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Letters from the Editors



I am currently in my last semester of my senior year at Union. On the day of this magazine's release, I will only have about three more weeks left of my entire college career. Can I be honest with you? I don't feel ready to meet the real world. As I write this, in my heart there is a swirling mix of thrilling hope of what this next stage of life could bring but there is also so much sink-

ing fear of what I will lose or what challenges I may face. You see, in every new stage, we are confronted with the unknown: unknown people, unknown places, unknown challenges and an unknown self. For when we step into a new season, we may slowly leave behind who we were for who we are to become. And that can be terrifying.

So, as I confront what this next season could mean, I am so thankful for a team of writers, photographers and designers who desired to step into the unknown with me. This semester's edition of the Cardinal & Cream magazine looks into the hearts of people who have experienced worlds colliding, whether those are worlds of two drastically different international cultures or those of trying to reach out to someone who seems similar but who feels miles away from the known. At the heart, our team of editors wanted to explore what it means to look outside of ourselves. I hope as you read this magazine you see stories of people who know what it means to love others well and seek out a world beyond their immediate context. As Christians living out the Great Commission, we are called to go to the people who are different from us, and this magazine is us exploring what it means to do just that.

Come. Take a step into the unknowns of colliding worlds with us.

Love,

Kirbi Cochran

Someone asked me a few months ago if I regret not doing more in college or if I regret saying "no" to certain opportunities I passed up. As someone who battles overachievement, surprisingly, I responded with an emphatic "no." But the one thing I regret is not creating deeper relationships with even one more person. People won't remember me as the girl who had lots of



internships or as an editor-in-chief or for awards I won. They remember the intimate moments of friendship on a couch, or cooking dinners together in small apartments, or a spontaneous road trip to a nearby city. People will remember how I made them feel, that's what my boss always told us. And it's deeply true.

This edition of Cardinal & Cream focuses on people who care about how they make people feel, whether they did so across many cultures or right here in Jackson their whole lives. This magazine is filled with stories of outward focus and looking at how culture, whether at Union or far away, affects our daily lives and relationships with people. As I've read through this magazine and have edited the words, I'm convicted to look outside of myself, to learn lessons from those who live life differently than me and to open my eyes for how I can create cultures of real authenticity in my own life.

As you read this magazine, I hope it meets you in whatever season you find yourself in. Whether it be as a senior, like myself, looking back and wishing you had done a few things differently, or a freshman, with your whole college career ahead of you. Learn and grow with us. It's never too late to look outside yourself and care for people in a different way than you have before or experience a culture that challenges the way you've always lived.

With love,

Maddie Steele



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“As storytellers developing our craft, we seek to honor, move and inform our community by creating narratives that encourage thoughtful conversation, advocate for positive change and build lasting connections”

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Leaving an Imprint: Creating A Legacy In A Season That Is Temporary

*Written by Truman Forehand
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte*

“I’m not a math wizard, let me just start with that,” Hadie Sowell, senior intercultural business major, said. She was preparing for what she was about to say: the grade on her first college calculus test. “I made a 27 on it, which is terrible. And I remember getting that test back. And I was like, I’m not any dumber, just because I had a 27 on this. And I wouldn’t have been smarter if I got a 100 on it.” A lot of things that happen in college are not going to have any lasting impact.

All of us think of the legacy we will leave at the end of our lives. The end of college is not death, obviously, but it is the end of an era, and it produces introspection. Did it matter that I was here? For students, there will be a time when the memory of anything we did here will decompose.

“Some relationships and some things, some opportunities and roles are just for these four years,” Sowell said. “And that doesn’t make them less good or less important for your life. But they were just seasonal, you know. And so I’m not afraid to lose the seasonal things.”

Bad grades are bad, but Sowell still passed calculus. She lived to tell the tale. The same goes for other things we do here besides school. A lot of it will not impact our lives for more than a week, or a month or a year. Not every Cookout run will be legendary. We have to figure out what is seasonal and what is not.

Life expectancy numbers tell us that we can hope to have around 80 years to forge our legacy. To leave a record of a life. The four years spent in college are only a snapshot in that timeline. How do we leave a legacy from our time on campus? The stakes are much lower, but the window of opportunity is also much shorter.

“I’ve thought a little bit about this just when comparing, ‘Who was Dave in high school? Who was Dave in college? And how is he different now?’” Dave Edgren, senior business administration major, said.

We were talking about constructing a life. College is the first time for most people that you get to build it from the ground up, to decide who you are, how you spend your time, how you want to be known.

“In terms of constructing who I am, it’s funny, it wasn’t until senior year summer that I started going by Dave. So all of high school, I was David and my friends back home know me as David. It’s people at college who know me as Dave.”

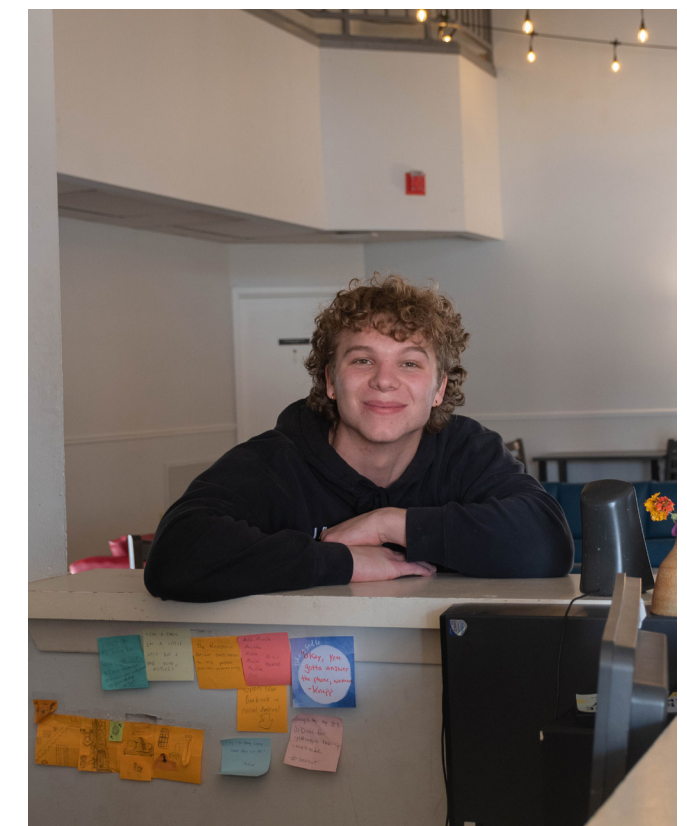
College presents a new door, a threshold you have to cross. You get to decide who you are when you step on campus for the first time. You can start from scratch, but it can be overwhelming because you might be forced to start from scratch.



When I got my roommate assignment for freshman year, there were two names I did not recognize in the email and two that I did. One was mine, one was my brother’s — the other two belonged to strangers. I’d never lived with strangers before, but this was college, and that’s what happens to the hapless, helpless freshmen who get paired together as roommates. There were strangers everywhere and familiar faces nowhere.

But on some level, every student faces that overwhelming feeling. Some of us flounder, some of us make a resounding decision about who to be, about what to be known for.

“I think a legacy can be a much smaller and more intimate thing,” Anna Thompson, senior social work major, said. “Okay, 500 people don’t know who I am, but these five really do, and I’ve been able to pour into them and to share my life with them and lead them closer to Christ. Like leaving an imprint on someone’s life.”





The stories people will tell when we leave matter a lot more than who knew our names. People will tell stories about Anna.

Her friend received tragic news, heartbreaking and horrible, and in the awful moments that follow something like that, was thinking of who to call. She called Anna.

“We were sitting in her room and she’s just broken, weeping, and I was just sitting there weeping with her and I didn’t really say anything, but I just sat there and just cried with her,” Thompson said. “And no one knew that we were sitting there crying about it and no one knew that we were just having this little broken moment in this dorm room. But it was so beautiful to me looking back to see how she knew she could call me and that I would come.”

We all get to choose to be known for something. Not all college experiences are created equally, though. There is a temptation to treat building a legacy as simply stacking accomplishments, which would make it something closer to a resumé.

“If I make it to the presidency in my club, that’s gonna last me four years and then it’s done,” Edgren said. “No one’s gonna remember that necessarily as much as just the people you touch.”

Some things might not be life changing, and that is OK.

“I still have that test, I have it in the drawer of my desk,” Sowell said. “And sometimes, if I’m getting overwhelmed about something, I’ll just look at it and I’ll remember that feeling. Like 19-year-old Hadie, shaking in her boots about to take this test, and then getting it back a few days later and realizing nothing changed.”

She keeps it as a memento, a reminder of something that did not matter.

For the majority of your life, college exists only as a memory. So, the question becomes: what do you want to be nostalgic for?

Dave Edgren knows. He was the RA of Pollard for two years, an older brother figure to two freshmen classes worth of residents. Last year, all the guys in the building wanted to play intramural soccer. So they went to Dave, and he made a team.

“I was like, I won’t play because I’m God-awful at soccer, but I will make the team,” Edgren said. “But we made the team and they were like, ‘Dude, you’re on the team. You’re playing.’ And I was like, ‘You realize I’m awful at soccer?’ And they’re like, ‘Yes, we want you.’”

They took the field wearing the uniform of the Pollard Pandas: a white undershirt with black circles drawn on with markers. They won, and they kept winning, and they took home the cup for lower division intramurals.

“I remember we were taking this picture in the goal after we had won. And someone was holding the soccer ball and they brought it over to me and they’re like, Dave, we want you to hold this because you made this happen. And so in the picture, I’m holding the soccer ball. And it is a silly little thing, but I think it meant a lot to me.”

My Analog Christmas:

The Technological Barrier Between Us And God

*Written by Katherine Anne Thierfelder
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte*

Almost a year ago, I wrote an article musing on the phenomenon of noise in our everyday lives. I talked about service workers wearing AirPods, live music or radio in restaurants that nobody listens to and our fear of a broken car stereo. I posit that our default position is popping in earbuds because silence makes us feel out of control and noise has become our metaphorical pacifier.

Let's make one thing clear: when I say noise, I don't just mean "of the ear variety." Noise can be "of the eye variety" as well. Noise is stimulation. Both scrolling through Instagram and listening to Spotify count.

Over Christmas break, I took two straight weeks when I went analog. I locked my phone, AirPods, Apple Watch and laptop in my bedside drawer. I pulled out my old-school alarm clock, record player, CDs and typewriter.

Initially, I didn't feel like I was the right person to do this experiment because it didn't feel like much changed in my day-to-day. I wasn't having any epiphanies or repenting of any sins. But after transitioning back into a life framed around the digital, I'm prepared to take the charitable conclusion of my earlier article a step further.

We are addicted to noise, and it is harming us.

To some people, I understand that this might seem like a "duh" statement. Parents everywhere are shouting, "Say it louder for my kid in the back!" Their kid in the back pops his Airpod out long enough to say, "Yeah,

I know. But this is life now, so would ya stop dogging me?"

But I want to try to break down what I mean.

I'll start by saying that my intention is not to condemn all things digital and prescribe you a strict diet of sunshine in secluded woods sans all noise (though that might not be a bad idea for a weekend or vacation). I'll be the first person to admit that the digital revolution has given us good things that are right to enjoy. But I think that we are severely lacking in the tools needed to enjoy the good things about our noisy, digital world while still filtering out the harmful things.

Even more than that, I think we are severely lacking the ability to see just how badly we are being hurt spiritually by it.

When I realized the damage that had been done to my spiritual life by my noise addiction, I fell to my knees faster than I ever have.

To give a bit of context, I had been searching for a deeper relationship with Christ since the beginning of last summer. I had been growing closer to the Lord, but my time in the Word had been lacking something, and I couldn't pinpoint what. Reading the Bible was boring. I felt a sense of urgency to be done with my quiet time when I started it. There was this worry in the back of my mind that it was taking too long; I was missing something. What was I missing? Nothing, but that's always what I felt: bored and urgent to be finished. But at the same time, I wanted to want to read the Bible, and despite how much I didn't enjoy doing it, I still made it a habit.



Throughout those months of praying for a rich quiet time, I knew that part of the reason I wasn't gleaning anything was that I wasn't meditating on the words I was consuming. I wasn't lingering in His Word, so I wasn't getting everything I could from it. For whatever reason, I just couldn't get my mind to stop feeling the need for speed long enough to try to meditate.

It was during my digital fast that I first successfully meditated, but it wasn't really a conscious decision. At least, not any more than it ever had been. I'd tried and failed to meditate many times before, but when I was reading the Word during my analog time, going slow just came naturally. I found the need for speed conveniently absent, and I didn't even notice the difference. I would sit down to read the Bible, completely unaware of what time I started, and read until I was done.

It wasn't until I picked my digital devices back up again that I noticed how different quiet time without phones was from quiet time with them.

My need for speed returned with a vengeance. I had just gotten into a good rhythm with the Lord. I had been wondering at His goodness, lingering in His presence and tasting the sweetness of His Word for two weeks, and suddenly, all of those senses were dulled.

After my experiment ended, I was reading an article about someone who had quit social media, and though my fast had not been from social media, it still hit me like a Mack truck. My noise addiction was affecting me more than I realized.

Meditation is a fundamentally slow thing. It involves thinking deeply on a set bit of scripture, filling your mind with the Lord and emptying it of everything else. My digital universe had trained me to constantly have 30+ tabs open in my brain at all times and anything less equaled boredom. It trained me to have as many things happening around me as possible at the cost of giving none of them my full attention.

That mindset is the antithesis of meditation.

Here are three things meditation is not:

To start, meditation is not efficient. It takes however long it takes, and you do it until you're done. There's no 10-step guide to streamline your quiet time, and

if there is, it's probably bull. Meditation does not fit neatly into a mind always racing the clock, and I believe our digital world molds our minds that way. Time is a suffocating thing when it's always on our wrists and we see it every time our smartwatch buzzes. It's the first thing we see when we open our iPhone for the 13th time in the past five minutes to check if anything has changed. Time moves slowly; it moves quickly; it never stops moving! We're always aware of it. We have to maximize the little bit of it that we have in a day, yet it's never enough. We are judged on efficiency; we do or don't do things based on how much of our time they will or won't consume.

Second, meditation is not highly stimulative. It doesn't work if you have 30+ other tabs open. It requires focus on God and the piece of His Word you're reading and nothing else.

Finally, meditation is not easy. In a world where we've been handed everything on our digital platter, our fingertips itch to take shortcuts. There is no shortcut to meditation. You just have to do it, fail, rinse and repeat until you improve.



Many of us, especially those of us who have grown up in the digital age, were thrown into this world without any time to stop and consider how we might handle tech in a healthy way. There wasn't a beat before we were handed a smartphone where we could pause and consider what kind of impact this might have on us, especially spiritually. There are studies done now, sure, but I think this goes beyond scientific studies. I think we all need to take some time away from our digi-verse to think for ourselves about the harms that have come as a result.

I am not recommending getting rid of your smartphone (though, if you wanted to, I wouldn't stop you) because the fact of the matter is that it is nearly impossible to function apart from all things digital. Our world is built on the digital. Instead, I am recommending everyone take a fast from it, whether that's a week-end or several weeks, several months or 24 hours. You can't truly know how you're being impacted until you separate yourself from it. You can't learn how to handle



technology or, to use biblical language, steward these gifts well unless you see it for what it is.

So, if you've never done it, take a fast from your digital devices. You can do it. I promise. Trust the Lord that there won't be any major emergencies in the time that you need to take off. Let those around you know what you're doing so they're not surprised, and if you truly cannot go without your phone for whatever reason, turn all notifications off except the absolutely necessary ones. Try putting your phone in a different room and only checking it every so often instead of keeping it in your pocket. Make your life as analog as possible, then turn your eyes and mind Godward.

You might be surprised by how easy it is to encounter God when you take away what is between you and Him.



What's Done In Secret

Written by Noel Moore

Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

I have never been particularly good at not seeking credit.

If I do something good, I want recognition. Making an A on a test, helping plan an event, doing something kind for someone else — there is a large part of me that wants others to know that I did those things, that wants to be rewarded and applauded and praised for whatever noteworthy task I've accomplished. After all, I'm a good person, aren't I? Why should I be shy about it? Not that I am some self-righteous or boastful person, of course, but there is nothing wrong with wanting some well-deserved credit.

Right?

That was my mindset as I greeted Emily Key, the Office of University Ministry's administrative assistant blowing in with the chill as I stood to wave her over. She brought the warmth of the OUM inside Modero, entering the shop with a smile and making her way over to my cozy table. Faint chatter and sounds of coffee brewing swirled around us as we sat. A cold winter sun highlighted part of her face.

After a brief introduction, I asked Key what it was she did in her office. I knew she sent the chapel emails I received in my inbox each week, but that was about it.

"A lot of my job is helping with the things behind the scenes," Key said. "Like planning out travels and coordinating, running cars and pickups and all those things that happen."

I was already stressed just listening. Having had to plan a number of "behind the scenes" type of events recently, I knew how difficult that could be. I tended to casually mention to whoever was nearest at the time how draining the preparation had been or how much work I had put into it or how much time it had taken. It made the job worthwhile to know that at least someone could give me credit for how hard I was working.

But Key spoke of working for the Lord, not for man. Of striving to seek no worldly approval, only God's. The events that she planned, the work that she did — other people got the credit for it. Key also did not shy away from the struggles that come with trying to live that out.

"I think being in a position where a lot of the things are behind the scenes is kind of convicting in a way because there are moments where you want what you're doing to be seen and recognized and appreciated and praised and all of that," Key said. "And I think we want that often. You want a little bit of validation that you're doing a good job, and that what you're doing is important and that it matters. Doing something without knowing if it matters or not, it's so hard. It's so hard. No one else sees what I'm doing. No one else knows that I was part of this. But the work can still matter, and it can still be important."

Her words convicted me. Just as she'd said, I had begun thinking that my actions only mattered if others knew about them.

"I needed this reminder," I said, and Key laughed.

"Me too."

As I met with others in similar roles, the theme continued. No matter their position, it was difficult for everyone to avoid seeking credit. I asked Amy Eads, administrative assistant and coordinator for Student Life, what her plans were before she ended up at Union.

"In my younger days, I had visions that I was, you know, going to be working in the business world and working in the city and all of that," Eads said with a fond chuckle. "When you go to college, you just expect to go out and conquer the world."

She now lives in "little Chester county," working behind the scenes to keep Union running smoothly. Though it's not what she expected out of life, Eads is content.

"Still feel like I did a good job conquering the world," Eads said. "Just a smaller area of it"

Katherine King, academic secretary for Union's psychology, sociology, political science and history departments, agreed.





“I think when I was in high school and college, for sure, I always liked being a leader,” King said.

She now serves in a variety of supporting roles, including ministry wife and secretary, but she finds fulfillment in those positions, despite what she had originally planned for her life.

“Really, through college the Lord kind of taught me slowly over time that what he’s called me to is just as

important as anything else, whatever it is, whether I’m getting earthly rewards or not,” King said. “I’m more secure in who I am now, even though my role may be less glamorous than other roles that I’ve had. But I’m more content with who I am as a person, who I am in Christ, that I really don’t seek that or even desire it.”

Each woman I had the privilege to speak to wasn’t showy, wasn’t boastful, but in quiet ways put me first without ever once pointing it out. At the end of our interview, Key could have left, but she asked me how my semester was going and seemed to genuinely care about my answer. Eads found time to speak to me despite expecting her first grandchild any day. When King and I moved to the honors lounge to chat, she took the wooden chair and gestured for me to sit on the couch — “Not that side, though, it looks a bit dusty.” Never once did they ask for recognition or gratitude for their kind gestures. They just acted.

We are told it’s best to live our lives out loud, making an impact wherever we go. We want to be trailblazers and hard workers and change-makers, and perhaps most of all we want to be recognized for what we have done. But these women and countless others demonstrate the value in quiet leadership, in finding contentment outside of earthly praise.

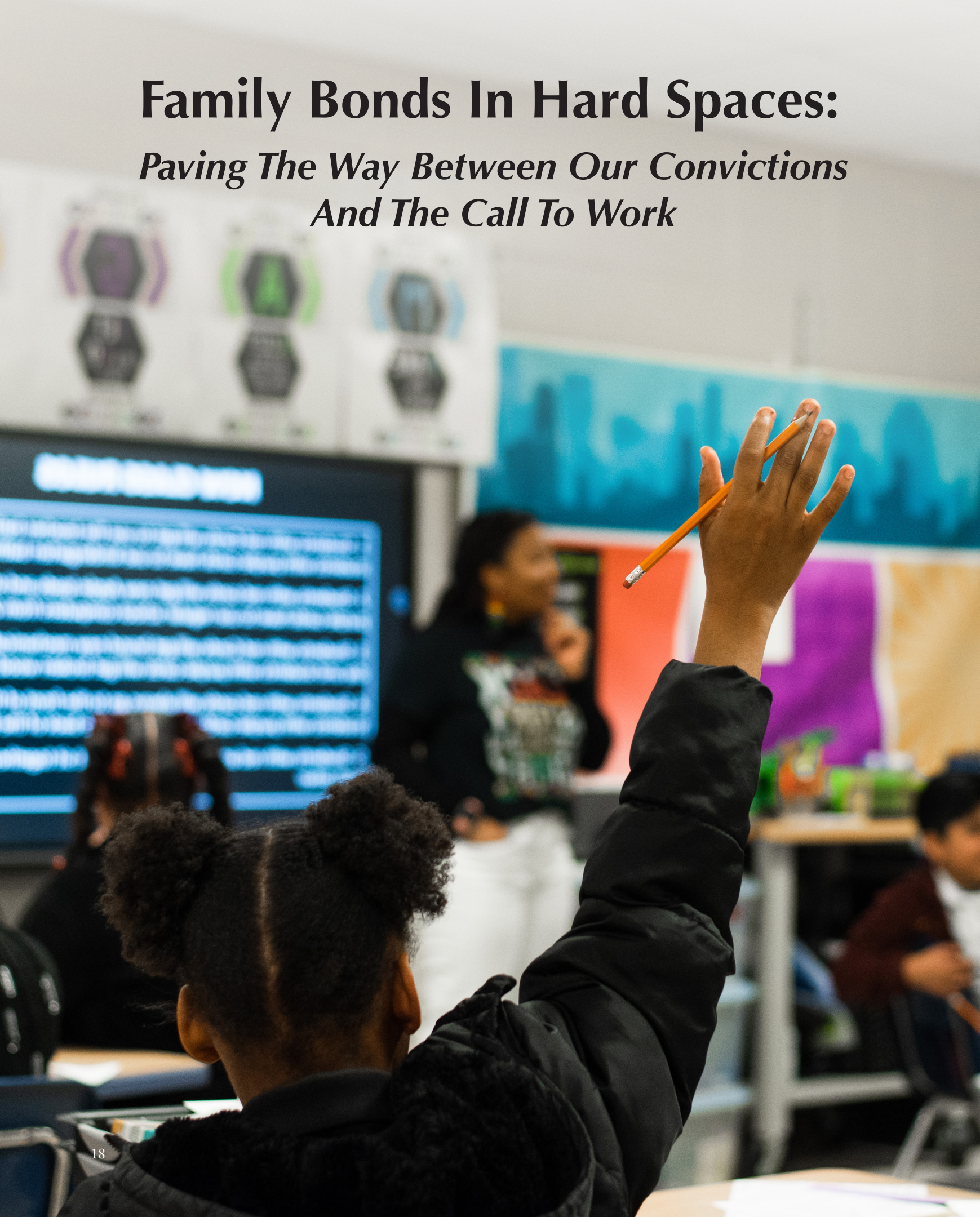
“It’s an opportunity to think about your work as something that’s for the Lord and that he sees,” Key said. “And no one else sees it, and no one else knows the thing that you did. That’s fine. They don’t need to. The Lord knows, and the Lord sees.”

In a world of social media and self-absorption, the idea of doing good without an audience to cheer you on is nearly foreign. Especially in college, a place where so often it feels like you have to be constantly in the spotlight in order to have any worth. But I left each interview feeling both convicted and inspired – to step up in whatever role the Lord is leading me towards, just as these women have done, and to do so eagerly and without expectations of worldly praise or recognition.

As Matthew 6:6 puts it, pray with the door closed. Do good without performing. The verse ends with a promise: “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Not other people, not the world — God recognizes us when we do good. And isn’t that enough?



Family Bonds In Hard Spaces: *Paving The Way Between Our Convictions And The Call To Work*



Written & Photographed by Maddie Steele

I still remember the day Jenna Wilson, senior nursing student, walked through our living room door when she got home from LeBonheur Hospital in Memphis. She was in the midst of pediatric clinicals and had been assigned to a particularly difficult case. The patient had been in a car accident and her parents were not responding or visiting her. When Jenna arrived at the hospital, this patient was assigned to her to cheer up and connect with.

“I was nervous to go in and make this girl happy,” Jenna said, as anyone would in this situation.

The emotional pain the patient was experiencing had turned into physical pain, manifested in asking for pain meds frequently. The patient was callous at first, but with the help of a musical therapist at the hospital, Jenna learned a new way to help. Soon, she found herself singing karaoke with her patient. Jenna never imagined her day to involve singing Beyonce with a teenage patient, but that’s what was needed to treat her. She saw the walls fall down and the patient relaxed. She stopped asking for pain meds, and she began to see that nurses really do care. But Jenna had to return to campus; she had to leave this patient, disconnect from “nurse Jenna” and go back to “student Jenna.”

Countless students on campus experience this feeling daily as they are student teaching or caring for patients.

Krista Robertson, senior elementary education major, shared a similar experience with a student she taught at Andrew Jackson Elementary School. This fifth grade student had parents who were in jail and was instead being raised by her grandmother, but she soon faced the death of this grandmother. She decided to attend school the following Monday and Krista was teaching the lesson, not knowing all this had happened in her student’s life just a few days prior.

“Miss Robertson, I was having the worst day ever and I came to your class and it made me really happy and I was so happy I came to school today,” the student said to Krista after class.

“And this is why I teach! Her life was super crappy, but she was able to find joy in my class. If I could do this for her every single day, I would,” Krista explained as she recounted this story.

Jenna Wilson and Krista Robertson steward both their lives as students and their lives in their clinicals and internships. Their future careers deal with difficult people daily, and they hold their patients’ or students’ futures in their hands.

These two cultures, one of the full-time Union student, and the other a young professional in the working world, can feel like a game of tug-of-war on some days. The schedules conflict, and often, it feels like they have one foot in college and one foot out. Yet it is valuable, it is sanctifying, it is deeply hard, yet deeply rewarding.

Krista has been student-teaching fifth grade social studies since the beginning of this school year. Many of her students have difficult home lives, and most come from broken families. She tells me the principal often says they have a “parent problem, not a student problem.” After all, where do children learn to gossip or fight or steal?

“A challenge for elementary students is that they’re little sponges. You have the most influence in the world to develop them as better humans and to teach them lessons, and they listen to you,” Robertson said. “God has given us an opportunity as teachers to steward them, and we have a responsibility to teach them not just from books, but life lessons. Figuring out how to steward that well has been challenging.”

Jenna has been in her clinical rotations since the beginning of junior year. Many of her patients have no support system and often seek support from their medical care team. One man in particular, who is unhoused, frequently comes into the ER just to get a blanket and talk to the nursing staff as his socialization for the day. He needs community, and the hospital staff gives that to him.



“Being on Union’s campus, you kind of assume that people have things together and life is good and they’re established, but there’s people right next to us who don’t have life together and don’t even have people to help them get their life together,” Wilson said.

On the difficult days, when a patient dies or there is a family situation that burdens Jenna, she has learned to give herself room to process, to feel and to understand that it’s okay to be affected by the patients she sees. But there is also a reality in the fact that this is her life from now on. She has plans to become a NICU nurse after graduation, which will involve a great deal of grief-filled patient situations.

“A very common theme among floors I’ve been on is coping with negativity in unhealthy ways. But for them, the only way they can cope is to be explicit and sarcastic and to make worst case scenarios and things that the average person would see as terrible, a very humorous thing,” Wilson said. “As a student, you want to be fresh and contribute as much as you can, but all the other nurses don’t think in this light.”



The same can be said for the world of education that Krista finds herself in. Many teachers are frustrated with their daily tasks, dealing with unruly students and often being cursed out by parents, all at a low pay grade. Coming in with fresh eyes and excitement, Krista finds it challenging to be around the negativity of burnt-out teachers.

Real life outside of college is hard and it’s weighty, but in the midst of jobs that are stressful and taxing, family is formed.

“Something really sweet coming into the NICU, the preceptors and nurses have used the phrase ‘family’ many times. We are a family, we treat each other as family, we try to incorporate our interactions with the parents as family. That’s been a breath of fresh air. It’s been sweet to see how the nurses step in for each other and carry each other’s burdens, and they know each other’s stories,” Wilson said. “They even know what appointments the other nurses have later in the day. Or even something as simple as, ‘Hey, what are you gonna do with your nails?’”

Family is an interesting word, given the fact we usually use it in two contexts: our own biological family or the church. Jenna and Krista describe the challenges of their work cultures as having an end result of “family.” While Jenna’s career in nursing deals with patients who might be alone or in need of the supportive aspects of family, Krista’s environment inhabits a space where children need an example of what the literal structure of family looks like.

“School culture in general, they try to build a family, but at Andrew Jackson specifically, we have a hard demographic: most of them come from very broken homes,” Robertson said. “We definitely lean on each other to bridge relationships and to show our students that we are a family and what that looks like. It’s beneficial to have people to lean on when you’re working in a hard place.”

This family model has been sparked for many students here at Union, but specifically for Jenna in her roommates and relationships with professors. Union is so often referred to as a “bubble” and a space where, if you’re in the right circles, you are constantly talking about the Lord and what he is doing in your life. It becomes normal and mundane, and we take it for granted. But what about when we go out from this “bubble”



and are launched into a public school where discussion of religion isn’t allowed?

If Union is truly teaching us and training us in the correct ways, the cultures of Union and those of hospitals and schools shouldn’t conflict. Being in a “bubble” such as Union should only propel us forward and energize us in the ways we need to do the work we are called to do. The call to work is Biblical, it is from the Lord, so how does Union enable us to live out our command to work?

“How do I share truth with you and love on you and discipline you as a student in a secular world as people I can’t share the Gospel with?” Krista asked. “I can’t say the word Jesus at all. Everything in public education comes from a place of ‘how can I be a good human’ instead of ‘how can I glorify God.’ Mrs. Cates always tells me the way I live my life is how people will see Jesus,” Krista said. “The way you love your students and their parents even when you have a parent cursing you out is a perfect example to share the Gospel.”

Well Worn, Well Loved

*Written by Sarah Edgren
Illustrated by Abby Kraus*

I like the way
Books look when they have been read many times
Pages creased and dog-eared
Words underlined and circled
Coffee stains splattered
Dried leaves pressed between pages
Wrinkled covers
Notes scribbled in the margins

It is weathered
But it is well loved

I am the same
The Lord
In His love for me
Allows
The pages of my future plans to be torn out
He allows
Stains of grief to appear on my heart
He allows
The questions in my margins to be left unanswered
He allows
The cover titled "my story"
To be crossed out
And replaced with "His story"

He allows this all
For being weathered and worn,
Means changing and growing
It means that I am well loved



Fellowship Everywhere:

Santhosh Abraham's Journey

Written by Samuel Stettheimer

Photographed by Maddie Steele

“My favorite one is something called krapow gai, which is chicken with basil leaves. You add a bit of garlic, oyster sauce, chiles and bit of soy sauce also,” Santhosh Abraham told me. “That’s a favorite to bring.”

I had asked Abraham, an associate professor of accounting at Union, what his favorite food to bring to a potluck is. I asked first because he is very cultured, having lived in seven countries total, and second, because potlucks are something Abraham passionately partakes in. Living as a Christian in those seven Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic and Christian cultures taught Abraham what the missional church is supposed to be: a picture of hospitality and fellowship.

Abraham was born in a heavily Islamic region of Nigeria and lived there for the first ten years of his life. His mother was Christian at the time, and his father found faith after he and his family nearly crashed in a plane that was only saved by recent rain sogging up the ground and slowing the landing.

Abraham’s early experience of faith took place in a bubble isolated from the immediate culture. Christianity in the south of Nigeria had some influence and the family could attend an Assembly of God church, but otherwise, he couldn’t experience real fellowship.

When his family moved back home to India, Abraham experienced the opposite. Much of India is heavily Hindu, of course, but the Abrahams lived in Kerala, a famously high-literacy, further-developed, religiously-diverse Indian state that was much friendlier to their faith. They also had a close church family, since the church was founded by Abraham’s actual family.

Abraham’s maternal grandfather came to the Christian faith he previously ignored after his wife was healed overnight from uterine cancer following a period of prayer and fasting. He went on to found the church tucked away in Kerala’s diversity.

“Fast forward to today: It’s one of the most influential churches in Kerala right now. It has close to 3,000 people, or somewhere in that range. It’s quite big for a church in that part of the world,” Abraham said. “My grandfather started the church, and it has become a big place of comfort for many people.”

Comfort helps with spiritual care, but being missional involves addressing physical needs. Abraham, thinking primarily of India, emphasized the serious need for Christian communities to care for those left behind. On a visit to India over winter break, Abraham learned of Gilgal Ash-wasa, an elderly care home that took in his parents’ former neighbor, a widow called Ebenezer.





“She didn’t have anyone, any family — like, no kids, no immediate family. She found a place in this home,” Abraham said. “Traditionally in India, but also in most of the Eastern cultures, when you get older, you go and live with one of your children. That’s normally how it works; the idea of, like, an elderly care home is not very common there in that part of the world.”

But one day, a minister was waiting for a bus and saw a crying older lady who had no one to take care of her. The minister and his wife took Ebenezer in, and when she died after a few months, she left her savings to the couple to start the elderly care home.

That’s what the church is supposed to do: actively bring people with need — physical and spiritual — together with Christ. Evan Thompson, a third-year accounting major who accompanied Abraham on a school trip to Thailand, witnessed physical need too.

“I walked by some person who was just laying there with, you know, a shriveled-up arm or something wrong. And it just brought to life the idea of ‘silver and gold have I none,’” Thompson said, referring to the story in Acts 3 of Peter healing a beggar.

Thompson described two modes the church acts in: the missional, which goes out to seek followers, and the attractional, which brings followers to itself.

Being missional looks different in non-Christian cultures (Northern Nigeria, India, Thailand, Dubai), secular cultures (Scotland, New York) and nominally Christian cultures (England, Jackson). Living in each of these cultures prepared Abraham to be missional through hospitality.

“So one of the passions that I’ve had, and my wife also has this passion, was to be able to work with people who are not Christians, you know, to be that salt and light in the middle of them, right? And I think God brings you to different places for set times and different purposes,” Abraham said. “It’s one of the things I want to do because I have experienced that as a student, inviting people to homes and having meals and those kinds of things, and sharing some of their testimonies while they did that.”

Those experiences of hospitality as a student took place in England, when Abraham was a financially struggling academic with an expecting wife. When they had only

200 pounds in the bank, a Christian family gave them a temporary room.

Scotland was a very different religious experience. Abraham found it to be a very secular country where the average person on the street is agnostic. But even in that rough of secularism, Abraham did find a diamond of fellowship.

“The highlight of going there was meeting a man called Brian Windrome, who was my line manager,” Abraham said. “To have a boss like that, who was a very strong Christian, was a really, really great opportunity for me to be mentored because, you know, sometimes people would make a bit of fun of Brian, but they still respected him.”

Between Brian’s mentorship and the hospitality of the small local church, Abraham’s time in secular Scotland prepared him to give missionally, most notably in Albany, New York.

“What makes Albany interesting is there’s a lot of international people, different faiths,” Abraham said. “So we had a lot of interaction with a lot of Hindu families in the apartment blocks, and we stayed in the apartment block. Most of these people were from overseas. Probably the strongest relationships I’ve had from all the places I’ve been to was there.”

Among this international crowd, Abraham and his family practiced giving the same kind of hospitality they had received in the UK. They joined a movement of other international people from different churches called “capital district international fellowship.” Over time, they became tightly knit.

“We would have a fellowship meeting, and then everyone would bring some food, and you had a potluck, different kinds of food, at the end of that,” Abraham said. “All these people didn’t necessarily always have family nearby. So even when it came to Thanksgiving, we would just meet together. This was our family. Everyone would come together, have a dish, meet in the morning. And we would do things together, watch a movie in a church hall and then spend that whole day there. But for us, though, it gave us the opportunity to invite people who are not Christians to this meeting.”



“Jackson is obviously very different.”

The international community is certainly not as prevalent. Fewer people come to faith through miraculous healings or salvation from plane crashes. Culture is typically Christian in name.

“The challenge in those countries is finding, like, a Christian friend. Here, you have a lot of Christians, so the challenge may be: how do you be an example among the Christians? There, it’s: how do you be an example among non-Christians?” Abraham said. “Even among the so-called born-again Christians, there are plenty of opportunities.”

Abraham unloaded a bank of ideas for different prayer meetings, small groups and fellowships on me. It felt a bit like a pitch meeting. He’s in several groups now, but apparently not enough. He needs to cook and pray for more people. In 2023, Abraham aims to form a new fellowship group dedicated to prayer and fasting. He hopes to break communal fasts together, in homes, perhaps with the Thai cuisine he so loves.

“Wherever in the world you go, whether it’s America or anywhere else, there’s no better way to get to know people than our food. Even in the Bible, you see Jesus eating and talking in someone’s house, and things happen. That would be something I’d like to do.”



Learning To Love Through Foster Care



Written by Kirbi Cochran

Photos Contributed by Tara Cochran

“Kirbi, how would you feel about having a little sister?”

This question usually comes around 3, 4 or 5 years old. But I wasn't 3, 4 or 5, I was 14, and my mom wasn't asking if I wanted a biological, baby sister, she was asking if I was prepared to make room for a 7-year-old girl who needed a home. Not understanding foster care, and not being able to fast forward one year in the future to see how much I would struggle to love this new person in my home, I enthusiastically declared, “Yes! That would be a dream!”

To some extent, that's true: when you idealize foster care, it is a dream. When it's advertised on billboards and movies as “simply helping a child in need” or “just showing love to a child will make all their problems go away,” it sure does seem like an easy task. But the reality is that when those rose-colored glasses, the ones that make everything seem beautiful and colorful and perfect, finally fall away, what's left is a difficult task.

Mary Beth, the previously mentioned 7-year-old girl, joined our family later that year. We picked her up at the small Department of Children & Family Services office in her hometown. While my parents signed the paperwork, I met my new foster sister for the first time on the worn couches in the tattered waiting room. After a while, we headed out to the parking lot where all of her belongings were packaged up in trash bags or old backpacks, all of which we moved over to our car, most bags made it to her room, some were put in the garage and never made it back out again.

We drove home that day to a cake and small party for the newest version of our family. So began our entry into the first stage of fostering, the first stage of any relationship, the first stage of culture shock: the honeymoon stage. This stage is the epitome of rose-colored glasses — everything seems like a dream that you will never wake up from, until you wake up.

This season lasted a long time with Mary Beth. She was joyful, fun, enthusiastic and she brought life into our home.

“Why do you hate me?” Mary Beth asks.

“I don't hate you,” I lie.

It's another typical night for dinner, my family gathers around the table. Hanging back I take my time putting food on my plate and water in my glass. If I finish too early and sit down before the right moment, she might try to sit next to me. She might even try to talk to me. And if she talks to me, she'll push a button. And if she pushes a button, I'll pop again. And if I pop again, I'll have to glance into the glaring eyes of my shame again.



Welcome to the frustration stage of culture shock.

In this stage, everything feels hard, things don't make sense, you're upset and don't know why, and everything seems to be working against you. The same goes for relationships and for the stages of fostering. At this stage of my life, I wasn't fully mature and I wasn't fully grown, so the emotional maturity to be able to love someone when they're hard to love: not there. It was at this stage when I would intentionally avoid Mary Beth, when I would hide in my room to do "homework" because she was loud and I was annoyed. Honestly, this type of frustration is pretty typical for teen girls and their little sisters. I can remember having similar arguments and frustrations and fights between me and my older biological sister. But the difference is that my family intentionally brought this young girl into our home so that we could show her the love of Christ.

"Kirbi, if you can't love a girl in your own home, then you can't be a missionary and love people outside of it."



These words from my mom are forever burned in my brain. She was right. If I can't love someone at my kitchen table, I can't love someone on the other side of the world. At the time I had hopes and plans to be an international missionary who would go to the nations and show people how much God loves them. But my family always said that our mission was our home. Growing up, I never went on international short-term mission trips because there was a child and a need 10 feet from my bedroom door. So, this honest and loving word from my mom broke my heart. And I will never forget realizing that as much as I talked about how much I loved Christ, His love was not in me.

The third stage of culture shock is the adjustment phase. In this stage, you can start to see the good in both cultures, and in the case of fostering — people. Life begins to adopt a new definition of normalcy, and each side in the relationship learns how to live with the other.

For Mary Beth, this looked like me taking small steps toward friendship. We spent one whole evening where I helped her study for a quiz she would be taking the next day in class. Now, that evening also involved a big

fight, an apology from me through Mary Beth's locked door, a cliché movie-esque attempt at starting over and then actual studying. I can vividly remember the minutes of time between the big fight and my apology through the locked door. Following what I'm sure was a very unkind comment from me, we both stormed off to our separate bedrooms. I sat on my bed, curled my knees up to my chest and pleaded with God.

"Father, why can't I love her? I don't understand! Why does it feel like my heart is closed off to her?"

I asked God for answers, and then I asked God for forgiveness. Clearly, what my mom said was right. There was not some fatal problem in Mary Beth: she was just an 8-year-old little girl who wanted to be loved by her big sister. The problem was in me. Sitting on my bed, I finally accepted the fact that my heart was in desperate need of change, and so I took the first step of transition through the adjustment stage into the unknown world of the acceptance stage.

The process from here was not seamless by a long shot, but adjustment takes time and so does forgiveness, on both sides.



Unfortunately, the way culture shock, relationships and fostering always seem to go is that the moment you begin to truly reach the acceptance stage, it's time to move on.

After two and a half years, Mary Beth finally received the hope of adoption from an aunt living in North Carolina. When my parents learned about these distant relatives, they reached out to them asking if they would be interested in adoption. The answer was yes, and Mary Beth would soon have a permanent family and a loving home.

At this parting, I experienced heartbreak for a different reason. I was no longer heartbroken because I could not love the young girl in my own home or because I was faced with the reality of my own hardened heart. My heart broke instead because I had finally learned to love Mary Beth just in time for her to leave.

We hugged goodbye in the driveway of our home, both crying from the sorrow of losing one another. Then she climbed in the car with my mom, headed to North Carolina, and we never saw one another in person again — only photos and a few FaceTime calls with the family from there on out.

Once Mary Beth transitioned to her new life, we returned to our old one. But it was not long before we opened up our home again, this time for a young teen mom named Kirsten and her infant son Brayden. This time I was determined to love better, be more patient and reflect Christ every day. I failed some and succeeded more often, but all the while I remembered the first little girl who came into our home and opened my heart to love those who need it most.

Back To The Basics:

An Analysis Of Christian Art

*Written by Mattie Washington
Photographed by Laila Al-Hagal*

In my family, we listened to Christian music.

Uplifting, positive, encouraging words were the only ones you would hear from the radio of my mom's Town & Country minivan. It didn't matter if there was a stormcloud over our heads on the way to school each morning. The music was going to lift our spirits one way or another, golly-darn it.

The problem was that each song contained the same general language, structure and tune. It made sense to me why some of my friends said their families didn't listen to Christian music. As sad as that was, the same songs every day began to wear on me. I was stuck in a dull routine that I couldn't escape.

It was for this reason I was shocked to find my entry level Arts in Western Civilizations professor an avid fan of Christian heavy metal, a realm I didn't know existed. Despite the professor's appreciation for the subgenre, even he had a critical view of the approach Christian media has taken in recent years.

"Anytime a new Christian heavy metal band would come up, they would always have to tell you in the advertising who they sounded like in the secular world," Steve Halla, associate professor of art, said. "They would say in the advertising, 'The new band Whitecross sounds just like the group Ratt.' So there was this

sense with Christian music that we're trying to take what's in the secular world, and we're going to give you something that sounds just like it, but we're just going to change the lyrics a little bit."

He hit the nail on the head. I immediately remembered the early Lauren Daigle phenomenon. Now a popular artist on her own accord, Daigle gained initial fame by being compared to pop artist Adele. This is a useful tactic for modern Christian artists, but it also is discouraging.

What is the reason artists who sing about their faith don't feel able to pave the way within the music industry? Why did so many of them choose to rely on the success of secular artists to propel their own careers?

Halla emphasized how this has been prevalent in Christian culture for a long time. The industry has attempted to bait people, easing them into Christian media slowly by giving them the sounds they are used to. Perhaps this was the problem with faith-focused media as a whole.

"Part of what would always frustrate me is, why aren't we out in front of culture? Why can't we just close the door for a minute and not really take in anything that's going on out there?" Halla said.



In a way, his point referenced how art used to be long before the secular world held the reigns of the artistic community. In the past, Christians praised through visual and musical art, focusing more on the quality of the art and how it correctly represented the Gospel. Instead of focusing on describing a limited selection of Christ's characteristics, songs and paintings used to depict parables and use storytelling genius to convey things to those partaking of the media. A model such as this is a direct comparison to Jesus.

"He was presenting it in a way that was ultimately creative. Above all, he lived it," Professor Lee Benson, chair of Union's art department, said of Jesus. "He could've put the Torah up there, but he didn't. He was trying to tell the story in a way that got people interested and got people thinking, 'What does he mean?'"



In this sense, Christian media has lost its sense of intrigue and depth. “The Love of God” by Frederick M. Lehman contains lines such as “The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell; it goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.” The pool of music produced in recent years has struggled to contend with the visual descriptions of aged hymns.

However, modern music like this can be found if one knows where to look. Songs like Casting Crowns’ “So Far To Find You” and MercyMe’s “I Can Only Imagine” contain the kind of modern lyricism that point to Christ through the use of a graphic imagination. Both songs tip a hat to how the most powerful messages are found through sharing personal trials.

Coming from an old country church in the middle of nowhere, I have grown up favoring the classic Baptist hymns. My church had one dedicated pianist, my grandmother who wasn’t afraid to lift a hand in praise, and the song “Victory in Jesus” ringing through the sanctuary. It was a scene of pure reverence, as the lyrics quite literally told the “old, old story how a Savior came from glory.”

I was perplexed how each hymn we sang could hold such power within the words. Then, the investigation set in. With each hymn I looked into, I began to notice a common theme. In the past, writers dedicated the hymns to deeper metaphors that went beyond surface level statements like “His love is like the ocean.” Instead, artists created narratives that strove to exist past a single line of the song. The kind of writing they demonstrated required consistent practice and determination to master.

While in pursuit of perfecting their craft, artists had the opportunity to improve their skill while also dedicating their lives to their relationship with Christ. Looking deeper, I discovered that this very concept was how the art department at Union encourages their students to create work that equally amazes audiences and brings praise to their Maker. Demonstrating awe-inspiring skill can speak volumes to one’s faith where being solely audience-focused can hinder the message.

“It might not be right away,” Halla said. “It might be that I have a show, people see the work and a couple months go by and I get an email saying ‘this work that

you did — I saw a picture of this online the other day. What was this about? What was your reason for making this?”

Halla used the scenario to describe how Christians don’t have to aggressively churn out mediocre art to reach a vast majority of people. Likewise, replicating secular media could even be seen as faith communities grasping for relevance within non-believing communities. Instead, Halla advised students to act as a guide for the Gospel with humility and a true love for Christ.

“As those openings arise and those relationships are there and start to form, then it’s like, ‘Here’s the story behind that. Here’s what motivated me to do that,’” he said. “My prayer would be that that would open up avenues by which I could share a little bit further with people.”

Through genuine art, the evangelical message can be delivered with the largest quantity of love and effectiveness. Instead of forcing a watered down message

to keep up with the world of secular art, Christians should work on ideas that come from a place of passion and sincerity. Through being honest in learning one’s craft and pursuing it wholeheartedly, Halla emphasized how audiences will be most receptive if the art is naturally giving praise. Sharing the meaning behind a work that deeply resonates with you can influence others so much more than “slapping a cross” on the work and calling it “art.”

“When you learn the skills and technique, and you work at it in such a way that you can block out any idea of an audience,” Halla said, taking a moment before he continued, “simply say ‘I want to do this for the glory of God and give everything I have and do the absolute best work for no other reason but to glorify my creator.’”

Benson agreed, nearly mirroring Halla’s statement and said, “That’s how you teach passion. Live it. Be sincere about it. We’ve all seen people fake it, but when you have it and you can see it, it ain’t being fake.”





THREADS

Photo Story by Laila Al-Hagal



“I Hope We Don’t Scare People”: Athletes And The Cultural Divide At Union

Written by Grace White

Photographed by Laila Al-Hagal

“I hope we don’t scare people.”

That’s what Alec Hardy, a junior exercise science major and infielder for Union University’s baseball team, said when I asked him how he thinks regular students see the athletes at Union.

Hardy started at Union in the fall of 2022 after transferring from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and already he notices the gap between athletes and every other student on campus. One of the things Union baseball’s head coach stressed when Hardy came on his visit was that he wanted to try to mend that gap.

Since hearing that, Hardy has bought into his coach’s goal by joining the fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE), which has given him the chance to meet new people and become a leader in an environment other than baseball.

“I feel like non-athletes are really involved on campus, but they don’t really get into the full swing of athletics,” Hardy said. “And I feel like being in SAE, I’m able to form a group to come to athletic events, not only baseball, but we go to basketball games. We go to softball games when we can. We go to whatever we can, whenever we can, and it’s pretty cool to be able to do that.”

As an athlete at Union myself, I believe that one of the main factors causing the divide is that athletes are not completely understood by the general student population, and the general student population is not completely understood by the athletes. Sure, some students may have played sports at some point in their lives, but it is not the same as what a college athlete faces on a day-to-day basis. For some athletes, all they know and are comfortable with is practice, working out and playing. They may not even be able to fathom what it is like to be a “normal” student without their sport in their lives.



However, understanding between the groups will not come about on its own. It is going to take effort on both sides to meet in the middle, communicate and learn to understand each other better.

“We’re just regular students too,” Hardy said when asked what he wishes the general student body understood about him and other athletes. “‘Student’ comes before ‘athlete’ even in ‘student-athlete,’ so like, I’m here to play baseball, but I’m also here to get an education. And I mean, baseball is going to end one day.”

I am a senior at Union, meaning this season is the last I will experience as an athlete. When I enter the workforce, I won’t be surrounded by just athletes or people who think exactly like me.



Being at Union has helped me get used to that idea. As a member of the editorial staff of the Cardinal & Cream, I have been able to work with students who are not my teammates and who view the world differently than I do. I have been challenged to get out of my comfort zone in an environment that is safe and uplifting. I couldn’t be more thankful for the opportunities that I’ve been given. Because of Union and my fellow students and teachers, I will be more well-equipped to take on the “real world.”

Like Hardy, Reese Owens, a sophomore digital media communications major and Union volleyball player, has seen the gap between athletes and non-athletes and has made efforts to bridge that gap.

Owens recently joined the sorority Chi Omega, is a member of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) and takes pictures for Union’s Athletic Department. She feels that in some ways, the general student body puts athletes in a “box” and just expects that they do not want to interact with them since they already have their built-in circle of friends. However, Owens realizes that being a volleyball player is just one part of who she is.



"I do try to get away from it," Owens said. "That's what I told people too when I was going through the recruitment. I don't want to be known as just a volleyball player. I want to be involved in more things and be a part of other things that are bigger than myself. But it's hard to get away from."

Because she is an athlete, there have been things at Union, such as Family Weekends, that Owens has had to miss out on. She wishes that more people understood the time commitment it takes to be a college athlete.

"One, we don't have time to do a bunch of stuff that regular students do," Owens said. "Two, there's a lot of obligations that we have, especially even during the day, like weights, practices, games, making time to eat, making time to study, like, it doesn't leave a lot of time to do other things. I don't think people understand the time commitment and the toll it takes on you because college sports are hard. It's not easy."

Brooke Elliott, former Union women's soccer player and current senior enrollment counselor for Union undergraduate admissions, has also witnessed the divide and made her own steps toward change.

Elliott has a similar story to Owens in that she joined the sorority Zeta Tau Alpha, worked in Union's sports communication department and served as an officer in Sigma Delta, an organization whose members have majors or minors in the Department of Physical Education, Wellness and Sport.

Within her first week at Union, Elliott could see the gap between athletes and non-athletes. None of the athletes that she knew went to any of the Welcome Week events for new students, so she did not go either. She thinks that athletes kind of have this expectation placed on them that they are supposed to find the activities of regular students weird and uncool, even though in reality, the activities can be enjoyed by everyone, even athletes.

During the spring semester of her freshman year, Zeta Tau Alpha offered Elliott a snap bid. She desired the opportunity to get to know new people outside of her small circle, and Zeta allowed her to do that. When she got married, she had ten bridesmaids and over half of them were Zetas.



Elliott is grateful for the chances she had to have a life outside of soccer, and now that she works at Union, she is able to see a completely different side of the relationship between athletes and non-athletes.

"I feel like I'm seeing less and less athletes be involved in other things than I did when I was a student," Elliott said. "Whatever it is right now, compared to when I was a student, athletes are not involved like anywhere close to the way we were involved, I don't think."

She gave a couple of suggestions as to how to reach out to athletes and encourage them to take part in on-campus activities, such as better marketing to athletes specifically and someone personally going to each team and inviting them to the events.

In her interactions with prospective students, Elliott draws from her own experiences to help them see what a great place Union is, and sometimes she even forgets to mention that she played soccer because she was able to have so many great memories outside of soccer with Zeta and her on-campus job.



It would be great for all of our athletes to have such real and genuine experiences at Union outside of their sports because at the end of the day, athletic careers do not last forever. It begs the question: What do we want our lives to look like when we hang up our cleats for the last time?

"I don't know what my life would be like right now if I had just played soccer and didn't do anything else," Elliott said. "Probably not good."





Navigating Culture:

Finding The Balance Between Individualism And Collectivism

Written by Avery Chenault

Photographed by Laila Al-Hagal

“It has this warmth to it. There’s always people around you,” senior engineering major, David Ebrahim said to me as we sat in a coffee shop on an icy, winter day.

Ebrahim is describing his hometown, over 6,000 miles away in Egypt. Having lived in Egypt his entire life, Ebrahim moved to the United States during his freshman year to study engineering at Union University. He left behind the culture of his childhood to adjust to a different, American way of life.

“My hometown is kind of the opposite of what we have here,” Ebrahim said.

Ebrahim shared stories of crowded streets and active communities, stories of neighbors quick to help others and church bodies quick to address the needs around them. As he talked, the differences between Egypt and the United States became clearer.

Egypt is distinctly collectivist. The United States is distinctly individualist.

Collectivist cultures are defined as groups that tend to be more people-oriented and focused on the good of the whole community. Collectivist cultures are generally accompanied by tight-knit familial relationships and highly integrated communities.

Individualist cultures are defined as cultures that prioritize uniqueness and self-expression without much thought toward the group.

Individualism is, in some way, all I have ever known. As someone who was born and raised in the United States, individualism was taught early on. Work hard so you can be successful. Help others so you can be a good person. Do whatever it takes to achieve the American dream, your American dream.



In a culture obsessed with self, Ebrahim's insights on collectivism make me think.

"You don't have that much privacy," Ebrahim said.

We both laugh. I think about longing for my own room as a kid. The rite of passage of driving my own car. The introverted ideal of having your own space.

Ebrahim goes on to describe streets bustling with activity, apartment buildings full of people and a community where you're always only a few minutes away from the places you need to be.

But the collectivist culture of Egypt is not only influenced by crowded streets and lack of privacy. Currently, in the middle of an economic crisis, Egypt's collectivist culture is strongly influenced by need. Collectivism is not only a cultural spectrum but a means of survival.

"There's a lot of hardships for people," Ebrahim said. "That kind of motivates their thinking into a more collectivist thinking because they need — they have to support each other."

Because of the close living quarters and integrated communities in Egypt, hardships can affect the whole community whether an individual is truly affected or not. When one part of the community is damaged, everyone is burdened in some way.

"When there is something happening, it's probably happening to everyone," Ebrahim said. "So, they kind of know, or sense, or hear or just somehow they will know there's someone in need for something."

Within collectivist communities, your neighbor does not just live in the same apartment complex as you but is someone you can depend on in time of need. Restaurants are not just places to eat but important gathering places of lively fellowship. The church is not only a place of teaching and worship but a vital pillar within the city.

"Church is kind of open every day," Ebrahim said. "I think during my high school I went to church about five times a week."

The differences between the Egyptian church and the American church were a difficult transition for Ebrahim when moving abroad. Places of worship, so fundamental to various cultures around the world, were one of the first differences he noticed between collectivist Egypt and individualist America.

"I know how much the Bible supports or asks believers to live in a community that is much closer than what I see here," Ebrahim said. "So, this is one of the points where I know that this is something that stands out and that is something that needs to be even better. Because people need to get closer to each other than just meeting Sunday morning and having coffee together and then leaving."

One thing is evident in our conversation. As an Egyptian studying in the United States, Ebrahim can easily see cultural differences. He can not only observe these differences but hold them in perspective. As a collectivist, he sees the strength of individualism but also the gaps the individualist mindset can create in communities. Navigating between two cultures, Ebrahim recognizes the individualism of America while never letting go of who he truly is.

"I don't think any culture is completely collectivistic or completely individualistic. I think we're looking at de-

grees of them," Philip Ryan, professor of language and director of the Center for Intercultural Engagement, said.

Ryan shares how the cultures we are raised in influence the way we interact with the world, but this does not mean the culture and worldview of your childhood will remain the same. In fact, it is often good for cultural thinking to grow and evolve.

"More collectivistic cultures still can embrace the individual and individuality at the same time. I never think it's 100% either way," Ryan said. "But still, they are values that members of those cultures are enculturated into without even thinking about it."

Not all individualists will think individually all the time. Not all collectivists will think collectively all the time. Culture is a spectrum combining different life experiences to inform our thinking. Understanding cultural dimensions is beautiful and even sometimes necessary.

"All human cultures are varying degrees of individualism and collectivism," Ryan said. "When you understand what those things are and understand how those things operate within a system of culture, it helps you navigate difference better, it helps you navigate negotiation better and, I think most importantly, it helps you navigate your own understanding of yourself and how you're operating in those spaces."

When the collectivist stops to consider the individualist, there is understanding and growth. When the individualist stops to consider the collectivist, there is understanding and growth.

Coming from an individualistic culture, I am inspired by Egypt and encouraged to think beyond the culture I have always known. Collectivist cultures encourage close relationships, something that individualist cultures often so desperately need. Sometimes, the only way to grow is to think beyond your current reality and learn from differences.

"Individualism is good," Ebrahim said. "But it needs to be used in the right way."

As Ebrahim balances cultures, he appreciates the uniqueness of individualism while also observing the gaps individualism creates in societies. He is not afraid

to share the wisdom his cultural experiences have brought to him.

"Our relationships need to be much closer. And even when you look at college campuses, for example, you can tell that people need even deeper relationships through their friends or peers," Ebrahim said.

In an environment so focused on individual success and happiness, Ebrahim does not want to assimilate completely to one way of thinking. In a culture so focused on the individual, he does not want to forget about the beauty of a group. There is a balance in navigating cultures, and Ebrahim demonstrates this well.

"I don't want to be a heavy burden on one hand, and on the other hand I want to be as balanced as I can," Ebrahim said. "Because if I turn to live the life that they're living, then I've lost the point where I actually want to be."



