and all manner of folks of different racial and ethnic backgrounds share table fellowship and prayer?⁵⁶ In the immediacy of such experiences of “crossing the color line,” we may have no way of explaining how, or why, or what convergence of forces pushed us beyond our familiar circles of kinship, even while we may feel a certain “rightness” and sense of trust as we move forward. Perhaps like Griffin we are, so to speak, feeling our way in the dark.

The African American mystic and theologian Howard Thurman recalls that it was not uncommon in the black church of his childhood in Florida to see the occasional white visitor seated in the pews on Sunday morning. Yet the reverse was unthinkable. Few black Christians would have dared to step foot in white Christian houses of worship for the better part of American religious history.⁵⁷ I shudder to think how the same pattern of segregation and white

55. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 76.

56. King's oft-cited observation that “eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America” is hardly less accurate or damning today than it was sixty years ago. See Mary Jo Bane, “A House Divided,” *Commonweal* (Nov. 4, 2013): 17–19.

57. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1976), 32.

supremacy has manifested in my own Roman Catholic Church, from the first contact of European missionaries with Native Americans, to Catholic involvement in the slave trade, to segregated worship and reticence even today among the Catholic bishops to speak more prophetically against racism.⁵⁸ If we cannot build Beloved Community in our churches, then where in God’s name shall we ever find it? In retrospect, what strikes me now is the realization of how easy it would have been, and understandable, if folks at our Denver parish or any other number of predominantly black Catholic churches had rejected me and my family for what we were: outsiders.

I make no claims to universal truth or special insight, least of all on behalf of people and communities whose intentions or thought processes remain more or less hidden from me. (Indeed the deepest realms of my own life story remain a mystery to me!) At the same time, perhaps like Griffin, I believe what I have learned from these experiences and enduring relationships in communities of color, notwithstanding my own blind spots and cultural limitations, is trustworthy. As Griffin’s account teaches me, we break through the race veil not by denying our own racial ignorance and cultural prejudices, but by confronting them straight on. We need communities of friendship and inclusiveness, prayerfulness and mercy, to help us do so.

Rediscovering Child Mind: Leaning into the Mystery of Encounter

Few have written more poignantly than W. E. B. Du Bois about the torment and irony of race relations. In the world of ideas and books, as Du Bois observes, he was free to fraternize with every manner of “smiling men and welcoming women”—“I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not”⁵⁹—while the “real world” chained him stupidly behind the Veil. It was “in the early days of rollicking boyhood” in New England, he recalls, when for the first time “the shadow swept across me,” the revelation of the inferior status he was accorded by his white schoolmates, and suddenly he felt “shut out from their world by a vast veil.” How many children of color today feel the sting of that bitter cry, “Why did God

58. The classic study is Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); see also *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), and Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010). In November 2018, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops published “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,” a pastoral letter against racism. While some individual bishops have spoken forcefully through the years, it is the USCCB’s first formal statement on racism since 1979. See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/statements-letters-against-racism.cfm>.

59. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 109.

make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”⁶⁰ And yet I cannot help but wonder: are there not a great many white Americans, too, who long to rise above the Veil? Are there not people of all races, especially among the young, who yearn for a taste of the Beloved Community, and who would rather not wait for the afterlife to experience it?

While the seeds of cross-cultural empathy may have first stirred in me as a boy listening to *Songs in the Key of Life*, those seeds have been watered again and again over the course of a lifetime, and certainly not only in churches. Indeed, more than any other context in recent years, I have seen it flower in the university classroom, among students of every racial, ethnic, and religious background. It begins, as I would describe it, with the cultivation of Beginner’s Mind: a disposition of openness and presence to everything that bears me outside my comfort zone, and the conviction that no matter what ideas, beliefs, or cultural differences may separate us, *I have something essential to learn from you* that I could not learn otherwise. I refuse to play the cynic. My heart and mind are open to you, your gifts and essential goodness, the pain and beauty that shines from within your culture. To cultivate Child Mind—which, it is worth repeating, has nothing to do with childish ignorance or willful naïveté—is to practice leaning in, lingering with, and listening to the other, especially when it is hardest to do so. The possibility of communion across the color line—not uniformity, but a unity that celebrates difference—is real, it is beautiful, and, above all, it is trustworthy.⁶¹

This is not to suggest that the Veil is illusory, that the sooner we all “get over it” and stop fixating on race in America, the better. To the contrary, we cannot rise above the Veil unless, like Griffin, we confront it head-on and learn to break through it, imperfectly, in fits and starts, by trial and error. By “we” I mean each of us individually and all of us collectively, in our workplaces and schools, neighborhoods and cities, courthouses and churches. To put our hands out and touch the Veil, to begin to feel our way through the darkness, is already to begin breaking through it.⁶²

60. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 7–8. I am acutely aware that my son Henry, adopted as an infant from Haiti, will eventually have to wrestle with difficult questions of identity and belonging as he grows into his freedom as a young black man in America, and that neither the circle of his family’s love nor the reach of his parents’ white privilege can protect him forever. My prayer is that by virtue of our love he will never feel himself “a stranger in [his] own house.”

61. By “communion” I gesture to something well beyond mere tolerance, though the latter is not a bad place to start. For a sustained discussion of racial justice and the transforming power of cross-racial and cross-cultural encounter, see Christopher Pramuk, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

62. Facilitating conversations about race in any context is not easy, and the classroom is no different, not least for white teachers. For me, the challenges have been considerably offset by the sheer richness of the materials at hand: in my case, African American literature, poetry, music, theology, and the depth of student responses to such. A passion for the subject and the recognition of one’s own limitations goes some way in reassuring students of color who may presume that “your whiteness is preventing you from seeing our humanity,” as one teacher puts it. See Melinda D. Anderson, “How Teachers Learn to Discuss Racism,” and linked resources, in *The Atlantic*, January 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/01/how-teachers-learn-to-discuss-racism/512474/>.

There is a certain freedom in the realization that nobody enters the conversation about race a fully developed, perfectly “sighted,” whole person. Each person enters the conversation (or refuses it) from a unique social location and developmental stage in the drama that is human life. And each of us bears crippling wounds and serious “blind spots.” We need to be challenged with difficult truths but we also need to give each other room to grow into new ways of imagining our place in the world beyond our present horizons and habitual or defensive comfort zones.

Consider Jesus’ iconic encounter with the rich young man (Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30). It wasn’t the young man’s riches as such that were his obstacle to “salvation” or communion with God; rather it was his seeming inability to even recognize, much less cross, the great divide that separated him from his neighbor. By inviting the young man to give up his wealth and walk with the poor, Jesus was daring him to break free from his imprisoned imagination—a conception of God and of holiness made small by the prison of privilege—and to risk his freedom for love and solidarity in a way that promised more authentic fulfillment and joy than his wealth or social status ever could. To begin to confront our social blindness is already the beginning of the path toward healing it. Yet the young man “went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

By some accounts the challenges facing children of color today in the United States are, on the whole, empirically worse than they were fifty years ago. This was not hard for me to believe during my ten years living in the deeply segregated city of Cincinnati, where the poverty rate among black children is second only to that of Detroit.⁶³ It is not hard to believe in Denver, my present home, where racial and economic segregation is no less damaging but is far more easily hidden behind a veneer of economic prosperity.⁶⁴ Short of “becoming black” in the radical manner of Griffin, how can I—how can we all—become more human in the midst of these sobering realities? The realization with Griffin that at the deepest emotional level “there is no Other—that the Other is simply Oneself in all the significant essentials,” has been for me a struggle and journey of a lifetime. But it comes to me palpably as I watch Henry, my Haitian-born son, mixing it up with other kids on the playground. It comes as I recognize my own delight reflected in the faces of other parents around me, mothers and fathers of every racial and socioeconomic background.

In the way that Griffin observes the intimacy of a mother wiping chocolate from her hungry child’s lips; in the way he shudders at the depths of his own prejudice; in the way he gathers all of his experiences into himself as he surrenders to

63. See the Greater Cincinnati Urban League, *The State of Black Cincinnati 2015: Two Cities*, http://homecincy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-State-of-Black-Cincinnati-2015_Two-Cities.pdf.

64. Monte Whaley, “Denver Area Schools Continue to Battle Segregation and Related Issues,” *The Denver Post*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.denverpost.com/2017/06/19/segregation-denver-colorado-schools/>.

sleep on an impoverished but generous family's floor—embracing the strangeness, the danger, the beauty, the vulnerability—there are critical moments of decision in all our lives, perhaps in each day, when we are invited by the mystery and beauty of life itself not to play the cynic. And if we are intentional about the choices we make, over time we are likely to find ourselves surrounded more and more by other benevolent spirits who recognize our desire for fellowship, inclusion, and justice for what it is—sacred—and who likewise refuse to play the cynic. Much in the way of Stevie Wonder, Griffin's witness encourages me precisely as a father *and* as an intellectual to listen to my own childlike heart, and to place my trust in its most intimate experiences of discovery in places and among peoples outside my comfort zone. As artists, both Wonder and Griffin help me to embrace the realization that “in my most childlike hour, my heart has not deceived me. I will not break faith with my childlike heart.”⁶⁵

Some years ago I was part of a team of faculty and student leaders who invited John Howard Griffin's eldest daughter, Suzy Griffin Campbell, to speak at Xavier University in Cincinnati, where I was teaching. When one of our students asked Campbell why she thought her father did what he did, she replied, after a thoughtful pause, “I think he did it for the children.” It struck me that she didn't specify *whose* children. He did it for the children. He did it for *all* children.

Foretastes of Heaven: Reimagining the Present from the Future

The final Veil, of course, is that which shimmers between life and death. In his classic work *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel highlights the inseparable connection between our worship practices in this world and our state of preparedness for the next:

[The] Sabbath contains more than a morsel of eternity. . . . Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come. Sad is the lot

65. The phrase is borrowed from James Finley, “Thomas Merton: Mystic Teacher for Our Age,” *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015): 183. It may seem counterintuitive, if not politically naïve or laughable, to appeal to a notion such as Child Mind in a discussion of race and racial injustice in America. Yet, as I write these lines, in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, I don't think so. The values most of us were taught as schoolchildren—being kind, especially toward the most vulnerable; respect for the power of words to lift up or tear down (i.e., “sticks and stones”); telling the truth; reverence for democratic principles—have been wantonly trampled, expediently overlooked, or cynically dismissed by the supposed adults in the room. Under what strange logic should such core values not apply to our public and political discourse? It might do us all well to revisit the basic lessons we thought we had “learned in kindergarten.”

of him who arrives inexperienced and when led to heaven has no power to perceive the beauty of the Sabbath.⁶⁶

Whether or not one shares Heschel's faith in “the world to come,” his insistence on the continuity between life before death and life after death suggests a provocative thought experiment.

If we imagine heaven to be something like a great feast, as it often is imagined in the Bible, how prepared shall we be when we are seated at the heavenly banquet table? (One can imagine that the seating arrangement will be no accident!) Will I recognize those sitting next to me? Will I know their names, stories, dreams? *Will I need to ask their forgiveness before the feast is served?* Sad will be our lot, suggests Heschel, if we arrive in heaven with no prior experience of the Beloved Community, the multiracial community, and indeed, the multifaith community.

Let me bring the discussion, finally, back to music. It is worth recalling that when Heschel marched from Selma alongside Martin Luther King Jr. they sang “We Shall Overcome” and other spirituals that were the soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement. “I felt my feet were praying,” Heschel would later say. Why? Perhaps because, as Du Bois observed, the spirituals awaken an irrepressible sense of possibility in those who sing them. To listen to the “sorrow songs” is to behold “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas.”

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?⁶⁷

One could make the same observation, almost word for word, and pose the same questions of Stevie Wonder's music. Is the hope that resounds throughout *Songs in the Key of Life* justified? Does Wonder's faith in humanity “sing true”? Might his music give us even a small foretaste of heaven? Of course, nobody can answer such questions for another person. They can only be answered by way of experience, and each of us may answer differently over the course of a lifetime.

When Larry King asked Stevie Wonder whether he ever considered retiring from music, Wonder didn't hesitate: “For as long as there's life; for as long as

66. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 74.

67. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 175.

we have things happening in the world; for as long as people haven't been able to work it out; for as long as people are not trying to work it out; for as long as there's crime and destruction and hate; for as long as there is a spirit that does not have love in it, I will always have something to say."⁶⁸ James Baldwin professed a similar credo of artistic resistance some fifty years ago: "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real."⁶⁹ The artist loves the world by unflinchingly revealing the world to itself, including its unrealized possibilities.

There are no guarantees that embracing such a vision of life, a "faith in the ultimate justice of things," will not make me look the fool. To envision a day when we will be judged not by the color of our skins but by the content of our character is to risk, at least on this side of death, bitter heartbreak and disappointment. On the cold surface of things, we are still a long way from such a reality. Yet every now and then, dreams and visions of things that once seemed impossible have a way of breaking into reality. Life is too short to play in small circles. We feel our way through the darkness by unclenching our fists and reaching out to hold the hands of others. We sing our way from fear and hesitation to courage and fresh hope. We make the path forward by walking it.

Let the people say Amen.

Addendum and Additional Resources

Some thirty years ago, in 1988, the Los Angeles-based hip hop group N.W.A. released their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*. Among the most influential and controversial artists of the "gansta rap" genre, their music was often banned from mainstream radio for its perceived misogynistic lyrics, glorification of violence, and expressions of deep hatred of police. Iced T, Beyoncé, and innumerable other black artists have since registered musical protest and resistance to the ongoing oppression of African Americans in systemic poverty, mass incarceration, and police brutality, from past to present.

The birth of "black theology" (or black liberation theology) may be dated at least to the 1960s with Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King Jr.—if not much earlier in Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Howard Thurman, and others. Black theology found its voice explicitly and most influentially in the work of James H. Cone, who published his landmark work, *Black*

68. Wonder, interview with Larry King.

69. James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 318.

Theology and Black Power, in 1969, the year after King’s assassination. Emerging more or less at the same time as second-wave feminist theologies (Daly, Ruether, Tribble), Latin American liberation theologies (Gutierrez, Segundo, Gebara), and European political theologies (Metz, Moltmann, Soelle), it would be hard to name a more significant theological movement in the United States than the black theology of Cone and of many others who followed, including womanist theologians who foreground the experiences of African American women. Today it is impossible to overlook the impact of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, which itself has profoundly spiritual, if less explicitly theological, foundations.

Thus Stevie Wonder and John Howard Griffin stand within a vast cloud of witnesses whose art, spirituality, and theology cultivate resistance and bend toward a vision of racial justice.

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