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### Forum: What Shall We Read?: One Person's Failure, Albert Camus, The Fall

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and political science with an edge on the side of gender justice and a compassion that said that no matter where people stand they are people with something to contribute to conversations. The two books offered two values that shaped my work: one, to speak up for women, and two, to listen to all who might want to talk about the matter. Both Elshtain and Gadamer construct their political philosophies with deep respect for each individual while stressing the importance of community and the common good as part of who we are as fully developed persons. ■

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## ONE PERSON'S FAILURE

Albert Camus, *The Fall*

William Neenan, S.J.

Albert Camus' 1956 novel, *The Fall*, has been a companion of mine for decades. That companionship, like all friendships, has evolved over the years. As a young Jesuit, I was attracted to the principal character of *The Fall*, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. His honesty and challenged integrity appealed to the naïve individualism of youth. As an older Jesuit, I am no longer entranced by the ideal of the individual alone in a vacant universe. Camus has been categorized as an existentialist, but personally he is more attractive than his contemporary, the hypocritical poseur, Jean Paul Sartre.

The story line of *The Fall* is simple. Jean-Baptiste in the first person relates how his life centers on one defining moment. While strolling along the River Seine one evening, Jean-Baptiste hears cries from one who has fallen into the river. What to do? Alone with his conscience, Jean-Baptiste realizes he must choose either to respond or not to those cries. "I have forgotten what I thought then. 'Too late, too far...,' or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one." I see three falls in this scene: first, a person falling into the Seine, second, Jean-Baptiste's moral fall and third — did Camus envision this also? — an echo of that primal fall whose consequence St. Paul describes "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19)

After a long Jesuit life, I have come to read *The Fall* in an explicitly Christian context. Thus let us imagine Jean-Baptiste as accompanied that evening by his

fiancée. Imagine further that his fiancée was an expert swimmer but now incapacitated. Thus accompanied, Jean-Baptiste hears cries for help. Would he now be more or less inclined to attempt a rescue than the solitary Jean-Baptiste of Camus? He might have been or not. But in either instance it would merely be a tale of one individual's struggle and not a statement on the human condition. Christians believe we are not alone in the world. God's presence is guaranteed with the Word made flesh. We believe we are embedded within various social webs: family, friends and communities that offer us support and structure. Thus as an older Jesuit I now see Camus' novel the riveting tale of one person's failure rather than a description of the universal human condition. ■

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## EXPERIENCE RESHAPES THE SELF

M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* Trans. M. Desai

Faith J. Childress

It is easy to learn a life lesson from Mohandas K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Gandhi, better known as the "Mahatma," is famous for his leadership from the 1920s to the 1940s of the nationalist, non-violent struggle against British colonial rule in India. When I first read this memoir nearly twenty-five years ago, the Gandhi whom I "met" was not yet the Mahatma of later fame. In recounting his experiences in India, England, and South Africa, Gandhi paints a distinctly non-Mahatma-like self-portrait: selfish son, imperious husband, caste-breaker, bad dancer, indifferent violin student, and unsuccessful lawyer.

What, then, was there to learn from a Gandhi with a host of human failings? Gandhi's "experiments," including diet, religion, clothing, simplicity, leadership, non-violence, and service, were part of his quest for "self-realization" and his search for moral principles that transcended culture. In each aspect of his life and career he tried to figure out what constituted the