

# AColyte

Commencement 2024

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



# We Went to Work

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

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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Coming to the End of One Story  
And the Beginning of Many Others  
Spring 2024

I get pretty sentimental at this time every year.

As I look toward Commencement, I've been thinking a lot about this song I heard last summer at the Kerrville Folk Festival from my friend Hillary Tipps.

It's the best song about COVID I've ever heard.

*Refrigerator truck pulls up to the hospital garage  
Get the Colonel on the phone  
Ask him how to live in a war zone.  
Climbing the stairs with my hopeful stethoscope slung around my neck  
As I turn the corner, I say a little prayer and I chant  
Just last night, there were twenty-five breathing machines  
Today's first light: fifteen*

*God knows it hurts  
This only works  
If I am grounded  
If I am quiet,  
Letting the light in  
Counting the days*

*When the world shut down  
When the world shut down  
When the world shut down  
We went to work*

*Going on, hand-sanitized by gin and the sun on the dashboard  
Keeping people safe by keeping them away – so lonely  
When the lungs shut down  
Chaos all around  
Take a moment  
Huddled face-to-face  
Together, ask for grace  
Through the tears.  
Just last night, there were fifteen breathing machines  
Today's first light: three*

*God knows it hurts  
This only works  
If I am grounded  
If I am quiet,  
Letting the light in  
Counting the days  
It feels like a curse  
But it could be worse  
At least I'm not drowning  
Instead I go home  
Leave my clothes by the door  
And thank God I can breathe*

*When the world shut down  
When the world shut down  
When the world shut down  
We went to work*

That's from an album called "MacGuffin" by Tipps and Obermiller.

Here's a Spotify link if you're interested:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1sQTpJ6IcA1CKgp3UWXEzs?si=MU8MN ElyQnOHhYUQfg3fPQ&context=spotify%3Asearch>

Hillary is a former nurse (although I think probably once you're a nurse you'll always be one deep down in your bones).

As I said above. I think that's an excellent song.

It shines light on all the people who worked hard through the terrible early days of the pandemic.

Most of us in #RooNation did not have to face those unbelievably tragic times (although you can read about a couple alums who were right in the thick of it in New York City here

<https://theacolite.acsites.org/2020/05/08/the-valley-of-the-shadow-of-death/>)

Fortunately, we didn't have to deal with that level of mass suffering.

But that doesn't mean we had it easy.

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*They call them First World problems  
But they still break your heart.  
--John Craigie*

On April 13, I was at the ACE Day Opportunities Fair with some excellent AC students – current and future Sallie Majors Religious Life Interns. The ACE Day Opportunities Fair was a way for prospective students who were on campus that day to learn about student activities and organizations at AC.

We met lots of prospective students and are excited that many of them will join our student body this August.

Over the course of the Fair, some of the students at the table with me were reminiscing about their own ACE Day and prospective student experiences.

They were current juniors and seniors.

Which meant that their first semesters at AC were in 2020 or 2021.

You current seniors will remember what a weird time that was.

You entered Spring Break of your Senior Year of High School pretty much like all the folks who came before you.

And then EVERYTHING changed.

As we continued our conversation at the ACE Day Fair, the two students I was talking to both showed me photos on their phones of their unworn prom dresses.



They were excited to get prom dresses but they never got to wear them (at least not for the prom they were anticipating).

It was interesting to me that they both still had those photos.

And it occurred to me that those unworn prom dress pics are good examples of the unusual circumstances of the last four years for all of you seniors.

He two students at the ACE Day Fair can't be the only ones with photos like that.

They are reminders that, while you had one set of plans, the circumstances of your lives--and of all our lives--changed.

During your time at AC, we've all learned about  
masks  
and remote learning  
and COVID tests  
and vaccines.

All that was unexpected.

And it was hard.

It's good for us to remember that.

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Here's a sudden jump to the Bible.

Genesis 22:28 says:

*<sup>28</sup>Then the man said,  
"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,  
for you have striven with God and with humans,  
and have prevailed."*

I think that's relevant for all of us this week of Commencement 2024.

This verse from Genesis comes at the end of a story about the biblical character Jacob wrestling somebody – maybe an angel, maybe a man.

There's no foreshadowing in the preceding chapters and verses in Genesis.

Jacob just suddenly finds himself in a wrestling match.

It comes out of the blue.

It's a completely unexpected struggle.

Sound familiar?

So they wrestle.

Jacob's hip gets injured. He limps for the rest of his life.

The verse quoted above comes at the end of the wrestling.

Jacob gets a new name.

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Okay seniors, be careful. I'm about to lead you way out on a limb here.

But bear with me.

The wrestler tells Jacob,

*"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,  
for you have striven with God and with humans,  
and have prevailed."*

The text tells us that Jacob gets his new name, "Israel," because he has "striven with God and with humans and ... prevailed."

So "Israel" might mean, "the one who wrestles against God and humans and has prevailed."

But it can also be interpreted to mean “the one who wrestles – or struggles – alongside God and humans.”

Similarly, although “prevailing” might mean that Jacob won the wrestling match, I don’t see how that’s particularly helpful or consistent with the rest of the Bible. There are no other biblical stories about God losing battles or contests to people.

It would be appropriate to interpret Jacob’s new name, “Israel” to mean something like “the one who strives alongside God and humans and persists.”

That makes a lot more sense in this context and certainly feels more relevant to our own lives.

I think that’s a good way for us to think about this story in the context of our life together over the last four years.

That’s what you seniors have done.

You have struggled alongside each other and persisted.

You’ve faced unexpected difficulties and you’ve survived.

And you’ve had help in your struggles.

To quote my friend Hillary,

When the world shut down, we went to work.

All of you.

All of us.

Together.

Pause for a moment and think about that.



Like Jacob, we have all been permanently marked and affected by the unexpected struggles we've faced.

And, also like Jacob, we should realize that our story is not over. It is just beginning.

This story from Genesis is not the end of Israel's story, it is the beginning of a new chapter; a new era.

The last verse of this story from Genesis says

*<sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel,  
limping because of his hip.*

Jacob's – Israel's – story with God and with humans does not end when the wrestling match is over . . . when the struggle subsides. It's only just beginning.

The sun comes up and Jacob moves on.

And that's how it is with us.

We have been marked by our past struggles.

We have been blessed and helped and nourished as we've tried to live faithfully together and do the work that we have committed to do.

We've made it here because, when the world shut down, we went to work.

And, like Jacob limping into the morning sun, our story is not nearing its end.

It is only just beginning.

So I'll end by telling you now what I'll tell you at Commencement:

Therefore,

Go out into the world.

Be people of peace.

Have courage.

Hold on tight to all that is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Support the weak.

Strengthen the fainthearted.

Honor all people.

Love and serve the world

Share what you have.

Speak truth tenderly and lovingly.

Clean up your own messes.

Use the brains God gave you.

Figure stuff out.

Act like gifted, beloved, and capable people

because that really IS what you really are.

And never forget that the

grace, mercy, and peace of almighty God

are with us all – whoever we are –

Today, Tomorrow, and Forever.

Seriously.

Amen.

Until the Fall, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Wondering If “Alum” Counts as a New Name  
 (“One Who Struggles Alongside Other Humans and Persists”)

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain