

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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9-23-2016

## Behold the Power of Gesture

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### Recommended Citation

Schaap, H. (2016). Behold the Power of Gesture. *Relief: A Journal of Art & Faith* Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/1084](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1084)

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## Behold the Power of Gesture

### Keywords

gesture, power, touch, Pontius Pilate

### Disciplines

Christianity | Creative Writing

### Comments

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# Behold the Power of Gesture

September 23, 2016     Howard Schaap

It's so staged, so false, so politician of him. After a days-long drama of political wrangling over authority and jurisdiction that extends into the dream world of his wife, the man of power ends the debate with a gesture. Perhaps it's his political signature: staged events to render judgments. Perhaps, backed into a corner, it's only this time that he does it. Perhaps it's simply functional, a way to communicate to those in the back of the crowd who can't hear. Whatever the case, to put an end to the problem of Jesus of Nazareth, Pontius Pilate resorts to gesture: a subordinate appears on stage bearing a bowl and a towel; the man washes his hands, dries them, leaves the stage. I don't think I understood what gesture was before Paula Huston introduced it to me three years ago. Gestures come in all styles and types, from dramatic to mundane, even compulsive. Just yesterday, in the middle of a class that I team teach, as the other prof did his thing, I found myself pulling at the point of my lip, a bad habit from childhood that my wife has been trying to break me of for years. It's the kind of thing I used to be self-conscious of, the unguarded moments when we return to childhood coping mechanisms.

Then I learned about gesture.

In Bich Minh Nguyen's book *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, a memoir about growing up Vietnamese and Buddhist in white, Christian Grand Rapids, Nguyen creates a character named Jennifer Vander Wal, a girl who seems straight out of a Cheer commercial due to the clean, controlled, middle class figure she cuts in life. Except for one thing: Jennifer compulsively licks her top lip, a glimpse, says Nguyen, of her lack of control, her humanity, and as such a hopeful gesture in its own mundane way.

So, standing in front of a class of college seniors, in that weird position of vulnerable power that is teaching, I kept pulling my lip, marking my humanity.

I love good gestures in writing, am constantly on the lookout for them. And I want to write good gestures, for which there is at least one clear truth: You can't force them. If they are to carry power, they should be either liturgical, coming from a pattern of gesture that lends them some weight, or they must spring from someplace so surprising that they flip the script. That's why every year students miss one of the simplest, most profound gesture in literature, that of the grandmother from Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": "She reached out and touched him on the shoulder." Simple, meaningful touch, reaching across the barriers that the grandmother herself has been attempting to put between her and the Misfit, and for which she receives a more violent return gesture, which is all students see.

The power of gesture is why Matthew doesn't fail to give us the political stunt of Pontius Pilate. The staging, the liturgical water, a handwashing that washed nothing, an unbaptism. Or why several gospel writers give us our savior's much more meaningful washing gesture, one that came out of a liturgy the disciples recognized as something performed by a servant: the

stripped-down Son of God wrapped in a towel, bowing before them, the lowly-intimate touch of cleaning their dirty feet, a gesture that washed everything.

Yesterday, in Intro to Lit we looked at Kim Addonizio's "First Poem for You." Students are mystified by the poem's touches, how the speaker traces her lover's tattoos, contemplating that they'll last even beyond their love, till he's "seared to ashes." "Such permanence is terrifying," the speaker says, "So I touch them in the dark; but touch them, trying."

This is a pretty good prayer for our times. All of postmodern life feels like a handwashing. Black lives matter. **Tribal battles** for rights. Sex trafficking. Prison reform. International labor abuses. Environmental destruction. All broad headings about which we try to say, "It's not my fault, it doesn't concern me," but behind which are specific lives, specific plots of land, local ecosystems.

Perhaps the answer is gesture. To move beyond the headline, to make contact with someone, to reach out a hand, to "touch them, trying."