

*The*  
Goodness



*of the*  
Ordinary Life

© 2013 Sam Koenen. All rights reserved.

# Dedication

*To all who are remarkably ordinary,*

*weary and worn-out,*

*profoundly plain.*

*To all who are fresh out of superlatives and remarkables.*

*To those who suspected that the ordinary life was the best one all along.*

*(You were right.)*

# Foreword

Shortly after Christmas last year, I sat in a packed theater watching the new *Hobbit* movie. My favorite scene is a brief one between Galadriel and Gandalf. This scene does not appear in any of Tolkien's writings, to my knowledge. Yet it captures the heart of Tolkien's entire vision.

Galadriel asks Gandalf why he has brought the unlikely Bilbo Baggins on such a dangerous quest. Gandalf replies,

---

*"Saruman believes that it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I have found **it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness at bay.** Simple acts of kindness and love."*

---

Gandalf is right (as usual). Radical shows of lavish generosity have their place, but they rarely produce any lasting change. Goodness shows its true power in simple, ordinary faithfulness: the daughter caring for her ailing mother, the single parent raising two kids, the diligent employee at a thankless job.

But goodness has power even in the most mundane displays. Handshakes and telephone calls, a kind word, a smile. The smallest act—the halfling show of kindness—fuels hope and keeps the darkness at bay.

**This ebook is dedicated to the small, everyday deeds of ordinary folk.**

When we embrace the life of ordinary folk, we suddenly find that contentment is in our grasp. Joy and fulfillment are not years in the future, but are gifts we can enjoy now.

This ebook is an attempt to put all of this into words. The articles range from the philosophical to the poetic. But all of them were inspired by a bone-deep belief in the goodness of the ordinary life.

I hope this vision is contagious. Enjoy.

Sam Koenen  
[sam@samkoenen.com](mailto:sam@samkoenen.com)



CHAPTER 1

# Milking the Cow of the World

*by Gregg Valeriano*

*“We invent nothing, merely bearing witness  
To what each morning brings again to light”*



## Humbled by the Lowly Stone

*“Cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.”*

I know little about the philosopher George Berkeley but it is said that he denied the existence of matter. How did Berkeley come to such an absurd conclusion?

The story goes that the empiricist philosopher John Locke affirmed the existence of matter yet could not come up with a description of it. Somewhat exasperated, Locke proclaimed “it is something that I know not what.” Berkeley thought Locke, in a failure of nerve, shrank back from the logic of his empiricism. If matter cannot be described, then the logical conclusion would be that it does not exist! Of course, Berkeley's conclusion runs counter to common sense.

This short poem by Richard Wilbur is based upon the story of another refutation of Berkeley, this time by Samuel Johnson:

---

*“Epistemology”*

*by Richard Wilbur*

*I.*

*Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones:*

*But cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.*

*II.*

*We milk the cow of the world, and as we do*

*We whisper in her ear, 'You are not true.'*

---

Johnson's secretary, James Boswell, records the episode of Johnson's famous rebuttal of Berkeley in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*:

---

*“After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it--‘I refute it thus.’”*

---

Wilbur's poem is entitled "Epistemology." Epistemology is a discipline in philosophy concerned with questions of knowledge and knowing. In its more skeptical moments it is concerned with whether can we know anything at all: How do we know that our perceptions of the world are, indeed, true and not just illusions? Perhaps we are being deceived by an evil demon to see what we see? What if we are just brains in a vat of nutrient, stimulated by an electrical current to form perceptions which have no connection to the real world? Can you prove otherwise? These questions have haunted philosophers at least since the time of Descartes, if not before, and still occupy the time and interest of many a philosopher today.

Of course, philosophers who ask these questions are often dismissed as ivory tower quacks who let their philosophical musings eclipse common sense. After all, they cannot be serious!

“Try putting your finger in a wall socket, that will shock you out of your ivory tower musings,” we say incredulously! “The next time you stub your toe on a rock, tell me that matter does not exist,” we say matter-of-factly! And with these common sense rebuttals, the epistemological musings of philosophers are refuted thus.

Yet Wilbur cautions that a common sense response to the world maybe be no more adequate than the philosophers who deny its existence: “Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones: but cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.” Wilbur warns that our attempts to understand the world come up short. We are humbled by the lowly stone.

But why does he think this? What is his point? What is he trying to get us to think about concerning our epistemological situation in this world? It is these questions I will explore over the next few articles.

## The Confusing Life of a Skeptic

*“We whisper in her ear, ‘You are not true.’”*

In our first discussion of Richard Wilbur's poem "Epistemology," we considered how Wilbur rejects Samuel Johnson's common sense approach to the material world. As we shall see in this post, by critiquing common sense Wilbur is not advocating skepticism. Rather, I take Wilbur to be suggesting that both common sense and skepticism fail to recognize something vital about this world. Before we get to that we need to look at skepticism.

If our common sense understanding of the world comes up short, if we are humbled by the lowly stone, to what degree do we come up short? If we trip over the lowly stone, how far do we fall in our humiliation? Can we know anything about the world? Is Wilbur suggesting that we are in a state of inveterate skepticism?

Not at all. In fact, Wilbur critiques any kind of skepticism, any kind of denial about a material world outside our minds. There are stones upon which we stub our toes, there is an external reality which we bump up against. Wilbur's rejection of skepticism can be seen in the second couplet of "Epistemology":

---

*II.*

*We milk the cow of the world, and as we do  
We whisper in her ear, "You are not true."*

---

Skepticism has a long, infamous place in western philosophy, going back to Socratic and pre-socratic times. But the major-

ity of western philosophers have pointed out an inherent problem with skepticism. As mystifying as the world is and as difficult as it may be to know this world, skepticism is a seriously deficient philosophical position, because it is logically incoherent.

When a skeptic states that nothing can be known, this is both a self-defeating proposition (they know this, after all), as well as a self-defeating epistemological position. For if the skeptic gives reasons for the truth of his skepticism, he is claiming all kinds of reasons and propositions that he knows to be true, which lead him to believe that nothing can be known to be true.

While it is true that skepticism is logically incoherent, I think Wilbur is saying something more: skepticism is a kind of performative contradiction. There is a story, probably apocryphal, about the ancient skeptic Pyrrho. It is reported that he so distrusted his senses that he would have fallen off cliffs or been run over by carts or savaged by dogs had not his friends closely followed him around.

But of course, none of us are this incredulous about our senses. Even if they fail us from time to time, we live our lives trusting that our senses reliably tell us how the world truly is.

In the second couplet Wilbur seems to be making this exact point from a different angle. He says that the skeptic adjudicates his way in the world successfully: he survives, lives, thrives, enjoys and even marvels at the world. He milks it for all it's worth, yet still persists in denying its reality. The skeptic

successfully milks the cow of the world, then whispers in her bovine ear, "You really don't exist, you know."

The ultimate problem with skepticism, is that it can't be lived. The skeptic claims that skepticism is true but lives as if it is false.

Yet if we were to stop here in our interpretation of Wilbur's poem, I think we would be left with a slightly facile understanding of Wilbur's gist. Wilbur is critiquing both Johnson and Berkeley for ingratitude. But I want to get at what drives this ingratitude.

# The Disenchantment of the World

*“Creation is a sacrament in which God entices us.”*

I ended the last article agreeing that skepticism (as well as common sense) is a kind of ingratitude. To understand the ingratitude of skepticism we need to turn to Descartes.

It has been said that one of the most disastrous events in Western history was when Descartes sequestered himself in his tiny apartment in Germany, huddled around his stove, seeking to anchor belief on a more certain ground. I think this is a bit of an overstatement. But like all overstatements, it is an overstatement of a certain truth. When we understand this truth more clearly, we will see how skepticism, as well as modern philosophy, is ingratitude.

Descartes is often called the father of modern philosophy and a central concern of modern philosophy was epistemology. It is well known that Descartes' epistemological starting point was a radical and methodological doubt. Why did he begin with doubt? In order to find a truth that could be known with certainty.

Moreover, because this doubt included incredulousness about his senses, Descartes was driven inward in search of foundational truth. In the words of David Bentley Hart, Descartes' method gave priority to a moment of radical self-doubt about everything outside the self. As Descartes augured deeper into the recesses of his rationality, he found one truth that could not be doubted: I think therefore I am.

Engaging in such radical doubt, Descartes took seriously the problem of skepticism: he held that only if skepticism can be overcome can we be confident of our beliefs. But what would

it take to overcome and dismantle skepticism? Or what does the skeptic demand for accepting a belief as true? Nothing less than rational certainty, a certainty which brooks no possibility for error, mistake, or doubt, a pure indubitability.

And here we see something interesting about Cartesian rationalism and skepticism: they both demand rational certainty for knowledge claims. This means that neither Descartes nor the skeptic can accept mystery.

For both Descartes and the skeptic, the “rational self” is the locus and arbiter of truth. Whatever cannot be proven by this rational self to be true cannot be believed. Neither the skeptic nor Descartes can stand before a mystery (or even recognize a mystery) with humility and gratefulness. But there is more.

Descartes set in motion an understanding of the world that would challenge and overcome how previous generations saw the world. Before Descartes, the material world was seen as a conduit of the divine. The world betrayed a divine order that bears the fingerprints of God. It was a world that was enchanted, magical, mysterious, sacramental, a medium of a transcendent beauty and love. But Descartes challenged this worldview and a new world began to emerge. According to Charles Taylor, for Descartes to know the world we have to objectify it and that means to see it mechanistically and functionally. With Descartes, Taylor claims, we see the beginnings of the disenchantment of the world. In other words, starting with Descartes, men no longer see the world as enchanted with the divine.

How does this apply to ingratitude? Skepticism cannot accept the limitations of human reason and accept that the material world is a great mystery in its very existence and in our ability to know it. Therefore, the skeptic denies any material world to be sacramental. The Cartesian modernist, unlike the skeptic, believes that the world is out there, but can only see it through the suffocating confines of autonomous human reason. Therefore, he sees only a mechanistic, disenchanted material world, mute and dumb. Both skeptic and Cartesian reject the gift of creation as a great mystery that reveals God's love and beauty.

But from a Christian perspective, this is exactly what creation is: a sacrament in which God entices us by speaking forth his infinite beauty and love to us.

It seems that we have drifted far from Wilbur. But in the next article we will see that Wilbur's poetry is deeply sacramental, full of wonder and gratitude. As such, it stands as a sharp rebuke to any disenchantment of the world.

## The Poetry of Gratitude

*“What makes the world a mystery full of depth and meaning is Divine Love.”*

*“Beauty is cosmic order perceived as gift.” —David Schindler*

We have seen in the last three posts on Richard Wilbur's poem "Epistemology," his critique of how certain philosophers would have us view the world, if indeed we can view the world, as disenchanted and void of mystery, inherent beauty, and meaning. Wilbur, by contrast, constantly points us to a world of deep enchantment.

Richard Wilbur is considered “one of the world's mostly highly regarded poets and is often considered America's finest poet writing in traditional meters and forms” (Paris Review). But what are the subjects that are paced by Wilbur's traditional meters and shaped by his poetic forms?

Paul Mariani states that Wilbur's poetry is “filled with things of this world, things closely, precisely, felicitously observed.” A sample of titles taken from Wilbur's Collected Poems backs Mariani's statement: "Green," "The Lilacs," "A Black Birch in Winter," "Seed Leaves," "Mayflies," "A Barred Owl," "The Writer," "PlayBoy," and "The Mind Reader," just to name a few.

Wilbur's poetry is born of fierce empirical acuteness. Unlike Descartes whose approach to the world is based on doubt and a distrust of the senses, Wilbur's poetry is driven by the fundamental belief that there is a world we can know, as evidence by his poem "Lying":



---

*In a strict sense, of course,  
We invent nothing, merely bearing witness  
To what each morning brings again to light:  
Gold crosses, cornices, astonishment  
Of panes, the turbine-vent which natural law  
Spins on the grill-end of the diner's roof,  
Then grass and grackles or, at the end of town  
In sheep-swept pasture land, the horse's neck  
Clothed with its usual thunder, and the stones  
beginning now to tug their shadows in  
And track the air with glitter. All these things  
Are there before us; there before we look  
Or fail to look . . . .*

---

Wilbur's powers of observation penetrate even through surface observations to see a depth to the things of this world. For Wilbur, the things of this world, even the most mundane, are enchanted with mystery and the divine. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Wilbur states:

---

*"I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy, that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good. I am perfectly aware that I say this in the teeth of all sorts of contrary evidence, and that I must be basing it partly on temperament and partly on faith, but that is my*

*attitude. My feeling is that when you discover order and goodness in the world, it is not something you are imposing—it is something that is likely really to be there, whatever crumminess and evil and disorder there may also be. I don't take disorder or meaningless to be the basic character of things. I don't know where I get my information, but that is how I feel."*

---

While grounding his perspective on the world in "feeling," and being "unsure" where he gets his information from might spike the ire of philosophers, they should be reticent. After all, it is Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, who approached the world with shut eyes, stopped ears and withdrawn senses. Withdrawing into his rational self, eventually re-opening his eyes, seeing what only his rationality will allow, a world "disenchanted, a mere mechanism, devoid of any spiritual essence." In short, a world barren of pulchritude.

Wilbur's points us to a very different kind of world, a world that can be rationally known but one that does not easily reside within the confines of our rationality. Witness Wilbur's poem "On Having Mis-Identified a Wild Flower":

---

*A thrush, because I'd been wrong,  
Burst rightly into song  
In a world not vague, not lonely,  
Not governed by me only.*

---

There is more to the world, things that are true of this world, that we can know but go beyond our rational powers.

To put it somewhat differently, all that is is more than it is. Contra Descartes, Wilbur's understanding of the world is sacramental. The material is spiritual and yet still material. Implied in his poems, he states, is G.M. Hopkins poetic line, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

What gives existence, meaning and depth to the world and to the things of this world is the divine. In other words, Wilbur would agree with the Scriptural notion that the divine is made manifest in things of this world and this is what gives the things of this world depth or what Wilbur calls "fullness." We can see this in his poem "A Wedding Toast":

---

*St. John's tells how, at Cana's wedding-feast,  
The water-pots poured wine in such amount  
That by his sober count  
There were a hundred gallons at the least.  
It made no earthly sense, unless to show,  
How whatsoever love elects to bless  
Brims to sweet excess  
That can without depletion over flow.  
Which is to say that what love sees is true;  
That the world's fullness is not made but found. . .*

---

For Wilbur, what makes the world a mystery full of depth and meaning is Divine Love. It is this love that has called this world into existence and blessed this material world that "brims to sweet excess." In this Wilbur is thoroughly Scriptural, for Scripture tells us that the world is full of goodness, shining forth the Divine Love that has brought it into existence out of nothingness, over flowing without depletion--world without end.

Perhaps Wilbur's most famous poem, "Love Calls Us to Things of this World" helps us to see this from another angle. In this poem the speaker is awakened, peeling open his sleepy eyes to see:

---

*Outside the open window.  
The morning air is awash with angels.  
Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,  
Some are in smocks; but truly there they are.*

---

For Wilbur, this world is filled with transcendence. The problem, as we awake, the speaker tells us, is to avoid "the soul shrink[ing]/From all that is about to be remember[ed]./From the punctual rape of every blessed day." That is, we must avoid letting the normal work of every day blinds us from the transcendence that pervades even the mundane—bed-sheets, blouses and smocks. But the speaker cries out in defiance:

---

*Oh let there be nothing on earth but laundry,  
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam  
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.*

---

If it is love that makes this world enchanted, then, for Wilbur it is love that enables us to bear witness to this enchantment. Wilbur through his poetic genius is pushing us to not avert our eyes from this world but to be vigilant, fixing our gaze upon this world with loving intent. When we do (to steal a line from Wilbur's poem "She") we will see the world as:

---

*When Adam's will was whole, and the least thing  
Appeared the gift and creature of his king.*

---

Simply, we will see the world with gratitude.

CHAPTER 2

---

# Quotidian Mystics

*by* Thom Banks

*“One Word outnumbers all our uttered words,  
Who spoke a chaos into loveliness.”*



## Quotidiana

*“One Word outnumbered all our uttered words,  
Who spoke a chaos into loveliness.”*

### ***At New Year's***

Back to their first positions  
The vagrant stars have stepped,  
Our human resolutions  
Quite humanly kept.

But it must make sweet sport  
When thunders out abroad  
At our failings' report  
The reckless laugh of God.

### ***Encomium***

That we have not done justice with our words  
To hills and sod and stones and wood and seas  
And You, forgive us, while unprompted birds  
Dislaurel us with sudden melodies.

The tree deserves what she does not expect:  
Adequate thankfulness for summer shade.  
Our fulsome compliments cannot reflect  
The fullness that Your pregnant fiat made.

Our efforts fail You that our love affords.  
Good's gravity outweighs our mouths' excess.  
One Word outnumbered all our uttered words,  
Who spoke a chaos into loveliness.

### ***Lines on the Death of Earthworms***

The earth-inquisitive children halve  
The rain-aroused earthworms with spades.  
Like pagan gods the younglings laugh  
Til mother takes their ersatz blades

And drags them in for lunch. The slain  
Meet no such change as dead men meet,  
Earth-born, at last of earth again;  
Earth was bread and being complete,

At last a grave, what was their all,  
What was their dining board and bed,  
A tomb to last till stars shall fall,  
And earth shall render up her dead.

### ***Blessing Narcissus***

It would have been a tender thing  
To skip a stone across that pool  
And strike awake that lovely fool  
Abruptly from his blossoming.

### ***Late Spring***

They take their time, the springtime shoots  
And buds to blossom. Still we wait.

We try our patience on the roots.  
We know, like Abram, soon or late  
The promise in its ripening  
Will come, and the uncoming spring.

### ***Of Mere Vastness***

In lieu of worship, minds seek magnitude.  
At times a Hubble Telescope becomes  
A monstrance bearing massive sacraments--  
The careless meteor that voidward roams.  
It does not stop or stay. Our brief amazement  
Soon dims. A comet flees too fast for prayer.  
And in what outskirt of the heavens could it  
Make flesh of its pure flame to feed us there?

THOM BANKS

## Rebuke Arboreal

*“A season makes sense only as part of a sum.”*

I grew up in a small town, as a very bad pop song once had it. Our local paper was frequently hard put for stories, and bore up under no inconsiderable indignities to fill page space. Once, a photographer of theirs was compiling a photo essay, “Locals Earning Their Daily Bread,” or something similarly quaint. He was considerate, or desperate, or both, and seeing my sister and me playing in the front yard amidst the newly fallen leaves, he asked my mother if he might snap a few shots of us. They appeared in the weekend paper. My sister, then as now, was quite photogenic.

This was a week before my birthday, and the all the leaves were at the high pitch of their redness; all that is, save those that grew on one tree. This one faced our house, and her leaves were those which chiefly ornamented the front lawn for the few short weeks before winter. These were a mixture of the brashest yellow and a tenuous red which touched on orange. This tree was my favorite, for unlike her neighbors, she never exhausted her fund of variety. One of the other trees' red leaves was the exact twin of another. Of all this tree's offspring there was never a pair alike. Each bore its red and its gold in proportions singular to itself. The two colors never divided from each other jaggedly, but bled together in a show of mutual acquiescence. There was no sudden border between them. Their blending was so gradual that a third tone showed a subtle insinuation of a presence between them. While it proceeded from the first hues, it had an essence of its own. Here was a royalty of foliage. The tree was a sermon by herself. Here was one thing that produced after its kind: after all, what

were her leaves but so many elm leaves? But among all her leaves, where did she submit to repetition? The mind was tempted once more to reiterate,

---

*“Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale...”*

---

She “made most hungry”, if there is an appetite for atmosphere and season that does not hope to fill itself. But the first part of the quotation applied to her becomes mere sentiment, the cud of Hallmark fifty times rehashed. Her leaves withered, and no mistake. They withered and rotted on the lawn like so many leaves less regal. Finally every last arbor-flame dried up into a morbid anonymity. The first week of November did its work, and a wind storm usually gathered the bodies to their forbears in so many gutters and ditches.

Whatever dourness obscures the surface of autumn, or our understanding of it, it is not the likeness of the season itself. Autumn is not tragic. It would be, perhaps, if there were no other seasons. Inconveniently for the congenital pessimist there are. A season makes sense only as part of a sum. We commit a fallacy when we remove it from that fullness and concentrate on the bare thing itself, the skinned minimum. That we do this so often and with so many things is the root of our thoughts’ common poverty. It is impossible to believe that we are the first to sense a real dreariness in the death of leaves. It is probable that we are the first to sense nothing else. Ends and passings signify nothing to us, or at least nothing outside the bounds of our own paltry experiences. More

expansive reflections, reflections like those that fill Villon’s great poem with the refrain, “Where are the snows of yester-year?”, are foreign to our somberer contemplations.

It is not certain whether occasional despondency--the despondency we meet and wrestle at midnight--is purely vicious. Its more prosaic varieties are unquestionably luxurious. Even Solomon could not afford them. While a living lion, he saw clearly and without self-pity that he would one day be counted lower than a dog, and (proof of his liberality) never appeared to hold it against the dog. He took his conclusion in bread and wine and a smiling heart. Half the world’s lasting poetry begins with the same set of premises. Those who make them have ended variously, some in happy bonhomie and some in shabby self-indulgence. This exactly is the difference between a Villon and an Omar Khaayam.

My tree chose rightly. This is especially impressive in the case of inanimate objects. She was on the right side of Solomon, and her leaves made an end of it in parade ground uniform, taking delight in their toil. Like so many created things, she was garrulous in her homilies, ones to which I was deaf or blind or both. At six, one is oblivious to most things, I suppose. Neither do I remember ever to have been moved at that age by a sermon of the more conventional type. Here too were significances I could not spell. As it is with most people, my aesthetic sense began to grow at that same age when one begins either to love or resent the discipline of worship.



I found the picture the photographer took some years later. It had yellowed less royally than the half of its subject. In it my six-years' self appears caught in the indolent, easily frustrated happiness which is that age's regular accompanist. My sister is in the photograph as well, her expression something calmer, something that has achieved a more mellowed and temperate joy. More than either of the pair by far the leaves look exultant. They are dead when the picture was taken. On finding the picture, I felt a rebuke the trees did not intend. "Here is an end of the matter."

THOM BANKS

---

## To A Lady Who Said

*“As your hands, unstained by distress  
Return the gifts of grace to grace.”*

### ***To a Lady Who Said That She Could Not Abide False Blonde Hair in Women Her Age***

Serene in your surrender, you  
Hate not, nor love the fading thing,  
Which acquiescence sadly few  
Attain to, life's pride perishing.

Here's one who's bought a new face; here's  
Another dressing half her age.  
More comically our empty fears  
Show, balanced by our preening rage.

But in you shows a peacefulness  
Regretless in your restful face  
As your hands, unstained by distress  
Return the gifts of grace to grace.

### ***Lenit Albescens Animos Capillus For Dad***

They have no *dignitas*, Bermuda shorts;  
Work shirt and slacks, save on that rare occasion,  
Become for him a uniform of sorts,  
Though never of Catonian complexion.

Not being the kind to chorus ichabods,  
Though tending from habit to older fashion,

And never much for newly minted gods,  
He knows quite well that trumpeted revulsion

Is unbecoming, even in the old.  
His age still very well remembers how, but  
Does not worry too much for to uphold  
Its own rewards so much as it fears what

Might go wrong if a friend bought that Mercedes.  
He understands quite well, having once been  
Young, what is the exhilarant joy of these,  
But too much time on silver wheels wears thin,

And there is soup, and the half-tumbler of wine  
To satisfy one's evening happiness.  
*Eos* is not for him. More in his line  
Means in his age always to wish for less.

It is simpler that way, we will concede.  
His genius does not care to ramify,  
But rather prunes the tree that from a seed  
It has maintained with care, and patiently.

### ***A State of Inquiry***

The hawk's rapacious circuit in the sky,  
The serpent coiled discretely on the stone  
And ship upon the sea left no reply  
To him who made them bread for meditation.

No practice that could tempt us to perfection,  
In love or work or silent revery  
Unriddles itself like the flagrant sun,  
But slowly it unfolds its secrecy.

Some mysteries bless those who search them blindly  
With sounder wisdom and with sharper sight.  
Some oracles there are do not take kindly  
To suppliants dragging secrets into light.

And your half-smile is wealthy in suggestion,  
Which modestly a simple answer scorns,  
Leaving me thirsty with my arid question--  
Why smiles the lily dryly in the thorns?

## Impious Apologies

*“Each of us fears ultimately that  
God is sniffing out our trail.”*

Occasionally the embarrassments of others turn contagious.

I think it was two years ago I went over to the house of a couple, friends of mine, for dinner. As it happened, I arrived about fifteen minutes early (a terrible habit of mine, generously unrepached by my circle of acquaintance) and my friend’s wife let me in. He was not yet home from work and she invited me to make myself comfortable in the living room. I was about to do so when a thought, evidently of some urgency, dawned upon her and caused her eyes to widen considerably.

She explained that a friend of hers had visited from out of town earlier that same afternoon and she had not yet restored the room to that state of levitical uniformity which conscience, and for all I know, the avenging spirit of Emily Post demanded. I assured her that her concerns were baseless and entered the sanctum. As memory serves, there were a pair of coffee cups on the table beside the couch, a small assortment of photographs and a couple of throw pillows on the ground propped against the table leg. This was the extent of the domestic ataxia she had described. Still mortified despite my best reassurances, she returned to her dinner preparations, likely whispering a litany of remorse to Hestia or whichever goddess was most likely to express umbrage if a dust bunny should ever accumulate under the couch.

Even if her compounded self-reproaches reached almost the boiling point of melodrama, my admiration for the lady in question was, if anything, increased following this episode

and I think my friend all the more fortunate to have married her. At a point whose exact position differs from person to person, we will all apologize for some small pandaemonium or uncontained untidiness. This point in single men such as myself is seldom reached, and has over the course of bachelorhood's history taken on an almost legendary quality, like the source of the Nile before Speke and Burton, or the anthropophagi in Mandeville's chronicle. For all that, it is real enough. We will all apologize for the wreck of our living rooms, the scattered papers and shopping bags on the floors of our cars or for the untrimmed tree branches that encroach upon our neighbor's telephone line. Some of us are less appreciative of the tranquility which is endangered by these small discombobulations, but we will respond when the issue forces our hand. In these domestic trials single men act with that quality which, according to Churchill, characterizes America in her foreign policy: "Always ready to do the right thing once she has exhausted every other alternative."

We apologize for much. But do we apologize for the right things, I wonder? Typically we do so for our own homes and gardens and the stretch of sidewalk which fronts these if any of them should show signs of dishevelment. We apologize for our pets if they raise Cain with the neighbors. We apologize for our children at various social functions if they misbehave or manage to besmirch themselves with any of those thousand natural defilements which childhood is heir to.

And what of karma, or kismet, or Providence? We pay lip service to them (the first, at least--the last sounds uncomfortably

religious) and thereby own that life is too rich and full a thing to fit our hands, and so we are not responsible for its multitudinous joys and heartaches and plenary agitation. In spite of this, we are not above the habit of bandying about apologies as conversational filler. I once overheard: "Say do you have the time? It must be close to five, isn't it?" "I'm sorry, it's only four." The second interlocutor had no shrinking diffidence in his features. He was tall--taller than I, at any rate--and his face possessed a touch of Errol Flynnesque insouciance such as ought by rights to find in an extra hour of daylight an occasion for secondhand pride, and meet it with a smile and an arched brow. A man like this should be the last of Adam's progeny to feel sorry that his fellow man has overlooked daylight savings time. I ought (and hang me, I failed) to have said, "Say there, none of us is at the back of this, I promise you. You can thank God for it, or blame Him, but don't give yourself too much credit. Time's a longer thing than all of us but One. And as for the Spring Forward, thank no one, neither speak of it, for it is of the pit."

Every form of skepticism has misgivings tucked away in a closet somewhere. When we find ourselves in circumstances shapeless or unfamiliar, the half of our self-confidence trickles away from us. We are like tourists in a country whose language is strange and whose people we fear to offend. Our qualms betray us into mitigations far more graceless than the unnoticeable faux pas which elicits them. We say we are sorry when we are surprised, or when our ignorance of even the most trivial thing is briefly laid bare. Our defenses fall for a

moment, and we surrender without conditions. Each of us fears ultimately that God is sniffing out our trail, and our inability to give an account of ultimate things reveals itself in slavish overtures in respect of things relatively unimportant. It is in the miniscule points of social niceties that we magnify these molehills. For instance, how often do we hear others (worse, ourselves) phrase as a question what they intend as a statement? “You know how it is that...?” Definiteness deserts our speech and our manners, for fear we should ruffle our fellows’ sensibilities, which are equally delicate. Hamlet could walk into any office, school or church today and toy with the present occupants as with a thousand Osrics:

HAMLET: Put thy bonnet to his right use. ‘Tis very hot.

OSRIC: I thank your lordship. It is very hot.

HAMLET: No believe me, ‘tis very cold. The wind is northerly.

OSRIC: It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

HAMLET: But yet me thinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.

OSRIC: Exceedingly, my lord, it is very sultry...

The strength of confrontation, even in the best of causes, is not in us. We mistake (willingly or otherwise) a false humility for pious Fear and Trembling, and drift accordingly. It is beyond me to guess how men might be encouraged to repent of false repentance without exacerbating their condition. But

when we do so, I hope it is not too steep a challenge that we do so in the active voice.

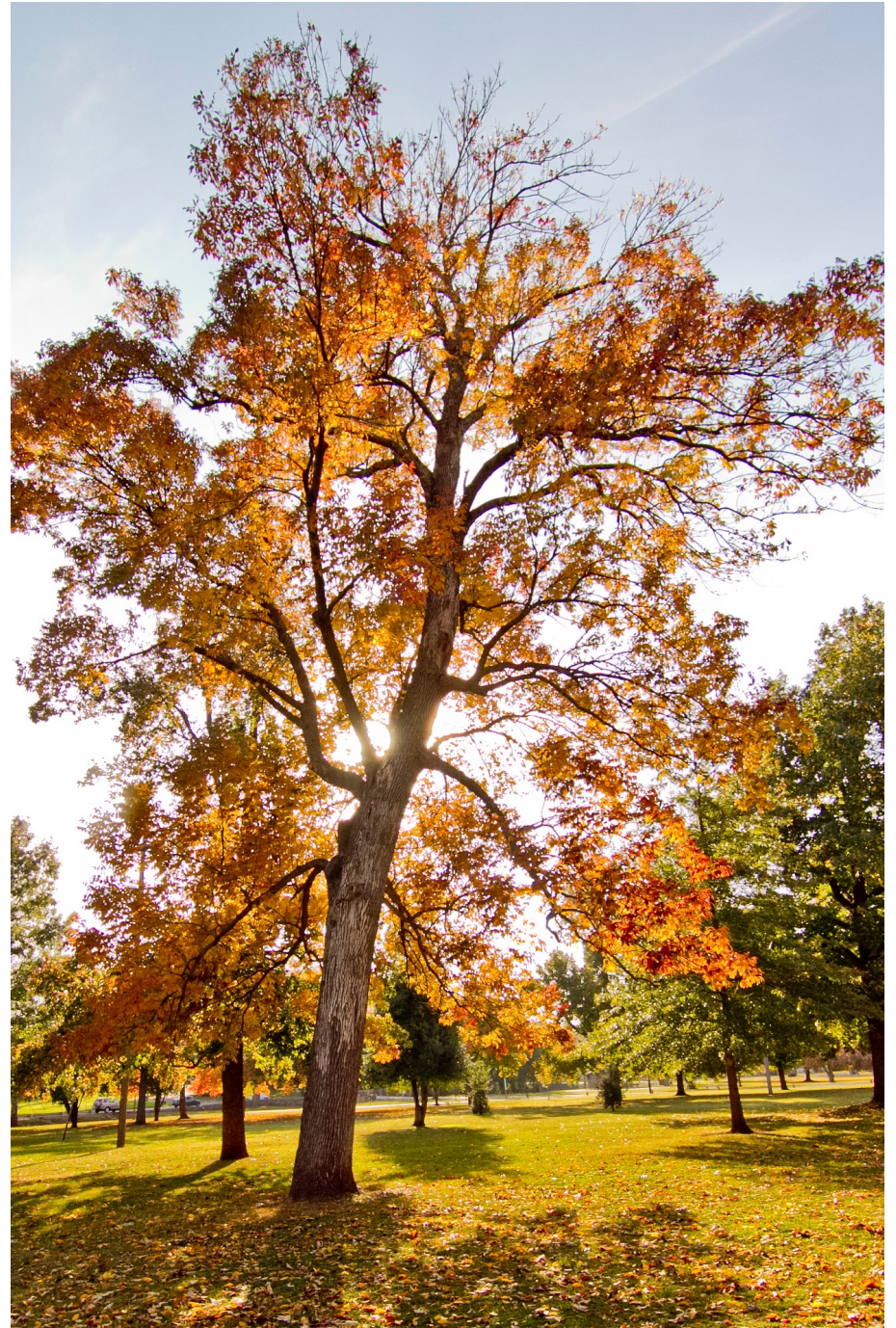
CHAPTER 3

---

# Keep All Our Goings Graces

*by Sam Koenen*

*“God’s first fiat of Creation was also a commitment to His final sigh on the Cross.”*



## The Beginning of Love

*“How is it that our insignificance is the very thing that gives us so much worth?”*

Few would ever argue that love is not important. Though many of us have felt the sting of love gone wrong, only the most bitter of us ever renounces it altogether. There is something in our very essence that longs for love—that yearns both to love and be loved.

Where does this longing for love come from? Why do we all care so much about it? Why is it that love does indeed seem to make the world go round?

The answer to this question will be the foundation of this series of posts on Love. To answer it, we need to look back to the very beginning of things, back to Creation itself, for it is here that we first learn what love really is.

### The Great Dance

All theology must begin with the Triune God, the paradoxical doctrine that forms the linchpin of all reality: that God exists in three distinct Persons who share the same essence. God is unity and diversity in perfect harmony, complete in Himself and lacking nothing.

Before this Triune God decided to create, no other matter or being existed. There was simply Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in perfect self-giving love and community, each seeking to honor the other two—all without losing the profound unity of being. When early theologians sought to explain this, they described the Triune Community as perichoretic, each Person simultaneously remaining distinct and yet also interpenetrating the other Persons. Later in Christendom, the po-



ets reached for a metaphor to express this doctrine and came up with The Great Dance.

Because the Trinity is always complete and lacking nothing, God felt no necessity to create. He felt no lack or external constraint. There was no cosmic gun to the head, nor was anything lacking in the perichoretic Community of the Trinity.

This means that God's creative work was an act of perfectly free will on the part of the Creator. There was no need for anything to be created, yet God brought everything into existence. This powerful act was far more than a brute act of will. It was not merely a naked fiat, but was had a definitive purpose.

## Joining The Dance

What was God's purpose for Creation? If it wasn't a pure act of power, what was it?

The story of Scripture indicates that the reason God made such an intricate but unnecessary world was simply because of His love. God created in order to extend the scope and range of His Trinitarian love—to bring more dancers into the Great Dance.

In the days of Creation, each fiat--each proclamation of "let there be"--was the result of overflowing Trinitarian love. Though complete and perfect, the Trinity expanded its community of love through fiats that brought unnecessary things into being—things like almonds, hippos, and poetry.

Now, let's put together an essential point about Creation and love. Because God created out of perfect freedom, everything He made is absolutely unnecessary—apart from God's good pleasure, there is no greater reason for anything other than God to exist. But precisely because of God's pleasure manifested in love, everything that God made is given purpose and meaning. And because God loves what He made and seeks to bring it into the Great Dance of Trinitarian community, everything has incalculable worth and importance—though it is unnecessary.

## Learning The Steps

God's act of creation was powerful, free, and motivated by love—but it was also costly. In His act of Creation, God "went beyond himself." To some degree, He renounced isolation, solitude, independence. In love God not only made the world and humans, but acted on His love by forming covenants with them—bonds of obligating love that would culminate in the Absolute Sacrifice of Cavalry. God's first fiat of Creation was also a commitment to His final sigh on the Cross.

So how should we respond to all of this theology? How do we learn the step to the Dance of Trinitarian Love?

First of all, when we realize that all the beauty and goodness of this world are given with divine loving intent, we should be profoundly grateful. Despite the ongoing injustice in the world, thanksgiving should still mark all our waking moments.

Secondly, our gratitude calls us to imitate the Creator's love in all of our relationships. This means that our love should be:

1. *Sacrificial*—We have to be willing to give of ourselves for the beloved. We must willingly sacrifice time, resources, energy—and hardest of all—our will and desires.
2. *Vulnerable*—We must be willing to have all our love misunderstood. Slandorous rejection should not end our love, but make us all the more faithful in it. For while we were yet enemies of God, Christ died for us.
3. *Free*—Our love must seek to move the beloved into the Great Dance of the Triune Creator. This means we forfeit our own agendas for the beloved, and seek to help him/her move closer to Christlikeness.

How is it that our insignificance is the very thing that gives us so much worth?

## Why Death Is Lame

*“Before we can leave the tomb,  
we must enter it.”*

When his charismatic friend Charles Williams died, C. S. Lewis wrote his reaction in a letter:

---

*“Death has done nothing to my idea of him, but [Charles] has done—oh, I can’t say what—to my idea of death. It has made the next world so much more real and palpable” (May 28, 1945).*

---

Charles Williams’ life was so full of love and truth, grace and beauty, that his death only made Lewis more certain of the afterlife and the coming resurrection. The idea of death and Charles Williams could not co-exist in Lewis’s mind.

And so it should be at the death of any Christian. Explaining the consequences of Christ’s resurrection, St. Athanasius once wrote,

---

*“All the disciples of Christ despise death; they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead...So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross.”*

---

Because of the resurrection, Christ’s death became a victory. Because of the resurrection, Christ’s death killed Death. The resurrection turned the cross into a sword, which Jesus of Nazareth used to cut off the head of the Serpent and destroy the power of Sin and Death.

And because Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection—the first of many to rise from the dead—Death has lost its eternal sting. Now Christians refer to death as the First Resurrection, since to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, "so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 5:4). Athanasius points to fearlessness of the martyrs in the face of death as certain proof of Christ's resurrection. What else could cause such confidence before charging lions, burning stakes, and boiling oil? George Herbert describes death as a reluctant servant of Christ, a begrudging coachman conveying saints from their deathbeds into the presence of their King.

Death does still bite. We still wail and weep when Death takes loved ones. We pound our thighs and shake our fists at the pain of such a fallen world. But to mourn thus is simply to imitate what Jesus did at the tomb of Lazarus, just before he raised his friend to life. Death may tear at us, but its damage is only temporary.

For not only do we willingly follow Christ into death with our faces held knowingly toward the heavens, but we also have learned how to suffer. We know that the Cross comes before the Crown. We know that we will face the slings and arrows of this outrageous world, suffering injustice and longing for peace. But as we suffer our own persecutions and enter into the oppressions of others, we simply imitate our Savior. And we know how the story goes: before Glory comes Golgotha, before the new wine comes vinegar and gall, before Easter morn-

ing comes Gethsemane's dark night. Before we can leave the tomb, we must enter it.

Though we must still suffer, we suffer in hope, knowing we follow our Captain so that we can become like Him. Like Christ, we also hasten to our crosses with stout hearts, eager to do battle with the sin in the world and in our own hearts. We look death and suffering straight in the eyes and scorn them for their impotent weakness.

And what if Death kills us? What if we suffer to the shedding of blood? What if? As Hopkins put it, "In a flash, at a trumpet crash,/I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am." Like Christ, if we die we only become stronger.

After all—the last time Death did its worst, Christ saved the whole world.

## The Grace of Groundhog Day

*“The endless death of winter can only be broken by a love that kills the self.”*

Tomorrow is Groundhog Day, one of my favorite holidays because of its deeply theological basis. That's right deeply theological. Let me explain.

Each year on February 2 my wife and I invite over a bunch of friends for a high feast of Philly cheese steaks, bottled lagers, and sweet potato fries. As we eat we watch the underappreciated classic: Bill Murray's *Groundhog Day*.

### Behold The Man

Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, a weatherman who finds himself stuck in an endless loop of the same day in the same place—February 2 in Punxsutawney, PA. This is Phil's private version of Hell: trapped in a small town with a bunch of “hicks,” no hot water, no phones, no luxuries. What's worse, everything is exactly the same each day. Phil demonstrates absolutely no love for anything around him but himself.

At the beginning of the curious loop, Phil Connors is an ego-centric jerk of a weatherman—arrogant, demeaning, crass, and selfish. After realizing he can do nothing to escape from Feb. 2, Phil plunges into hedonism, indulging all his appetites in quick succession. Ironically, being trapped in the same day actually gives Phil just what he always wanted—himself and nothing else. No messy relationships, no obligations, no strings to force his desires, dreams, plans. But Phil rapidly grows disillusioned with self-serving pleasure and sets his sights on higher things—namely, Rita.

Rita is beautiful and virtuous, as her name implies—"Rita" means "pearl" (symbolized throughout the movie by Phil's hoar-frosted window). Phil uses his endless days to catalog Rita's likes, dislikes, and history—all the knowledge necessary to seduce her. Phil's plans fail repeatedly; every Casanovic attempt ends with a hard slap on the face. At one point Rita declares, "I could never love anyone like you, Phil, because you'll never love anyone but yourself." Rita identifies Phil's core problem—he loves himself and nothing else. Like the groundhog, Phil's shadow—his sinful self—dooms him to everlasting winter.

Rita's spurning leads Phil to bitter cynicism. He tells Rita, "You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil. I'll give you a winter prediction. It's going to be cold, it's going to be gray, and it's going to last you for the rest of your life." The endless cycle of Feb. 2 has become a metaphor for the futility of Phil's narcissistic love. Self-love can bear no fruit, and therefore has no future.

## Love's Transforming Call

Phil finally convinces Rita that something odd is indeed happening to him, and so she agrees to spend the day with Phil. This is the turning point for Phil, because he simply spends time with Rita for her own sake, not for some selfish end. And through the course of this day, Phil sees the true depth of Rita's virtue and beauty. She becomes his Beatrice, his Lovely Lady who calls him to become a better man. After she falls asleep, Phil says to her, "I've never seen anyone who's nicer to people. The first time I saw you, something happened to

me...I don't deserve someone like you, but if I ever could, I swear I would love you for the rest of my life."

When Phil wakes up the "next" morning, he makes strenuous efforts to change himself. Rita's virtue and beauty have so enraptured Phil that he willingly turns to the world with eager attention, caring for others, for music, literature, sculpture. His love for Rita has caused him to begin loving the mundane things of Punxsutawney. In theological terms, Phil dies to self and begins living for others.

Most significantly, Phil begins to do acts of mercy—giving money to the homeless, repairing flat tires, catching falling boys, saving choking men. Love for Rita has transformed Phil from a scoundrel to a knight-errant, performing chivalric deeds that will make him worthy of his lady. Though this is a delightful change, Phil still does good so that he can win Rita—he has yet another lesson to learn.

This lesson comes when Phil can do nothing to save an old beggar from dying. No matter his efforts, no matter how devoted his love, he cannot keep the old man from dying. Yet the very fact of Death has deepened Phil's love; it has called him to attentive action for the old man for no other end than to serve. Phil has learned the true nature of sacrificial love, of selfless service to others.

With this final lesson, Phil has come to the end of his pilgrimage. Far from seeing Punxsutawney as his own private Hell, Phil has learned to love the small town with all its quirky citizens. Consequently, Punxsutawney has come to love Phil

as well. Surrounded by most of the town, Phil declares in his final coverage of the Groundhog Day festivities, "Winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here amongst the people of Punxsutawney and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter." The lesson Phil learns is clear: the endless death of winter can only be broken by a love that kills the self.

## Sameness Is Grace

Phil has learned that sameness is not a curse but a gift of grace. Sameness teaches us how to love, how to sacrifice, how to devote ourselves to others. Seemingly endless days of poopy diapers, grumpy bosses, frustrated labors, difficult neighbors, and rebellious children are not a Hell that God has cursed us with but a gift that will teach us how to love properly. Through the mundane and difficult our love grows strong and faithful.

And so, I celebrate Groundhog Day with friends and food to remind myself that Christ has called me to love the things of this world—starting with those around my table and simple things like bread and cheese and paper napkins.

## Who Cares About Beauty?

*“Deep down, we know that we  
were made for beauty.”*

Everyone thinks beauty is important, but how much do we really value it? Does beauty ever change the way we live? I spend many of my days in a haze of materialism, pursuing beauty only for narcissistic ends. Others I know wander like mystics, scoffing that all beauty is an illusion that will burn up in the end.

We never seem to live as if beauty really matters. Our time and energy are so focused on getting and accomplishing that we should ask ourselves: Is beauty really that important?

### Made for Beauty

Those who have really experienced beauty would answer this question with an emphatic yes. We have known beauty in ways that resonate with our soul. Beauty has both undone us and made us new. It has calmed us with sunset and shaken us with thunderstorm. We have seen beauty in the birth of a child and the wonders of a wedding night. Beauty haunts us even in the faces of the very old, hiding a coal-bed of fire behind eyes creased with care.

These experiences with beauty change our lives and reorient our desires. *Deep down, we know that we were made for beauty.*

One of my most memorable experiences with beauty happened in my senior year of high school during Christmas Break. I was slogging my way through Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* for my AP English class, and I was really be-



hind. Three days before class started again, I sat down and power-read through 250 pages of dense philosophy Russian prose. I was plunged for long hours into the mind of a murderer slowly going insane with guilt. It was pretty tedious stuff, and the only thing that kept me going was the looming deadline.

Then it happened. I sat rigid in my chair and couldn't read fast enough. The murderer knelt at the crossroads. All his mental anguish disappeared in a single, deliberate act of confession. The ending of the novel showed me a beauty I had never known before. I finished the last fifty pages, then read them again. I felt like I had been resurrected right alongside the criminal.

Reading that book awoke in me a raging thirst for beauty. It had undone me, remade me, and gave me new eyes to look at the world. This seems to be the effect and purpose of beauty. Those who have experienced it never have enough.

## Does God Care about Beauty?

But does all this make beauty really important? These experiences certainly have an impact on those who experience them, but are they essential for human fulfillment? Isn't it possible to live a complete human life without beauty?

Absolutely not.

Such a life is impossible. Without beauty, human happiness doesn't exist.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his audience not to worry about what they will eat or wear. Instead of worrying, they should consider the flowers, who don't worry about their clothes, but are always dressed in splendor because God Himself dresses them. This should bring comfort to Jesus' audience because they are much more valuable than flowers—so how much *more beautifully* will God provide for them?

Notice what Jesus says about beauty here. Beauty is not irrelevant or superfluous, because God gives attention to the beauty of his acts of creation and providence. Applied to humans particularly, we can see that God cares very much about beauty in human lives.

Commenting on this passage, Ed Welch writes,

---

*“Jesus is making a point about beauty. His kingdom is not merely drab and functional; somehow the kingdom he is announcing is a kingdom of beauty. The Beautiful One is King and his children are and will be reflections of his beauty” (Running Scared, 108).*

---

Welch sees the connection between beauty and *the type of people we are to become*. If we are to be people who reflect beauty, what does that mean for how we live right now?

## Called to Beauty

The answer to this question is too long for this blog post, but it does lead to two conclusions. If God is concerned about beauty, then Jesus is concerned about beauty in his kingdom. And if Jesus' kingdom includes re-making the human race in his image, then beauty is an essential part of human existence. Beauty, then, is really, really important.

What's more, beauty is not something we can just tack on to our lives in the odd hours of the weekend. Rather, we are meant to *live in a way that is beautiful*. Our work, our love, our play, our lives are meant to manifest beauty.

To the degree that we fail in this calling of beauty, we also fail to live fully human lives. So shake off that haze of materialism. Stop trying to levitate your way off this dangerously beautiful world. We are called to beauty, so let's roll up our sleeves and get busy.

---

# The Next Steps

1. To read more about *The Goodness of the Ordinary Life* and how you can get involved in a community dedicated to living the ordinary life, visit [The Goodness of the Ordinary Life page](#).
2. What did you think of this ebook? Share your thoughts and comments with others by visiting [this page](#).

## Share This Ebook

You are welcome to share this ebook with anyone and everyone. I only ask that you don't sell or change it in any way.

Use these links to share:

[Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Comments](#)

For more ideas on how to share this ebook and to offer feedback, visit [The Goodness of the Ordinary page](#).

---

# About the Authors

Sam Koenen is a writer, teacher, and avid reader.

He lives in Bozeman, Montana with his wife, Catherine, and their three kids.

When he isn't playing with his kids, he's a good enough fly-fisherman to worry the local trout.

Read more at [SamKoenen.com/about](http://SamKoenen.com/about).

Connect with Sam:

---

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)

---

Thom Banks and Gregg Valeriano are Sam's good friends and fellow teachers. Thom, Gregg, and Sam wrote a blog together for a little while. The blog faded, but the friendships flourished.

