

“A BOOK I’D LIKE MY ELECTED OFFICIALS TO READ”

When Presbyterian pastor Rich Jones had a chance to meet Hillary Clinton in July, he presented her with a copy of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. We asked professors, writers, and policy makers to tell us about a book they would want to hand to their elected officials to read. Surprisingly, and independently of one another, three of the seven respondents chose the same book. (Perhaps less surprisingly, it wasn’t *Works of Love*.)

I’d love to have our leaders sit down with Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*. The great problem we deal with—one that crosses political lines, though it’s stronger on the right—is what we might call hyperindividualism. Schooled as we’ve been by the high-consumer society in which we’ve come of age, we’ve taken the quite lovely American idea of individualism and ripped it entirely out of balance. By some estimates, three-quarters of Americans don’t really know their next-door neighbor. It’s possible, if you have a credit card and an Internet connection, to have UPS deliver everything you need for daily life to your doorstep. The average American has half as many close friends as the average American of 50 years ago. Might this explain something about our unhingedness as a nation?

Berry has long been the great novelist, poet, and essayist of community. His short stories and novels of the men and women of Port William are a remarkable canvas. But I love *Jayber Crow* best of all; it does more to define a working community than any book I can think of, and in ways that help us, obliquely, with the decisions we need to make as a polity. It conveys the delicacy of community, and the great pleasures of a kind of membership.

Berry has lived long enough to see some of his ideas take root. When he started advocating for farmers’ markets, there really weren’t any; now, for a decade, they’ve been the fastest growing part of our food economy. If you eat a local carrot this week, thank this Kentucky author and farmer. Just as there’s nothing nostalgic about a farmers’ market (it’s actually a vision of the future), so is there nothing nostalgic or sentimental about Berry’s novel.

—**Bill McKibben**, founder of the grassroots climate movement *350.org* and faculty member at Middlebury College, where among other things he has taught a course called *Stories from the Bible*

I wish the elected officials in Tennessee would read Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Stevenson’s legal practice, the Equal Justice Initiative, is dedicated to defending the poor, the innocent, the inadequately defended, children, domestic abuse survivors, and the mentally ill who are imprisoned in our grossly unfair national criminal justice system.

The state of Tennessee is the poster child for a largely broken system: gangs have taken hold in urban and rural areas, drugs—particularly methamphetamines—plague our state, we have a horrendously high rate of domestic violence, and 46 percent of prisoners end up back in prison within three years of release. Tennessee now locks up more people than Australia (a country with four times the population), at a cost of more than \$1 billion each year. When a commission devoted solely to sentencing reform was dissolved in 1995, our state began a more than two decades-long slide into a patchwork of criminal laws with varying penalties that trend toward harsher punishments which are proving to be ineffective. *Just Mercy* reveals the tragic consequences of unfair punishment in a justice system oriented mainly toward punishing offenders rather than meeting the needs of victims, offenders, and the community.

A master storyteller, Stevenson makes a compelling case for the power of restorative justice. He tells the story of his work in the 1980s and 1990s with death row prisoners, especially those who have been wrongly condemned and unjustly treated by the legal system. Prisoners like Walter McMillan, falsely accused of murder, are no longer blotter sheet fodder but brought into our lives as someone who survived false conviction and sentencing, blatant racist treatment, and eventual release. Stevenson weaves in other cases with McMillan’s to show that his case was not and is not an anomaly.

—**Emilie M. Townes**, who teaches womanist ethics and society at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. She is the author of *Womanist Ethics* and the Cultural Production of Evil (*Palgrave*).

John D. Inazu’s *Confident Pluralism* invites us to reflect on what has gone wrong in American government and in our polarized and paralyzed country. It reclaims the Madisonian idea that strongly held differences of opinion and values are inherent in our nation’s life and require both legal protection and public respect.



Illustration by Timothy Cook

Inazu, who teaches law at Washington University in St. Louis, writes as both a constitutional scholar and an engaged citizen. He calls for enhanced protections for those who express unpopular opinions. He addresses the weakening of the First Amendment right of assembly, and he calls for restraint in the government's use of power in confronting protests such as those in Ferguson, Missouri. He argues that while government may have the power to impose its policies against the practices of religious groups—for example, by withdrawing tax exempt status—it should generally refrain from doing so.

More than advocating legal protections for dissenters, Inazu calls for a public attitude of respect for opponents, especially when there are strongly held disagreements. When we advocate our own positions, we should exercise tolerance, humility, and patience. He suggests that we attempt to find common ground with our opponents by building personal relationships—by sharing meals, for example. This is an especially useful idea for members of Congress who spend little personal time together, and who know each other principally as either political allies or foes.

Holding together a diverse nation of strongly held interests has been the great American project since our beginning. Inazu calls us to make it our project today.

—**John C. Danforth**, an Episcopal priest and lawyer who served three terms as a U.S. senator from Missouri. His latest book is *The Relevance of Religion* (Random House).

Iurge officials to read Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* because we can no longer pretend that the scales of justice in America are fair and balanced. The data on incarceration show disparities along the lines of race and class. But *Just Mercy* is more than a data report. It takes us into the lives of people unfairly treated


at every stage of the criminal justice system. Stevenson issues a clarion call for us to do something about them.

The United States is having its largest prison boom ever. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 6 million people are jailed or on parole. This is sinful. We must take the profit margin out of prisons and put an end to the profiteering off selective human suffering. We need elected officials to pass legislation that upholds the constitutional rights of all of our citizens and corrects the disparities in terms of race and class. We must end the death penalty and its inhumane practices. These corrective actions open the door for the emergence of liberty and justice for all.

As this election season comes to a close, we are challenged to ask ourselves "What kind of country do we want to be?" and "What kind of world do we want to give our children?" The steps we take today can be toward justice and freedom—or they can be toward injustice and dehumanization.

—**Leah Gunning Francis**, a vice president at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and the author of *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (Chalice)

From Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya, Syria, and beyond, the United States has been engaged for decades in a seemingly endless series of wars and military operations that have cost many lives and drained our national treasury but have failed to stop the spread of terrorism and violent instability in the Middle East and elsewhere. To understand these conflicts and their baleful consequences, elected leaders could find no more insightful guide than Andrew J. Bacevich's latest book, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*. A former U.S. army colonel


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Surrealist Frantz Zephirin alongside his painting, *The Passage of Ogo*



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whose son was killed in Iraq, Bacevich is a gifted writer who has become the nation's most trenchant and influential critic of imperial pretensions.

Bacevich analyzes the many armed conflicts in the Middle East as a single continuous war in the heart of the Islamic world. What began as a means of securing access to oil continues today as a struggle against terrorism and "violent extremism." On the first page Bacevich starkly declares his military assessment of this ongoing war: "We have not won it. We are not winning it. Simply trying harder is unlikely to produce a different outcome."

Bacevich excoriates Washington's "collective naïveté" about the utility of military power. Elected leaders fail to understand that military force cannot solve the underlying political and social crises that lead to many armed conflicts. Nor do they see how our own military interventions often spark armed violence and insurgency. Yet the wars and military operations persist: Obama's Afghanistan surge of 2009, the ill-fated Libya operation in 2011, thousands of drone strikes across the region, a growing number of military operations in northern Africa, and the slow but steady buildup in the number of U.S. troops and airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.

Bacevich does not offer an alternative strategy, but the implications of his searing account are unavoidable. America's war in the greater Middle East is unwinnable and must be brought to an end.

—**David Cortright**, who directs policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame

As we make laws and try to adjudicate justice, we often lose sight of the human faces affected by those laws. We also forget that mercy and justice are not incompatible. Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* reminds us of both of these realities in a tangible and practical way. He tells the stories of people who have become trapped in a merciless criminal justice system, namely people of color. He provides a searing examination of the death penalty, revealing the biases and errors that wrongly sentence people to

death and (most troubling of all) sentence children to die in prison.

Stevenson indicts not only a broken criminal justice system but also a broken society and nation. He turns a spotlight on the intersecting realities of racism and poverty in this country, which practically ensures that certain people will end up incarcerated or sentenced to death. For this reality, he makes clear in no uncertain terms, “we are all implicated” as we have become a nation of people who too easily “condemn” others—especially the vulnerable and least of these. “The true measure of our character,” Stevenson tells us, “is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

Yet Stevenson does not leave us hopeless. Inspired by the hope that he sees in those who have been victimized by an unjust society, even those condemned to die, Stevenson speaks of the “seeds of hope” that will move us closer to reclaiming the humanity we have relinquished. Perhaps the greatest of these seeds is “proximity”—getting to know the very people who have been relegated to a life of crime and death. This book is a testament to proximity. It brings the abandoned and condemned of our society closer to all of us.

—**Kelly Brown Douglas**, who teaches religion at Goucher College and serves as canon theologian at Washington National Cathedral. She is the author of *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God (Orbis)*.

extinguishing indigenous communities throughout “the Americas.”

To help me sit with the grief of these realities—that women’s bodies are controversial in a land that continues to be raped by the greedy with little protest from the rest of us—I pulled off the shelf Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* and reread the introduction.

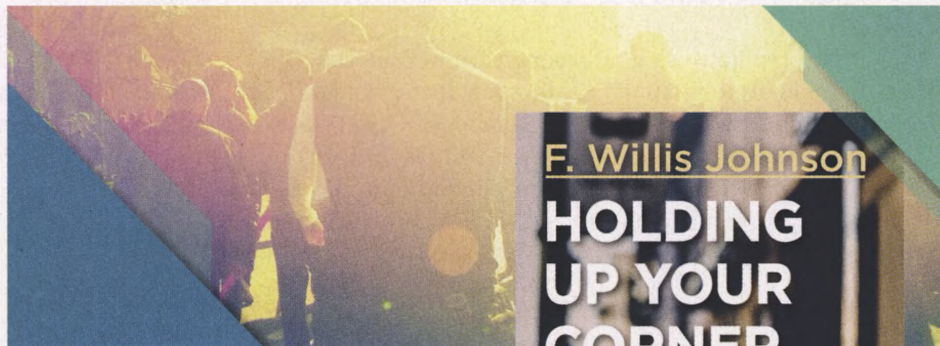
The last time I’d read from this book was over 20 years ago, in my first women’s studies class in college. At that time, I was more focused on Allen’s theorizing of Native literature than on the political implications of that theorizing. Today I am distraught by the depths to which the dominant culture truly dominates us as I read Allen’s assertion that “the physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy.”

We may elect the nation’s first female president this autumn, but Allen reminds us that even if we cross such a barrier, our democracy is still a far cry from walking in balance—the ethos of this land before the rise of our republic.

—**Malinda Elizabeth Berry**, who teaches theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana

This summer I was struck by two events. The first was Spencer Tunick’s July photo shoot “Everything She Says Means Everything.” Tunick’s photographs—which portray 100 naked women holding up large mirror disks outside of the Republican National Convention—are a commentary on the meaning of women’s bodies in our society. He wrote that this particular work “is for my daughters, for their future, for them not to grow up in a society with hate, for them to grow up in a world with less violence toward women and more opportunities for them,” further noting that the female body “may be the most controversial subject in this presidential election.”

The second was learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, a philosophical framework that gives “Christian governments” legal rights over indigenous lands and permission to dominate indigenous people. From the 15th century to the present time, the Doctrine of Discovery has shaped policy through theologies of entitlement, enslaving and



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