

From Dust-Mote Drifting to Living on Purpose: A Journey in Philosophy of Religion

Intellectual Autobiography for IARPT, June 15, 2021

Wesley J. Wildman

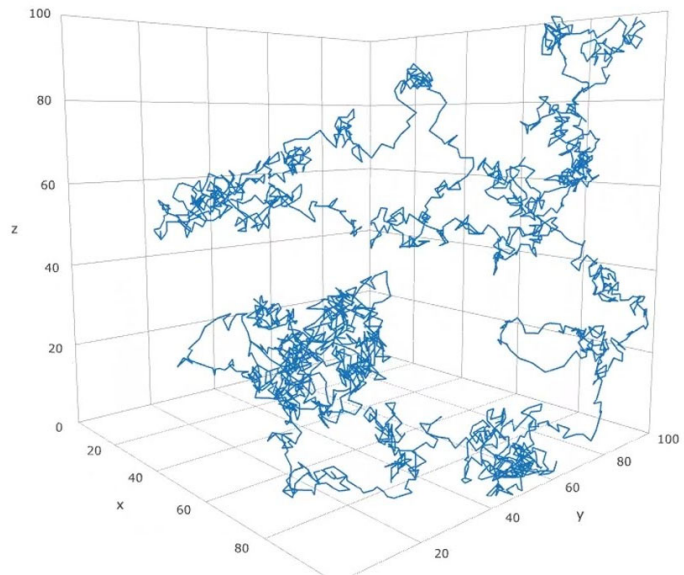
Professor in the School of Theology and Faculty of Computing and Data Sciences, Boston University

Executive Director of the Center for Mind and Culture, Boston

(WesleyWildman.com and MindAndCulture.org)

Introduction

Being asked to present an intellectual autobiography at this point in my career, when I feel as though I'm in full flight, has been a thought-provoking exercise. What have I been doing, exactly? And why? How did I get here? Where am I headed? It's been rewarding to reflect on such questions. It's also been sobering to realize that my professional life has unfolded without a grand plan. Part of me wishes I'd been more rational and deliberate about what I've been doing. In fact, though, my journey has been more like the trajectory of a dust mote than a shark moving in for the kill. I've kept busy, I've enjoyed myself, and I've tried to forge a cumulative intellectual profile that is worthy of the investment I've made in it. The strongest claim I can make about it is that it is *an emergently coherent mix of instinct and desire, with good and bad fortune constraining the direction of travel* – more like play than plan, then, I think. It occurs to me how privileged I must be to have approached my career in this way and still *have* a career.



I'll explain the haphazard aspects first. Then I'll move on to what I see as emergently coherent.

How I Stumbled into a Career

I was born into a vast extended family of Australian farmers, tradesmen, military men, and nurses – most of them serious Methodists. The very smartest of them never saw any point in finishing high school, save for the couple who thought becoming a school teacher might be a good career and had to access teacher's college. I know of none who went to university save my mother's maternal grandfather, who was also the only minister I've been able to track down in the family tree. In fact, he was the Principal of the Methodist Seminary in South Australia. I look physically unlike the rest of my immediate family but, with blonde hair and blue eyes, I'm the spitting image of my mother's mother, so I figure I'm a genetic throwback to that particular great grandfather.



Rev. John Blackett and his wife, Wesley's mother's maternal grandparents, with 9 of what was to become 14 children. Photo taken in 1897 when leaving the church posting at Koolunga, South Australia. Standing in front of the mother is **Phoebe Mathilda Blackett**, the oldest child, of whom Wesley is the spitting image. Phoebe married Alec Mills, Wesley's maternal grandfather. Phoebe and Alec had four children at the farm called "Millbrae"—Patricia (Pat, who married George and farmed in Geranium), Thomas (Tom, who married Janet (Jan) and farmed at Tintinara in southeast SA), Richard (Dick, who married Esther and farmed Millbrae), and Elizabeth Phoebe (Beth, who married Phillip Charles Wildman, and became a Methodist Deaconess and a nurse, living in Adelaide).



As a youngster, my life was all about playing sports and making music. School was easy and fun, as it was for many of you, I'm sure. Church was like family – taken for granted, until at age 15 I had a non-spectacular conversion experience and started taking personal religion seriously. In practice, that meant reading the Bible and praying daily, taking on leadership roles among the church's youth, and playing keyboard in a couple of Christian bands.

I never fretted over what to do with my life. I just drifted along. I liked learning, so I wanted to keep doing that – not for a career but for enjoyment. University was free in Australia, which is just as well because I never could have gone otherwise. That left only two problems. First my parents and family didn't understand what I was doing. I was the weird one who liked school; they let me be and assumed I'd figure something out eventually. Second, I didn't know what to study at university. We didn't have anything like the school counselors my own children had in their American high school and I didn't know anyone who had finished high school except for teachers and local ministers, who weren't advising me, though I should have been asking them for help. There were no books in my working-class home so I had no idea about philosophy and couldn't have told you who Plato was. I was flying blind.



Wesley's sports career off to a rocky start as someone confiscated the cricket ball. Older brother Peter looks on.

At first I thought I should go to the conservatory to study music. I'd been playing the piano and the oboe for years, as well as composing music. The orchestras I played in gave me access to the conservatory and

that was the one part of university culture I'd come across. But something disastrous happened in my final year of high school. Certain pieces of music I'd play on the oboe involved challenging breathing and I experienced horrific migraines while playing them. I could continue with keyboard and composing but I couldn't play the oboe safely anymore. Add to that the difficulty I had managing the social intricacies of temperamental musicians and the one idea I had about university training was off the table – despite finishing top of the state in the university entrance exam for music.

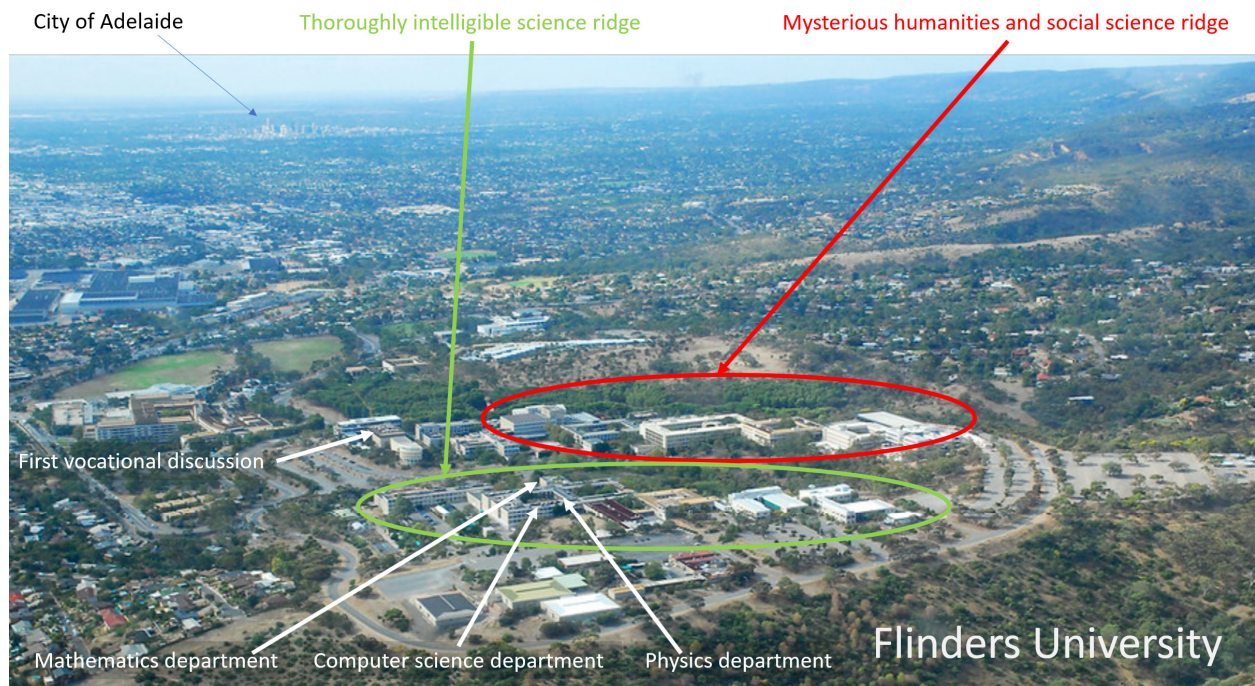


Elder Conservatorium, University of Adelaide

What else could I do? Well, I loved mathematics. That felt like the ultimate game to me; even when it was hard it was fun. There was a university within a long bike ride from my parent's house so I went there and visited the library looking for information about the university. There probably was an admissions office but nobody mentioned that and I stupidly didn't think of it. From the university bulletin in the library, I discovered an advanced mathematics track, which sounded like fun. I wasn't approaching university mathematics with any conviction. It was literally the next thing I thought of doing after the music route ran into a dead end.

I vividly recall the first vocational discussion I ever had. I was standing in the W-Z line to register for university. When I got to the front, the guy looked at my test scores and grades and said, "Why do you want to study mathematics? You could do anything with these scores. Do you want me to put you down for medicine?" I suddenly felt overwhelmed by the possibilities before me. I didn't understand in the moment that I should have been having these vocational discussions. I replied, "I don't know. I applied for mathematics," attempting to ground myself in a simple fact. "Okay," he said, and that was that.

Despite my ignorance, my drive was clear and consistent: to learn and have fun. But I had no idea how to get useful information, so I was on a random walk through a culture I barely understood.

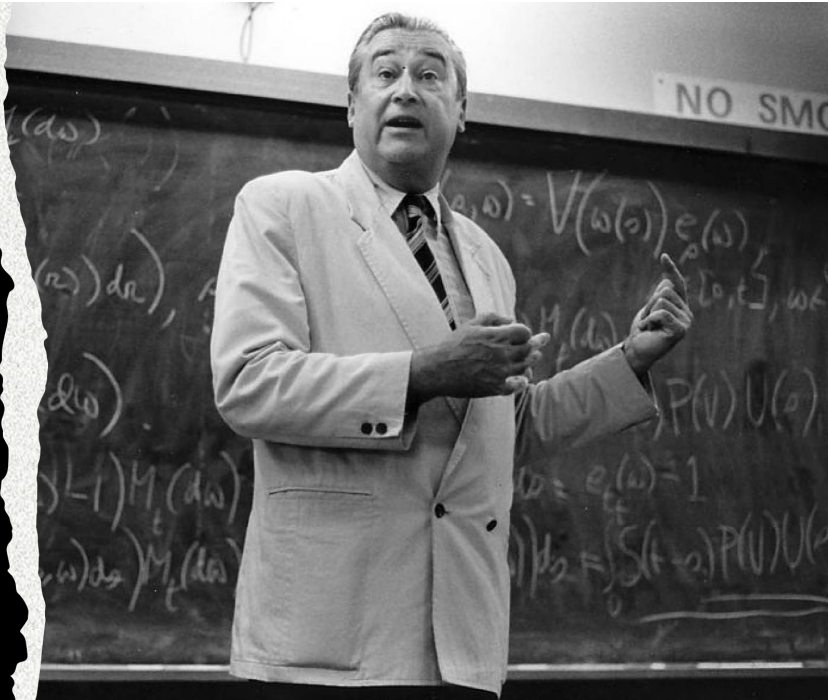


Soon I was working on a triple major in pure mathematics, physics, and computer science. On the side, I was taking a fascinating Biblical Hebrew class at a local seminary, just because I loved the Bible. My university didn't have distribution requirements so I wasn't forced to learn that the humanities and social sciences existed. All that stuff, whatever it was, lived on the other side of campus. I was happy in my class of twelve students in the advanced mathematics track, learning quantum mechanics in physics classes, and learning how to program computers, first using punch cards, and then with more advanced input systems. Those early programs, some written in low-level assembly language, were good, and creating them was a monumental experience, clearing a line of work that I've kept up all the way until today.

The professor who taught all semesters of the advanced mathematics track was an unpredictable Slovak genius, Igor Kluváněk. Our approach to mathematics was from first principles – axiomatic all the way. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was getting a pretty good education in philosophy of mathematics as well as in mathematics itself. Before we knew it, we were proving the fundamental theorem of calculus and solving differential equations, and we never needed more than ten axioms to pull off the miracle.

Those classes were utterly compelling to me. Prof. Kluváněk would often set up votes among the students on some test of understanding. I was quite often the only one on my side of a vote, sometimes wrong and sometimes right. I didn't care about agreement with my fellow students; I cared only about the truth and trying to make out her form in the mists of ignorance. In this way, the love of truth was seared into me, like a brand, never to be removed. I've come to realize that this was a far more profound conversion than my conversion to Christianity at 15.

Igor Kluvánek, Slovak-Australian mathematician, persecuted after Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations in 1968. Kluvánek was visiting Australia at the time. His Catholicism led to him being convicted to two years in jail, in absentia; his property was confiscated; and he, his wife, and their five children were made stateless. Flinders University created a mathematics chair for him. Much later he returned to Slovakia to a hero's welcome, resisting pressure to be the Minister for Education in the Slovak Government.

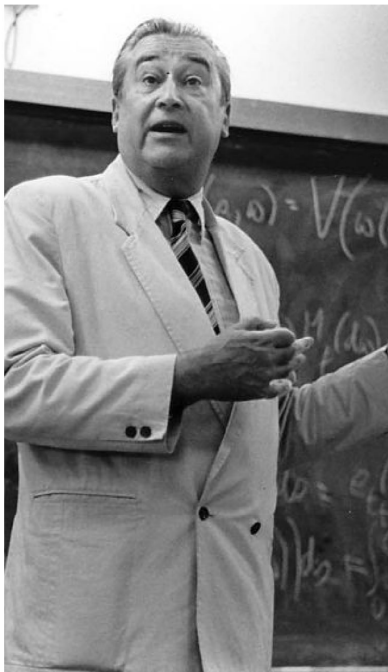


I've learned that I received an amazingly high-quality education in mathematics. The computer science major was good and the physics major was average, but the mathematics education was excellent and changed my life. I began thinking philosophically about assumptions long before I knew there was an academic field called philosophy. I also learned what beauty could mean. Advanced mathematics is so beautiful it hurts.

Unfortunately, my eleven fellow travelers in the advanced mathematics degree couldn't take the heat so they all dropped out. I graduated in a class of one. I had a friend in physics but my undergraduate degree experience was lonely and isolating. I still lived at home, where I held an informal leadership position in the church youth group, played in a band, and spent an inordinate amount of time repairing my junker car, rebuilding the engine twice and working on pretty much everything except the suspension. Learning about cars gave my father, who started out as an aircraft mechanic, something to teach his brainy son. But that home life and my isolation at the university kept me close to my community of origin and limited the impact of university culture.

I was 19 when I graduated university and still had no idea about a career. In the final year of that first degree, five exciting vocational adventures occurred that illustrate the dust-mote principles guiding my decisions at that point.

First, I saw a poster advertising Air Force recruiters coming to campus. On a lark I dropped in, thinking I'd love to fly jets and hoping that my science training might be an advantage. I showed the recruiter my transcript. He bluntly informed me: "Your grades are too good. Smart people don't follow orders." I realized: I really didn't *want* to follow orders. Despite coming from a military family, a military career was off the list just like that. You might say it was worth a closer look, and you'd be correct. But everything I was doing was impulsive.



Five vocational possibilities emerging at the end of the first university degree.

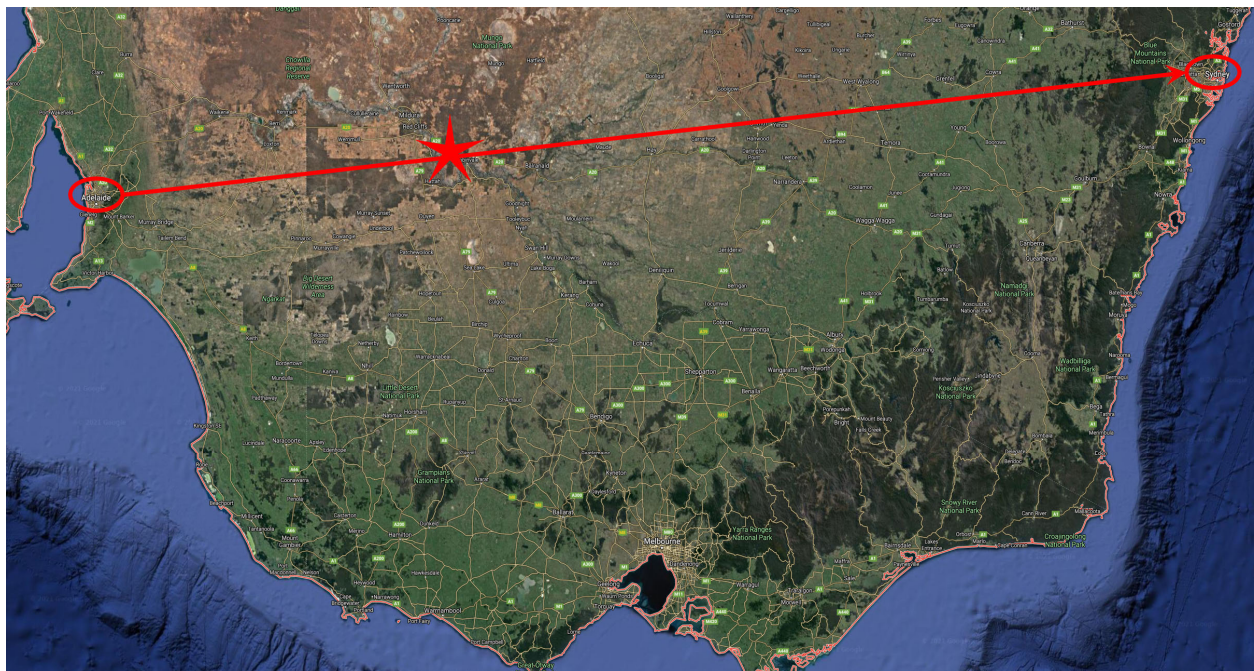
Second, I applied to work with the Australian Signals Directorate, an intelligence branch of the Australian Defense Forces, aiming to do code breaking or something else with my math, science, and computer skills. I dutifully showed up for an examination with several hundred other people, at which point I realized it was a coveted position. Eventually, half a dozen of us were flown from Adelaide to Melbourne – my first flying experience – and went through a long day of war games, evaluations, and interviews. I didn't know if I wanted this kind of life but I thought I was doing well in the interview, until the moment I was seated in front of a panel of eight people and a scary-looking man asked me about how my religious convictions fitted with intelligence work. I'd prepared for that and told him the truth: "I'd rather the world didn't need intelligence services but that's not the way the world is and I think my faith is consistent with this kind of work." I didn't get offered the job and was hugely relieved.

Third, someone suggested I work for a mining company because they need mathematicians to help find precious minerals underground. I applied to work for the biggest mining company in Australia and got a job offer. This was the first offer I'd received and I needed to do *something* after I graduated. But it didn't feel right. It didn't feel like learning and fun. It didn't feel like chasing truth and beauty. And I didn't want to live in the back of beyond. I didn't even respond, a sign of how confused I was.

Fourth, my father said, "Look, I've no idea what you've been learning or what it's good for. But some of the people in my office building went to university. Maybe you could talk to them." So he took me to work with him and I wandered around the building just talking to people I saw, thinking I'd never see them again and so not worried about what they'd think about a kid wanting to talk about careers. As it happened, I did see a lot of those people again. In my wandering, I discovered that the Bureau of Statistics was in that very building and they were looking for a mathematician to help prepare for an upcoming census – a full-time, temporary position. I got that job, working a couple of floors away from my father, who was inspecting government buildings for fire safety at that point in his own meandering career. But there was no way a job like that could be my main activity. Where was the learning and the fun?! So I took the equivalent of a one-year masters degree in pure mathematics at the same time. By a

stroke of good fortune, my father's office building was a couple of city blocks away from a university so I took classes there. I became master of what the government called flex-time, hitting my work hours and still having time for classes, literally sprinting back and forth between the two full-time obligations. Unfortunately, government work was incredibly boring, so I took on another job coding medical forms across the hall, for no pay, just to stop from losing my mind when I was forced to be in the office. The census people would come and grab me when they needed something. At the end of that year, having held down two full-time jobs while studying full time, the higher-ups told me they were impressed with me, and offered me a permanent position. I was horrified at the prospect of working like that for the rest of my life. I politely declined but I wanted to run screaming from that place.

Fifth, Prof. Kluvánek asked me to tutor his daughter in mathematics. She was a high-school senior at 18 and I a college senior at 19 and it was a job I enjoyed. I got to hang out with a pretty girl while confirming my suspicion that I loved teaching. And I got to talk with Prof. Kluvanek in his kitchen each day I came over to tutor his daughter, where I learned about new kinds of cheese and saw wine in a house for the first time (like I said, we were serious Methodists at home). I found out about Kluvánek's politics, he made gentle fun of my Protestant Christian beliefs in the way only a very serious Catholic can, and I started to learn about mathematics from a different angle – from the perspective of university teaching and research. He advised me to do a PhD and told me who I should study with. My religious connections came in handy because a friend knew someone who got me admitted to a residential college at the university in question. Before I knew it, I'd finished my second degree, loaded my junker car up with everything I owned, and, at age 20, finally left home. For what? For a PhD in mathematics and a completely indeterminate future. But I was going to have fun learning, and I was going to hunt for beauty and truth, and that's what drew me.



Driving from Adelaide to Sydney in an old car is a recipe for disaster. A radiator hose burst partway.

It was a hot summer day as I drove from Adelaide across country to Sydney, a nineteen-hour trip. I said goodbye to my family at 4am to avoid some of the heat and set out on my grand adventure. They still had no idea what I was doing or why but they thought I knew. Had they understood how I was making

decisions, they might have been concerned. But being a smart alien in a normal working-class family means that it's on you to figure things out.

Somewhere in the middle of nowhere I blew a radiator hose. It was still early so I limped into a small town – too small for a repair shop – and waited for someone to wake up so I could get some help. Sure enough, the local council's stream-roller driver saw me sleeping in the car out front of his house. He found an old piece of hose that I was able to use. I stayed in touch with him and his wife for years after that moment of help in time of need. It was a classic outback Australia moment. I understood these people. They were like my family, my relatives. But I didn't understand the people of the professional music world. And I was headed to a place where I was pretty sure I wasn't going to understand the people I'd meet any better. I was increasingly nervous the closer I got to Sydney.



Macquarrie University didn't look this pretty when I was there. It was more like Soviet-era architecture, all concrete practicality.

I arrived at Macquarrie University, located Robert Menzies College where I'd be living, and settled in. Two exciting and life-transforming things happened then.

First, I was making new friends. I *did* understand these people and they *were* interested in me. They wanted to talk about ideas, theirs *and* mine. I discovered worlds of philosophy and political theory and linguistics, which were second nature to these young people. The intellectual world way way bigger than I'd realized, and far more interesting. A number of them became life-long friends. I might have been a PhD student and they undergraduates, but we were almost the same age and they were university culture insiders whereas I was a country bumpkin with an outsized mind – a bear of very big brain as my wife was to put it years later. I might have had two degrees and was participating in a software startup business on the side, but they were showing me how small a world I'd been living in. Soon I was getting good at bridge and other card games that I'd never known about, playing all night in a kind of belated claiming of the interpersonal intensities of youth. I joined the university table-tennis team and snuck into the national university championships as the second worst player there. I won the college chess championship by defeating a desperately outraged young man in the final, who underperformed, and my partner and I lost the college 500 championship final because our opponents cheated, a story we tell

to this day. I was listening to the New Testament read in Greek and spontaneously translated into English every time I went to a college church service. I was dating people I could barely understand and falling in love with people I couldn't date. What *was* this world? And how could I belong to it? This was a whole new kind of learning and I was having fun in ways I'd never dreamed possible. It was an unfamiliar kind of beauty, differently intense than mathematics and science. I was encountering the humanities for the first time and my blinkers were falling off.



Robert Menzies College at Macquarie University was an amazing place to live.

Despite being the newb, my friends listened to me when I'd explain why I didn't expect an answer when I prayed because God wasn't the kind of thing that communicated. I'd tested that idea for years. If God was in the communicating business, the evidence trail I'd created was virtually impossible to explain; we were better off making other assumptions. They'd ask me about the New Testament Book of Revelation and I'd explain its historical setting, the probable meaning of "666", and the ease with which apocalyptic literature can sweep us up into delusional thinking. I was already building out my personal codex of tendencies to cognitive error and training myself to resist those errors, and my friends wanted to know about how *their* minds might be making inferential errors – from *me*, no less. These were the same people who celebrated my 21st birthday far from my family and cared for me when I was sick. This was an intoxicating experience for the relatively innocent person I was at that time – innocent, except in the realm of pursuing the transcendentals: goodness through diagnosing and resisting tendencies to cognitive error, truth through mathematics, and beauty through everything, from mathematics and philosophy to the intoxicating possibilities of a deck of cards and a close friendship.

The second huge thing that happened in this new social and intellectual wonderland was that I started to wonder whether mathematics was a good fit for me. On the one hand, my obsession with goodness, truth, and beauty became activated more by the humanities than by mathematics, and that upended my motivational structure. On the other hand, practical circumstances changed. At the end of that first year away from home, when I was 21, my PhD supervisor changed universities. Naturally I followed him, which is the Australian way. I moved to a residential college at Australian National University in

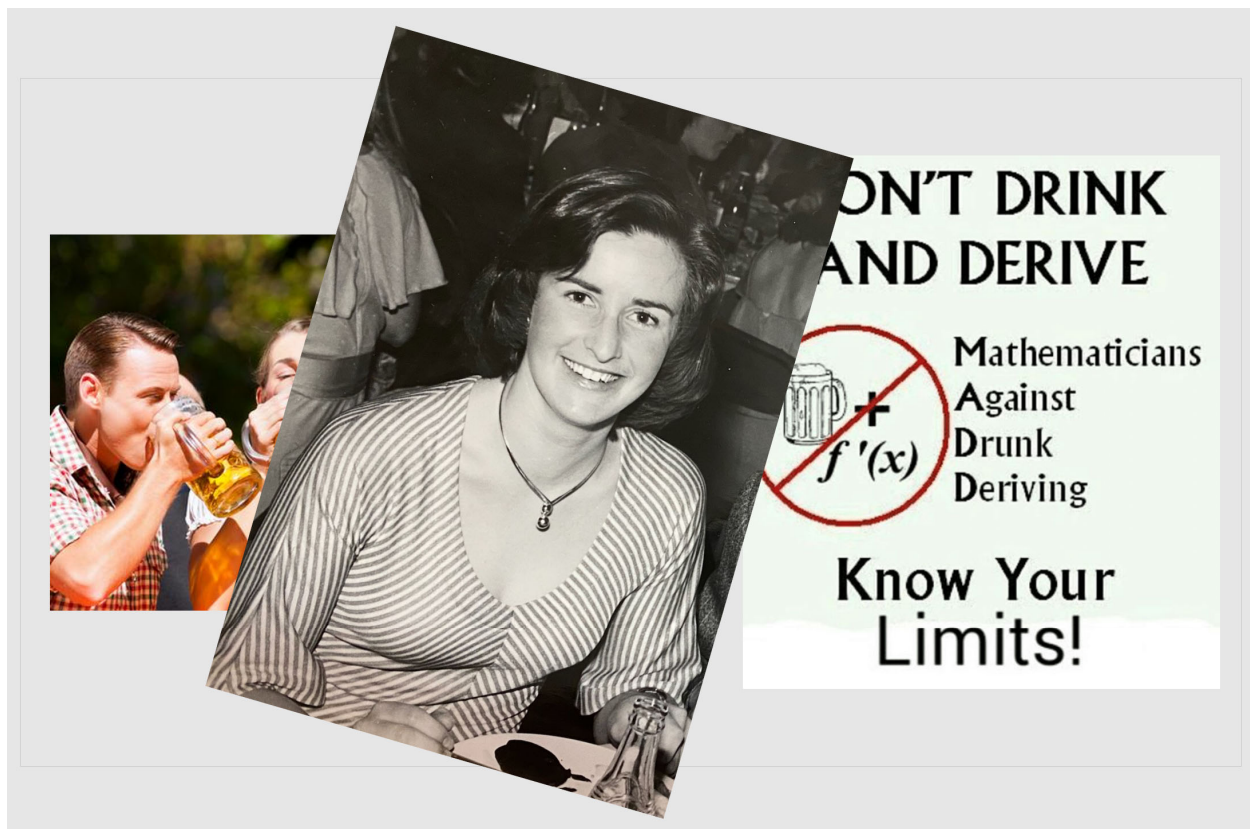
Canberra as the mathematics tutor. I tried to get used to the weird city of Canberra – a place of which it is as true to say as it is of Oakland, California that there is no there there – but I never felt at home. What a cascade of events then occurred, and very quickly, all before students returned to school from their summer break. I was desperately lonely, for want of my friends back in Sydney. I'd newly fallen in love and was suddenly separated, commuting back and forth between Sydney and Canberra like the Prime Minister. I was intoxicated with the humanities and felt suddenly bereft of them. And I was discovering the limits of my interest and capabilities in mathematics. A year spent indulging every kind of fun is not the way to focus on a PhD, and that was surely a contributing factor. Honestly, though, I don't regret a minute of those all-night bridge games or anything else. It was about time I escaped the comfy loop of family and church that had held me close through the first two university degrees.



My supervisor and I were attending a mathematics conference at our new university, with guests from far and wide. I was back in a world of people I couldn't relate to, whose idea of a good time was debating mathematical theorems over beer or wine, neither of which I drank. Holding my glass of water in that setting was an apt symbol of the alienation I felt. Then there was a catalyzing event. A young man from another university was sitting at a lunch table and listening to my advisor talk about his breakthrough theorems in functional analysis. I was trying to decide whether I even cared when this young man asked an insightful question about extending one of my supervisor's results. He turned to me and said, "Why haven't you asked me that question?" I was crushingly aware that I was disappointing him, which quadrupled my sense of alienation. I might be able to get this PhD but I realized that I'd never be a great mathematician – and I knew enough by then to know what that meant.

All of a sudden I couldn't figure out why I was doing what I was doing. I hated the social environment, I hated feeling lonely and alienated, and the work had lost its siren-like appeal. There was somewhere else I could be! With people who actually liked me! With my girlfriend! Learning the humanities! And with a new aspiration: to be *really good* at something. I'd learn and have fun; I'd pursue goodness, truth, and beauty; *and* I'd be excellent!

I left Canberra almost immediately, with half-hearted apologies to everyone I was inconveniencing, and a full-throated apology to my supervisor, whom I genuinely liked and respected. This was simultaneously my greatest personal failure and my greatest personal success, in different respects. I think it was the moment I became a man, knowing enough at last to choose what I *didn't* want to be in an informed way, and making the decision regardless of the ensuing complications.



Mathematicians downing beers and debating theorems or beautiful girlfriend. What would you choose?

And there *were* complications. I didn't have a plan or a place to live. I was a thousand miles from home and had no relatives in Sydney. So I lived in my car for two months and my girlfriend kept dating me, the homeless guy, while I figured out what to do next. In due course, I learned about a divinity degree at the University of Sydney, and it sounded perfect. Unlike in a seminary, the university setting meant that I'd get a religious studies education and explore a variety of humanities disciplines, and still make money running tutorials for the mathematics department.



A Morris Major. Hard to decide whether to love or hate that model.



Leigh College, Sydney. At the time I lived on the second floor for a buck a day, it was a seminary of the Uniting Church of Australia. These days it is an Islamic College.

My church connections hooked me up with a local seminary that was stuck with a heritage building they could neither tear down nor afford to repair. I lived in that building with half a dozen other people for a measly ten dollars a week – in American terms, a buck a day. I was no longer homeless, I had a new degree program to begin, I was making new friends and keeping old ones, and my girlfriend still liked me. I had no money but a \$400 gift from the University of Sydney saved me, enabling me to pay my modest rent, buy food, and run my car while I waited for mathematics teaching to start generating income. I'd solved my survival problem and the solution was soon to get a lot more compelling.



The front entrance of Wesley College at the University of Sydney. On the left is the chapel where I was married.

Across the road from the Divinity School at the University of Sydney was a vast residential structure called Wesley College. Part-way through my first year in the divinity degree, someone told me they were looking for a mathematics tutor. Apparently the college's Master had heard about the newly arrived divinity student who was teaching mathematics in the university and wondered if I'd be interested. I don't know who had helped them make the connection but, my goodness, was I ever interested.



Formal dinner at Wesley College. High Table, where members of the senior common room dine, is off in the distance.

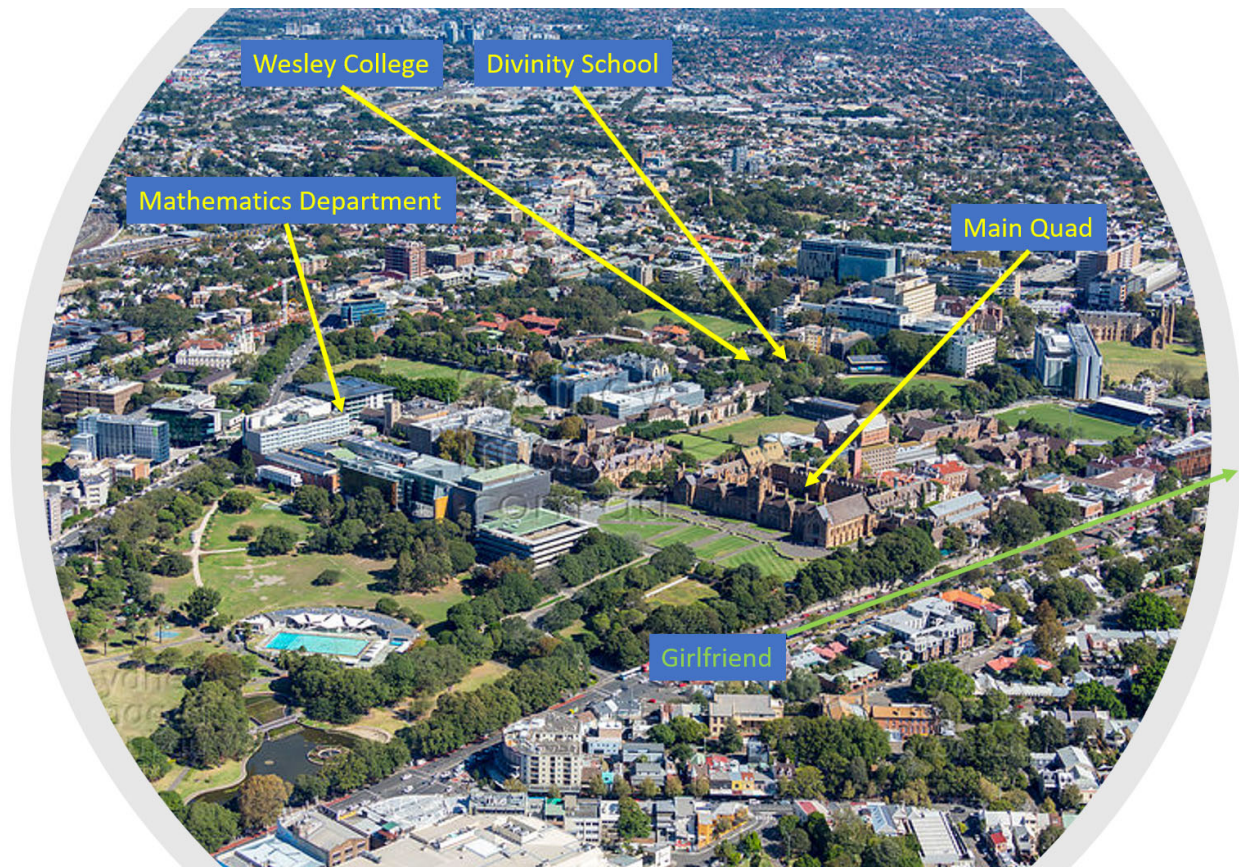
I became the residential mathematics tutor at Wesley College, by virtue of which I joined the Senior Common Room, sat at high table for formal meals, and was suddenly deeply embedded in profound conversations on all manner of topics. My love of the humanities was coming into full bloom and I hadn't then detected any limitations in my capabilities or interest, as I had in music and mathematics. The learning part was there, with the fun part, and my obsession with goodness, truth and beauty was taking hold of me in a novel way. The new criterion for making vocational decisions was also out in the open – my longing to be *really good* at something. And I was falling in love not just with people and experiences but with the university culture, the amazing institutions in which I've spent most of my life since.

The divinity degree was simpler and broader in structure than the MDiv degrees I've learned about in the USA. There were three years of religious studies, three years of the history and thought of Christianity, and three years of biblical studies in Greek and Hebrew. In addition, each Friday my cohort spent the day at a seminary picking up subjects not taught in the university so that ordination would be a vocational option – the same seminary I'd been living in for several



University of Sydney, main quad.

months. I felt far more at home with this type of study than I ever had learning science and mathematics. I was in philosophy classes for the first time – all analytical, Anglo-American philosophy – and loving it. I didn't know anything about the continental or American or Indian or Chinese traditions – these were never mentioned – and we never talked about the history of philosophy, so I still didn't know anything about Plato or Aristotle or any of the thinkers that later would become guiding lights for me. But the analytical skill set was amazing.



Philosophy felt like a game and I played it the same way I played the mathematics game: hard – especially compared to my fellow students who just wanted to get through. I recall a confrontation with a professor in which I was attempting to correct an error in his logical formalization of an argument. The professor was intransigent, I was appalled that the norms of the game weren't being upheld, and my fellow students were uncomfortable with the resulting social dynamics in the classroom. Eventually the professor saw his error in logic and apologized but it took me a lot longer to see my social error. Of course, nobody was trying to correct me; I guess they hoped the young guy who was too smart for his own good would eventually catch on to the gentler interpersonal culture of the humanities. That proved to be difficult for me; internalizing the humanities culture took the better part of a decade.

I became good friends with a Canadian completing a PhD in the philosophy department, Andrew Irvine, who went on to be a professor at the University of British Columbia. Our discussions constituted a second education in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of logic, parallel to the philosophy of religion I was learning in my degree. It was all analytical philosophy, all the time. I was deep in it, developing formal arguments about the foundations of logic, just as I'd learned the foundations of mathematics with Prof. Kluváněk.

Interestingly, Prof. Kluváněk had grown weary of the world of professional mathematics and moved to Sydney to train for the Catholic priesthood. I'd visit him in his seminary every couple of months. He was the one person who would talk straight with me about my developing mind. I remember one warning in particular: "The transition from science to humanities can be a flight from rigor, from a domain in which the meaning of excellence is clear." It was all he needed to say. I needed time to grasp the meaning of excellence in the humanities context, where the criteria arise very differently, but I was determined. It was no longer a question of sound proofs, impactful experiments, valid mathematical models, and computer code that works in an engineering sense. It was hermeneutical subtlety, existential nuance, breadth of vision, and sound judgment in making sense of vast tracts of data.

I resisted the fuzziness of the norms for humanities-style excellence at first, mostly because I saw them flagrantly violated by players who would have been quickly dismissed as charlatans or fakers in the sciences. They were in it for something other than the truth, who was the unquestioned goddess in mathematics. But the upside of humanities-style excellence was intoxicating. We could talk about *anything*, including things that matter in human life a lot more than mathematical theorems and computer programs. It was magical for me. This ambivalence about humanities disciplines has never completely left me. As always, the greats rise to the top but the culture of science is a lot better at weeding out mediocrity at the lower levels, and earlier.

In the second year of my divinity degree, as the girlfriend relationship deepened, I began wondering how I'd make a living. Most of my fellow students in the divinity degree were heading toward ordination and I pondered that option. I was the pianist for chapel services at Wesley College and an attendee at the weekly chapel service on Friday at the seminary, where I sometimes played the piano, too. My main religious investment was in a house church formed by friends of my girlfriend – five very close couples – and that was wonderful. I didn't know how to say it with philosophical clarity at the time, but my instinctive naturalism and my iconoclastic approach to religious anthropomorphism, not to mention my analytical, intense personal style, made me an awkward fit for church leadership roles. I solicited advice from senior friends who were ordained about whether I should pursue it, and I knew a bunch of people like that by then. Most said I should. One, who loved me dearly, told me I shouldn't. He said that my worldview wasn't compatible with being a Christian minister and that I needed to believe the teachings of the church wholeheartedly to be ordained in good faith. He might have been right but I was a determined follower of Jesus. Surely that had to count for something, even if I thought prevailing God ideas were anthropomorphic distortions and a lot of Christian beliefs were useful fictions. His identitarian commitment to "purity of belonging" bothered me then, and it still does; I don't see people remembering Jesus as keeping anyone at a distance. But institutions have identity and survival needs, and he saw my kind of worldview as unable to meet those conditions, and thus as a threat to the church.

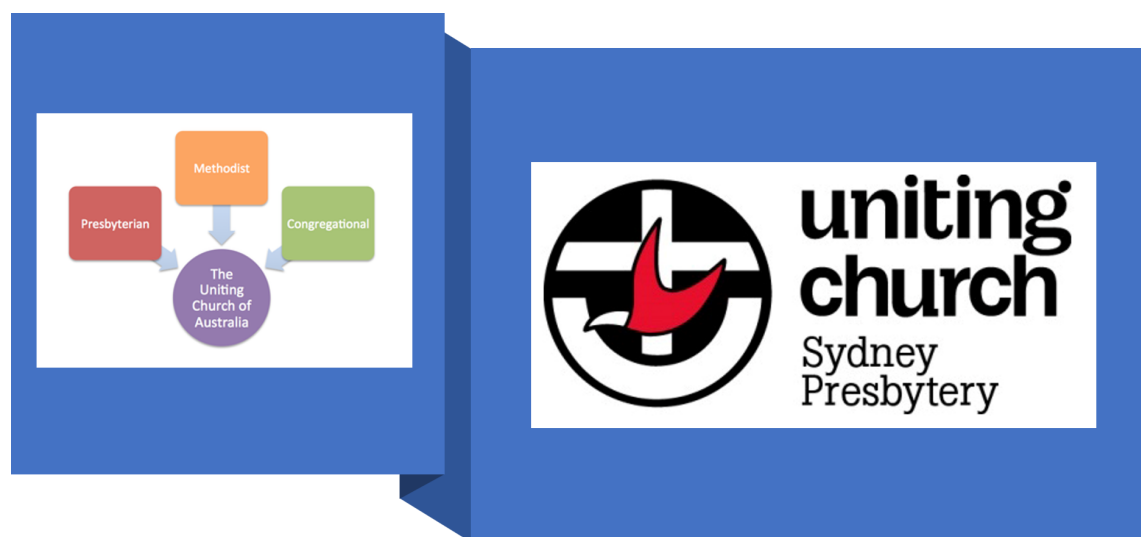
On balance, I decided to go for ordination within the Uniting Church in Australia. I was less well suited for the job than I realized, and not only because of my unorthodox beliefs. My natural eagerness and compassion was limited by interpersonal awkwardness and insecurity. My Clinical Pastoral Education training in hospital chaplaincy during one summer break brought a lot of that to the surface where I could start to work on it, thank goodness.

The mandatory psychological evaluations for ordination culminated in an amusing meeting with the psychologist. He said, "I've never seen scores like this. Honestly, I think you're making a vocational mistake. Have you ever thought about becoming a psychologist?" He seemed like a double agent, pretending to filter clergy candidates while really filtering candidates for the psychology profession.



Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney, where I did chaplaincy training in a Clinical Pastoral Education program.

The presbytery meeting at which I made my ordination presentation was a complicated event. My pitch was more or less, “This is who I am as a Jesus follower. I offer myself in service to you, the church. If you are interested in my contribution, please ordain me and I’ll do my best.” In the questioning that followed, the eager supernaturalists quickly zeroed in on my failures relative to their way of thinking about what a Christian minister should be. Others asked questions that functioned to defend me; they didn’t mind people who didn’t toe the orthodox line. The debate implicit in that questioning period flowered in the closed-door deliberation that followed, with me outside waiting. I was told later that it was a fraught moment. But a vote was called and the majority said they wanted me ordained. The happy Tongan giant who went before me, telling stories about the supernatural miracles through his life that marked his calling to ministry, was supported unanimously.



I was eventually ordained in the Uniting Church of Australia, a union of three Protestant denominations.



The girlfriend who'd drawn me back to Sydney from Canberra, who'd stuck with me through the homeless period and a divinity degree, said she'd marry me, despite knowing me quite well by then. Suzanne was a conservative evangelical Christian at the time but she liked me well enough to tolerate my naturalistic sensibilities. She didn't seem too bothered by the idea of becoming a minister's wife, either. So, at age 24, I graduated with my divinity degree and all at once found myself married, ordained, employed in a big church in Sydney, and living in a house owned by the church.



St. Andrews Uniting Church, Parramatta → used furniture store → pizza place → Bavarian Beer Cafe

I loved preaching and baptizing and marrying and celebrating the Eucharist. Looking back, I'm pretty sure I wasn't much good at any of it. It was a difficult job and my ideas about excellence were underdeveloped. But I learned. My senior colleague, Rev. Ron Sparks, was the embodiment of pastoral excellence and I was awestruck. He was operating at a level barely imaginable to me and I longed – I still long – to be that good. I can honestly say that if the world went to hell and I could no longer be a university professor, the first move I'd make is to find a way to minister to people in their spiritual journeys, inside or outside of the church. And Rev. Sparks would be an inspirational guide as I did so.

I missed the university but I was busy with my ministerial duties. My side business as a software developer was absorbing. Everyone was telling me I needed to do a PhD, probably because they knew I'd never be much good as a minister. I found out about doctoral programs in the USA and UK – thank goodness for libraries that collect university bulletins. A year and a half into our marriage and my career as an ordained clergy person, Suzanne and I moved to California, where I'd been accepted for a PhD degree in philosophy of religion at the Graduate Theological Union and admitted for coursework next door at the University of California, Berkeley.



Graduate Theological Union with UC Berkeley behind



UC Berkeley Philosophy Department (MOSES "ALL")

Berkeley was amazing. I took almost all my classes in the UC Berkeley Philosophy Department, including everything John Searle taught, which was analytical philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. I remember one time I was walking with Searle. He pulled me to a halt as we were crossing the campus and tried to persuade me to stop wasting my life at the Graduate Theological Union and switch over to a PhD with him in philosophy. I told him I'd been hoping he'd help advise my dissertation in philosophy of religion but he said he wasn't interested in philosophy of religion. I was upset but that was an important moment for me. I understood the world of philosophy well enough at that point to know something about what he was asking me to do. And I chose to say no because I didn't want to limit the scope of my quest for goodness, truth, and beauty. Getting a job as a philosopher of religion might be more difficult, but I calculated that I'd have far more freedom as a philosopher of religion to study what I loved most.

That intuition proved to be correct, I think. It might have been the first time in my life I made a vocational decision that was fairly well informed, as against the result of an ignorant flash of instinct and desire. To do what I do as a philosopher of mind or a philosopher of language or a philosopher of science would be professionally almost unthinkable, whereas to do what I do as a philosopher of religion is no more than very peculiar.



Berkeley also introduced me to continental philosophy. I read Heidegger with Hubert Dreyfus and picked up a lot of modern western philosophy, from Locke and Hume and Kant onwards – though almost nothing prior to 1650 save for theologians. Despite all the talk about a bitter conflict between analytical Anglo-American philosophy and continental philosophy, I never sensed any problem putting them together. What I saw was a hundred kinds of smart people trying to interpret a complex world – we were all in this together. I was learning about the American pragmatic tradition of philosophy, too, first through William James. I read all his writings and letters, and he was the focus of one of my PhD qualifying exams. I also read John Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Just as I saw no problem unifying the three great traditions of contemporary western philosophy, I saw no need for anything beyond a unitary theory of inquiry, pushing back against the two ways of knowing that we see in Locke and Kant: based on experience and based on reflection. Dewey confirmed my instinct that they have the same logic and biological underpinnings. You could abstract from the way we know and focus on the logical relationship of ideas, and you'd distill out analytical philosophy. You could focus on the act of interpretation and the way distortions and power transactions are thereby navigated, and you'd distill out continental philosophy. But why settle for an abstraction? Why not drink the whole biologically grounded and culturally shaped brew and benefit from holding the distilled abstracts together?

Another doctoral qualifying exam focused on the theme of religious experience. My personal religious experiences were a bit dull but I was fascinated, in part because of my relationship with the inimitable Huston Smith, whose experiences were spectacular by any measure. I was a teaching assistant for him on four occasions at UC Berkeley, in an introductory class on religion, for which my years of religious-

studies training at the University of Sydney proved useful, and in an advanced class on the perennial philosophy, which was essentially an in-depth exploration of Huston's own worldview. Most importantly, for three years, Huston met weekly with me, my friend Kate McCarthy, now at Chico State University, and one other person. That was probably the single most important educational process of my life. Everything was on the table for discussion. Huston would listen and argue, as would we. His degree of conviction was stunning to me, who had and still has never felt completely confident in anything related to comprehensive worldviews and lifeways. Huston would get frustrated with us for not feeling completely convinced about the perennial philosophy – and not a little worried, perhaps sensing that the future of human civilization was in unworthy hands – but he never gave up on us, or on trying to convince us to see things from his point of view. I think Kate would say the same as me: we had never felt so well loved by a professor.



Huston Smith

One of the most influential people in my life at that time was Robert Russell, a physicist teaching theology and science at the Graduate Theological Union. I got involved with the theology-and-science venture he had going on, creating their database and doing various other technical things for them, as well as taking a couple of religion-and-science classes and participating in conference events. We often commuted together in his old green Volvo and I savored those amazing conversations. Part way through my first year, Bob told me that the church where his wife, Charlotte, was one of the ministers was looking for a doorkeeper to live in a cottage on the property and take care of the place. Free rent sounded great and nine months into our US sojourn, Suzanne and I left Berkeley to live in Piedmont. We lived in the cottage because of the doorkeeping job but they also made me an associate minister with responsibility for administration, adult education, and worship. Suzanne became the administrator for

the 400-child church school, working closely with one of Charlotte's ministerial colleagues, Larry Martin. I worked most closely with the senior pastor, Sam Lindamood, who became a towering mentor for me.



Robert John Russell



Piedmont Community Church

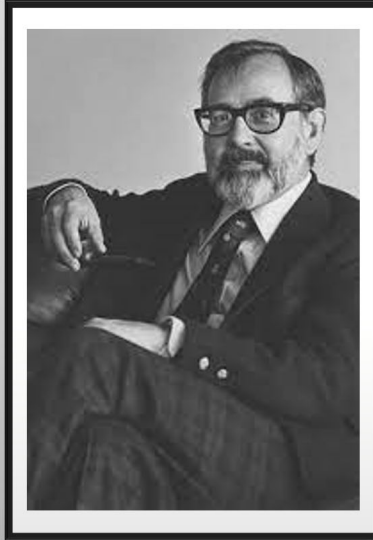
This is not the place to explain how important those people and that place were to Suzanne and me. Suffice to say that our two children were born when we lived there, they expanded the cottage for us, we made another group of lifelong friends, and we were crushed by grief when we left for Boston after five years of life-changing experiences. Leaving was very nearly unbearable, incomparably harder than leaving home a dozen years earlier. What I should say here is how deeply I sensed the harmony between my professional ministerial commitments, even as a religious naturalist, and my academic philosophical commitments. That hasn't shifted much over the course my career. Just as my disagreement with Jesus over his supernatural worldview doesn't stop me from following him in my weird way, so my criticisms of ecclesiastical institutions don't stop me from appreciating the beauty within them and working to strengthen them where I can.

But back to the PhD... My advisor was Claude Welch, who retired as Dean and President of the GTU just as I arrived but stayed on for many years as a professor. He was an impeccable professional who loved academic trappings but also a



Rev. Samuel Johnson Lindamood, Jr. and Gay Trimbach with me.

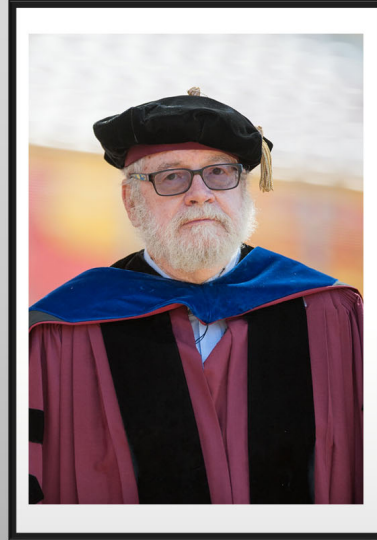
disruptive hoot of a man. This was symbolized for me in his acerbic evaluations of academic silliness and his crazy bridge-bidding impulses. Those bridge games at his home in the Berkeley Hills were wonderful times, and I was often there for other reasons, too. My computer business was still running, and I consulted with the GTU and for private clients. Knowing this, Claude roped me in to help with some of his research projects, including an important nation-wide review of Presbyterian seminaries. It was an introduction to research in the social sciences, which at the time was one of the weak parts of my multidisciplinary resume.



Claude Welch



Van Harvey



Lee Yearley

Claude connected me to Van Harvey in Stanford University's Religion Department. Van became a dissertation reader – and a good one, reading my nonsense closely and constructively. After I defended the dissertation, Van organized an interview with department chair Lee Yearley for a two-term sabbatical replacement position at Stanford, which I secured. I'd solo-taught a PhD seminar as a PhD student while Claude, the designated professor, was on a semester-long cruise, but the Stanford classes were the first ones I designed myself. Teaching those undergraduates was a blast. They were a couple of steps smarter than the average Berkeley undergraduate taking Huston Smith's Introduction to Religion class. And I felt in my element.

Finally, I'd found a professional niche that felt right – university teaching. Getting a job was the challenge. Fortunately, I landed an offer from my first on-campus interview and it was in a university-based Divinity School, no less – a venue where I could live out my ministerial calling while also being planted in a thriving university culture. I came to Boston University in 1993, 32 years old; the father of two sons, Sam at two-and-a-half years and six-month-old Ben; with a mortgage I couldn't quite pay, forcing me to restart my computer business to make ends meet; and with a life partner who miraculously was still willing to follow me eastwards, away from her Australian roots. I've remained at Boston University ever since, suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but never less than monumentally grateful for my academic home.



Wesley & Suzanne with Sam (left) and Ben (right) in 1993



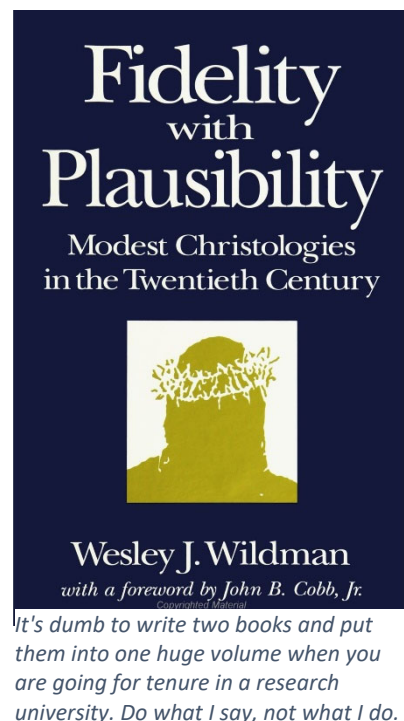
Boston University School of Theology (left)

How I Built a Career

Having floated dust-mote style into a splendid career opportunity, I needed to build a career. And here we come to one of my limitations as a scholar of the humanities: at the time, I wrote like an analytical philosopher or a mathematician. I needed to write in such a way as to match my ever-deepening humanistic interpretation of reality. I wrote and rewrote my dissertation, more than a dozen times, striving for the kind of elegance and economy of argument I admired in other humanities scholars.

The dissertation was a mostly historical analysis of Christologies that reject absolute claims of definitiveness and significance when interpreting Jesus. It was dramatically multidisciplinary, taking up all disciplines that could have anything to contribute to plausibility assessments in the domain of Christology. I added to the original what amounted to a second volume in the form of a constructive argument about two ways this could be done in the present. I should have published that as two books but SUNY published the whole in a single gigantic tome. Had I been thinking about tenure requirements, I definitely would have published it as two books! But I was absorbed in the landscape of the argument, charting the terrain and learning how to describe it in prose. I figured tenure would take care of itself.

Tenure did take care of itself, though with a twist. The external reviewers were unanimously in favor of tenure, as were my departmental colleagues. But the School of Theology's promotion and tenure committee was unanimously opposed. While conceding that publications, teaching, and service were worthy of tenure, they argued that a person with my kind of theology doesn't belong in a Christian seminary and that awarding me tenure would damage the



school. It was the first time since the split vote on ordination that my naturalistic worldview had caused any serious problem for me. That committee's vote was opposed by School of Theology Dean, Robert Neville, and found unpersuasive by the university's promotion and tenure committee and Provost. It was awkward staying around when key leaders in the School of Theology outside my department had voted to cast me aside. But I learned from one of those committee members that they knew it was a fight they wouldn't win.



Academic Russian Doll Game (aka Tenure)

Key quote from School Tenure Committee Report:

"He does not believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour."

You have admire people who act on principle, lose the fight, and are wonderfully collegial afterwards. I respect that.



That episode says a lot about my colleagues in the School of Theology. They were worried about giving institutional cover to a religious naturalist and said so in their vote, even though they knew full well they'd be overridden. They voted their conscience. I found it easy to respect that. And why not fight over naturalism and supernaturalism as a framework for interpreting religion? They drew a line in the sand with their vote, I crossed it, and their beloved school changed in a way they didn't like. Yet they remained thoroughly collegial even after they lost the mini-battle. I've taken that as a model for honorable fish-fighting in the tiny pool that is university politics. Make your case the best you can and then accept the result with equanimity and compassion. Sure, our personal and institutional aspirations can rise and fall on such votes but those aspirations are only worthy of institutional support to the extent that we persuade others to vote for them.

My second home at Boston University was the Graduate School, where I taught in a number of PhD tracks related to philosophy, theology, ethics, religion and science, and the scientific study of religion. After years of uncomfortable struggle, the Graduate School gave the Religion Department permission to redesign the PhD program, which they did by requiring that its scope be limited to research areas in which they could field a nationally competitive program based solely on their department's resources. Faculty outside the department could then be brought in to strengthen those specializations. But they had nobody working in my areas so all activity on that side of my academic life has slowly wound down. In fact, the two last PhD students in the scientific study of religion are now working on their dissertations and it'll all be over soon. I fought hard to keep alive Boston University's remarkable history of scientific approaches to religion and I lost, as did several dozen other faculty whose relationship with

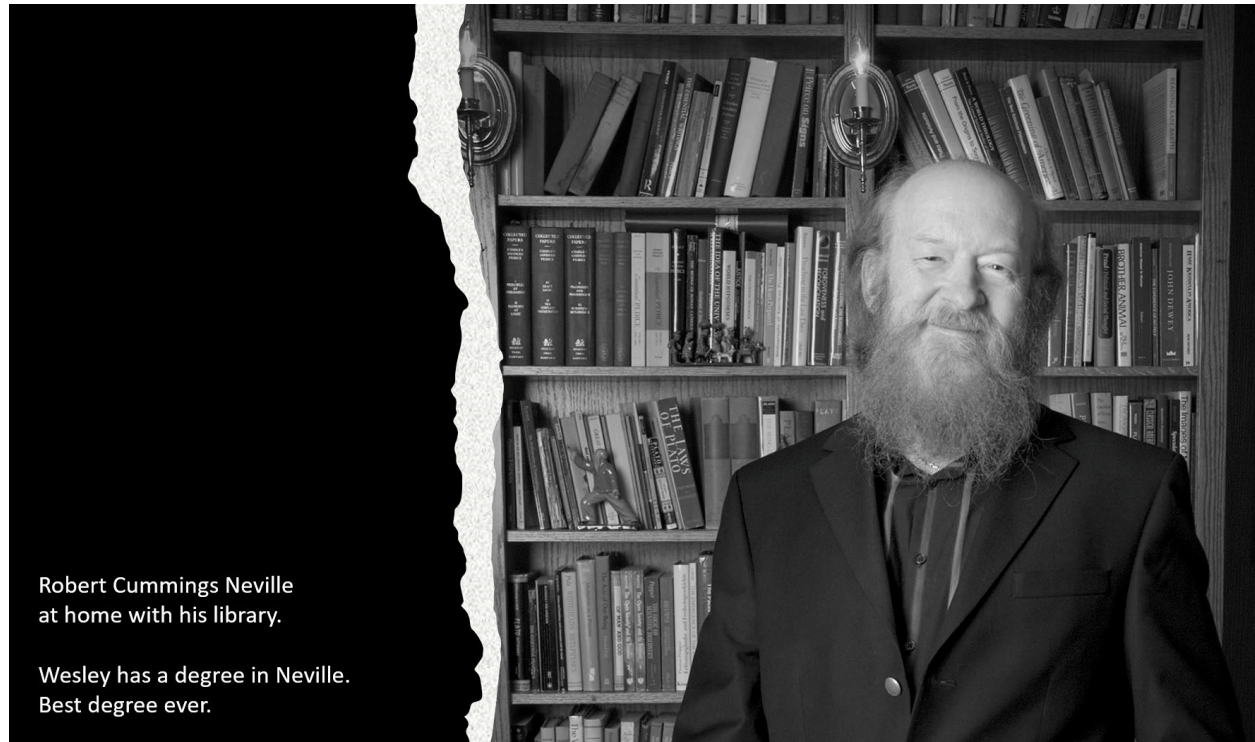
religious studies was suddenly blocked. Something similar happened at Yale University some decades earlier. But I remembered how my School of Theology colleagues behaved when they lost their effort to deny me tenure and I tried to emulate their equanimity and compassion. At the time and ever since, I defended the right of the Religion Department to define the PhD in Religious Studies as they saw fit. If they wanted to set aside literature in the scientific study of religion, which now amounts to half of what is published each year, then fine, so long as they're honest about what they're doing. And they have been honest about focusing strictly on the humanities study of religion. It's a strategic error that'll have to be corrected eventually – you can't just ignore so much amazingly fruitful research indefinitely! – but it was a politically necessary move at the time.



Religion-and-science doctoral training carries on in the School of Theology's PhD in Theological Studies, as does philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, and philosophical ethics. But a Divinity School is not the right institutional venue for PhD-level training in the scientific study of religion, so I do that outside the university instead.

My publications at Boston University have been deeply conditioned by several events. The first was the discovery of Charles Pierce. In William James's letters, Peirce tends to come off as a poor sob in need of sympathy and support. Yet I discovered that my critiques of James's philosophy were already present in Pierce so, poor sob or not, I needed to get to know him. The way I did this was by attending seminars taught by Bob Neville – one on the early Pragmatists and the other on Pierce's writings. I believe it was confusing for PhD students to have a newly minted professor learning side-by-side with them in Bob's seminars. But my mantra was unchanged: I lived for learning and fun, to pursue the transcendentals and excellence, and those classes helped me on all counts. I did what I wanted and maybe the PhD students saw that learning is more important than status. My time in Bob's seminars helped to round out my training in the third leg of the western-philosophy stool. I still saw no reason to choose between the analytical, continental, and pragmatic traditions. At the same time, my countless conversations with Bob

constituted an education unto itself. In my experience, a degree in Bob Neville is the very best preparation for doing anything related to philosophy and religion. What an amazing friendship!



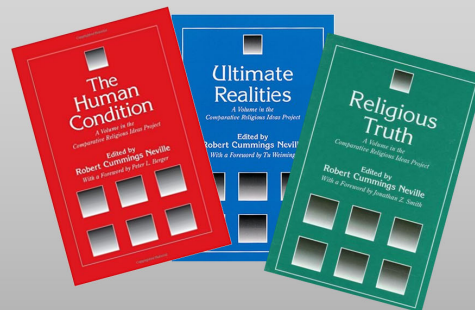
Bob also roped me into the comparative religious ideas project, in which everything I'd trained for seemed to come together. I already knew something about Indian philosophy, thanks to the religious-studies training and my years with Huston Smith. Now I was learning a lot more thanks especially to David Eckel on South Asian Buddhist philosophy and Frank Clooney on Hindu philosophy. Bob along with Livia Kohn and John Berthrong ushered me into the intricate hallways of Chinese philosophy, greatly extending the little I'd learned before. And I represented for the group the modern scientific approach to religion and the associated worldviews. It was a stunning experience!

Crosscultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project — by the Numbers

- 7 specialists, one for each of seven religions
- 7 PhD students, one for each specialist
- 3 generalists (Neville, Berthrong, Wildman)
- 8 meetings per year for 3 years
- 3 volumes of results



Left to right: John Berthrong (generalist), Livia Kohn (Chinese Religion), Noman Al Haq (Islam), Paula Fredriksen (Christianity), Francis Clooney (Hinduism), David Eckel (Buddhism), Anthony Saldarini (Judaism)



As the CRIP project drew to a close, I felt ready for something larger and more synthetic. Professors profess, after all. What would I profess? All that training in numerous disciplines, philosophies, religions, worldviews, and lifeways had to yield something worthy of the effort. So I launched the series of books that constitutes my systematic philosophy of religion. I wasn't sure how long it would be at the start, but I'm writing the final book now, volume three in what turned out to be a six-volume series. Volume 1 is on method and lays out a bio-cultural, unitary theory of inquiry, explaining what I'd already been doing for years. Volumes 2 and 3 concern ultimate reality and make a comparative case for a naturalistic cosmology and a mystical understanding of ultimate reality by assessing the relative plausibility of competing interpretations across dozens of considerations from numerous disciplinary perspectives. Volume 4 is on religious anthropology and volume 5 is on religious and spiritual experiences, jointly applying the naturalistic cosmology and the apophatic mystical theology to interpreting the human condition. Volume 6 is on religious language and the puzzle of effing the ineffable, exhibiting the linguistic and social tricks that make possible and plausible a seemingly futile activity.

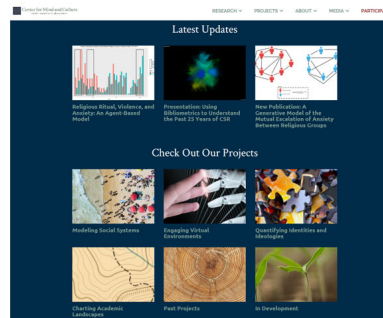


The Religious Philosophy Series – Systematic Philosophy of Religion in Six Volumes

Collectively, those books aim to interpret the existential depth of human life, regardless of religious tradition or commitment, demonstrating the payoff of deep engagement with every aspect of human inquiry, from mathematics to medicine, from physics to philosophy, and from evolution to ethics. Not many people work across many religious traditions and many disciplines so there is a predictable problem of finding an audience. But these books are like home to people of my sort, who feel straitjacketed by institutional demands to limit the scope of inquiry to monodisciplinary or dialogical ventures, or to advance the institutional and apologetic interests of individual religions. I'm a both-and kind of thinker and person, so I encourage narrower and more focused forms of inquiry. But I'm grateful for an institutional home where I can do my thing, too, unlimited by the useful but finally artificial silos built around university departments. Inquiry should follow the shape of the problem, not the shape of the institutional container.



- The Center for Mind and Culture (founded in 2007) is a research center generating integrated solutions to complex human problems (www.mindandculture.org).
- CMAC conducts research in scientific study of religion through the Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion (www.ibcsr.org).



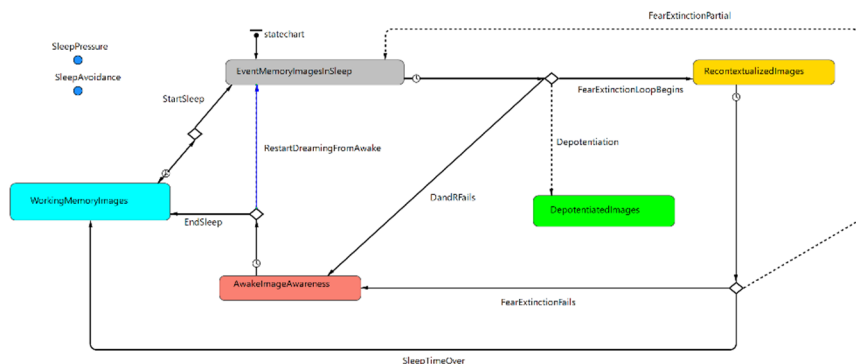
CMAC is a busy place!

5 Directors (2 alums)
 18 Research Associates (7 alums)
 4 Postdoctoral Fellows (10 alums)
 7 Doctoral Fellows (9 alums)
 5 Fulltime Staff (9 alums)
 40 Research Assistants (32 alums)
 30 Collaborating Specialists (15 alums)
 6 Websites/blog portals
 2 Instant-feedback survey sites
 35 Projects active at the present time
 Free monthly *IBCSR Research Review*
 Numerous books and journal articles
 Approx. USD\$15m in funded research

Almost a decade and a half ago, neuroscientist Patrick McNamara and I founded a non-profit research center, now called the Center for Mind and Culture. Patrick has since retired from board duties but I remain its executive director and he and I still conduct research together. CMAC focuses on the seemingly intractable social problems that CMAC targets using computational, data-science, scientific, and humanities research methods.

CMAC exists, in part, because I'd grown weary of philosophy, theology, and ethics that postures at transformation but never has any impact. It strikes me as a kind of self-exculpation of the force of real-world problems that intellectuals say they want to address. Focusing on exclusively scholarly contributions is fine when we're starting out, trying to win some standing in our disciplinary homes. But veteran researchers who profess the importance of practical change should make a real difference with their research, not merely through the classroom or among their scholarly colleagues. Accordingly, CMAC's informal motto is "rescuing big-brained academics from social irrelevance."

Patrick was the first person to show me how to cross the line and make research count for improving the world. His work on Parkinson's Disease (PD), in which I've been honored to participate, promises to improve the self-understanding of people suffering from that condition. Time and again I've explained this research to people with PD or living with partners who



The Disturbed Dreaming Model

have PD, only to see them weep with new-found awareness as the mystery of their changing spirituality suddenly became intelligible to them.

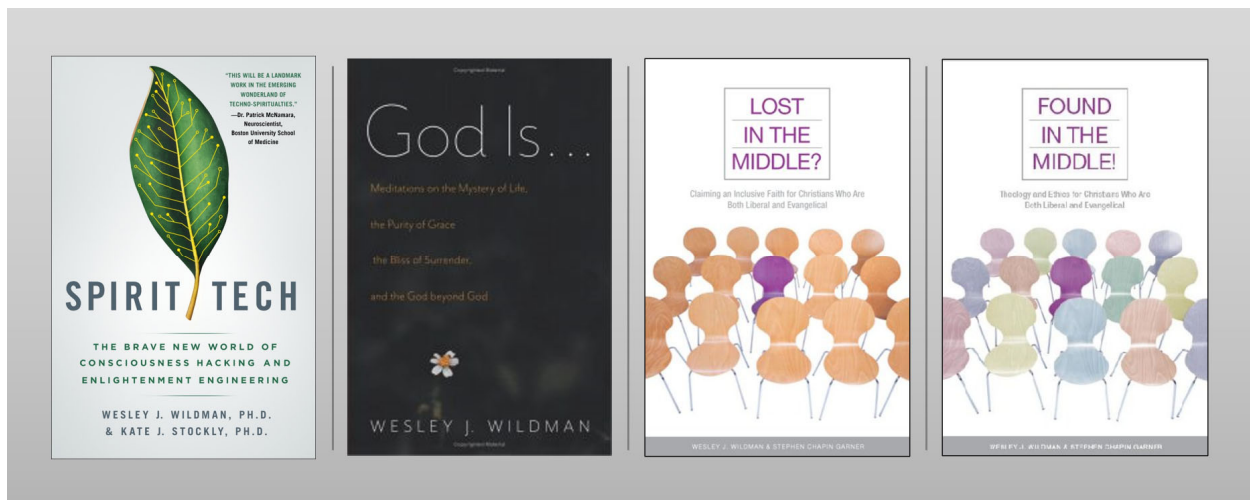
Since then we have worked on Nightmare Disorder, publishing the first computational model of the nightmare process, which enables us to explain how treatments work and, for the first time, to optimize treatments for different kinds of people.



CMAC conducts research in the scientific study of religion through its Institute for the Biocultural Study of Religion. We're gearing up to conduct multidisciplinary, computational-social-science research into environmental issues through the Climate, Culture, Conflict and Cooperation Consortium. And we're starting to catalyze an organizational identity for scholars in computational humanities and social sciences. Much of our effort addresses side effects of our complex civilizations where computational and data sciences, multidisciplinary research, and stakeholder engagement seem to promise breakthroughs in understanding capable of leading to real-world change. The problem of rural suicide is worsening despite all the money being thrown at it. The exploitation of children in the commercial sex industry is abetted by social media, a nasty side effect that efficiently connects a desperately corrupt demand with a desperately vulnerable supply, and is genuinely difficult to stop. Religious and political extremists have been with us for millennia but now they're amped up by the possibility of weapons of mass destruction they'd eagerly use to lay waste to entire cities. I freely grant that not all philosophers of religion or philosophical theologians or liberation theologians *need* to tackle real-world problems. But those who, like me, spout about our obligation to change the world certainly do.

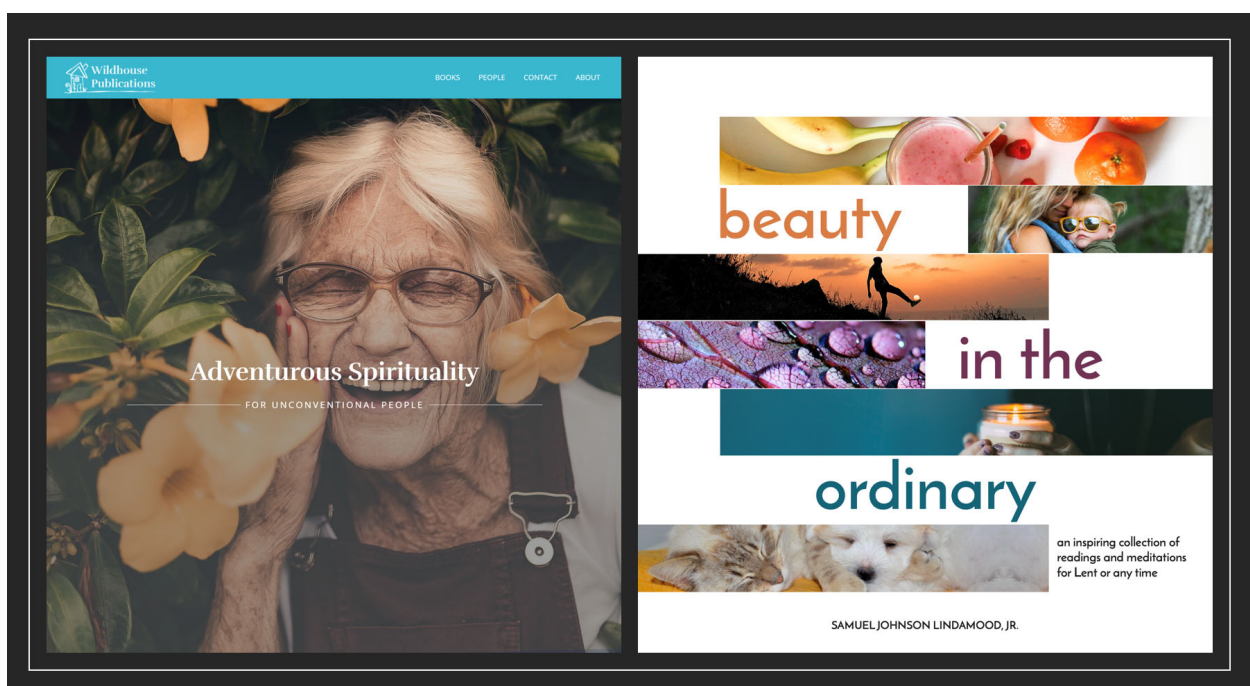
I've stumbled onto another way to exercise an influence – through publications that address a wider public. The journey from academic prose to trade books has been painful, reminiscent of the journey from a technical, scientific mode of writing to a humanities mode that I struggled with early in my career. With the help of patient editors, I'm getting there. My first two trade books, co-written with Boston University alum Chapin Garner and targeting an audience of moderate Christian pastors and lay people, were not barn-stormers. I believe one of them, *Lost in the Middle?*, was reprinted, which is

something, but there was something deficient about the message, the marketing, or both. My book of sermons has not been a wild success, either, but that could change. Recently, I've done many podcasts and interviews, and occasional op-ed writing, improving my public communication skills. My most recent trade-non-fiction book, co-authored with Boston University alum Kate Stockly, is *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering*. Maybe that book will do better.

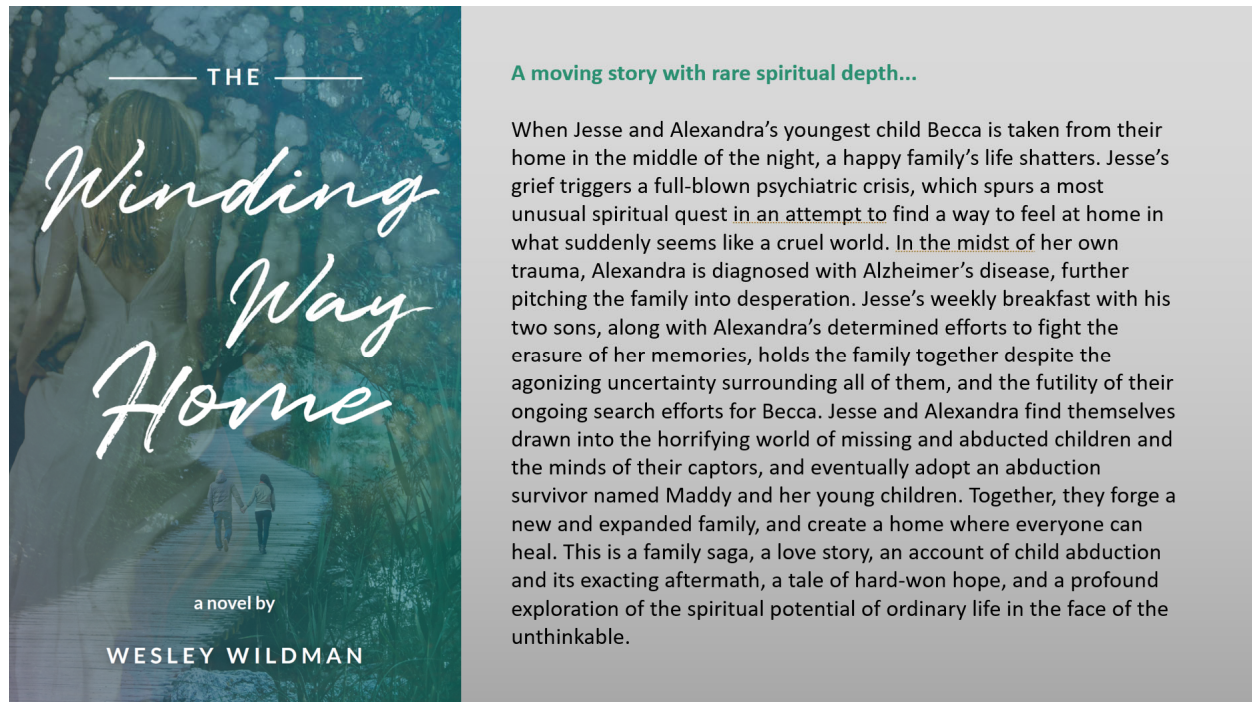


Outreach books for a broader audience.


Hopefully future trade books will do better still, and perhaps even reach an audience of spiritual seekers for whom traditional religious institutions are alienating. I started Wildhouse Publications to create trade books for this audience. The first item hot off the Wildhouse press was a gorgeous full-color book of readings and meditations by Sam Lindamood, my friend and mentor in ministry from California days. Subsequent publications will slowly build a catalogue of books for the spiritual-but-not religious, the marginally religious, the spiritual atheists, and my mystically inclined co-travelers.



In an effort to address the spiritual depths of human life without requiring people to read the six volumes of complex prose in my systematic philosophy of religion, I've even tried my hand at fiction. Learning how to weave fictional magic has been the most difficult transformation in my writing yet – honestly, it was agonizing – but I had a story to tell. My first novel, *The Winding Way Home*, will appear before long, and took me seven years to write, a measure of the pain involved. Others are in process, and hopefully they won't take as long or hurt as much.



At this point in my career, I'm a bit overwhelmed by the opportunities available to me. My computer business is entering its fifth decade. The publishing venture is just starting and it's difficult to make projections about it. CMAC is busy – we're paying about five dozen people, mostly part-time researchers – and there are many ways we can direct our efforts depending on how fundraising happens. Recently I was appointed as a founding member of Boston University's new Faculty of Computing and Data Sciences on the strength of my work in computational humanities and computational social sciences, and my dedication to research in ethics of new and emerging technologies. I'm deeply involved there and it offers almost endless intriguing options. And I still work the job I love in the School of Theology as Professor of Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics. I treasure my colleagues who are a humane and serious group of people. Some of them probably still think I'm ruining the school with my mystical brand of naturalism but they don't make a big deal about it. They'll replace me with someone less disturbing when I get around to retiring and the institution will roll onwards. I adore my students and they seem to appreciate me most of the time, even though I'm no longer young and cool, whatever that meant back in 1993 when I started. I haven't minded losing political battles, in part because I've created other venues for self-expression that are more under my control, and in part because I'm deeply plugged into research groups in many parts of the world. This dispersed network of wonderful research colleagues and friends has become my emotional home as well as my professional research environment. Not seeing them outside Zoom during pandemic times has been every bit as awful as not traveling constantly has been a welcome relief.



Center for
Computing &
Data Sciences

What's next? I have trade books, research projects, and fund-raising schemes in the works. But the heart of what I do as a professor is transreligious, multidisciplinary, naturalistic, mystical philosophical theology. I plan to write a second series in that vein. For years, Bob Neville has been trying to get me to inhabit a worldview and explain it from the inside instead of setting up a debate in order to assess the plausibility of competing views relative to mine. Long before I began the Religious Philosophy series, I did what Bob hoped I'd do, and started writing a systematic philosophical theology that would explain my position from the inside, demonstrating how it relates to and absorbs a host of related considerations. I planned out four volumes and wrote several hundred pages before junking the whole thing. The truth is that I wasn't ready. Bob was born ready and has never really worked in another mode for an extended period of time, not since his early twenties anyway. But I've never possessed his degree of confidence, being constantly aware of the plausibility of arguments other than my own. My pathway has been different, accordingly. I first needed to explain to myself why I found the view I hold relatively more plausible than the truly moving and intellectually powerful alternatives. That's what the six-volumes of the Religious Philosophy series are all about.

Soon, however, I shall be ready to channel Bob—not his confidence, mind you, because I'll still be hovering at 60-70% while he abides in stratospheric heights of conviction. No, with a smidge less confidence, God willin' an' the crick don' rise, I'll be developing my philosophical theology internally to my own position, reconnoitering the landscape from there rather than from a makeshift viewing tower I construct to oversee the entire territory. I still like the four-volume design I created two decades ago, and I might even be able to rescue some of those hundreds of ditched pages, which at the time of ditching struck me as fatally juvenile. I'm about as ready as I'm ever going to be.



Conclusion

I celebrate daily the privilege of being able to pursue inquiry into questions that are sometimes matters of ultimate concern for me. These are questions about the meaning of life, the ground of moral reasoning, the wellsprings of value, the origins and destiny of our species, and the depth structures and dynamics of history and nature. My amazement that this kind of inquiry is culturally and institutionally possible leaves me filled with wonder. And I can do it in very practical as well as intensely theoretical ways. I feel lucky, especially given the way I stumbled into this career.

My vocational decisions define me as a person as much as anything does. They express my peculiar way of moving through the world: I'm a follower of Jesus, an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in a Christian church, a student of the Buddha, a spiritual quester for the transcendentals, a cultivator of holiness in the form of resisting tendencies to cognitive error, an atheist regarding all divine beings, a philosophical theologian who deploys God language to refer to the existential depths of reality, a partner to Suzanne, and a father to Sam and Ben. I started out like a dust mote but I learned to choose these things, or the aspects of them I could choose. Now I'm living on purpose.

