

AMERICAN CRISES AND THE COMMON GOOD

Dr. Scott Huelin



It was a glorious fall morning in the second week of classes at my first university teaching post. After breakfast I kissed my wife and two young sons goodbye, as if this day would be the same as any other weekday, and hopped on my bicycle for the short ride to campus. The

commute was particularly refreshing, with the newly risen sun warming my face and a crisp autumnal wind awakening my senses. As I dismounted the bike and locked it to the rack, I distinctly remember thinking to myself, "What a great day to be alive!" About an hour later, just before I walked in to a first-year Honors seminar to discuss Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I learned of the tragedy unfolding in New York City. As the enormity of these events began to sink in, I felt as a sharp pain the irony of my earlier euphoria. Over the remainder of the day, I spent many hours guiding students in thinking about the unthinkable, while I found my own heart careening between patriotic outrage, Stoic resignation, and faithful lament.

Like me, some of you remember with eerie precision the images and the emotions of September 11, 2001. Others of you were barely sentient on that day and recall only what you have subsequently learned about the sole foreign attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. Nonetheless, we all now live in a world which has been profoundly shaped, both for good and for ill, by the events of that day and our individual and collective responses to them. In fact, our own 'unprecedented times' can be helpfully illumined when placed alongside those horrific events of 20 years ago.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, national unity was both palpable and fervent. It seemed that everyone was displaying Old Glory in their front yard, and strangers generally seemed to treat one another more like friends and neighbors. Partisanship in Congress was overcome by our collective need to thwart Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Of course, the planeless skies silently testified to a looming threat, but that nagging fear seemed mostly productive, a collective *memento mori* moment for the national soul. The only time I've ever felt something similar in the air was right after the initial COVID lockdown in 2020. The threat felt real, but it also seemed that everyone was eager to flatten the curve, celebrate heroes in health care, hug their loved ones, and look after their neighbors.

Alas, in neither case would national unity last. After 9/11 our unity began to fray when Americans

disagreed publicly and profoundly over the best ways to keep our country safe from this new threat: whether a second front in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) should be opened in Iraq, whether torture should ever be used in intelligence gathering, whether the government should be granted sweeping surveillance powers over American citizens. Similarly, as the initial COVID lockdown came to an end, we began to dispute publicly over the best ways to keep our country safe from another new threat: whether to continue aggressive lockdowns, whether vaccines were safe, whether 'essential workers' or the elderly should get vaccinated first, whether masks do more harm than good, etc.

Worse, in both cases these genuine differences over how to address a common threat produced profound divisions within the body politic. Our current and virulent form of political tribalism can trace its roots pretty directly to the post-9/11 face-off between so-called 'Neo-con warmongers' and so-called 'Islamophiles.' We weren't just divided against one another, however; Americans became more and more suspicious of their own government. While Vietnam and Watergate began the erosion of this trust, Internet-fueled conspiracy theories in the wake of 9/11 greatly accelerated public distrust in government. As soon as early 2002, self-appointed Internet pundits were promoting the idea that 9/11 was an 'inside job,' a controlled demolition performed by Federal agents but blamed on external enemies. And we hadn't made it to the halfway point in 2020 before the Internet was full of theories connecting vaccines and Bill Gates and 5G and government-sponsored mind control to a Deep State effort to remove President Trump from the White House, or connecting mask mandates to pedophile rings run by the 'Demon-crats' and Hollywood elites. Such theories in turn fueled the party-driven tribalism by recruiting citizens to metaphorical war against fellow citizens instead of bringing us together against the shared enemy of either terrorism or pandemic.

In this we might find the most surprising and instructive parallel between the aftermath of 9/11 and our current situation. I wonder whether ordinary Americans have turned against one another amidst both of these national crises partly because so little was asked of us in combatting each of them. Ever since WWII, when the entire nation was last galvanized behind a common cause, US military adventures abroad have been conducted in such a way as to place little to no burden on the average American citizen. Yes, an extraordinary amount of blood and treasure was spilled in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan (\$8 trillion and 900,000 lives combined), but most Americans continued to go to jobs and schools and malls as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Gold Star families were quite right to wonder whether they were asked to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of these wars. Infamously, President Bush, in a joint session

of Congress, offered this advice to American citizens eager to know what they could do for their country in its hour of need: "I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy." In other words, keep shopping. Oddly, the costs of COVID in the US, both in dollars (somewhere north of \$6 trillion) and in lives (more than 711,000), are strikingly similar to what has been spent on the Global War on Terror. Unlike GWOT, however, our concerted efforts to combat COVID began with significant shared sacrifices, such as lockdowns, and minor ones, such as masks, but all of that unity was swiftly brought to an end by the imperative to reopen the economy, thereby freeing consumers to, you guessed it, keep shopping.

Don't get me wrong: I'm the first person to argue for a resilient economy that works for all citizens as a pro-life issue. But the parallels between our responses to 9/11 and the COVID pandemic suggest to me that, collectively, Americans have lost sight of a common good which transcends merely economic interests. The Founding Fathers built their design for our democratic republic around this very concept. To wit: "the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued; and that no form of government whatever has any other value than as it may be fitted for the attainment of this object" (*Federalist* 45). Here James Madison echoes a line he first read in Cicero (*On the Laws* 3.3.8), one which also can be read in the stone lintel above the south door to the Madison County courthouse: *Salus populi suprema lex esto* (the well-being, lit. 'the health,' of the people is the supreme law).

Now for some salutary imagining: How would the last two decades have been different if our elected leaders had inspired us with a broadly shared conception of the common good and thereby had summoned us to lock arms as a nation in a shared struggle? And how might we now be involved in proposing, pursuing, and embodying a vision of the common good, especially in our local communities? Let us, in our several communities and our different ways, heed the calling of God through his prophet Jeremiah: "Pursue the well-being of the city I have deported you to. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive" (Jer 29.7, CSB).

HONORS
at
UNION

EXCELLENCE-DRIVEN
CHRIST-CENTERED PEOPLE-FOCUSED
FUTURE-DIRECTED

ALUMNI IN CONVERSATION

We miss conversation with you all, so we asked our alumni to share responses to the question, "What is one thing you're doing this year that has nourished your hope?"

Rachel (Edgren) Pancho ('18)

Mom and RN in Shreveport, LA

"Everything has felt big this past year. Discouragement, despair, and disunity has been prevalent and has felt crushing at times. I think for me focusing on the things that seem smaller - my community, my patients, my husband, my church, my child. The people that I have opened up to and those that have entrusted me with their stories and their hurt, but also their heart for the future. That has brought me hope."

Daniel Regan ('18)

Accountant at Tennessee Baptist Children's Homes, Inc. in Nashville, TN
"Make gratitude lists daily."

Anonymous

"I have slowly been learning that relationships are the greatest calling we have as Christians, so I have been taking more time with people instead of holding as tightly to schedules."

Benjamin Pinkley ('18)

Quality Control Chemist at the Clariant Corporation in Louisville, KY

"I don't think I've been able to do anything to nourish my own hope, but my hope has been nourished by others. I already tend

to handle conflict with withdrawal, which can quickly become an unhealthy coping mechanism. There came a point over the course of the last year when I realized this had caused me to halt all attempts to use my creative energy or engage with friends. My hope was nourished when I reached out to loved ones with concern over this regression and they responded with the kindness of expressing what they valued in me. The encouragement of others that I hadn't lost myself in the unhealthy survivalist reactions I took nourished my hope."

Grace (Runkle) Mullin ('21)

Barista in Jackson, TN

"While COVID gave all of us a break from large social gatherings, I focused my attention on a smaller, closer circle of friends. Sometimes we learn the value of something through experiencing its lack. By pressing into deep relationships, I am regularly surprised and encouraged by the grace and love shown to me in friendships with brothers and sisters in Christ."



Katie Rose Ritchie ('14)

Church plant worker in Cape Cod, MA

"This year, I'm setting practical, intentional goals for sharing hope with others in order to nourish it in myself. For example: reaching out to three people each week with a text or note of encouragement. I find that the more I look outside of myself and focus on what God is doing in the lives of others, the easier it becomes to identify the hope and joy that is all too easy to miss."

Leah Atkins ('20)

Graduate student in Classics at the University of Oregon in Eugene, OR

"Hugging my dearest sweetest most adorable perfect heaven-sent love-incarnate itty bitty baby kitty, Lottie. I've been waiting so long for a cat and now she's here to chirp at me every morning!"

Nicki (Caturano) Stricklin

Mom in Winston-Salem, NC

"I have renewed a sense of hope and beauty in my life through the practice of writing poetry. It's been a wonderful avenue to practice gratitude and reflection. The poems are simple and usually short, but they capture the details and bittersweet moments of this season."

Emily Littleton ('17)

Working in Taiwan

"I've started reading poetry again, a poem a day as part of my devotional time. It's been wonderfully refreshing for my spirit!"

Benjamin Marsch ('21)

Engineer for Pictsweet in Jackson, TN

"When push comes to shove, folks are more likely to extend grace and mercy than we might regularly expect. I found that comforting once I began to notice it."



THE BOOKSHELF

What are Honors folk reading this year? Some titles taken from Honors Colloquia and faculty & staff's own reading piles.

Art + Faith: A Theology of Making, by Makoto Fujimura

An Earth-Careful Way of Life, by Lionel Basney

The Federalist Papers, Adams, Jay, and Hamilton

Fidelity: Five Stories, by Wendell Berry

Horizon, by Barry Lopez

Love & Salt: A Spiritual Friendship Shared in Letters, by Andrews & Griffith

Peace Like a River, by Leif Enger

Post-Truth, by Lee McIntyre

Reading While Black, by Esau McCaulley

Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy, by Cathy O'Neil

Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment, by Storey & Storey

What are you reading?
You can always email us at honors@uu.edu or chat, swap titles, or update your contact info.



Josiah McGee ('19)

Associate Director of Education at Passages and Graduate student in Global Diplomacy at SOAS University of London

"One of 2020's greatest losses was in-person relationships. Zoom was helpful, but eventually it becomes recognized as a substitute for authentic human connections. With gradually increasing freedom to do so, I have enjoyed reconnecting with friends and relatives both at home and abroad. In each of these humans, I am better able to see the image of God up close, and that reminds me how kind and gracious He is."

Leigh (Walker) Dale ('21)

Barista in Chattanooga, TN

"This year I have traveled to see the magnificence of God. I had many trips canceled last year that I was greatly looking forward to, including a mission trip to Maryland. I am so grateful that we are able to travel, see creation and meet new people safely again. This has given me hope that things get better, as long as I am patient."



Heather (Vidal) Hetrick ('16)

Mom and Laboratory Specialist for Union University in Memphis, TN

"Raising my children. I am continually amazed and encouraged by their joy, how they delight in the simplest things, their curiosity, resilience, and their pure and simple faith. Hearing my three-year old sing 'Christ is risen from the dead... and Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us' at any time and in any place reminds me why the hardest days are worth it."



Melanie Nassif ('21)

Graduate student in Theology and Church History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, IL

"Not only have I been spending more time in prayer and some good books, but I have been gardening a lot. I take the time to quietly meditate on God's love and his creation. Spending hours with the soil and plants has taught me the immensity of the Lord's love. If I am willing to put so much time and effort into a garden, how much more is he able and willing to cultivate the garden of our souls—each and every day!"

COURSE REFLECTION: SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE TUTORIAL

Katie Simpson will graduate in the Spring of 2022 with a Bachelor of Music in Composition. She grew up overseas but now hails from Raleigh, North Carolina.

"Radiance," he said. "It's more like . . . bursting out of the frame." I swirled my coffee in contemplation. Something about that statement stuck with me.

A year later, that little word continues to peek out at me as I reflect on the 2019 Scholar-in-Residence course, taught by Dr. Jeremy Begbie, professor from Duke University.

I spent the first half of the semester reading books and articles assigned by Dr. Begbie before he arrived on campus. I plunged into the worlds of St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and Boethius, Luther and Calvin, Bach and Handel, each time uncovering philosophies regarding the telos of music I had never even thought to think of. From this groundwork, the reading branched out to topics on musical time and eschatology, stewardship in the world of sound, and the purpose of music in and out of the church. By the time Dr. Begbie arrived mid-March, I was at least familiar with how Christians and philosophers have developed our understanding of the purpose of music throughout history, which provided a framework for his lectures on the role of music through the Christian themes of hope, freedom, lament, and resurrection.

Right off the bat, I was in awe of Dr. Begbie's life. As a theologian, musician, and composer, his goal of integrating theology and the arts resonated with my own interests and dreams as an aspiring composer, musician, and theologian. Despite his incredible knowledge as a professor and talent as a pianist, oboist, and composer, Dr. Begbie was kind and very encouraging to someone still plodding through her music theory classes. Sitting before me was a renowned author from Scotland and professor at Duke who decided to spend an entire week of his life answering the questions of a confused college freshman. Yet nothing seemed to separate us except the table holding two cups of coffee and a sheet of music.

At one point the subject of beauty came up. I said something akin to "I hope my music would be beautiful." To which he suggested I come back tomorrow with a reason for why I said that and a definition of what it meant for music to be beautiful. I did as he requested and came back proudly with five thought-out points as to why music ought to be beautiful. To this, he barely responded; he had only wanted me to think through something I thought was a given. Instead, he started talking about how the sun spilled

through the trees, overflowing the world below. And that good music, like good art, is uncontainable, constantly overflowing from the form—radiant. He proceeded to challenge me to think about how I would write music that was *radiant*, overflowing, yet bound to the forms and rules of music. He told me there should be purpose in my writing. That, like writing an essay or poem, everything in my music—every note, rhythm, phrase, theme—can be given and re-given to the listener. While reading through a fugue I had written, he pointed at a two-measure phrase and said that my entire piece should come out of that one phrase; I could mirror the phrase, turn it on its head, add a sharp here, toss it around between voices, and come up with an entire research paper spurred from this one thesis sentence.

A good poet takes words and sounds to paint a complex idea or difficult comparison in such a beautiful way that it blows the reader's mind. A good theologian refuses to run in circles around one "infallible opinion" when the God he studies is not only in our little circles of knowledge but most definitely overflowing the frames our doctrines call God. The task of the composer is to do the same: not to limit or spoon-feed a very capable audience, but to show them something they have thought of a hundred times before and to re-create that something. This re-creation would hopefully be delivered in a way we could call beautiful, but also in a way that overflows the frame, providing a glimpse of something bigger, something they perhaps had not even thought to think of.

This *radiance*—this bursting out of the frame—was a very tiny part of the course, yet for whatever reason it kept peeking out everywhere. One of Dr. Begbie's lectures, "Music and Lament," demonstrated the importance of capturing pain, loss, longing, or grief in a way that pulls hard at the listener's heart, forcing him to embody the cries overflowing from the violin or lonesomeness seeping past the oboe. In the lecture on "Music and the Resurrection," I again could hear themes of radiance: a brilliant joy that couldn't possibly have come out of a piece of music bound by space and time. Its beauty spilling over and out of the cross has somehow set a young woman's feet dancing and tears flooding down an old man's face.

It is this radiance that I think of every time I am tasked with writing a piece of music. Rather than making my job as a composer easier through tips or tricks, Dr. Begbie left me with eyes open to the huge responsibility I have to not only write well or beautifully, but to write in a way worthy of this thing he called radiance. But I now know that what little radiance I see or hear in this world is only a tiny ray of the radiance overflowing from and bursting out of our Father, flooding our little planet with beauty and lovers of the beautiful. We are dust and exhaled radiance from the mouth of God. Nothing truly beautiful can completely contain the radiance inside a frame because, like God, even our tiny reflections of Beauty must spill past the edges.



HIGHLIGHTS

August 2020

Outdoor Coffee Hours commenced, made possible by the All-Terrain Party Cart. Honors students and faculty are still able to gather for conversation and caffeination every Friday afternoon, socially distanced and outdoors.

October 2020

Two students applied for Fulbright grants, one to teach English abroad and another to conduct independent research. In what proved to be an unprecedentedly competitive year for Fulbright, neither ultimately received a grant, but both put forward impressive applications. Any current students or recent alumni interested in the Fulbright program should contact Rebecca Edgren.

The freshman class convened for a fall cookout and scavenger hunt masterminded by Dr. Barnard: the (now-infamous) Grove Code.

November 2020

For Campus & Community Day, more than 20 Honors students and faculty partnered with Jackson City Parks for a second year to do clean-up and maintenance at Muse Park.

February 2021

The Honors Student Association hosted a screening of the documentary-drama film, *The Social Dilemma*, followed by discussion of social networking technologies and their influences.

March 2021

Dr. Farr Curlin, MD, delivered the 23rd Annual Scholar-in-Residence lectures, "Contending for Good Medicine in a Secular Age." A Jackson native, Dr. Curlin is the Josiah C. Trent Professor of Medical Humanities and Co-Director of the Theology, Medicine and Culture Initiative at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Curlin's work focuses on the relevance of religious ideas and practices for the doctor-patient relationship, the moral and professional formation of clinicians, and care for patients at the end of life. His latest book is *The Way of Medicine: Ethics and the Healing Profession* (University of Notre Dame Press).

In lieu of the annual Art & Architecture Tour, the Beauty class attended a day-long Festival of Arts retreat, including sessions with poet Kate Daniels, book binding artist Maritza Davila, and composer-musician duo Dawson and Tanea Hull.

April 2021

The Honors Student Association threw a Spring Fête Champêtre on the campus grounds with music, food, and games.

MAY 2021

The year ended with an in-person banquet for the first time in two years. It was a pleasure to celebrate 26 General Honors graduates, 15 Discipline-specific Honors graduates, and 8 University Honors graduates.





HONORS COMMUNITY
1050 Union University Drive
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HONORS *at* UNION

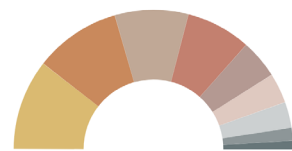
Honors at Union

Our Digits

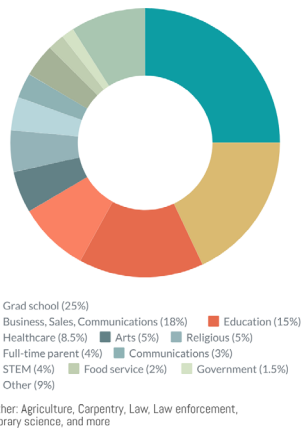
315 grads in 10 years

- living in 7 countries, 38 states, & 1 district
- 25% are in graduate school
18% have earned graduate degrees
- 16% are parents

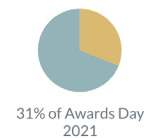
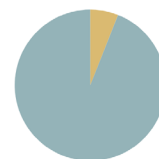
Vocational interests of roughly 40%
not represented by occupation



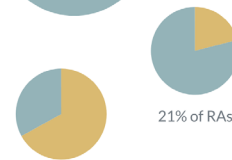
Alumni Occupations



6% of student body



31% of Awards Day 2021



21% of RAs

67% of Debate Team

185 current students

- in 52 different majors
- high-count departments: Biology, Languages, Business, Communications
- 43% homeschooled, 28% public schooled, & 28% private schooled