

AColyte

Advent 2023

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



11 THINGS BEFORE THE WINDOW

AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

In And around Wynne Chapel

October-November 2023

What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?

--lots of people think Elvis Costello wrote this song.

But it was actually written by an old British Rockabilly guy named Nick Lowe

On the wings of a snow white dove

He sends his pure, sweet love

A sign from above

On the wings of a dove.

--lots of people on the Internet think Ferlin Huskey or Dolly Parton wrote this song,

But it was actually written by a Nashville guy named Bob Ferguson.

Sorry this is a bit long.

There's been a lot going on.

There's a new stained glass window in Majors Chapel.

I'll get to that. But I first I want to tell you about 11 other things that happened in or around Wynne Chapel in October and November..

1. FRIDAY OCTOBER 13—JSA SHABBAT SERVICE

The Austin College Jewish Students Association held their Friday Evening Shabbat Service in Majors Chapel on October 13.

Because this event took place less than one week after the Hamas terrorist attack on Israeli communities that resulted in hundreds of deaths and the taking of hundreds of Jewish hostages; and based on similar decisions by Jewish students on college and university campuses throughout the United States; and informed by advice that Austin College Jewish students had received from Jewish friends at other schools; the Austin College JSA originally asked to have an AC Campus Police officer present at the dinner.

Of course we were prepared to have an AC Police officer at the Shabbat Dinner. We want all our students to feel safe and we were prepared to take steps to ensure that everyone in Majors Chapel that night would feel (and would be) safe.

But Majors Chapel is behind card access doors. Except for specific occasions, nobody without an Austin College ID can ever get into Wynne Chapel.

So after initial conversations about safety and security, the JSA leaders decided that they did not want to communicate to the rest of the AC community (and especially their fellow students who are Muslim) that they did not trust them or feel safe on our campus.

So there was no AC Police Officer at the Shabbat Dinner.

It was a very cool event and all of us who attended had a lot of fun.

2. FRIDAY NOVEMBER 3—COVENANT REVIEW **MEETING**

The Church Relations Committee of the Austin College Board, **President O'Day, all the AC Vice Presidents**, Senior Associate Vice President for Institutional Advancement **Suzanne Crouch**, and I met with representatives of the Synod of the Sun to begin the process of renewing our Covenant with the Presbyterian Church.

We've been doing that regularly for decades and the partnership and cooperation between Austin College and the Presbyterian Church will continue to grow.

Austin College believes our historic and ongoing relationship to the Presbyterian Church may be most fully seen through discussion of what that relationship enables us to offer – to all our students, to the church, and to the world.

If we do this right, AC's Covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church can be good news, in different ways, for everyone on our campus.

We (the College and the Church) plan to keep doing it right.

3. SATURDAY NOVEMBER 4—AC 175 DINNER

We had a big dinner on campus the Saturday of Homecoming weekend to officially mark and celebrate the 175th year of Austin College.

As you know, we've been celebrating our 175th year since August.

Mayor Plyler read a Proclamation from the Sherman City Council congratulating AC, President O'Day spoke briefly, the weather was perfect, and we fed over 600 alumni, students, faculty, staff, and friends.

After 175 years, we've learned how to throw a good party.

4. SUNDAY NOVEMBER 5—HOMECOMING/FAMILY WEEKEND WORSHIP

We had a wonderful Homecoming/Family Weekend Worship service in Wynne Chapel on November 5.

As usual, the A Cappella Choir was excellent. As I said at the service, “God always loves me, but I think God likes me best when I worship with this Choir.”

One of the things we do at Homecoming Worship every year is read the names of all Austin College alumni and community members who have died in the previous year (it’s called the “Necrology”).

I have done that for 31 Homecoming services and it is always a moving experience.

The older I get — and the longer I’m around here — the more of those names I know.

It feels appropriate for the College to pause every year and mark the passing of alumni, faculty, and others affiliated with our school.

The last name I read this year was especially meaningful to me. Outside of my family, 1961 Alumnus and Senior Trustee **John Ed Withers** had more to do with my becoming an Austin College student and a Presbyterian than any other single person. He and my Dad were close friends since they were 13 years old.

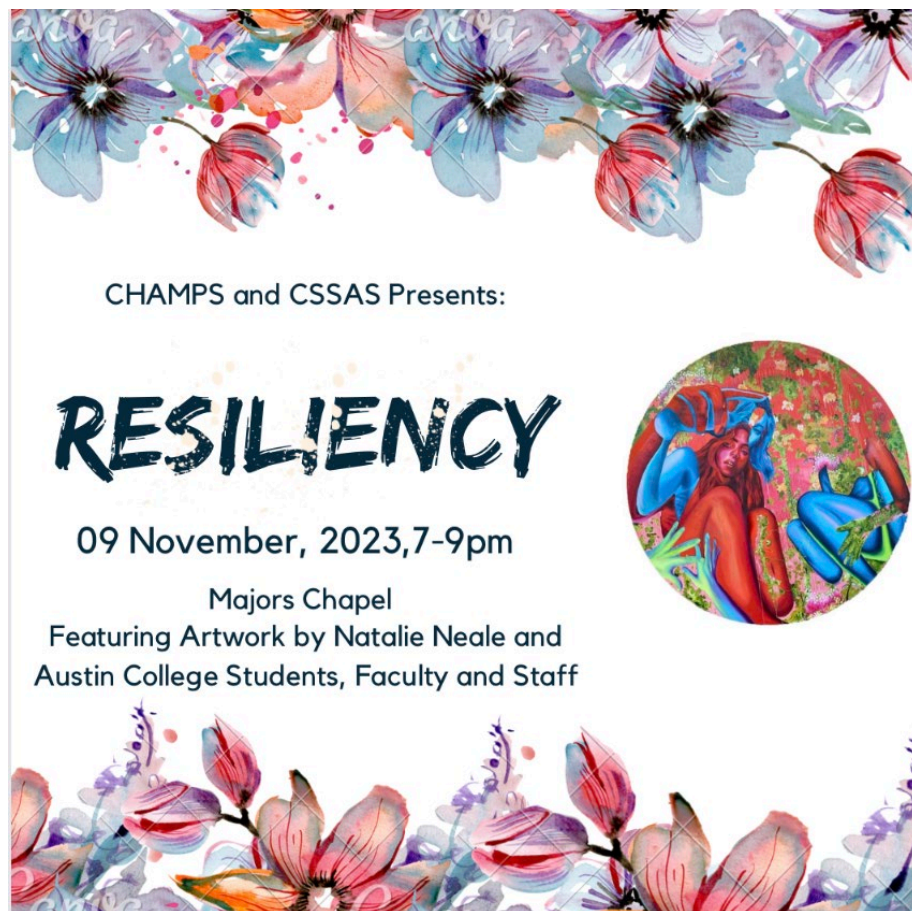
My life would be significantly different in many ways if it had not been for John Ed Withers. He was a good man and a great friend of Austin College and our students.

And I'm sure the other alumni and former colleagues whose names we read on November 5 had similar influences on the lives of others.

It's good for us to pause and mark the passing of those who have made Austin College the place that it is today.

5. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 9—NATALIE NEALE **ART SHOW**

This happened in Majors Chapel on November 9:



From the promotional material for the art show:

The "Resiliency" art show features artwork by Natalie Neale and Austin College students.

"Resiliency," celebrates the triumphs and struggles of individuals overcoming disabilities. Through various mediums such as paintings, sculptures, and photographs, this show aims to challenge societal norms and perceptions of disability.

Just like in nature, where plants may wither and die but eventually regrow and thrive, individuals living with disabilities also have the ability to overcome challenges and lead fulfilling lives.

The "Resiliency" art show not only sheds light on the strength of those living with disabilities but also serves as a reminder that no matter what challenges one faces, it is possible to achieve their goals and dreams.

Natalie Neale is an impressive and gifted artist and educator.

It was great to have her and some of her art on campus (and in Majors Chapel).

The Austin College CHAMPS organization, led by President **Cody Dean ('24)**, did an excellent job inviting and hosting Ms. Neale as part of their ongoing efforts to help the entire college recognize and address issues related to disability and access.

6. SATURDAY NOVEMBER 11—GREAT DAY OF SERVICE

Our annual Great Day of Service involved hundreds of AC students who engaged in community service at over 30 sites throughout Grayson County.

It's just what we (y'all) do.

Gifted people acting gifted.

7. SUNDAY NOVEMBER 12— **VETERANS DAY FOCUS AT SUNDAY NIGHT** **WORSHIP**

With valuable assistance from **Professor David Schones**, our weekly Sunday Night Communion Service on November 12 included intentional expressions of gratitude and support for the 40+ Austin College students who are veterans or immediate family members of veterans.

At noon the next day, President O'Day and Dr. Schones led a "Roll Call" ceremony at the flagpole outside Ida Green Theater in which we read the names of all Austin College students, faculty, and staff who serve or have served in the United States military.

8. MONDAY NOVEMBER 13— **MUSLIM STUDENTS ASSOCIATION INTERFAITH** **DIALOGUE DINNER**

As is their annual custom, the Austin College Muslim Students Association hosted an Interfaith Dialogue Dinner in which AC students from various religious traditions gathered in Mabey Hall and discussed beliefs and customs in their particular traditions pertaining to times

- When a child is born
- When a child becomes an adult
- When marriage occurs
- When someone dies.

This year's panel included students representing

- Baha'ism,

- Hinduism,
- Islam,
- Judaism,
- Protestant Christianity, and
- Roman Catholic Christianity.

They were outstanding and the MSA were excellent hosts.

9. TUESDAY NOVEMBER 14—CONVERSATION ABOUT ISRAEL/PALESTINE

On Tuesday November 14, Professors Cate Bowman, Ruchan Kaya, and I hosted a conversation about the current conflict between Israel and Hamas/Palestine.

As they arrived, students were given a QR code so they could share comments and express their feelings anonymously if they preferred.

Here's what I said as the event began:

1. *The values listed in the Austin College Mission Statement are:*
 - *Personal Growth*
 - *Justice*
 - *Community*
 - *Service*
 - *Academic Excellence*
 - *Intellectual and Personal Integrity*
 - *Participation in Community Life*
2. *There are exemplary, intelligent, compassionate, and admirable Austin College students who believe that the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel were barbaric and outrageous acts of terrorism.*

3. *There are exemplary, intelligent, compassionate, and admirable Austin College students who believe that the response of the Israeli Army in Gaza and beyond has been barbaric, disproportionate, and genocidal.*
4. *All of those students – with their contradictory understandings of the current situation in Israel/Palestine – all of those students deserve to be here and deserve to be heard.*
5. *As we engage in these difficult conversations, let's remember who we are. We are a college that values*
 - *Personal Growth*
 - *So we should keep listening and learning respectfully*
 - *Justice*
 - *So we should pay attention to what's fair*
 - *Community*
 - *So we should respect each other*
 - *Service*
 - *So we should think about others and do what we can for them*
 - *Academic Excellence*
 - *We need to know what we're talking about and*
 - *Learn more than we know now*
 - *Intellectual and Personal Integrity*
 - *We need to stay true to our values*
 - *Participation in Community Life*
 - *We need to step up*
 - *And show up*
 - *For each other*

After I finished, Dr. Kaya gave some historical perspective to help understand the immediate context of the October 7 Hamas attacks and the response of the Israeli government and military.

Then Dr. Bowman read comments that had been shared by students.

In addition to written comments, we eventually shared a microphone and enabled students to voice their questions, opinions, and concerns about the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

It was an extraordinary evening.

Students expressed a variety of opinions about the Hamas attacks and the Israeli response.

But what this old Chaplain remembers most vividly about that evening is the way all of the students who spoke or shared comments that evening worked very hard *not* to direct their remarks or anger at other students.

In the midst of legitimate passion, and in the face of real disagreement about how to interpret the events in Gaza, our students were able to maintain respect for their fellow students.

That was moving.

And it was real.

It was part of the whole truth about how the world is.

Those in attendance did not leave the room suddenly agreeing with each other, holding hands, and singing “Kum Bah Yah.”

But we maintained mutual respect in a very difficult context.

Don’t dismiss that as meaningless.

It was one of the most meaningful and encouraging things I witnessed all semester.

10. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 16— EMERGENCY FUND AUCTION

This year 67 items were sold at the Emergency Fund Auction, as well as hundreds of Gift Card Raffle tickets.

We raised **\$6,913** to be used to help Austin College students, staff, and faculty who face financial emergencies.

And we had fun as we were doing it.

11. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 30— LESSONS AND CAROLS SERVICE

Our annual Service of Lessons & Carols on November 30 featured beautiful music from the A Capella Choir and the Austin College Chamber Orchestra. I especially enjoyed the Chamber Orchestra's excellent rendition of *Here Comes the Sun* — certainly an appropriate song for Advent.

As away of marking the 175th year, we did not invite faculty or staff members to do any of the scripture readings this year.

Instead, we invited three alums to join 4 current students and President O'Day to be readers this year.

Current students **Erica Moyo** ('27), **Elizabeth Jacobs** ('26), **Lee Campbell** ('25), and **Thomas Jolin** ('24), were joined by alums **Lilly Pappas** ('22) and **Mari Elise Ewing** ('07), and **Shane Webb** ('07).

None of us who know Shane (who is currently pastor of Woodhaven Presbyterian Church in Irving) were surprised at all that he showed up in full kilt regalia.

I don't want to dwell on that, though.

I want to direct your attention to one verse from the passage (Isaiah 9:2-7) that he read that night.

ISAIAH 9:6

**FOR A CHILD HAS BEEN BORN FOR US,
A SON GIVEN TO US;
AUTHORITY RESTS UPON HIS SHOULDERS,
AND HE IS NAMED
WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD,
EVERLASTING FATHER, PRINCE OF PEACE.**

That verse was written approximately 750 years before the birth of Jesus.

Despite what many earnest and faithful Christians might wish to be true, there is no reason at all to believe that Isaiah was somehow writing about Jesus when he wrote this passage.

He was writing about the birth of King Hezekiah.

Centuries later, when early Christians were searching for language to articulate their understanding of the meaning of the birth of Jesus, they remembered and appropriately applied Isaiah's words in that new context.

That's why we Christians often read those verses from Isaiah as we turn our minds to Christmas around this time every year.

It's why Handel used those words in his famous "Messiah."

And it's why we read those words at Lessons & Carols every year.

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So those are 11 things that happened in or around Wynne Chapel in October or November of this year.

Meanwhile, this happened on November 21 (when everybody was on Thanksgiving Break):



This beautiful stained-glass window, a gift from alumnus and Senior Trustee **Bob Johnson and his wife Joyce**, was installed in Majors Chapel.

It was designed by a gifted artist named Dennis Roberts.

It's really pretty – especially on sunny afternoons.

When you get the chance, feel free to come sit for a moment in Majors Chapel, take a minute to enjoy the window, and pray and think if you're so inclined.

If you do that, I invite you to take a moment to notice and reflect on what's in the window – and what isn't.

What isn't in the window is a cross, an image of Jesus, a star of David, an Islamic crescent, or any religious imagery that is specific or exclusive for any particular religious tradition.

What's there is a bright and colorful scene that includes sunlight, running water, and trees.

There's also an Austin College seal in the bottom left corner.

And there's a dove.

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For centuries, doves have been used as symbols of peace and hope in various cultures and religions.

In particular, since Majors Chapel is the site of regular services of prayer and worship for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students at Austin College, we wanted the imagery in the new stained glass window to be appropriate and hospitable for all of the students who gather and worship there.

So there's a dove in the window.

Think about the implications of the other 11 stories I've shared with you:

1. The Jewish Students Association chose not to communicate mistrust of fellow students by having campus police presence at their Shabbat Service.
2. The College is committed to maintaining its Presbyterian-relatedness in a way that benefits all students.
3. We've been doing this for 175 years and we're just getting started.
4. We remain grateful for the lives and gifts of all the members of #ROONation who came before us.
5. We remain committed to becoming a more inclusive community that actively nurtures and celebrates the gifts of all.
6. We will continue to encourage and facilitate service to others as part of the lives of all students.
7. We remain grateful for the service of all those members of our community of have made and fulfilled commitments to serve others.
8. We will continue to learn from each other, to embrace our pluralism, and to take faith seriously.
9. We will continue to strive to treat each other respectfully and lovingly even when we face profound and abiding disagreements.
10. We will continue to look out for each other and to assist fellow Roos who are having a hard time.
11. We will keep reading Isaiah 9:2-7 out loud every year with its promise that our future involves peace.

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That's why there's a dove in the window.

Doves are symbols of peace.

It's all about peace.

That's "Shalom" in Hebrew and "Salaam" in Arabic.

Peace is not just the absence of violence.

It's the presence of harmony and right relationship between people who are not identical.

Don't let anybody fool you – peace is hard, hard work.

But – don't let anybody fool you – we KNOW that peace is possible.

We've seen it.

We've done it.

I just told you eleven stories that show that.

So let's keep being who we are and doing what we do.

Don't get discouraged.

Don't believe the cynics.

Don't do anything to make them think they're right.

I'll end like I started:

What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?

Not a dern thing.

Until Next Year, I remain,

Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

JOHN WILLIAMS

Chaplain