

COLLOQUY

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Confronting the Wrong in the World

By Gutenberg Tutor
Brian Julian



It sure seems like there are a lot of people in the world who are wrong. They have the wrong politics. They have the wrong view of God. They have the wrong picture of what is most important in life and the wrong lifestyle as a consequence.

In light of this, it also seems like I should point out to these people that they are wrong. At least, it is very tempting to think that this is what I should do. The default mode of our culture is to respond to the errors in others by trying to tear them down. The internet makes it especially easy to find targets to confront and platforms from which to confront them. And the confrontation feels noble. To oppose error is to stand for truth. It is to bring light to those who may fall for the error. Refuting the wrong I see around me is a public service.

It is especially easy to think this way when I look at two of my heroes: Jesus and Socrates. Both men were famously confrontational. Socrates was well known for pointing out to people that they lacked wisdom; Jesus showed the ways people were not following God. Both men were so confrontational that they were killed by those whom they confronted. And in their deaths, both men displayed the nobleness of their causes. They were willing to die at the hands of people who were in the wrong rather than give in, stop confronting, and let the wrongness remain. Perhaps I, too, should take such a stand for truth and make confronting error my goal.

In this essay, I will argue that this is not the primary lesson I should glean from Socrates and Jesus. (And not just because I would prefer to remain unmartyred.) At times I may be called to take a public stand for the truth, and at times it may be necessary to call out the error espoused by someone else. But when it comes to my lifestyle, to my general attitude towards people in the world, the lesson of my heroes is not to make confronting others a central pillar. Rather, both Jesus and Socrates are exhorting me to confront myself.

I will begin by looking at Socrates. First, I should clarify that while Socrates was a real person, the heroic Socrates, the one I admire, is the literary Socrates depicted in the dialogues of Plato. In these dialogues, Socrates goes around conversing with people, and in the course of these conversations he shows that the people he is talking to don't know what they are talking about. For example, in the dialogue *Meno*, Socrates shows that Meno cannot say what "virtue" is. In *Charmides*, he displays the ignorance of both Charmides and Critias when it comes to the nature of self-control.

Socrates initiates these conversations because he sees them as a mission from his god. (He thinks of this god as singular and moral, in stark contrast to the Greek gods, so it is possible to see him as following the biblical God in a way uninformed by revelation. For the purposes of exploring whether I should imitate Socrates, I will consider him as doing so.) An oracle of the god started him on this path of confrontation, and it is a path he follows out of obedience.

So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. (Apology 23b)¹

Why would the god care that some people are ignorant? He cares because they are not merely lacking a knowledge of facts—they are lacking a knowledge of what is most important in life. They lack wisdom. In the *Meno* and *Charmides* examples above, one person is ignorant about virtue, while the other two do not know the particular virtue of self-control. In other dialogues, Socrates shows people to be ignorant concerning additional virtues: justice, courage, piety. And if people do not know what virtue is, they may be living for other things, for the wrong things. Socrates's confrontations are not merely about ignorance but about how people are living. He makes this clear when summarizing what he says to those he confronts:

Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul? (Apology 29d-e)

When he says these things, Socrates does not try to minimize the confrontation. He pokes and provokes, and these provocations are intentional. He is as irritating as a fly that bites.

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company. (Apology 30e-31a)

Following God (assuming it is the biblical God), caring for virtue—these are good. Should I imitate Socrates and become a confronter? Before answering this question, let me point out one more feature of the dialogues: Plato depicts Socrates as a failure. He confronts people in order to get them to live better, but the people he talks to do not change their ways.

Take the examples I gave above. Meno, Critias, Charmides—these are not merely fictional characters but are all notoriously bad men from Athenian history. Plato's original readers would have known the trajectories of their lives. When Socrates is done confronting them, they do not commit to virtue but instead go off and commit atrocities. Plato even emphasizes this at the end of *Charmides*. He has Charmides and Critias joke with each other about “submission,” “plotting,” and “force,” foreshadowing their future roles as tyrants. Socrates fails miserably.

Why would Plato write dialogues about Socrates that show him failing? A key part of the answer is to notice that with every dialogue there is a hidden participant. Socrates questions, his opponent answers, but there is always a third person: the reader. The speaking participants may be long-dead historical figures, but as I read the dialogues, I am very much alive. This means that I still have to decide how I am going to live *my* life. The mission of Socrates is still relevant to me.

Plato's Socrates, however, cannot confront me directly. He is a static literary figure, one who gives an unchanging set of responses to the characters as Plato wrote them. He cannot confront me on the details and particulars of my life. This means that if I am going to be confronted about my own life in the way that Socrates wants, the confronting will have to be done by me. I can read about the ways that Socrates confronts others in the dialogues, but then I must turn and ask whether his questions apply to me as well. I can consider all the questions to be found in the dialogues, but then I need to expand them and ask whether there are additional ways in which I am caring for the wrong things in life.

When it comes down to it, even if Plato's Socrates were a real person living now, and even if he were to talk to me directly, it would still be me who needs to confront myself. Even Socrates had to be a self-confronter:

I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men.... (Apology 38a, emphasis added)

Socrates had to test himself because only then can change happen. The unexamined life is not worth living because in it I never ask myself if I am living for the right

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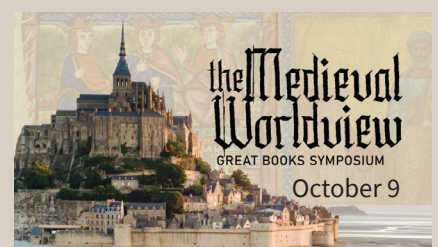


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Confronting the Wrong in the World

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things—for morality, for God—and so I never change if I am not. The question is not whether my life has been externally evaluated by someone else, for as we all know, and as is illustrated in Plato's dialogues, external criticism does not produce real change. It might produce behavioral conformity, but it will not alter the internal heart—what I care about and live for. In order for this latter change to happen, I must ask *myself* if I am centering *my* life on what is truly important. It is only when I am willing to do this questioning that I can also be willing to make the necessary change.

Socrates is admirable for emphasizing this examination, this confrontation. He is a worthy hero to emulate. But I must be careful when it comes to which aspects of his confronting I select for emulation. Socrates seeks out others to confront because he sees himself as being given this task by God; following God is admirable, but I do not think that God has given me this task, so admiring Socrates is not a reason for me to confront others. Plato's Socrates is also a literary figure, with confrontations designed to stimulate the reader; I am not a literary figure, so I do not need to engage in confrontations as a literary device. Instead, as a reader and as a human being who must decide what my life will be about, I can look at Socrates's confrontations and recognize the need to confront myself. If I find Socrates heroic, I should emulate him in my own life.

What about Jesus? He is not just a hero; he is my savior. And he confronts people in even more extreme ways than Socrates. He overturns tables. He calls Pharisees whitewashed tombs. He tells a crowd they are of their father the devil. He draws the attention of the woman at the well to how many men she has been with. But he does all of this confronting for the best possible motives—he is the only human who has ever lived perfectly. Perhaps, then, I should be confrontational like Jesus.

As with Socrates, I will suggest that this is not the lesson I should draw from Jesus. In this case, however, it matters that the writings in which we learn about Jesus—the Gospels—are history, not fic-

tion. They describe the real interactions of the real person Jesus.

And this real Jesus is the most important person who ever lived. There are many reasons for why this is the case, but I will point here to one that Jesus himself highlights: The way a person reacts to Jesus is the way a person reacts to God. If I honor one, I honor the other.

For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (John 5:22-23)²

If I believe one, I will believe the other.

And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. (John 5:37-38)

A person's reactions to Jesus are the same as his or her reactions to God. Because of this, Jesus cannot help but confront people. His very being is confrontational. For every person on the planet, the most important question we have to face is whether or not we will follow God. And the natural answer for every person on the planet, given that we are all sinners, is that we would prefer not to. Thus, just by showing up, Jesus is confronting people with the most fundamental question they have to ask, one to which they by nature answer wrongly.

This is why, in the example above, Jesus tells a crowd they are of their father the devil. He is making a criticism, but it is also, in part, simply an observation, given how they are relating to him.

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. ..." (John 8:42-44)

Since Jesus confronts by his very existence, I must not simply copy his mode

of confrontation. I am not the Son of God. There may be times when people are offended by me because I am a Christian, and in those times I may need to be confrontational in order to uphold the truth. But the vast majority of the time when someone has a problem with me, it is simply because I have problems. My sin and their sin clash, and we have a mess, not a case where I need to confront the other person. In these times, I need to remember a primary command of Jesus regarding confronting others: I should remove any logs in my own eyes before trying to remove their specks.

Like Socrates, Jesus confronts others in a way that does not suggest I should do the same. But also as with Socrates, I should learn from watching Jesus confront others that I need to confront myself. In this case, I need to force myself to answer the question "Am I going to reject Jesus, as do so many of the people whom he confronts, or am I going to follow him?"

Sometimes when Jesus confronts a person, he is posing this question to them. This appears to be the case with the woman at the well mentioned earlier. Notice her response to being confronted about her living situation. She does not take it as an insult, but she inquires more deeply into who Jesus is.


Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ..." (John 4:16-19)

By the end of the conversation, she is running off to town and proclaiming to people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29). Jesus confronts her with who he is, and by all appearances she is on her way to following him.

Jesus cannot confront me in exactly the same way. He is not here in human form to confront me directly. So, when I read about him confronting others, I need to turn around and confront myself with who he is as well. In saying this, I do not mean to ignore the role of the

Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, I will not turn to Jesus. However, being given the Spirit is up to the mercy of God and is outside my control. When it comes to what *I* can and should do, the answer is to confront myself with who Jesus is.

Confronting others may be necessary at times, but in our society there is so much of it. My project here has been to examine two of my heroes whose actions

could be taken as support for fanning the flames of confrontation. I suggest that they should not be understood as giving me reasons to confront others. Rather, they would encourage me to turn my gaze inward and confront myself. There is a lot of error in the world, but some of the wrong is in myself. To honor the examples of Jesus and Socrates, this is the wrong I should confront. 

¹ All quotes about Socrates are from Plato, *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd ed., rev. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



In this life, we are constantly being judged. Employers judge our work; friends judge our attitudes; complete strangers judge our fashion sense; and tutors judge their students' academic progress. Of course, we all do the same thing—we judge other people's actions and attitudes, their fashion sense and taste in music—pretty much anything that can be judged, we make judgments about, and we do it almost automatically.

This isn't a bad thing, in itself. Judgment rests on identifying what is good and valuable, and identifying the good and valuable is something we should be doing. It's a human thing; and, moreover, it's a Christian thing. How else can we know what is worth pursuing, what we should fight to protect, what we should love?

In this way, love relies on judgment. Judging rightly opens a path to loving rightly. We love God because he loved us first, and we recognize the great goodness and value of that love. As we come to better understand the goodness and greatness of God—which is to say, as we come to judge of Him rightly—we also come to love Him better. In a similar way, judging our neighbors rightly—seeing their goodness and value as not less than our own—gives us reason to love them as we love ourselves.

But just as judging rightly can lead to loving rightly, judging wrongly can lead us to loving wrongly. We can love things we should despise; we can despise things we should love. Less dramatically, we can love things more or less than we should—out of proportion with their actual goodness and value.

We are all prone to make mistakes in our judgments. We misjudge God, other people, events, accomplishments, and even—perhaps especially—ourselves. Knowing that we cannot entirely trust our own self-judgment, we seek the approval of others. We adjust our attitudes to please our friends, our appearance to please strangers, our work to please our employers, and our study to please our instructors.

There's a pragmatic side to this, of course—pleasing these people (which is to say, earning their favorable judgment) leads to desirable results. Our friends become more friendly, strangers compliment our outfits, employers raise our wages, and instructors award us good grades. We come to rely on the judgment of others when evaluating our attitudes, our actions, our accomplishments, even our haircuts.

Again, this isn't a bad thing in itself. In many circumstances, other people are

better equipped to judge than we are. I trust my mechanic's judgment about my car's transmission; I trust Elior's judgment on Irish music, Chris' judgment in the realm of physics, Brian's judgment about film, Nancy's on Kierkegaard, Cindy's on Shakespeare, Kathleen's on the German language; and, of course, I trust Charley's judgment about anything having even remotely to do with salmonids. And I also trust their judgment about how to teach our mutual students. (Well, not the mechanic.)

Is my trust in their judgment justified 100% of the time? Of course not. Like everyone else, they make mistakes. Like I do. On balance, though, it's wise to trust their judgment in areas they are qualified to judge. If Kathleen tells me, "The seniors' pronunciation of German words is becoming really impressive!" I will believe her. She is in a position to judge their pronunciation, while I am not.

Class of 2025, when you came to us four years ago, you were putting your trust in our judgment, whether or not you realized it at the time. Thank you for that.

We quickly noticed that your class, as a whole, responded strongly to our judgments—especially as those judgments were expressed in the grades you earned. You also really wanted to hear verbal confirmation of your progress—those proverbial "words of affirmation." (I remember your plan to get Chris Alderman, with his radio-quality voice, to record affirmations for you to listen to.) You really liked the words, but you *believed* the numbers—the grades. And why shouldn't you? Grades are the standard metric for educational achievement.

I hope you have come to appreciate that the standard metrics for achievement aren't always the best metrics. Sometimes they aren't even particularly

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The Grand Inquisitor

A Review by Gutenberg
President Chris Swanson

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* stands as one of the great literary achievements of all time. The story is breathtaking in scope and plumbs the depths of human desire. It addresses what it means to live before God. Among a great number of famous scenes, perhaps the most famous is "The Grand Inquisitor." In it, Ivan, one of the three Karamazov brothers, tells a fictional story to his brother Alyosha. The story is about an inquisitor during the sixteenth-century Spanish inquisition. He is a cardinal who seeks to protect, shepherd, and keep his flock happy.

Ivan's story begins with Jesus returning to the earth to be greeted with joy by people who desire to be healed. The inquisitor, however, is not pleased and locks Jesus in prison. After a day in the dungeon, the inquisitor visits Jesus for a private interview. Jesus says nothing, but the inquisitor lays at His feet a powerfully worded accusation. He claims that Jesus did not love His people because He gave them the freedom to choose Him or reject Him.

Ivan Karamazov, in the guise of the inquisitor, believes that "nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom." The freedom that concerns Ivan is not political or economic freedom but, rather, the freedom people are given to decide for themselves if they wish to follow God. Jesus failed to take away that choice, and because of that perceived failure, the inquisitor and others like him have had to step up and do what Jesus would not do: "... they have vanquished freedom and have done so to make men happy" (232)¹.

The inquisitor develops his criticism of Jesus by reviewing the three temptations Satan used to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. First, Jesus could have spared mankind the uncertainty of freedom by promising bread: "But Thou didst reject the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to make all men bow down to Thee alone—the banner of earthly bread. And Thou hast rejected it for the sake of freedom and the bread of Heaven" (234). Jesus' second failure was to reject the temptation to show His glory with a spectacular miracle that no one would have any choice but to believe; Jesus' rejection of "miracle" was unconscionable according to the inquisitor, who felt obliged to fix it: "We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon *miracle*, *mystery* and *authority*. And men rejoiced that they were again led like sheep, and that the terrible gift that brought them such suffering, was, at last, lifted from their hearts. ... Did we not love mankind, so meekly acknowledging their feebleness, lovingly lightening their burden?" (237). The third temptation was similar: "...Thou didst reject with scorn, that last gift *he* offered Thee, showing Thee all the kingdoms of the earth. We took from *him* Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth" (237).

In each case, the inquisitor identifies himself with Satan, feeling compelled to correct Jesus' failure to put men at ease and rid them of the uncertainty and anguish of choosing: "The most painful secrets of their conscience, all, all they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all. And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the

great fear and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves. And all will be happy" (239).

After telling this story to his brother, Ivan admits he is an atheist. He cannot believe in a God that would leave man with the excruciating uncertainty and unhappiness of freedom of choice. The solution, according to Ivan, is the inquisitor's solution: create a framework where people are no longer burdened by choice; decide for them how they should live and think so that they may be spared the burden. The inquisitor is willing to take on himself the burden of choice so that others will not have to face it. In essence, they will not have to face life. The inquisitor is the ultimate example of a "helicopter priest."

What motivates the inquisitor? He does not deny who Jesus is. He recognizes Jesus, and he knows that he is working against Him. The inquisitor could bow his knee, confess his crime, and ask for forgiveness. He knows that Jesus will forgive him if he repents. In fact, in one of the most moving parts of the story, Jesus, having said nothing, kisses the inquisitor on the forehead.

But the inquisitor cannot repent. He cannot because he cannot stand to see the masses suffer. In his mind, the pain of seeing others suffer is truly insufferable. He will sacrifice his soul so that he does not have to see lost sheep aimlessly bleating on the hillside.


The desire of the inquisitor can be found in every human heart. We know all too well the danger of rebellion against God that our friends, family, and community face. We see it everywhere. We even feel the temptation to rebel in our own sinful souls. Few, if any, of us are untouched by students, friends, or family members who stray from the truth. We do not live in a medieval culture where "Christian confession" is nearly universal. We live in a world that the church no longer controls. The stakes are high, and we want to tilt the odds in our favor.

In our secret thoughts, many of us fear the pain of watching our children, our congregation, our students, or even our country going astray. In our best moments, the fear arises from our care and concern. In our worst moments, it arises from our selfishness.

To embrace the Gospel, however, we must trust God. Not only must we trust Him with our own souls, but we must trust Him with the souls of our loved ones. The opposite of trusting is to try to control the outcome ourselves. We hope and often believe that if we can create the right circumstances, the right education, the right habits, the right answers, and the right loves—then those we care for will come out right. We attempt to socialize them into the truth. We may deplore secular attempts to socialize people into a secular agenda, but do we deplore only the *end* of secular socialization or also the *means*? We want to prevent our loved ones from asking the deep and hard questions of existence because that is outrageously dangerous. We want them to have skills and abilities, as long as they don't use those tools to question the right way.

But God is so much bigger than us. We are out of our depth. The inquisitor may have been able to make people happy and thus assuage his pain. But he could not prevent God from facing each and every member of his "flock" with a choice. The inquisitor cannot, as much as he would like, take away their freedom. And neither can we.

To embrace the Gospel requires both love and trust. Our job is to love and nurture. But it is also to trust that God will bring our loved ones along the path as He sees fit. Part of faithful love, of course, is to teach what we think is true. But we also have a responsibility to give those we teach the skills and encouragement to face the questions of life with some independence.

The choice that God has given us is not an easy one. We must continue to choose Him, even when it is hard. I fail every day. I feel that pain of seeing others choose poorly. I live in the balance of faithfully fulfilling my responsibility to others and trying to control outcomes. The good news—and it is very good news—is this: God will redeem our attempts and struggles, *and* we are not in charge; He is. 

¹Citations from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky; trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Signet Classic, New American Library, 1957).

2025 Commencement Address

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good metrics. So when you get a raise at work, be thankful, but reserve judgment. What you are paid may or may not reflect the quality of your work. Some people have accomplished great things with little or no compensation, and others have been well-paid for essentially doing nothing.

A college degree is another standard metric for educational achievement, one which you will be receiving from us today. So when Chris hands you your diploma, be thankful, but consider—are we qualified to make this judgment? Are we qualified to judge that you merit the title "Bachelor of Liberal Arts?" If you judge that we are, congratulations! You can be confident that your degree means something real, even beyond the value which you judge it to have. If you aren't sure that we're qualified to judge your educational progress, then you're in the same boat as every student who has wondered, "Why did my paper get a B? I did everything right! It should have earned an A." Or every employee who thinks, "Why did I get passed over for a raise again? I do everything that's on my job description." Whose judgment do you trust? Your instructor's? Your employer's? Your own? Your friends', to whom you complain about these situations? If you haven't figured it out already, deciding whose judgment to trust is another judgment you have to make.


But as strongly as you might feel about your grades or your wages, about what your friends think of you or how your family views your decisions or the value your culture places on your accomplishments, and as much as weighing such judgments can be a good thing—ultimately, all such judgments can only ever be secondary. Such judgments are secondary because their objects—the things they judge—are secondary. Your grades and wages and decisions and accomplishments are all secondary to *you*—to your self. We human beings are often qualified to judge secondary things like decisions and accomplishments. We are never qualified to judge one another as selves. To refer back to Nancy Scott's commencement address a couple of years ago, we are selves before our Creator, and only He can judge those selves. Only God is qualified to judge you as a person.

And that is the other reason that judgments about things like decisions and accomplishments are secondary: they are fundamentally less important than a right judgment about you as a person, as a self. While your decisions and accomplishments do express something about you as a person, they don't perfectly convey who you are. So when your fellow human beings form judgments about you, these judgments are necessarily imperfect. "Man looks at the outward appearance" and all that.

So God is your judge—your final judge, the only judge that matters in the end. This should be both comforting and terrifying. Think about God's standard of goodness: how will you ever measure up? Consider the sheer, simple impossibility of His two great commands: to love him without reserve or limit and to love the imperfect people around us the way we love our own, imperfect selves.

And how can knowing that God is your final judge be comforting? When Christians in the Roman church were busy judging each other for eating meat sacrificed to idols or over whether to hold one day of the week more holy than the others, Paul enjoins them not to judge one another on the grounds that God has accepted them all. He then comments, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

I find great comfort in that final statement. If I am the Lord's servant, he will make me stand, and I will not fall before his judgment. And you—Kate, Gracie, Samuel—if you belong to God, he will make you stand in the final judgment. So that leaves the question—what does it mean to be God's servant, to belong to God? I dearly hope that the time you've spent here at Gutenberg has given you tools to pursue the answer to that question and has encouraged you in your desire to make that pursuit because I cannot give you a satisfactory answer to the question, being myself in the middle of the chase.

So, when the people and institutions of this world judge you, give those judgments the consideration they merit—not more but not less. Never forget whose judgment matters in the end. And never give up your pursuit of the One who is able to make you stand. 

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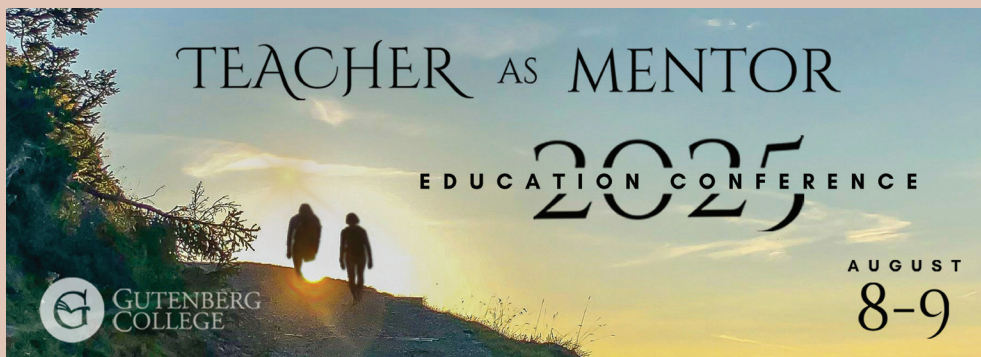
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