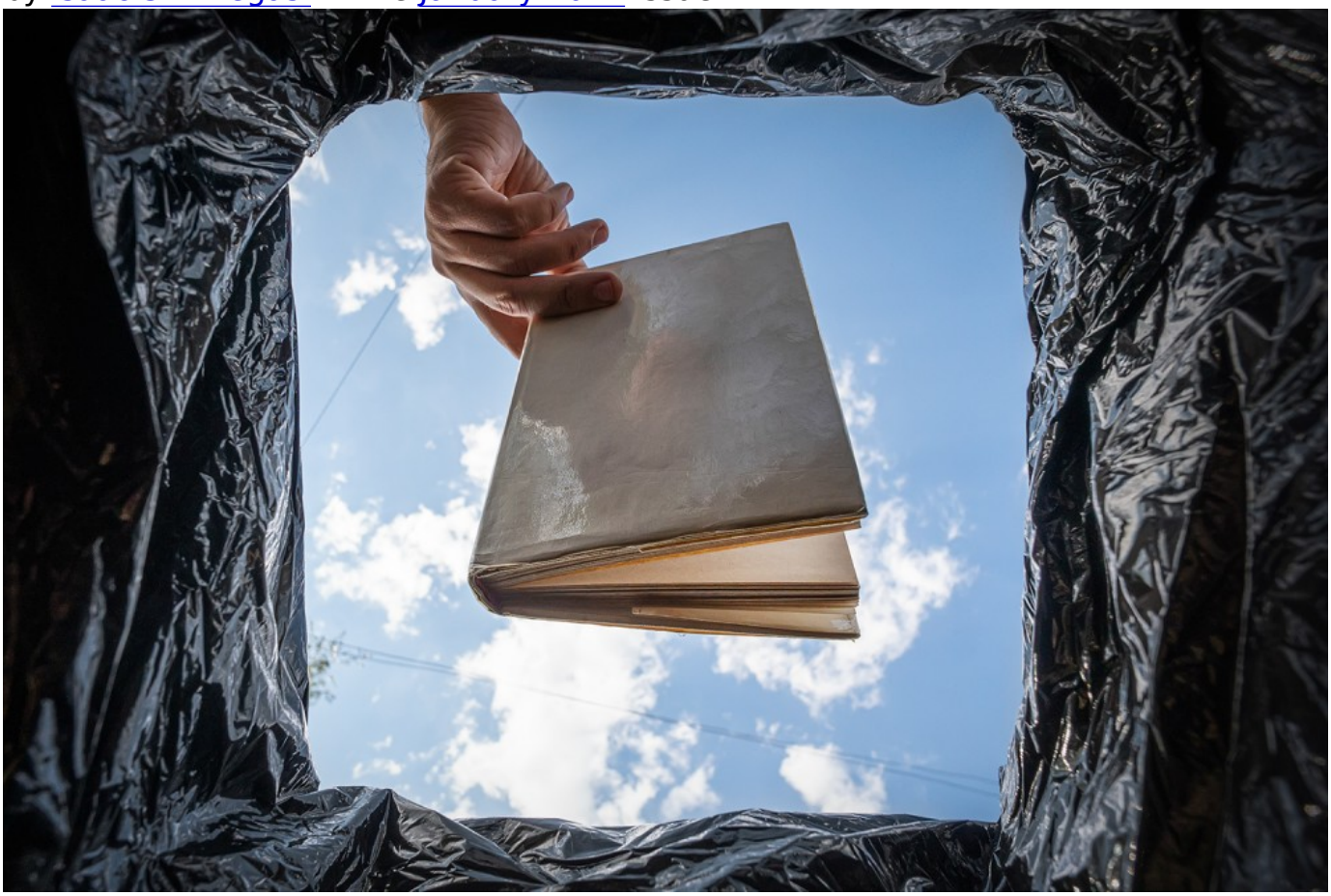
Harmful people with helpful ideas

I still read Luther, Calvin, and de Beauvoir. But John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse has made me rethink my mindset.

by Isaac S. Villegas in the January 2024 issue



(Photo by Diy13 / iStock / Getty)

In a scene early in Todd Field's 2022 film *Tár*, eminent composer Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) is teaching a master class at Juilliard. After extolling the compositions of J. S. Bach, Tár provokes Max, a nervous student, to respond with their musical inspirations. "I'm not really into Bach," Max answers. She prods Max with smug condescension, insisting that they must say something more to defend what she considers to be an absurd opinion. "I'd say Bach's misogynistic life makes it kind of

impossible for me to take his music seriously," Max replies. "Didn't he sire like 20 kids?"

That someone would link Bach's sexual life to his brilliant work offends Tár, who snaps back at Max in front of the class: "I'm unclear as to what his prodigious skills in the marital bed have to do with B minor."

In her review of the film for the *New York Review of Books*, Zadie Smith highlights this back-and-forth between Tár and Max as representative of our current debates about the connections between a person's life and work, between personal ethics and creative achievement. "Can an A-minor chord be misogynistic?" Smith asks. She lets her question linger unanswered. Probably because there are no answers—no schema for untangling the threads of influence in a work of art, no solvent to dissolve the contradictions that compose a person's life.

What seems clear is that we, according to our cultural mores, assume that an artist's or a writer's life is present—even if the markings are faint—in their work. The ethical or unethical aspects of their lives press into what they produce. Their identities and choices are somehow legible to us on the page or canvas. These kinds of ad hominem associations have become culturally relevant to our appreciation, enjoyment, and respect. This is in stark opposition to the 20th-century critical school that emphasized the "death of the author," maintaining that knowledge of an author's life and intention was irrelevant to the meaning of a text.

I don't think a particular chord can be misogynistic, but that might have more to do with my lack of musical sophistication than anything else. I'd be at a loss if, while listening to a piece of music, I was asked to pick out the indicted chord. But I do share something of Max's concerns when I think about my indebtedness to theologies and philosophies that come from the lives of people who've hurt others. I still read Martin Luther, despite his vile attacks on Judaism and his defense of killing Anabaptists. I still think with John Calvin, despite his active involvement in the execution of Michael Servetus. I'm troubled by the revelations of Simone de Beauvoir's sexually abusive relationships with students, but I can't imagine my own development as a feminist without what I've learned from *The Second Sex*.

The ideas of people who've enacted harm populate my thinking, my theologizing. This situation—our indebtedness to people who've violated the lives of others—didn't seem to trouble Augustine, who in *On Christian Teaching* encourages

his community of learners to glean knowledge from whomever, regardless of the taint of evil. Because, he argues, “wherever [the Christian] may find truth, it is the Lord’s.” We are like the Hebrews in the story of Exodus, Augustine explains, who took with them the silver and gold of Pharaoh’s regime upon their liberation. We plunder the good from wherever we discover it “for the just use of teaching the gospel.”

In 2013, the delegate assembly of my denomination, Mennonite Church USA, appointed me to our national governing body. Our first order of business, I soon discovered, was to commission a thorough investigation into John Howard Yoder’s sexual abuse. In the mid-1980s, the theologian was removed from his seminary position and banned from campus events. A few years later his ministerial ordination was suspended; he soon relinquished it in order to preempt its termination by the disciplinary committee.

Despite the alert sounded within Mennonite institutions about Yoder’s behavior, he was welcomed as a professor at Notre Dame and a founding fellow at the university’s peace institute. After his death in 1997, a cloud of vagueness regarding his abusive behavior settled on his legacy—a haze that allowed many of us to shrug off those untoward stories as rumors, mere allegations, a sideshow to the main event: his landmark contribution to peace theology.

After our denominational investigation made Yoder’s abuse indisputable, I had to rethink my automatic deference to the Augustinian position I outlined above. The notion that we can make use of knowledge wherever we find it, regardless of the oppressions bound to the production of that knowledge, doesn’t seem to work for Yoder’s peace theology, at least for me, because of the links we can now see that connect his life to his writing, his body to his mind, his deeds to his words. Not only how, in places, he developed arguments that justified his behavior. But also how his peace theology never took into consideration any sustained account of violence against women. Quite convenient for him, and tragic for the women he abused—as well as for the communities that, guided by his work, didn’t think to worry about intimate partner violence and abusive relationships in church communities because they were taught instead to focus on the ethics of warfare and just policing.

My point is not that we should only ever learn from people who align with our moral vision. Again, I still read and think with Luther, Calvin, and de Beauvoir. Besides, none of us is without sin. But I do think it’s worthwhile to notice, especially when we’re thinking about Christian ethics, if someone’s harmful patterns of behavior

have taken up residence in their ideas—to notice whether a theologian’s destructive inclinations have come along with their arguments like a stowaway. To listen for things we hadn’t heard before: a note, an argument, an idea that now sounds harmful.