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GRACE

BY WENDELL BERRY

The woods is shining this morning.

Red, gold and green, the leaves

lie on the ground, or fall,

or hang full of light in the air still.

Perfect in its rise and in its fall,

it takes

the place it has been coming

to forever.

It has not hastened here,

or lagged.

See how surely it has sought itself,

its roots passing lordly through

the earth.

See how without confusion it is

all that it is, and how flawless

its grace is. Running or walking,

the way

is the same. Be still. Be still.

"He moves your bones, and

the way is clear."

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Letter from the Editor

EVERY AUTUMN, the trees tell us the truth. Nothing stays the same. At first, this can feel like bad news. We humans tend to prefer permanence. We like things where we left them. We build routines, relationships, identities, and lives around the quiet assumption that tomorrow will look something like today.

And then autumn arrives. The green begins to fade. The air cools. The light changes. Leaves that spent all spring and summer reaching toward the sun begin, one by one, to let go.

There is a message encoded in the trees. Everything is impermanent. But maybe that isn't something to fear. Maybe impermanence is precisely what makes life beautiful.

When we begin to understand that a year doesn't last forever, we pay closer attention to the seasons. When we understand that a season passes, we notice the afternoon light. When we understand that the week, the day, the hour, the minute—even this breath—is already on its way somewhere else, something inside of us opens.

Impermanence creates spaciousness. It invites us to savor. To notice. To be here.

There is a strange freedom in realizing that the beauty resting right here at our fingertips is not only enough to behold and fill us up—it is, in some mysterious way, all there is.

This moment. This meal. This conversation. This person sitting across from us. This patch of sunlight moving across the floor. This particular version of our children. This particular version of ourselves. None of it will remain exactly as it is. And perhaps that is why it is sacred.

The trees seem to understand this better

than we do. They don't cling to what was. They don't spend October wishing for July. They simply release what the season has asked them to release, trusting that letting go is not the end of the story.

The leaf falls. The branch empties. Winter comes. And somewhere beneath what looks like absence, new life is already preparing itself.

So as you move through this autumn, pay attention to the trees.

And if, while watching them change, you have the sneaking suspicion that there is something in your own life asking to be released, perhaps you can loosen your grip.

You don't have to despise what was in order to let it go.

You can thank it. You can bless it. You can honor the season it belonged to. And then you can open your hand. Because maybe the message encoded in the trees isn't simply that everything changes.

Maybe it's that everything changes—and that's how life keeps becoming new.

As you turn the pages of this autumn issue of *The Citizen*, I hope you'll find a few things worth slowing down for—a story that stays with you, an idea that opens something inside you, a song that keeps you rooted in earth, or simply a reminder of the beauty already surrounding us here in this little corner of the world.

Thank you for reading. Thank you for paying attention. And most of all, thank you for continuing to be on this journey with us, season after season.

Enjoy this issue. Enjoy this autumn.

And don't forget to look at the trees.

With gratitude,

Ashton Gustafson | Editor, *The Citizen*



Salt, Pepper & A Whole Lot of Prayer

THE STORY OF HELBERG BBQ

By Ashton Gustafson

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEARTOFTEXASFOODIES

HELBERG BARBECUE STARTED with a cheap smoker, a bad brisket, and a little homesickness. A decade later, after accolades, a devastating fire, and a remarkable second act, Phillip and Yvette Helberg are still seasoning their barbecue—and their lives—the same way.

There are plenty of ways to complicate a brisket. Phillip Helberg prefers not to. Salt. Pepper. Smoke. Time. And, if you ask Phillip and his wife, Yvette, the ingredient that has mattered most over the past decade isn't found in the kitchen at all: prayer.

So much so that the phrase they've used for years—"Salt, Pepper & a Whole Lot of Prayer"—is now officially theirs. The Helbergs trademarked it this year. It sounds like a great barbecue slogan. Spend enough time with them, though, and you realize it isn't really a slogan. It's closer to an operating system.

Because the story of Helberg Barbecue is certainly about brisket. It's about smoke and fire and the peculiar Texas obsession with taking one of the toughest cuts of beef on earth and tending to it for hours until it becomes something transcendent. But it's also a story about two young people who built a business while they were still figuring out adulthood, survived a pandemic, watched their first restaurant burn, spent more than a year cooking out of trailers again, and somehow emerged on the other side with something bigger than what they lost. And it all began with a brisket that was barely edible.

THE FIRST BRISKET

It was 2016. Phillip had grown up in Texas but was living out of state and missing home when Yvette's mother bought him a cheap smoker from Home Depot. Around the Fourth of July, he decided to try a brisket.

He did some research online, fired up the smoker, and gave it a shot. The result? "Barely edible," Phillip remembers. But importantly, edible enough.

Something about the difficulty of it hooked him. Brisket wasn't like throwing steaks on a grill. Low-and-slow barbecue required patience and feel. Fire had to be managed. Temperatures watched. Decisions made without ever completely knowing what was happening inside that black box. Phillip wanted another shot. Then another.

Two years later, the hobby had become a business. In April 2018, Phillip and Yvette opened Helberg Barbecue in a trailer at Pinewood Coffee Bar in Waco. They stayed there for 13 months, learning the rhythms of running a restaurant one plate at a time. Then something happened.

Daniel Vaughn showed up. Helberg received its first Texas Monthly write-up in August 2018. Then, in March 2019, the magazine named Helberg one of the state's 25 best new barbecue joints. In Texas barbecue, a nod from Vaughn can function a little like a papal blessing. People came. A lot of them. The Helbergs estimate business roughly tripled overnight.

It was an extraordinary moment to arrive on the scene. Texas barbecue was in the midst of a creative renaissance, and several names appearing alongside Helberg were becoming institutions in their own right. The backyard experiment had suddenly joined a much larger conversation about what Texas barbecue could become.

A few months later, around Memorial Day 2019, the Helbergs opened their first brick-and-mortar restaurant in China Spring. By 2021, Helberg had earned a place on Texas Monthly's coveted list of the 50 Best BBQ Joints in Texas. The barely edible brisket had come a long way.

FINDING THEIR PLACE

The original China Spring location had character, but "restaurant" might be generous. It was essentially a warehouse the Helbergs had DIY'd into a dining room and service area. Much of the actual operation remained outside—a food trailer, smokers, cooking equipment, and a collection of additions made as the business grew.

And grow it did. Eventually, the parking lot would fill before the dining room did. The Helbergs knew something had to change.

They bought land nearby in 2021 and began imagining what a purpose-built Helberg Barbecue might look like. But they weren't certain they should leave. They considered buying and expanding their existing property. They talked with mentors. They ran numbers. And they prayed. "If it was in God's plan for us to move here, or stay there and expand there..." Phillip remembers. They would wait.

By then, building costs had exploded. A new restaurant meant substantially more overhead and a considerable gamble: move roughly a mile down the road, spend a fortune building something new, and trust that the customers would follow.

The Helbergs were still wrestling with the decision when, in 2023, the decision was effectively made for them. The restaurant caught fire.

FIRE

Phillip can still pinpoint the moment he found out because, strangely enough, it exists on video. He was at home making venison sausage with his son. They had set up a camera to record a time-lapse of them linking sausage together.

Then Yvette walks into the frame. She's on the phone. The restaurant is on fire.

A friend had driven past the property and noticed smoke. No sophisticated alarm system alerted the Helbergs. By the time they understood what was happening, their first brick-and-mortar home—the place they had cobbled together, grown inside of, and earned national attention from—was gone.

Fire is an interesting character in the barbecue world. Contained, it creates the thing. Uncontained, it takes the thing away.

And suddenly the couple whose livelihood had been built around managing fire was faced with figuring out what to do after fire had managed them.

They also discovered how vulnerable they were. The Helbergs had been young when they started the company. They were in their early twenties when the business began and still in their mid-twenties, with a four-month-old baby, when they opened their first permanent location. They had learned entrepreneurship the way many people do: while doing it.

After the fire, they discovered gaps in their insurance coverage they hadn't understood existed—business interruption, payroll protection and other safeguards that become painfully obvious only when you need them.

Then something else happened. The community stepped in.

Where insurance left gaps, people helped fill them. Mentors offered advice. Customers rallied. Friends showed up. And the message from those who had been around long enough to understand the restaurant business was clear: Get open. As quickly as possible.

The news cycle moves. People's attention moves. Momentum disappears. So the Helbergs went back to where they started: trailers. Within roughly three and a half weeks, they were operating again from a temporary setup. Then came another temporary location. Then another move.



For 15 months after the fire, Helberg Barbecue was effectively nomadic. There is a wonderful symmetry to that number. Before opening their first restaurant, Phillip and Yvette spent 13 months operating from a trailer. After losing it, they spent 15 months in trailers again.

They had gone forward only to find themselves, years later, seemingly back at the beginning. Except they weren't the same people anymore.

A WHOLE LOT OF PRAYER

Ask the Helbergs what they know now that they didn't know when all of this started, and neither begins talking about meat.

Yvette talks about prayer. "There's no such thing as too small of a prayer." In the earliest days of Helberg, she remembers thanking God every day for every person who walked through their door. Not revenue. Not covers. People. "I would pray, thank you for everybody that came through our door."

That gratitude became something of a foundation beneath the business. Not a guarantee that everything would work out. Their story has provided more than enough evidence against that interpretation. Instead, faith became a way of holding what happened next: a pandemic, growth, recognition, a fire, uncertainty, rebuilding.

Phillip says those experiences have changed his relationship with the small crises that inevitably accompany owning a restaurant. "When you go through a pandemic and a fire," he says, certain things simply stop deserving the amount of mental real estate you once gave them.

Problems still happen. You deal with them. Then you move on. That attitude has spread through the restaurant in ways the Helbergs couldn't necessarily have planned. Former employees have contacted them years later to say their time at Helberg influenced their own journeys of faith. Others in the barbecue community have done the same.

For Phillip, that's part of the point. "No act of faith is too small." Sometimes the sermon is simply the way somebody responds when everything goes wrong. The way they treat an employee. The way they handle disappointment. The way they behave when the building is burning. Plant the seed. Let someone else worry about when it grows.

THE SECOND ACT

In March 2025, Helberg Barbecue finally opened the doors to its new home. Not another improvised warehouse. Not another trailer. The restaurant the Helbergs had spent years imagining.



The new Helberg is bigger and more polished, but the food still carries the DNA of that first backyard experiment. The menu respects Texas barbecue tradition without becoming trapped by it. Yvette's Filipino background occasionally shows up in specials and dishes. Phillip continues to experiment. Their smoked-then-fried chicken, which now seems tailor-made for the Instagram era, has actually been evolving since 2019.

That's another lesson in the Helberg story. Things that look like overnight successes usually aren't. The same is true of Phillip himself. He rarely needs to work the pits anymore. That may sound strange for a pitmaster, but he sees it as evidence that the company is becoming what it should be. His goal is for Helberg's pitmasters to become better pitmasters than he was. For the meat cutters to become better than he was. For the managers to become better managers than he was.

The job is no longer to do everything. It's to build something that can continue without him doing everything. Perhaps that's why people now travel to China Spring not only to eat Helberg barbecue, but to study it. Aspiring pitmasters have come from elsewhere in the United States and even Canada to work alongside the team. One Canadian barbecue owner came for months, lived with the Helbergs, and immersed himself in the operation before returning home. He had discovered Helberg because of the barbecue. But

also because of their faith. Which brings it all back around.

SALT. PEPPER. PRAYER.

Ten years after that first brisket, it's easy to look at Helberg Barbecue and see the visible markers of success: the Texas Monthly recognition, the lines, the new restaurant, the awards and accolades, the food that sends people driving across Texas toward China Spring. But the Helbergs seem most interested in something harder to measure.

The people who came through the doors. The employees who became friends. The former staff members who call years later. The community that showed up when their restaurant disappeared in smoke. The prayers whispered before anyone knew whether this little barbecue operation would work.

Salt and pepper are simple ingredients. On their own, neither is particularly impressive. Prayer can look that way too—small, ordinary, invisible.

But the Helbergs have spent the past decade learning what can happen when you keep showing up, keep tending the fire, keep planting seeds, and keep giving thanks for whoever walks through the door.

Maybe that's the secret. Not to a perfect brisket. Phillip has spent thousands of hours figuring that part out. To building something that can survive the fire.

Salt. Pepper. And a whole lot of prayer.

AUTUMN PLAYLIST

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 01 | Round Here
Counting Crows | 11 | Lost In The Light
Bahamas |
| 02 | You Wouldn't Know
Stephen Day | 12 | Arizona
Kings of Leon |
| 03 | Rein Me In
Sam Fender (feat. Olivia Dean) | 13 | Million Dollar Bill
Dawes |
| 04 | Make Me Wonder
Solon Holt | 14 | Sail Away
David Gray |
| 05 | Strangest Thing
The War On Drugs | 15 | Hotel Chelsea Nights
Ryan Adams |
| 06 | Not Myself
John Mayer | 16 | Linger
The Cranberries |
| 07 | 1979
The Smashing Pumpkins | 17 | 1000 Things
Jason Mraz |
| 08 | In The Moment
Jim James | 18 | Die Next To You
Emyrson Flora |
| 09 | Rebirth Of Slick (Cool Like Dat)
Digable Planets | 19 | I Remember Everything
Zach Bryan (feat. Kacey Musgraves) |
| 10 | Florence Sur Les Champs-Elysees
Miles Davis | 20 | God of Wine
Third Eye Blind |



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Op-Ed

HEAVEN IS A HONKY-TONK

By Ashton Gustafson

I GREW UP WITH A FATHER IN THE BEER BUSINESS.

It's interesting how that sentence has evolved for me over the years—how the meaning and perception have shifted as I've aged, reflected, and lived a little more life. But at the time, it was simply all I knew.

I spent a good chunk of my childhood riding shotgun with my father, moving in and out of honky-tonks across a small Texas town that CNN once named the most average city in America. Places like the Bar L, P2, and Frank's Eight Ball Lounge. When you grow up inside something, you don't label it right or wrong, good or bad. You just call it reality. And that was mine.

I loved it. I learned how to shoot pool. I learned to appreciate a one-dollar grilled cheese. And with \$1.50 in quarters, I could hold court at the jukebox for a solid two hours. George Strait. Willie Nelson. Merle Haggard. It was perfect.

It only dawned on me that this maybe wasn't the norm when I suggested hosting our soccer team's end-of-season party at the Bar L. Everyone else voted for Chuck E. Cheese.

At a young age, you start taking notes—whether you realize it or not. And one of the most important notes I ever took (or maybe the note took me), one I've kept in my pocket ever since, was this: once you step inside the doors of a honky-tonk, many of the labels that divide us outside those doors start to fade away.

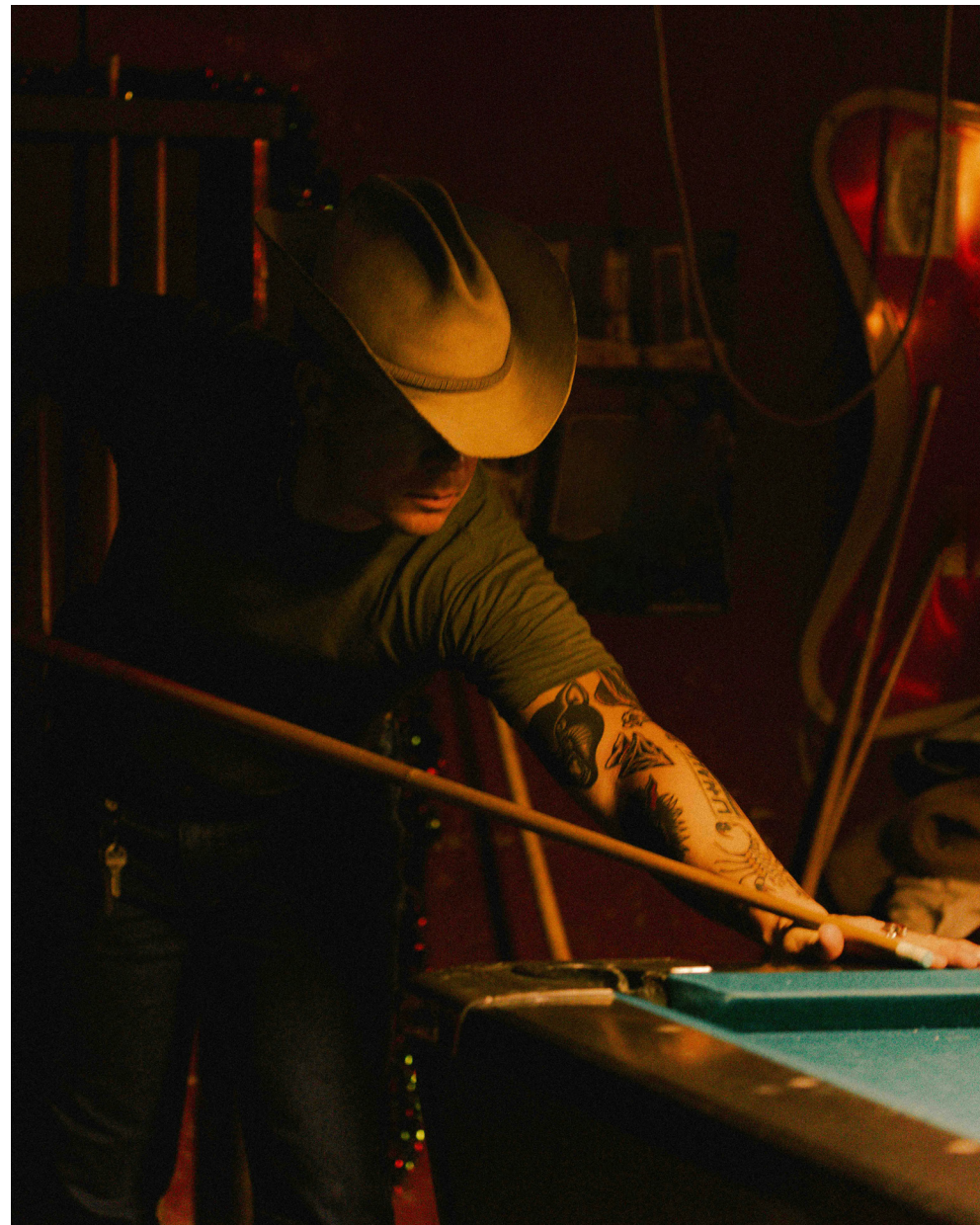
There was camaraderie. Everyone knew each other by first name and more often, by their nickname. Stories were shared. Laughter came easily. Life, in all its messiness, was allowed to be exactly what it was. One's net worth wasn't interesting. But their God-given essence sure was.

Years later, I found myself spending more and more time inside church walls. By the time I was sixteen, I was in a church setting five days a week. In 1999, this was very oxymoronic, and the religious bluebloods had some questions. The son of a beer man leading folks across all denominations in songs about unconditional love and a bearer of good news? Yes.

And I was always drawn to the Jesus stories. He was more interested in the book someone was than in the cover the world might know them by. Whatever conditions the world claimed were necessary for love, he melted them. Kind of like my honky-tonk friends and my father.

I still remember the time I walked into church and heard someone whisper from the pew behind me, "There's the beer people." That's my earliest memory of the world dividing, drawing lines, and labeling.

That moment stayed with me. But what always struck me about Jesus was that he rarely talked about hanging out in the tabernacle. He seemed far more comfortable in ordinary places—around tables, among "outsiders", in rooms full of stories,



laughter, food, and drink. If he did draw a line, it was to point to an open door with a neon light hanging above it that read 'come on in'.

Places that, if we're honest, felt a lot like honky-tonks. Because in those spaces, people could share their stories, raise a glass, laugh a little, and somehow—some way—arrive at the quiet understanding that even in the midst of suffering, when you stack the small joys of life together, they often outweigh the pain.

Which brings me to where we find ourselves today. It feels like dualistic thinking has never been louder. Us versus them. Right versus wrong. Good versus bad. The lines are sharp. The labels heavy. The room is tense. We subscribe to one halftime show and unsubscribe to another.

And maybe—just maybe—what we all need is a stack of quarters, a room lit by neon, a song we all know by heart, and a place where the labels fall away long enough for us to remember each other.

To remember that we are one. To remember that my story can open me to your story. And your story can open us to our story. And our story can collectively open us to The Story.

Maybe heaven looks less like correction and more like connection. Maybe we just need a neon-lit room and to split a grilled cheese with someone not like us. Maybe heaven is a honky-tonk. Maybe that will crack the case.

The table is long enough for all of us.

Visit ashton.beehive.com for weekly writings on business sense, soul wisdom, and the wonder of daily life—all in one place.



Painting Nowhere That Happens to Be Everywhere

THE COLORS OF WEST TEXAS IN THE WORK
OF MOLLY ODOM MAGILL

By Ashton Gustafson





“I KNEW INTELLEC-
TUALLY AND VERY
LUCIDLY THAT I
DIDN’T WANT TO TRY
TO CONVEY WHERE
I’M FROM THROUGH
ICONOGRAPHY,”

WEST TEXAS has a particular kind of silence. Not the absence of sound exactly, but something bigger. A horizon so wide it seems to swallow the noise. Caliche roads. Mesquite trees. Sunlight stretched across land that appears to go on forever. It is a place where, if you stand still long enough, nowhere begins to feel suspiciously like somewhere.

I knew something of that place long before I knew Molly Odom Magill's work. Growing up, I spent countless weekends in West Texas with my dad. Just me, my dad, and the horizon. We would disappear into that great expanse together, and though I certainly didn't have the language for it then, I can see now that somewhere out there the first seeds of my connection with the Great Mystery were sown and grew. Something about all that space, all that silence, made the invisible feel near.

This summer, when I first encountered Magill's work, I recognized something before I understood it. Her paintings took me back there. Not because she had painted a ranch I knew or a road I remembered. No landmarks told me where I was. It was something underneath the recognizable world—the color, the distance, the horizon, the strange spaciousness of it all. Somehow she had painted a place I remembered without painting the place at all.

Molly Odom Magill knows this territory well. She grew up in Baird, Texas, a small town near Abilene in Callahan County, where her family has roots reaching back roughly 150 years. Her parents still live there. Her grandparents lived there. The stories, roads, cemeteries, colors and characters of the place remain lodged somewhere deep inside her. Magill remembers once asking her grandmother how their family happened to be from a place they loved so much.

“We’re just lucky,” her grandmother told her.

It is difficult to look at Magill's paintings without feeling some version of that luck. Today, she lives and works in Dallas, where she operates her studio, Cliff and Callahan—a name that joins the two coordinates of her life: Oak Cliff, where she lives now, and Callahan County, where so much of her began. Her work exists in much the same territory, somewhere between old and new, rural and urban, softness and boldness, simplicity and complexity.

But calling Magill a landscape painter doesn't quite get it right. There are no obligatory cowboy boots. No windmills planted conveniently against a sunset. No attempt to reproduce the literal geography of West Texas. Instead, Magill seems interested in what remains after the recognizable objects have

been removed: the feeling of the place, the memory of it, the color of it, the horizon.

“I knew intellectually and very lucidly that I didn't want to try to convey where I'm from through iconography,” she says. For Magill, Callahan County was never simply mesquite, cactus, grass, boots and ranches. It was—and remains—something less easily named. Her paintings attempt to pull back from the physical landscape until what remains is almost emotional geography: fields of color, boundaries, intersections and shapes that suggest a place without telling the viewer exactly where to stand.

In other words, Magill isn't painting West Texas as much as she is painting what West Texas did to her.

Her creative inheritance began long before she thought of herself as an artist. Magill grew up surrounded by people who made things. Her grandmother was a teacher, a published poet and a classically trained musician. Her mother created constantly. There were artists and musicians around town, although few would have been inclined to announce themselves that way. They were practical West Texans, after all.

“We would never be so presumptuous as to call ourselves artists,” Magill says. “But so many of us were.”

Creativity wasn't treated as something precious or separate from ordinary life. It was simply part of being alive. Colors, pastels, hand-made classroom backgrounds, painted containers, music, stories. Making something out of nothing was less a profession than a way of moving through the world.

Magill studied design in college, including drawing, textiles, color and painting. One day, a painting professor told her that her brushstrokes were sophisticated and suggested she consider changing her major. The idea seemed almost absurd. Change her major to painting? “I have to be able to get a job,” Magill remembers thinking. “We work. We’re from West Texas.”

So she did. For nearly two decades, Magill built a successful corporate career, eventually finding herself in boardrooms in New York and Los Angeles, working alongside executives and celebrities—a long way, at least geographically, from a town of roughly 1,600 people. But painting never disappeared. There was always a canvas somewhere. One painting in her home was painted over seven or eight times during those years, an accidental record of an artist continuing to speak even while her career required another language.

Then, in 2018, a corporate reorganization eliminated Magill's job. One day she had a career; the next she didn't. She went home, talked with her husband and knew almost immediately that she wasn't going back. She started painting.

Months followed. Then more painting. Within roughly six months, someone bought one.

That first sale still carries a sense of disbelief for Magill.



Someone wanted something she had made enough to live with it. Then another person did. And another. Eventually galleries followed. Her first gallery exhibition came a couple of years later in Dallas. Today her work has been shown through galleries including Washington Gallery in Waco and Fort Works Art in Fort Worth, and has found homes across the country and considerably farther away: California, Oregon, Colorado, North Carolina, upstate New York. Even Nova Scotia.

And this is where Magill's work becomes especially interesting. People see themselves in it. A collector might look at one of her paintings and see West Virginia. Someone else sees Oregon. Another sees California. They recognize their own horizon inside a painting born from hers.

“I'm from the middle of nowhere,” Magill says, “which it turns out is everywhere.”

It may be the best explanation of her work. Magill paints somewhere deeply specific until it becomes universal.

Her paintings feel almost like frozen moments inside a West Texas kaleidoscope. There are shapes that resemble land with-

out becoming land. Horizons appear and disappear. Colors collide and negotiate with one another. Greens arrive unexpectedly. Soft earth tones sit beside something electric. At times it is difficult to tell whether the light belongs to sunrise or sunset.

And then there is the pink.

Look closely enough at any Molly Odom Magill painting and you'll find it: a touch of fluorescent neon pink hidden somewhere in the work. Every painting. No exceptions. It has become a kind of private signature, hiding in plain sight.

The origin of this small mark is wonderfully strange. Magill carries around a piece of burlap ribbon she painted neon pink. She takes it home to Baird, out onto caliche roads and into fields, laying the fluorescent ribbon against

the muted landscape and photographing it there. The combination—rough burlap, open country and a shock of almost unnatural pink—somehow feels like home to her.

There is also the mesquite. For much of the year, a mesquite tree is easy to dismiss. Thorny. Scraggly. Practically a weed. But for a brief moment in spring, when its new leaves emerge, the green can appear almost fluorescent. Magill notices that moment. Of course she does.

“There's not one painting goes out without a touch of fluorescent pink,” she says.

Think of it as a tiny Where's Waldo for anyone willing to pay attention. Once you know it exists, you start searching for it. Which may be an appropriate way to experience Magill's work altogether. Look again. There is almost always something else there.

Her process is not built around perfectly reproducing a photograph or standing in front of a particular vista with an easel.



Much of the landscape already exists inside her. She can hear the sound of tires moving across caliche. She can remember back roads and nights with friends. She can return mentally to the peculiar feeling of being young in a small town—knowing you are exactly where you are supposed to be while simultaneously sensing the enormous possibility of everything beyond it.

Still, Magill goes home. Her parents remain in Baird, and returning changes something in the work. She takes photographs. She drives the roads. She visits the cemetery. She looks at old pictures of grandparents and ancestors she may never have personally known but somehow feels she knows anyway.

“They’re alive and well in the fibers of my being,” she says. That sentence could describe the paintings too. Her ancestors aren’t painted into them. Neither are the stories or the roads or the people who populated her childhood. But they are there. Magill says the landscapes are people, too.

Perhaps that is why the paintings resist becoming simple abstractions. There is personality inside them. Tension. Relationships. One color changes because another color is beside it, not unlike the colorful characters Magill remembers from her childhood. Boundaries meet. Paths cross. Something unexpected interrupts what seemed settled.

Her artist statement describes the work as an exploration of “who we are, where we come from and where we are going,” using color, form and texture to consider boundaries, intersections and paths. It sounds like landscape. It also sounds a lot like a life.

Magill doesn’t pretend that either one moves in a straight line. She talks about painting as a continual process of getting stuck and getting unstuck. Often the moment when she begins to hate a painting—the moment she isn’t sure what to do next—is precisely when something interesting is about to happen. She has learned to keep going.

There is something decidedly West Texan about that too. The hard part isn’t necessarily an interruption of the work. Sometimes the hard part is the work. The unexpected mark, the wrong turn,

the thing that refuses to cooperate can become the very thing that makes the painting sing.

Maybe our lives aren’t much different. The roads bend. Careers disappear. We leave home. We come back. We become people our younger selves couldn’t have imagined, only to discover that the earliest parts of us were quietly traveling alongside us the entire time.

In 2018, Molly Odom Magill lost a job and returned to a canvas. In 2027, she is scheduled to serve as an artist in residence with the Texas Lyceum, showing her work through the organization’s events around the state. Somewhere between those two points is a winding path of paintings, exhibitions, collectors and thousands of brushstrokes that eventually carried a girl from Baird back toward the place she had never entirely left.

Cliff and Callahan. Dallas and West Texas. Here and there. Then and now. Magill’s paintings live at the intersection.

They remind us that place is more than geography. Sometimes it is inheritance. Sometimes it is memory. Sometimes it is the sound of caliche beneath a tire or a grandmother telling you that you were lucky to be born where you were. And sometimes, unexpectedly, someone else paints their memory of a place and somehow gives you yours back.

Maybe that is what I recognized when I first saw Molly’s work. Somewhere in those colors was a boy again, spending the weekend with his dad beneath an impossibly large West Texas sky. Just the two of us and the horizon. Long before I knew what to call the Great Mystery, something out there was teaching me how to notice it.

And somewhere on the canvas, if you look closely enough, there is always a little streak of neon pink.

A little piece of nowhere.
Hanging everywhere.

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THE GOLDEN HOUR

A bourbon, apple & rosemary cocktail for autumn evenings.

THERE IS A PARTICULAR KIND OF LIGHT that belongs to autumn. It arrives a little earlier each evening, settling across porches and rooftops in shades of amber and gold. The air cools. The shadows stretch. And for a few minutes, the whole world seems to ask us to slow down and stay awhile.

The Golden Hour was made for that moment. Bourbon brings the warmth. Fresh apple cider gives a nod to the orchard. A little maple adds sweetness, lemon keeps things bright, and rose-

mary brings an earthy fragrance that feels like autumn without trying too hard.

It’s simple enough to make on a Tuesday evening and handsome enough to pour for friends around the table on Saturday night. Make one. Step outside. Find a chair. Watch the light disappear. Some things are beautiful precisely because they don’t stay.

THE RECIPE

Ingredients

- 2 oz Bourbon
- 1 oz Fresh Apple Cider
- ¾ oz Fresh Lemon Juice
- ¼ oz Pure Maple Syrup
- ¼ oz Amaro Nonino
- 2 Dashes Angostura Bitters
- 1 Sprig Fresh Rosemary
- 1 Thin Apple Slice

Directions

Add the bourbon, apple cider, lemon juice, maple syrup, Amaro Nonino, and bitters to a cocktail shaker filled with ice.

Shake well until chilled.

Strain over one large ice cube in a rocks glass.

Gently clap the rosemary sprig between your hands to release its oils before adding it to the glass. Garnish with a thin slice of apple.

Serve immediately, preferably somewhere you can see the sunset.





Learning to Speak the Language of the Soul

A conversation with poet and author Mark Nepo about words, wonder, wisdom, and what it might take to find a way back to what is real.

Hosted by Ashton Gustafson, *Good, True, & Beautiful* is an ongoing conversation with thought leaders and visionaries from across the world.

THERE ARE CERTAIN PEOPLE worth calling when the world gets loud. Mark Nepo is one of them. Poet, philosopher, teacher, and longtime guest of the *Good / True / & Beautiful* podcast, Nepo has spent much of his life exploring the territory beneath the surface of things—the place where poetry meets spirituality, where grief becomes teacher, and where the questions are often more useful than the answers.

His newest book, *The Language of the Soul*, is built around a beautifully simple idea: words are pointers, not destinations. The danger is becoming so fascinated with the language used to describe life that the experience of actually living it gets lost.

For Nepo, that is precisely the problem—and possibility—of language. Words like soul, God, love, freedom, genius, sacrifice, and sincerity have been passed through so many mouths and generations that their original depth can become obscured. Nepo's new book attempts to dust them off—not to define the mystery, but to return the reader to it.

Words, as he explains in the conversation, are ultimately "mysterious placeholders" that help create a direct relationship with the things that matter. And some of the original meanings are astonishing. Genius, for example, once meant an "attendant spirit"—not exceptional intelligence reserved for the Einsteins and Mozarts of the world, but something closer to an inner guide available to everyone. Sage was originally connected to tasting. Wisdom wasn't simply something accumulated intellectually; it was something tasted directly through life.

Then there is sacrifice. Nepo traces the word back to an invitation far more interesting than simply suffering or giving something up: to release what no longer works in order to remain close to what is sacred. That definition alone might be worth carrying into autumn.

What has been outgrown? What is still being carried simply because it once worked? What identities, ambitions, certainties, or old versions of a life have become too small for whatever is trying to

emerge? Nepo knows something about this personally. Nearly forty years ago, a rare form of lymphoma almost killed him. Before his illness, he describes himself as a driven young poet—Poet with a capital P. After surviving, something changed. The drive disappeared. The poetry didn't. It simply moved deeper. "I was now drawn to things, not driven," Nepo says.

He compares the experience to repotting a plant. If a plant is alive and growing, eventually the very pot that once protected it will restrict it. Growth requires another container. Human beings, Nepo suggests, aren't much different. Sometimes even the most cherished identities must be loosened so the roots can keep growing.

It leads to perhaps the central question of the conversation: in a culture overflowing with information, labels, opinions, identities, algorithms, and increasingly sophisticated ways of experiencing life secondhand, how does a person recover a direct relationship with being alive?

Nepo's answer is wonderfully uncomplicated. Pay attention. Ask better questions. Listen. Taste life directly. Instead of asking someone what they do, try asking: What's it like to be you? It is a deceptively simple question. But perhaps that's exactly why it matters. The mind, Nepo says, is remarkably good at sorting and distinguishing. It tells the red light from the green one, milk from cleaning fluid, one thing from another. But meaning comes from somewhere deeper. The heart does something different: it absorbs, integrates, and reconnects what the mind has separated.

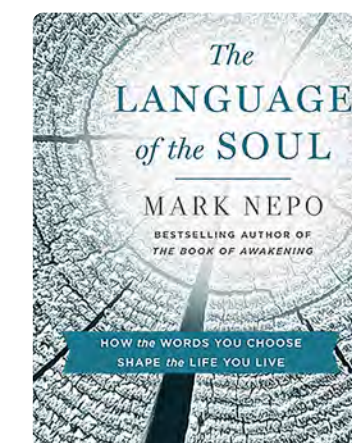
And maybe that is part of the medicine for this particular moment. Not another argument. Not another label. Not another perfectly constructed answer. A table. A conversation. A willingness to look another person in the eyes and wonder what it actually feels like to be them.

Near the end of the conversation, Nepo offers a line that seems to capture not only his new book, but much of the spirit behind *Good / True / & Beautiful*: "We just loved it into the open together."

Maybe that is what the best books do. Maybe it is what the best conversations do. They don't necessarily give the reader or listener something that wasn't already there. They hold up a mirror. They point beyond themselves. They offer an invitation to taste and see—to encounter life rather than merely collect ideas about it.

And occasionally, if enough attention is being paid, they help recover a language that somehow feels as though it has been known all along.

Listen to the full conversation with Mark Nepo on *Good / True / & Beautiful*, and subscribe wherever podcasts are found for more conversations with writers, thinkers, artists, and fellow travelers exploring what it means to live a more awake, connected, and wholehearted life.



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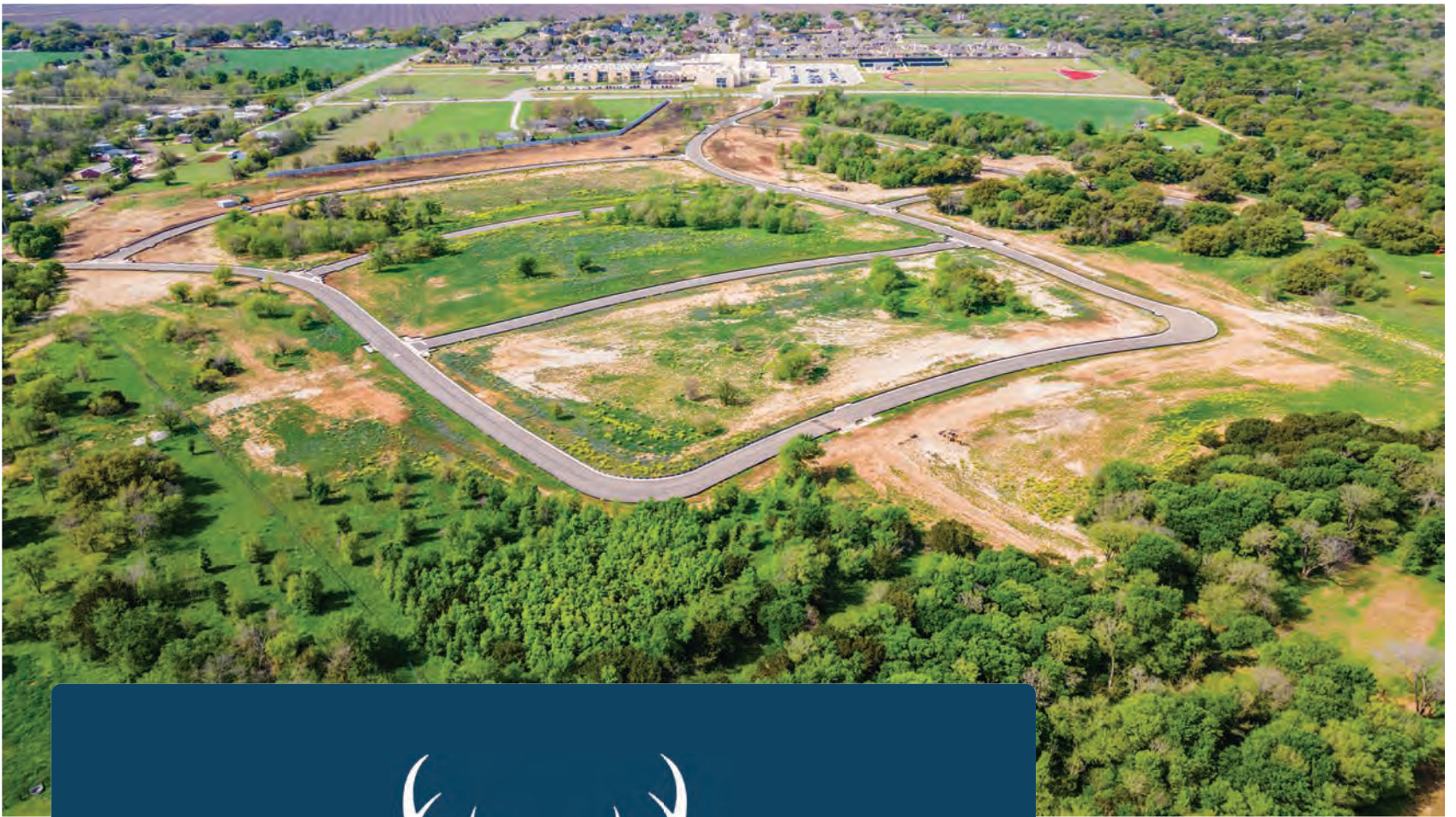
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