

“The challenge is exploring using our stories to explore the question: So what?
(x)

So what if there’s God or not? If there is, what does God have to do with me?
With us? (x)

It felt cool to her, so gorgeously refreshing that she brought it closer to her and
hugged the jug with her whole body. . . . she felt like she was touching God,
that she was hugging God and would never again want to let go. (xii)

“My mother wouldn’t let me play with that poor white trash, those Guthrie
kids.” (xiii)

Religion refers to the official organizations, institutions, rituals, rules, and
codified belief systems that human beings create over time in order to contain
and manage the power of faith. The biggest concerns of religion are usually
order, control, obedience, and maintaining the boundaries of the system itself.
(xv)

Theology, in contrast, tries to rise above religion’s rules and structures in order
to ask the perennially big questions about the meaning of all life, the cosmos,
of the full verses of the truth about God—or at least as much as we can grasp
or as much as grasps us. (xv)

God is mystery. (xvii)

This infinite mystery is our creator, sustainer, and ultimately our
consummator; our beginning, our middle, and our end. (xviii)

That eternally present love is, most simply stated, my definition of grace. (xviii)

Jesus stands as the truest and most vivid and profound human manifestation
of that life force. (xviii)

God does not stay at a distance from us, but constantly seeks to transform our
lives by asking us to awaken to the divine presence. . . . The challenge for us is
to open our eyes, ears, hands, minds, and hearts to receive the truth of God’s
real, persistent presence. (xix)

When you catch glimpses of this truth (conversion), you become painfully
aware of how asleep you’ve been and how most of us spend our lives acting as

if that brilliant love of God does not exist, oblivious to it, even disdainful of it. (xx)

The transformations that happen to you when you wake up to grace from sin are overwhelming and real. (xxi)

Theological minds Jones reads and values: Calvin, Niebuhr, Barth, Joe Jones, Luce Irigaray, James Baldwin, Howard Thurman, James Cone, Gustave Gutierrez, Katie Cannon. (xxii)

“Whether we are poor or rich, filled with joy or sorrow, virtuous or broken, being born or dying, in all things we belong to God.” John Calvin (3)

A large painting of an Oklahoma landscape hangs in my New York living room . . . a solitary oil rig surrounded by scattered pieces of drilling equipment and work-trailers. The rig stands tall against an empty field of wheat and a shockingly blue sky. (3)

I was taught this prairie version of American theology . . . in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) . . . the pithy slogan “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible” summed it all up for them. (4)

This dogged insistence on equality was applied to salvation, as well: everyone—even bad guys—was equally saved. They were unabashed universalists. . . . Salvation wasn’t a contest. It consisted of the bare fact that as in life, after we died, God loves us. All of us. . . . Little did I realize how radical this would sound when compared with the punishment/reward theology that still dominates so many American churches. (5)

“Jesus is a socialist.” (7)

Looking at those Bibles, my grandma, to her dying day, insisted that those plots were God-given, “our divine calling” to turn rock-hard red soil into wheat fields. (9)

The line between criminals and law-keepers was as fuzzy as a horizon line in a dust storm. (13)

For all of them, she said, Calvin’s *Institutes* was the basic textbook where they learned what they believed and remembered who they were. (22)

Reading Calvin helped me to understand more fully the world-view that allowed my family to survive all those years on the plains. (24)

Reading Calvin . . . helped me understand, more than any political-science textbook or historical study ever had, the deep theological undercurrents that

flow through the very heart of American culture. . . . You hear echoes of his core ideas in the patriotic songs we sing, the pledge of allegiance we ritually chant, the Constitution that forms our foundation, and still today, in the varied speeches and slogans that pepper American political campaigns, on both sides of the aisle as well as in chants and slogans of those who protest our politics (25)

The world, as Calvin describes it, is a light-filled place where God's glory shines so brightly that no part of the human condition is left hidden in shadows or closeted away. (26)

To be human (in 1559) is to be downtrodden and struggling against the odds, whatever those odds might be. (27)

Calvin was a keen observer of human nature, of that gulf between our interior nature and exterior behavior. (27)

The most egregious sin is humanity's will to be powerful in a way only God is—to control our own destiny, to assert our prideful will and allow greed and our unquenchable thirst for power to dominate our minds and compel our actions. (29)

But he also insists that even without the Bible, nature itself gives us the same testimony to God's good intentions for us. (31)

Instead, God becomes known to us only through the work of God's "hands and feet" as they bestow upon us Divine gifts that, if accepted, give us the strength needed to carry the weight of life's journey. . . . They are gifts of insight and practice that allow us, through our own free will, to live within the sin-grace tensions—never perfectly, mind you, but with a semblance of joy, especially when things are hard. (32)

There is also the spontaneous gift that comes to you as a deep desire to be a good, loving person, just as God has been good and loving to you. And there is the gift of prayer. . . . It is a simple but constant practice of consciously lifting up our messy, mixed-up, hard-hearted lives before God, and in doing so, knowing that God is present. (33)

We should want to do good because we are grateful for the blessing of life itself, not because we are terrified of punishment or are competing to win the ultimate prize of heaven. (33)