

'The Best Half-Hour of the Week'

For many members of the PEA community, Thursday morning Meditations in Phillips Church are just that.

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or the four editors of *A Book of Meditations, Volume 2: 1995–2001* (PEA Press, 2005), meditations are many different things. For Christine Robinson, they are like “small islands on a large, busy campus.” For Peter Greer, they’re “a way for the Academy to write a kind of disjointed memoir.” For David Weber, they “give a school-wide dimension to what our students are doing in English classes all the time: developing a personal voice,” a voice that is “authentic, reflective, honest—and not narcissistic.” For Doug Rogers, they “represent the very best of what Exeter seeks to nurture within our community.”

Excerpts from
the just-published
collection *A Book
of Meditations,
Volume Two:
1995–2001.*

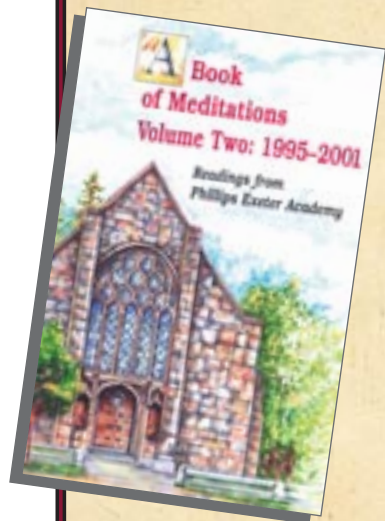
On Thursday mornings for more than 30 years, teachers and students, staff members and visiting alumni/ae have been gathering in Phillips Church to listen to meditations and, just possibly, to be transformed by what they hear. “There is the silence,” says Robinson, “then the music, then a story that can bring us out of ourselves and into another country or history or self.” If not traditionally religious, those stories “are often profoundly spiritual,” says Rogers. Adds Weber, “I know several faculty members who routinely say that meditation is the best half-hour of the week. Perhaps even more than assembly, it holds the community together.”

If listening to meditations is enriching, so too, the four editors say, is writing them, and they each assign the writing of a meditation to seniors during winter term, as do several other members of the English department. “It comes at a good time in the students’ lives,” says Rogers. “They’re ready for it—intellectually, emotionally—so it’s an assignment that really means something to them.”

That’s a feeling Robinson recognizes. “Through countless drafts,” she says, “writing a meditation allows me, *requires* me, to remember, to reflect, to explore and discover meaning. I may fire off letters when I’m angry; writing meditations centers me, calms me, brings me to things that matter.”

Compiling *A Book of Meditations, Volume 2* was, Rogers says, a thrilling experience, if occasionally a frustrating one. With more than 150 pieces to choose from, “we could have created several exceptional volumes,” he says, but in the end the four editors settled on the 37 they found most “compelling”: 14 by graduating seniors, with the balance by faculty and staff, alumni/ae and Bennett Fellows. The volume is dedicated to the late Rex McGuinn (1951–2002), “a wonderful teacher and a great supporter of meditations,” says Rogers.

On the following pages, we share a few excerpts from the best half-hour of the week. Both volumes of meditations are available through the Exeter Bookstore; go to www.exeterbook.com for more information.



ALI TAN '89

'We Must Give Our House to the Birds!'

—January 26, 1996—

Long ago, my grandfather was a rice farmer, and a poor one at that. Though he lived simply and worked hard, he dreamed of a better life for his wife and two daughters. But to a house full of girls and with no son to pass on the land and family name, no luck could ever come, or so the villagers thought.

Until one evening, at dusk, a small bird flew into my grandfather's house through an open window. “Eeeeeeh!” my grandmother screamed. “Chase it out!”

My grandfather did not move. Instead, he watched as the tiny bird flew around the house, swooping, soaring, ascending, diving about their heads. When he finally stepped towards it, the bird shot through the air and settled upon a wooden rafter near the ceiling, out of my grandfather's sight and reach.

“What will we do?” asked my grandmother.

“Tomorrow,” my grandfather promised, “I will leave all the windows open, so that it can fly away.”

Early the next morning, my grandfather opened all the windows and all the doors in the house. When he returned from his hard day of work in the hot sun, he asked my grandmother if their little visitor had left. “Not funny,” she said, pointing to a small pile of feathers and droppings in the trash. “I can still hear it up there.”

“Then let's keep the windows and doors open until the sun goes down. Perhaps it will leave at dusk.”

But just as the sun began to set, more birds came gliding through the windows, 16 of

them, swooping and soaring inside the house. My grandparents tried to chase them out, yelling and waving their arms at the birds, but to no avail. These birds were swift and sleek, and they soon alighted on the rafters where the first one had spent the night.

Just as my grandmother was about to break, my grandfather looked into her eyes. “Maybe this is a sign of good fortune. Let us pray to our ancestors and see what happens tomorrow.”

My grandmother just nodded and closed the windows. At least she could keep out the mosquitoes. At dawn the next morning, my grandfather opened the windows and doors. Seconds later, 17 tiny birds darted straight out the front door. “Good-bye, birds,” he sighed.

“Do you think they'll come back?” asked his wife.

“If they have built nests or laid eggs, it might be so.” My grandfather went that morning across the dirt road to his barn, where he found an old ladder tall enough to reach the roof beams of his house. When he reached the rafters, he gasped in amazement. “What are these?” he cried, for these were no ordinary nests. These were not made of leaves or straw but of clear, white material. And instead of resting on the beams, these were stuck upright against the angled ones, as if they had been glued.

My grandfather took two of these nests to town that day and learned that they were *sarang*

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burung. These were the nests of Javanese swiftlets, a rare species of bird able to weave its nest from the threads of its own saliva, thick with seaweed and water. For 10 centuries, the Chinese have believed that the nests are magical, nutritious, medicinal, and consider the nests delicacies, the caviar of the East. When he arrived home that afternoon, he ran into the house and threw open the doors and windows. "We must give our house to the birds!" he shouted, laughing.

My grandmother thought he was crazy. Give our house to the birds? What evil spirit had entered her husband's body?

But then my grandfather explained. "If the birds continue to come, we will be rich. I have sold two nests for enough lumber to build a new house. We have been blessed with this fortune. Some people risk their lives climbing sea cliffs to gather these nests, but we are lucky—the birds have come to us. Let us give our home to the birds, and for now, we will live in the barn."

ANAND DESAI '96

'This Is My Heritage'

— Spring, 1996 —

I came home one evening from the fourth grade in a fury. Somewhere between the swing set and sandbox and jungle gym during recess, I had somehow realized that I didn't want to be Hindu, that none of my friends were Hindu, and that I couldn't believe I had been forced to be something I didn't want to be for the past ten years of my life. When my father came home that evening, before he could close the garage door behind him, I asked why I had to be Hindu just because he did, just because I was born into this family. He picked me up and placed me in the seat of the riding lawn mower that still smelled like freshly cut grass. I put my hands on the steering wheel, and he knelt down beside me, still in his white coat and surgical greens, his shoes still covered with those blue surgical booties. He asked me, "What's the most important thing in life, Anand?"

"To be a good human being," I answered, as I turned the steering wheel back and forth, back and forth.

"Then be a good human being, always," he said, "and you'll be more Hindu than anyone

else in the world." I stopped steering and said nothing more to him that evening; I went to sleep under the white sheet and white down comforter, the leaves and the crickets louder after I turned off the lights and lay in the warm darkness, thinking: this is my culture, this is my heritage. I will carry on the tradition.

REX MCGUINN

On Generosity

— November 14, 1996 —

When I was 13, I invited seven of my friends to sleep over on a Saturday night. I helped my dad stock up on Coca-Cola; for the main meal we decided on frozen pizzas, a novelty in those years and a great treat in the mountains of North Carolina before the days of Pizza Hut. I went to each of my friends and asked them how many pieces they could eat, and helped my dad purchase just the right amount. My best friend, Toby Vosburgh, told me he would not be having pizza, because he would have to come late.

On the Saturday night of the party, we were all having a great time bringing the steaming pizzas from the oven one by one and dividing up the pieces. I knew exactly how many I had to look forward to, even as I ate the piece most recent from the stove. As we were starting the third pizza, my best friend came walking in. He had been able to get away from his commitment earlier than he had thought. I welcomed him in, fixed him a Coke, and explained to him that he was welcome to snacks, but the pizzas were all spoken for.

I was the third child in my family, and my father by this time had grown mellow in his ways. But at this moment he was very angry. He took me into the next room and explained to me that when we invited guests to our house, we would welcome them and offer them all the food and drink available. I agreed with him, but I pointed out that I had offered my friend Toby all the pizza he could eat, and he had said he wouldn't be there to have any. I had justice on my side. I had the facts; I had done everything I should have to prepare for this evening. If we gave Toby his share of pizza, the rest of us might not get all the pieces we had planned for, and since he hadn't ordered any, he didn't deserve any.

My dad, in most cases indulgent of me to

a fault, wouldn't budge. Toby was our guest, and I would have to offer him everything we had available to serve. Though I wasn't at all happy about it, we went back into the kitchen, and everyone sat down together for pizza and Coke.

That moment typifies a quality I admired most in my father: his willingness to support and give to others. And since then, whenever I have allowed a passion for justice or my own selfish needs to win out when I might have acted with generosity toward another, I have sooner or later felt my father's presence and his disappointment.

Even today I feel the justice of my argument about the slices of pizza that Saturday night. But as I grow older, I am coming to value justice less and less. Not in the political world. I still think that too few people in this world control too much of the wealth, and I would like to see a more just distribution. I still think that violent criminals ought to be removed from society. I still work hard to defeat racist politicians. But in the realm of personal relationships, I believe more and more that the generous impulse carries us so much further than our desire for justice.

PETER GREER '58; '81 (HON.); P'84

Re-Creation

— November 13, 1997 —

In the middle of last June, Anja and I went to Boston to see the liver-cancer specialist with whom we have spent more time than we would like, and he gave us news that we didn't want to hear, that Anja would have to undergo a new kind of treatment. We made our way home and through the rest of the day in a daze of sadness.

The next morning, with no school routine to distract us, we found ourselves face to face with our uncertain future. We went through the motions, the cereal and milk, the grapefruit juice, the Kona coffee, the "Today" show droning in the background, our minds on only one thing. And then one of us, and neither of us remembers who it was, one of us blurted out, "Hey, look at that!"

And we came together at the east window of our kitchen and looked together at the larger bird feeder standing next to the lilac bushes and realized together that what we were seeing was a pair of Evening Grosbeaks. We grabbed

our binoculars, and gazed and exclaimed and exclaimed and gazed. It was quite a sight! For one thing the bird is handsome, in a bold, somewhat garish way, looking like "an overgrown American Goldfinch," the Peterson Guide aptly says. For another, it is Anja's favorite winter bird.

But here's the catch: We were in June, not January. A winter bird in a summer setting. Just how unlikely was this moment, we wondered. I checked the writings of Edward Howe Forbush, the classic observer of birds in New England, and he was as informative as usual: the Evening Grosbeak, he said, is a "more or less common and regular winter visitor even as far south as Rhode Island and Connecticut," but, in the summer, it is, and here he used the parlance of birders, "accidental."

So we were gazing at and exclaiming about an accidental visitor. And we were smiling, and our own excited chirpings had replaced the drone of the "Today" show, and suddenly the Kona coffee tasted as good as it had in Hawaii, and I realized that, having been drawn from inside our world of grim uncertainty outside into a world of accidental beauty, we had been, in that instant, re-created.

I realized as well that, had I not received the outdoor education that I had, we would not have seen those birds. We might have seen a pair of birds on the feeder, if we had happened to have a feeder, and we might have thought of them as somehow unusual, but we would not have seen the birds that we saw in the way that we saw them, the birds that helped us re-create ourselves, with our spirits revived, our hopes rekindled, our determination once again evident. Some would say that we had experienced a moment of grace. Although personally not drawn in this direction, I feel in this case no impulse to demur.

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—REX MCGUINN

CHRISTINE ROBINSON '83 (HON.)

The Simplest Thing Is to Call Him a Homeless Man

— February 26, 1998 —

I pass him each morning on my way to the Bean-Bag cafe, avoiding eye contact like a good New England Yankee. He seems out of place in this residential San Francisco neighborhood, so unlike the hustlers on the busy streets downtown or the panhandlers up on Haight Street. He just sits quietly, having a

smoke, or roots around in his carts or, sometimes, sleeps with an arm over his eyes. Once in a while his dog will nip at my cuffs.

Cowboy, get over here are the first words I remember. On a Tuesday in mid-September, he asks me if he could have the sports section of the *Chronicle*, and my daily ritual of newspaper and coffee begins to include handing Section F to the homeless man.

For weeks, he remained a symbol and a reminder of my privilege. I could ease my conscience by the gesture of a newspaper, and see only neglect, deprivation, injustice, despair. He was dirty; he was without family. He drank in the morning; he had little protection in a storm. He marked the failure of government, of policy, of capitalism. And so, for a

time, he was just a figure on the urban landscape, he was poverty, he was homelessness, he was the dark side of San Francisco's beauty.

Until World Series time: New York against Atlanta, and I begin to skim Section F on my way up the street and to linger on the sidewalk with this man I've heard called Eddie.

As I listen, he moves, imperceptibly then steadily into a space I had not imagined, a space in which stories and memories, baseball and dreams, bring the two of us together.

DAVID WEBER '71, '74 (HON.)

Thinking About Winning

— Fall 1999 —

Competitively speaking, cross-country is sort of a crude sport. In our conference, a good one, if you have five or six or seven guys who can run three miles in less than or close to 16 minutes, you do well. If not, then not. Since when school began last year no one on our team had ever run our three-mile course in less than 18 minutes (and one minute is a pretty large improvement from one year to the next), we could see from the first day that wins would be hard to come by. In fact, we compiled a losing record for the first time since the 1980s. We did eventually defeat several opposing teams, but we lost several other meets by large margins. Andover dusted us.

So it's tempting this year to take last year as a negative model. Yet my memory of last year's season is one of almost complete joy. This is a paradox to reckon with. It defies very deep currents in American culture. . . .

Last year, when we mostly lost, the team not only didn't whine, it didn't lose its self-respect or its pleasure in this glorious but austere sport. We (that is, the runners) ran for an hour and more on roads through the autumnal countryside, on trails through the familiar, cooling woods; we ran repeats on the track and up the long hill to the bridge over the railroad tracks; everybody was doing the same thing, sometimes alone, sometimes with teammates who embraced the same challenge. And we got better, fitter, stronger. A runner who the year before was painful to watch became something of an athlete and took three minutes off his time for the three-mile run. We lost to South Portland, to Portsmouth, to St. Paul's, to Northfield Mount Hermon, to Deerfield, but there was no whining, because the team knew what it was doing, and knew that what it was doing was good.

A photograph of the 1997 team hangs on the wall of my classroom, Phillips 4. Taken a

few minutes after the completion of the varsity race at that year's Interschols, it shows the seven varsity runners walking toward the gym and the showers, arms over each other's shoulders. They are covered in mud; they are palpably tired, spent. The picture doesn't reveal how the team did (we were a disappointing fourth); it isn't about that. It's about being a team of runners, as my high school team was, as last year's team here was, as I believe this year's team is and will be. And it's about running itself, about sport, about a shared commitment to something that is hard, and precious, whatever the outcome.

DOUGLAS G. ROGERS

Baseball in the Dark

— February 8, 1999 —

Picture this moment: the Rogers' home, a small town in the northeastern corner of Ohio, a small boy nestled in his bed on a cool, summer evening. Light flannel sheets: in summer, soft and clean with the fragrance of Bill Finley's cornfields and the tall white pines from our backyard, my mother's caress lingering in the smooth folds of cotton. I lie there beneath the cozy comforter, a field itself of red, white, and blue figures, Cleveland Indians batters, their faces all the same, all inscrutable, the pitchers all right-handed, each captured in the exact moment of releasing the ball, the catchers squatting, knees squared, padded gloves up, eyes focused straight ahead. And I curl there, propped up against two plump pillows, the headphones of my crystal radio carrying to my ears the voice of Ken Coleman, the voice of the Cleveland Indians, speaking directly to me, official scorer, pencil poised in my right hand, scorebook against my thighs, the notebook cover once an A&P grocery bag, now born anew in the cleanly traced image of outfielder Rocky Colavito, his Batman chin and hawk nose and eagle-sharp eyes, the features of my hero.

My mother had tucked me in, kissed me goodnight, her footsteps echoing down the hallway. I had lain there quietly, waiting, waiting, before slipping over, furtive, foxlike, to my hidden treasure: the crystal radio, large silver headphones, flashlight, scorebook, and pencil, all tucked beneath a layer of T-shirts and underwear in my bottom dresser drawer.

TOM RAMSEY

Struggling With the Material

— March 4, 1999 —

At the beginning of this term, almost as a lark, I joined a pottery class of adult learners offered every Thursday evening in the ceramics studio. Now I haven't done ceramics since third grade when I made a pinch pot, stuck the eraser on the end of my pencil into the sides of it so it was dimpled all over like a golf ball, glazed it red on the outside and white on the inside, called it an ashtray, and gave it to my dad for Father's Day.

In the first class this term, I quickly discovered that my skills had not magically developed from disuse in the past 37 years. My first effort looked suspiciously like the ashtray. But I also discovered that I wanted to keep trying, something that hadn't been the case in third grade. So I tried a coil pot made of long lazy snakes of clay.

And then one night, I decided to work on the wheel. It took me a while to get the thing going, and the first few times my arms and the clay were all over the place. But gradually, I settled down. The wet clay began to move in my hands, out and up, the wheel turning fast and smooth beneath me. And something began to take shape on the turntable before me: a cup, a bowl. But I didn't stop even though the shape was recognizable, but kept on working the clay until it fell apart in a wet mass, and I had to start all over with a new lump: wedging, centering the mass on the table, revving up the wheel, working the clay, trying to get my hands to talk to one another as someone put it, collapsing the mass, going at it again, almost obsessively. Two hours later I was still at it.

Something besides making pots was going on here, because I wasn't making anything, just forming and reforming, working the clay over and over until there was nothing I could work with any longer, and then starting again. I kept at this process, even though I am not sure exactly what I was keeping at. A struggling with the material, a search for something lost or not there yet, an earnest questioning of the clay to see what it was about. A process that felt very much like the questioning and attempted answering I am doing with my own life these days.

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—ALEXANDER VALHOULI '00

Meditations

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MARK HIZA

A Borrowed Genealogy

— December 9, 1999 —

I am walking west of the old barn, past the raspberry patch, past the block of 30-year-old Cortlands. I enter the woods, threading through oak and pine, heading for an imagined sound. I pause and watch David McCrillis working. He is quarrying granite: cleaving large blocks for the foundation of the barn behind me. It is late morning, October 11, 1833.

David is out on the expanse of granite, kneeling on the stone, working with a hammer and star drill, slowly tattooing the convex outcropping of stone with a line of shallow holes. He finishes a line, stands and stretches—flexing hands cramped from gripping the hammer and drill. He bends to the line of holes and drops two L-shaped pieces of iron, called feathers, into each hole, orienting the L's like upside-down bookends, and then he places a small iron wedge in between each set of feathers. Now he is hammering in the wedges—iron pushing on iron pushing on stone—he is working with great concentration. He seems tired. A compassionate observer might describe him as sad. I know the reason for his sadness. As he works, his 2-year-old daughter is sick in bed with scarlet fever. His wife, Abigail, is caring for the girl. David works patiently, hammering a uniform pattern of pressure across the broad back of the stone. It doesn't seem possible that the small wedges can perform the trick of cleaving a 10-foot long, four-foot high, two-foot thick block of granite from the huge stone, but as I watch I hear a sudden, distinct crack, and the block falls.

I walk up to the outcropping, onto its gently rounded surface, and approach the sharp, man-made edge. David is gone. I look over the edge and see, four feet below me, a granite block covered in leaves. In that leaf mold I have found a star drill, the head of a three-pound hammer, feathers and wedges. I move away from the quarry and, while heading back toward the barn, hear the flat ring of the hammer on the drill. I turn around and watch David start a new line of holes, two feet in from the

cleaved edge. He stops hammering, raises his head, and seems to wait for something. Abigail calls from the house. "David! Come quickly! Sarah is dead!" David stands and drops his tools. They fall for 100 years.

I follow David as he heads home. We walk in the track of the stone boat. I stop at the half-built foundation of the barn, and watch him embrace his wife and enter the house. It is my house now, and I own its ghosts.

MERCY CARBONELL

The Curvature of History and Inheritance

— Winter, 2000 —

I was in American Literature class at Milton Academy, discussing Thoreau, when my grandmother died. Maggie had just read out loud his opening paragraphs to *Life Without Principle* and she had ended on his resounding note: "Let us consider the ways in which we spend our lives."

My grandmother's heart may have stopped beating at just that moment. I will never know. I wasn't there, in the ICU of the Wilmington Hospital, when she finally gave out or took in her last breath at 10 minutes to eleven on January 5, 2000. I was in American Literature class and Thoreau was speaking through the voice of a 16-year-old girl, who had just returned from the Milton Mountain School. And I was thinking of my students, 16 and 17 years old, tired of the routine of school, disengaged at times, waiting for the bells to ring, not convinced they have choices in their lives, plugging away, rushing here and there, soaking up facts and dates, living through deadlines, not consciously aware yet that each step they take can be a choice, can be theirs. If they want it to be.

I was thinking of Thoreau and the Basin in Franconia Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I was thinking of the Sunday when I stood there with Christine, alone on the icy paths, my new winter boots keeping me on solid ground. I was thinking of the almost human curves in the rock formations and the "old man's foot," that can be found in the way the rocks curl and stretch and diverge and come together. If you look long enough and want to see it. I was thinking about how four days ago I had been there, where Thoreau had once

been a century before. And I was wishing that I could pile these students into a car and drive them on I-93 North through the White Mountains and take them to the Basin, show them what I had seen last Sunday, and share with them what Thoreau had said in 1857. I was thinking about what it means to live truly, deeply, with intention, in tune with what is around you. And in these ways I was perhaps thinking about death, about dying.

And perhaps this is the way living begins.

ALEXANDER R. VALHOULI '00

'A Real, Live Piece of Me'

— April 13, 2000 —

This meditation is about what I've got, right now. It's a real, live piece of me. For months I've been preoccupied with next year: Will it be college or work? I've been overwhelmed by the winter blues, cold weather and the one-week stretch that separates January 28, my father's birthday, and February 3, his death day....

My father was good at living. He was capable of making life simple. He did not look ahead and wish he was where he could possibly or perhaps impossibly be. He was delighted with the past. The future was to be respected, not feared or desired, and the present was so simple; action followed aspiration....

It's not easy taking in the present with the type of simplicity that my father did; that's why I'm writing. I appreciate that I've been exposed to tragedy, because in the same light, I've been exposed to passion, which has done to my outlook on life what eyes in the back of my head would do for my vision. I think a lot less gets by me. Memories don't fade away; some are just not fully put together, not completed so they remain silenced and unappreciated. I'm lucky. I've begun to understand that I have earned my blessings. Having 13 years with my father was perfect. It was 13 years longer than it might have been. Today, I value each moment that I share with the people I love and respect, the people I consider friends and teachers and the people who intrigue me. I wish that we may all discover simplicity in our lives and appreciate where we are at all times. It's much easier said than done, but that's why it's a wish. ●