The following meditation was delivered by the Rev. Forster-Smith at Macalester's annual Christmas Candlelight Service.

I don’t know about you, but I have had a rough time since they extended daylight savings time into November. I think what was most unsettling about the change was just how abruptly we went from light to darkness at the end of the day. Maybe I’m just getting old or am falling prey to seasonal affective disorder, but waking up to darkness and looking out the window to watch the sun go down while I am in my last meeting of the day is rough. But maybe what is more disturbing is that my eyes have grown accustomed to the darkness. But this darkness is not only the sun setting earlier but the whole face of the deep, the shadow that surrounds our days and our night, awakening us to what seems more of a nightmare than what haunts our sleep: Darfur, polar cap melting, children sold into sexual slavery, and then the recent shooting at the mall in Omaha where I bought my wedding dress, not to mention a war in Iraq that won’t end. We look out onto a world of fear, uncertainty, darkness.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that we aren’t the only ones who have grown accustomed or at least adapted to the darkness. Isaiah prophesied a time as this, a time when people thought God was hiding from them. Hear Isaiah’s words in the verses just prior to the first lesson read tonight: “I will wait for the Lord, whose face is hiding from the house of Jacob and I will hope in God.” And the question is: What do you do with all the darkness? The darkness of the world? The dark night of the soul? It is often the darkness of our own lives, of the inner path that leaves us most fearful.

Isaiah speaks boldly: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” And there is such shining, such joy, that the prophet can hardly contain himself. He gets to the essence because when people are desperate, only the essence of things speaks to the heart; he pronounces the promise of new life that cracks open the night with the dawn of a new age.

When I think of the darkness and the dawning, I recall an incident that occurred about 25 years ago when I was at home in Iowa for Christmas. I had just been ordained to ministry and was with my family at my home church for the Christmas Eve service. My scrutinizing eye was sharply in place, critically

Continued on page 4

For Religious and Spiritual Life

Winter 2007
EXPLORING THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH
BY KATYANA MELIC ’08

What is the Bahá’í Faith?
The Bahá’í Faith is a world religion whose purpose is to unite all the races and peoples of the world in one human family. There are 6 million Bahá’ís in the world who reside in 235 countries. Bahá’ís are followers of Bahá’u’lláh, whom they believe is the Promised One of all ages. Bahá’ís believe in one loving Creator who created us all in order to know and love Him. Bahá’ís believe that all the peoples of the world belong to one human family. The differences in color, backgrounds, traditions, thoughts and ideas should enhance our experiences like a garden with flowers of every form, color and appearance.

Bahá’ís believe that all religions teach the same truth. The only difference between them is that each has appeared at a different time in human history in order to educate people according to the needs of that time. Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings address the needs and conditions of the world today. From the Bahá’í Writings, “To be a Bahá’í simply means to love all the world, to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood.”

Bahá’í Life on Campus:
Being one of the smaller religious organizations on campus, we organize close-knit activities that nurture a spirit of fellowship and encourage open inquiry. We have had weekly devotions this semester every Wednesday night, where we huddle in the chapel to pray and meditate over an issue of people’s interest. Such topics have ranged from spiritual tests and difficulties to the unity of mankind. Our organization also celebrates the major holy days, of which there are nine that we take time out of work and school to commemorate. We had a big Birthday of Bahá’u’lláh celebration. Because it is a world religion, the Bahá’í Faith has no set rituals. Instead, different cultures have various and diverse means of celebrating holy days. Here at Macalester we chose simply to have a fun dinner together!

We have also spent time connecting with the local Bahá’í communities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. It’s been a great semester!

We are looking forward to great events next semester with more focused study on spiritual prescriptions for social justice. We would love to get everybody and anybody involved. The Bahá’í Organization on campus is open to anyone who wants to investigate anything related to spirituality.

If you have more questions, check out www.bahai.org or contact Katyana Melic at bahai@macalester.edu.

EXPLORING FAITH COMMUNITIES IN THE TWIN CITIES
BY JESSICA FERREE ’09

This semester I served as the Faith Community Outreach program assistant for the CRSL in hopes of strengthening Macalester’s relationship with area faith communities. When I was asked to write an article for the CRSL newsletter, I intended to highlight the beliefs and practices of a local faith community. After a semester of work, however, I have decided to challenge students to connect with communities outside the infamous “Macalester bubble.”

During my first year at Mac, I struggled to find a church with which I identified and felt comfortable. Macalester’s religious organizations and services offered unique faith-based worship and fellowship opportunities, but I missed being part of a community that was distinct from my daily routine. After a year of searching, I had not found my “ideal” church. Instead, I discovered the beliefs and practices that I value most as a person of faith. Although I did not belong to a specific congregation in the Twin Cities, I realized that I had access to diverse religious communities that could help me develop my personal spiritual understanding. My goal was to find an off-campus place of worship, and in hindsight, I found multiple faith communities that not only provide worship services but also host academic lectures, organize volunteer opportunities, and have committed members from around the Twin Cities. Macalester College is surrounded by religious and spiritual communities: a Quaker Friends Meeting, the Mount Zion Temple; and Unitarian Universalist, Presbyterian, Catholic, United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and United churches are within walking distance of campus. A local Bahá’í community even meets on campus each week. The Buddhist Clouds in Water Zen Center and a number of mosques are further from campus, but each of these communities facilitates spiritual and personal connections to places outside of Macalester. I encourage students to get off campus to explore their faith and the religious communities the Twin Cities have to offer.

“After a year of searching, I had not found my ‘ideal’ church. Instead, I discovered the beliefs and practices that I value most as a person of faith.”

Macalester Bahá’í Organization’s banner hangs in the Weyerhaeuser Memorial Chapel. The symbol shown is the nine-pointed star, one of the most common symbols in the Bahá’í community with the association of the number nine with perfection, unity, and Bahá’í (Arabic for “glory” or “splendor”). The symbol inside the star is the ringstone symbol, representing God, humanity, and God’s manifestations in the prophets.
Fr. Jim Radde, S.J., traveled to Fort Benning on November 17 to train more than 60,000 soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat.

Photos taken at the School of the Americas Vigil held at Fort Benning, GA. The School of the Americas (SOA) is a military training facility that has trained more than 60,000 soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills since its founding in 1946. The SOA has been criticized for its graduates’ use of torture, murder, and political oppression throughout Latin America. Forty Macalester students and Fr. Jim Radde, S.J., traveled to Fort Benning on November 17th to protest the SOA.

BY HILLARY MOHAUPT ’08

BLESSINGS: A HOMILY
BY HILLARY MOHAUPT ’08

Reflections shared by senior Hillary Mohaupt at Vespers service in honor of those studying abroad next semester.

A silver airplane glimmers on the tarmac. As land and air crew members hustle about getting passengers and luggage aboard, the airplane shivers in excitement. Longing to leap from the confines of the airport, to let the wind lift her wings into a gentle or even tumultuous jet stream, to experience anything but the weighty gravity of her earthly experience, that airplane imagines what lies over the horizon, in the sky out of view.

The excitement of an adventure, the expectation of mysteries, the fear of what’s to come—I can feel all of those resonating in my memories of traveling. That moment—just before the propellers kick into action, just before the engines turn over for the very first time, just before we buckle our seatbelts for a journey that will change us—just before what will come. I think it is this moment between known and unknown that is most sacred, that is most blessed.

On Vespers nights we’ve sung together a line that still catches me off guard: “all praise to thee, my God, this night, for all the blessing of the light.” I have never been able to decide if the singularity of “blessing” is intentional or if it is merely a well-intentioned typo, but there is something about it that sits comfortably with my understanding of what it means to bless and to be a blessing. But I checked in with the linguistic authorities, knowing that my intuition also resonates with things like tarmacs and jet streams.

Webster and his colleagues put it this way: a blessing is an invitation to the goodness of God; an expression of affection or gratitude; a response to a sneeze; a consecration, a sacrifice, a wish, a benediction. Like the act of smashing a champagne bottle into the hull of a hulking ship on its maiden voyage, perhaps there can be only one blessing, one consecration.

Like each plane trip, each time on the tarmac is unique. We may have been in a similar situation, longing to leave the ground and to be in our destination, but ultimately minutes between boarding and take-off are set aside, yes, consecrated moments between what we know well and what we don’t know yet.

But I am reminded now that we are each other’s blessings. Last year or three years ago, most of us left the comfortable familiarity of the families we always knew, and soon we will face an unknown. For now, though, in these brief moments, we are waiting. Dreaming and acting, yes, but waiting all the same for the wind to catch our wings and to take us into the unknown sky. But like fellow passengers on an airplane, we are not alone. God blesses our interactions with intentionality, authenticity, hope, kinship, and love. In this great, impersonal world where so much is often at stake and so much is shattered by apathy, our good friendships are blessed ones.

Just like each time on the tarmac, each relationship is distinctive and the time we spend in those relationships is equally exceptional. If the word in the song is singular it is because, as anonymous once said, to the world we are each just one person, but to each other, we are the world. We stand or sit or pray together in these spaces of anticipation, waiting for whatever is to come.

In “The Blessings,” Dar Williams echoes just that. Naming her true friends as peace between chaoses, lights in darknesses, Williams describes a symbiotic, strong relationship that she remembers carrying her through the most difficult struggles and celebrated through the deepest joys. Williams and St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, too, remind us of shared hopes and encouragements. Even after take-off, we can remember the mixture of grief at leaving behind and the anticipation of whatever is to come.

Blessings lead to journeys: journeys into the world from the sanctuary, into the world from the harbor, into the world from Now. Indulge me for just a minute. Look up. (Really, look up.) Just a few layers of man-made materials are between us and the stars. Imagine them. Virginia Woolf wrote, “They say the sky is the same everywhere. Travelers, the shipwrecked, exiles, and the dying take comfort from the thought, and no doubt if you are of the mystical tendency consolation, and even explanation, shower down from the unbroken surface.” The same stars that comforted Mary in her loneliness far from...
Continued from page 3

Elizabeth, a kindred spirit in waiting, comfort us. They remind us of the space between take off and landing, and remind us of others looking up into the same sky, shivering in their own anticipation.

We all have such a long, long way to go. The blessing is the moment before the journey and the journey itself—it is unique to us in our own individualities and hopes. It is the sacred space between known and unknown. But—look up. Really. Look up. We’re among friends. Those stars remind us of the sacred, consecrated, wishful space of knowing and yet not knowing. The same God who scattered those stars across the canopy protects all of us, no matter where we are.

So, all praise to thee, my God, this night, for all the blessing of the light. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in God, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” I wish you all the blessing.

Continued from page 1

analyzing every move the pastor made, deconstructing the exegetical hunch of his sermon. And unfortunately, I determined it was a “C-” sermon. I was overcome by disappointment.

But then it happened. The church was plunged into darkness for the annual candle lighting. Up the aisle the candle lighters moved, passing the flame one to the next. Then I noticed a little girl on the end of the row across from me fumbling with the light. She was trying to hold her candle the right way, but it was precariously close to the person in front of her. I then realized what was going on. The child was blind, and in her blindness she was finding the flame by its warmth. And the instant she felt the heat, the glow that surrounded that flame spread across the face of that child with such glory, with such joy, with such remarkable light, that I was moved to tears. That child would never see the great light, the glimmers out of the corner of our eyes, not only in the beautiful moments but also right squarely in the shadows, in the fears, in the hurt and even in the hating world. And at the end of the night, it is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Mother, Prince and Princess of Peace who holds it all fearlessly, and also holds us fully.

Annie Dillard once declared “that love is greater than knowledge.” This love is seen in tattered moments, when we have the eyes to see the great light, the glimmers out of our eyes, not only in the beautiful moments but also right squarely in the shadows, in the fears, in the hurt and even in the hating world. And at the end of the night, it is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Mother, Prince and Princess of Peace who holds it all fearlessly, and also holds us fully.

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Center for Religious and Spiritual Life Staff

The mission of the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life is to recognize and affirm the diversity of religious and cultural experience at Macalester College. This includes nurturing students’ exploration of their religious tradition, helping express values by engaging in local and global issues with the aim of repairing the world, and by participating in the educational life of the college by promoting critical study, spiritual conversation and faith exploration.

CRSL Program Assistants

Jessica Ferree, Faith Community Outreach
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Christine Park, Multicultural Life
Caroline Rendon, Peace & Justice
David Schmitt, Community Service
David Wheeler, Arts & Worship

A Note from the Editors

Thank you for taking the time to read FINDING THE CENTER! As always, we welcome any comments and suggestions. Have a happy and healthy new year!

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