Prof's Picks

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The Rev. David Gortner, Ph.D., Director of Ministry Program and Professor of Evangelism and Congregational Leadership at Virginia Theological Seminary, recommends the following books as part of the Bishop Payne Library's monthly series highlighting a faculty member's "picks":

I am not, perhaps, the most likely one to pick up a national bestseller. But Christ Church in Alexandria (where my wife Heather VanDeventer serves as associate rector) came up with the brilliant idea of offering in-home supper-and-discussion groups during Lent, for people to read and discuss together *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, by Rachel Joyce (Random House, 2013). It turned out to be a wonderful book to read together – a book that draws the reader along the spiritual and psychological paths of hope, rediscovery, awakening, and revelation for characters who have become frozen in their own patterned resistance to the intrusions of life and death. The author develops her characters and their respective spiritual journeys with artful power. For Harold, a stirring of memory and remorses of the past, in the form of a letter from a dying friend, nudges, then stirs, then propels him to movement and speech and human relationship. For his wife, the experience of loss of control and predictability brings her to encounter herself, her neighbor, and her husband with new vulnerability and generosity. It is remarkable how the book shows the ways in which one loss shared openly can release memories and recognition of our many losses and joys. It was remarkable how group discussions of this book opened paths and doors for us to share with one another similar parts of our own stories.

*When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* has already been acclaimed as a tremendous, sensitive work of anthropology and psychology by Tanya Luhrmann. Currently at Stanford University, Tanya was previously on the faculty for human development, in the department where I studied at the University of Chicago. Her two other major ethnographic works were groundbreaking at the time: *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (1989), in which she explored from the inside the experiences and thoughts of those in contemporary England who embraced and practiced witchcraft and rituals of magic, *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologist Looks at American Psychiatry* (2001), in which she revealed the deep dual-mindedness of the field of psychiatry and its practitioners between the ascendant medical model of mental illness and the persistent psychoanalytic model. With each book, she has grown in stature as a sensitive and nuanced investigator of culture and or ritual practices. In *When God Talks Back*, Luhrmann explores the prayer life of revivalist evangelical Christians who are part of the Vineyard Fellowship churches, eager to understand the processes and means by which, through the practice of frequent and intense prayer that involves complete imaginal absorption, people can come to the place of regularly hearing God speak to them in the daily warp and woof of life. She unpacks and expands readers’ understanding of words like “pretend” and “imagination” as they relate to prayer and to all forms of social learning, explores the troubling experience of God’s silence or absence, and considers the experience of hearing God speak in light of other “sensory overrides” that people may experience in life. Dr. Kathy Brown and I have made this a core text for the DMin in Christian Spirituality, as it provides a social scientific and contemporary Protestant
perspective on what one finds consistently in the texts and practices of classic Christian spiritual traditions. As has become a consistent them in studies of religion (including Christian Smith’s groundbreaking study of religion and spirituality in American youth), intensity of immersion in the practice of one’s faith makes a difference for what one experiences and comes to know.

*The Lucifer Effect*. Philip Zimbardo’s magnum opus, returns to Zimbardo’s famous Stanford Prison Study as a lens through which to understand the evil that unfolds in human nature in situations of severe categorical distinctions blended with power differences between groups. Evil unfolds in the form of brutality that is excused with pejorative humor and with claims of the rightness, and even the righteousness, of a cause. Zimbardo offers insights into the dynamics of the college students that entered the prison roles of guards and prisoners, revealing much that was not previously published in a painful day-by-day account of the progressive “situated character transformations” that occurred. He extends his gaze beyond the “strange” dynamics of this experiment (which he had to discontinue after a week because of the cruelty that student “guards” were beginning to enact on emotionally demoralized student “prisoners”), turning his analytical eye on historical and contemporary situations in which human beings turned with full intent and purpose toward evil – the Holocaust, the genocides in Eastern Europe, Cambodia, and Rwanda, the wartime prison practices of the U.S. in Abu Gharaib prison, and the games of lies and complicity in corporations and systems of power that allow and even support atrocities. Zimbardo’s case is that evil emerges not because of the “bad apple,” but because of the “bad barrel”—the systemic and situational alignments of power, imparted meaning, and demand for obedience that produce extreme conformity pressure, ethical mutation, deindividuation and dehumanization. This work joins Hannah Arendt’s classic, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as a telling and chilling account of the way in which evil can unfold in any of us, especially when we are not vigilant against situations and systems that, by design, will corrupt character and bring out the worst in us.

In my course on “Evangelism, Public Witness, and New Faith Communities,” students are reading *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, a compelling text by two prominent sociologists, John McKnight and Peter Block. This is part of a mix of books on evangelism, community engagement and organizing, and church planting. McKnight and Block present a provocative argument that the rise of institutional “solutions” to community problems ends up disempowering communities. Instead of addressing problems themselves by drawing upon the natural strengths, capacities, and passions of people and groups in their neighborhoods, communities have learned in professionalized society to depend on police, schools, mental and physical health professionals, and family care organizations for matters of safety, education and character development, health and growth. This outsourcing mentality, encouraged by institutions that are eager to create needs for themselves by commodifying problems, mystifying (i.e., specializing) solutions, and marketing to dissatisfaction and creating perceptions of deficiency, results in people becoming “consumers and clients, not citizens and neighbors.” McKnight’s and Block’s book is a published manifestation of decades of work in Asset-Based Community Development, an approach developed by McKnight and his colleague Jody Kretzmann at Northwestern University as a corrective response to what they saw as some shortcomings in the classic community organizing methods of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation. Their approach, rooted in the critical perspectives of Jesuit-trained social theorist Ivan Illich, builds upon the observations made 180 years ago by French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville in his seminal book, *Democracy in America*—that Americans uniquely supported and depended upon each other through non-institutional local networks and associations. The book reads simply, belying its deeper origins, and raising challenges to any of us who have become too accustomed to thinking
of society—and church—in institutional rather than associational terms. It also raises important questions for churches regarding their relationship with their surrounding neighborhoods. Do we relate to our surrounding communities as providers for needs, or as partners in the discovery and sharing of gifts to mutually strengthen and support one another?

There are two other texts worth consideration, but I have used my space. Let me simply commend to you Ira Chaleff’s *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders*, as a tremendously helpful text for the artful practice of leadership from the second chair or from a recognized position of support. Chaleff outlines a set of courageous positions a strong follower must assume—and, not one before the other: taking on responsibility, serving (including serving the leader), challenging, participating in transformation, and taking moral action. I use Chaleff’s principles regularly when coaching and mentoring new clergy in their first or second positions after seminary. Let me also commend to you Garry Wills’ *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition*. In his inimitable style, and from his recognized place as a dedicated but critical Roman Catholic who is also a renowned journalist and historian, Wills directly challenges the structures, assumptions, and ecclesial reifications of priesthood, in a manner reminiscent of some of the most incisive language of Reformation-era texts. I use Wills’ text along with Jesuit George Wilson’s *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*, and our own Anglican solitary Maggie Ross’s *Pillars of Flame* to challenge students to wrestle with their own inherited and emerging notions of priesthood. Wills is worth reading—and, for the faint of heart, it can stir anxieties and fears of setting a fox loose in the henhouse.