Christian Educators journal

December 1998

Quarterly Journal for Christian day school educators

Dealing With Death

Volume 38 Number 2

Editorial

Lorna Van Gilst

Sing the Fiesta Song

Christmas season stretches from December to February in the Andes of Venezuela. By December 15 the residents of every home, every office, every school, every apartment building assemble an elaborate manger scene called a pesebre, displayed to honor the Jesus child, El Niño.

Long before mid-December, people collect Spanish moss, colored stones, little plants, and figurines for the displays. Every year they add new figurines or more plants until the pesebres begin to overtake the space, but they always keep the same Jesus child. Colored lights blink over the manger where he lies from December 15 until the paradura, the concluding ritual which should be performed before February 2, when the pesebre may be disassembled and packed away.

A few days prior to the paradura, El Niño mysteriously disappears from the manger, as Jesus disappeared from his parents during the temple festival in Jerusalem. On the night of the paradura, friends and family members gather to the melancholy strains of hired string and maraca players. People parade through the house and down the streets carrying lighted candles, looking for El Niño as they sing fifty sad, repetitive stanzas of the rosary. The godparents, who lead the procession, eventually "find" the child, conveniently at the end of the last stanza. The music turns jubilant as they return the Jesus child to the pesebre, this time propped in an upright position, to indicate that El Niño is no longer a baby. Then the guests blow out the candles, eat slices of biscotchel cake, and drink little cups of dark cambur (banana) wine while the musicians liven the music to fiesta volume until everyone joins in song and the hosts bring out more food.

My first paradura awed me, but also distanced me. I was there, but I was not really a participant. My neighbors were clearly honored to include the gringa in their annual ritual. But I didn't know the song. I didn't know the prayers. I didn't understand the significance of hired musicians or biscotchel or cambur wine. Were we supposedly eating the body and blood of El Niño? I sensed a strange mixture of truth and invention in the ritual. But for my neighbors the invention was as sacred as the truth. They all knew the song. They knew the prayers. They knew when to stand and when to walk, when to blow out the candles, when to be silent and when to speak. They knew what to do, but they didn't know why—except that you have to have a paradura. You have to stand El Niño on his feet for a few days before you pack away the pesebre. That's how you conclude Christmas.

My Venezuelan neighbors know that Jesus was twelve years old when his parents lost him. They know that Jesus broke bread and poured out wine, not banana juice. They know their ritual becomes routine. After ten or twenty paraduras in the neighborhood, they grow tired of looking for Jesus every night. But the paradura ritual is sacred even to the "secular" members of the community. So they carry on—for the children, they tell me.

Sometimes we try to "do" Christian education like a paradura. At the beginning of the term we gather to recite the litany in which we "seek God's blessing on the coming school year" and "promise to serve God in all that we do." We acknowledge all of the creation as the Lord's—though broken by sin, also restored by redemption—and we promise to praise the Lord in our school year. We promise to be living sacrifices, to obey, to serve in harmony and love. We want our students to have not just a moral education, but a covenantal relationship with God. So we put the right words in their mouths, hoping that these words will become inscribed on their hearts.

Perhaps we even sing the marvelous songs of praise: "Classrooms and labs! Come, boiling test tubes! / Sing to the Lord a new song! / He has done marvelous things. I too will praise him with a new song!" Certainly, we acknowledge that Christ is Lord of every aspect of life, school life too, of course. But after a while we get tired of the song. It isn't new anymore, and we don't sing so lustily. But we keep it up—for the children.

What the children are really waiting for, though, is the fiesta. The long litany is merely their entrance path. They understand that without the fiesta, the litany is hollow and boring—boring to us and to God.

The fiesta brings the litany to life, to a celebration of life renewed, to the fullness of the new song. We can't simply hand out the words to our students and say, "Here, sing! And sing it as if you mean it!" We may get volume, but not joy.

We who teach need to demonstrate every day that God is the Lord of our learning and teaching—that the seeds we grow, the words we write, the numbers we multiply, the stories we read, the chemicals we mix all reflect the God in whose image we are made.

Yes, we live in a broken world. Yes, we suffer defeat and experience tragedy. Yes, we struggle. But not forever. We have the promise that El Niño is not a mere figurine in a pesebre. Jesus Christ is the Lord of life. He is Lord of the new song, the fiesta song.

Let that song echo in your classroom in a Christmas that never ends. ■

Suicide and the Christian School

by Marc Nelesen

Marc Nelesen is pastor of the Third Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan.

The unthinkable

It happened on a Friday afternoon. The 2:30 p.m. call came saying that the first grade special reading teacher at the local Christian school was killed in an automobile accident. There was no question; it was a suicide.

The shock and the grief were immense. The situation was complicated further in that the school teacher's spouse was a staff member, and her young children attended the school. This was a family whose members touched every age group in the school. There were very few who could escape being personally affected by this horrible event.

The news swept quickly but erratically at the end of the school day. Some students left school having heard suspicions and rumors, while others had no knowledge as they celebrated the end of their school week. At the Friday afternoon faculty meeting it was evident that staff awareness was mixed. Some were mourning while, innocently, others seemed irreverent by their casual conversation. And then the husband of the teacher made the announcement to staff that no one would forget. A handful of pastors and a psychologist were on hand to help faculty and staff come to terms with what they had heard. Everyone was in shock.

Staff had varied "places" of shock and grief. They connected to this person as a friend, respected colleague, and fellow parent. Their disbelief at the possibility of such an event was met by their anger that she could do this to herself, let alone to the survivors: her staff, her family, and the students—who would bring difficult questions on Monday morning.

A plan in place

Fortunately for the school community, a Crisis Response Plan had been developed prior to this tragedy. Though not detailed in "what to do" in the event of a staff member's suicide, there was a procedure in place for planning for the kinds of support needed for dealing with crises in the school community. The following day the Crisis Response Team, composed of the principal, educators, board members, local psychologists, and clergy, met to plan for the community's dealing with the shocking death of a teacher. Four important, yet difficult, support issues needed definition:

1) How will grieving teachers be supported?
2) What resources and support personnel can be provided for teachers for Monday morning?
3) How will the needs and responses of grieving students be addressed?
4) What will the school as a community say about this teacher's death?

This meeting was a defining moment for the school community. For the first time in this chaotic situation we had some definition as to how we were going to get our arms around this tragedy.

Crisis Response Team members would debrief on Sunday afternoon with faculty and staff. We would disseminate information and give opportunity for the entire staff to express their thoughts, feelings, and modes of coping with this loss. Together we dealt with our feelings of shock, guilt, and anger in this unimaginable situation. This together time for the entire staff was good. It validated shared feelings and suffering, and it brought strength in a time of helplessness. The most common struggle among educators was their lack of awareness of the depth of depression in their colleague's life. They were aware of her on-going treatment and therapy, but they couldn't imagine that it would come to this. This heightened their shock and deepened their anger at the situation.

After the large group meeting, Crisis Response Team members met with the teachers and support personnel in each grade division (K-2, 3-5, 6-8). Together teachers and support team members discussed the unique issues related to each grade level. Together each group identified at-risk children, raised questions that could be anticipated at each grade level, and then as a group formulated appropriate answers. Teachers went into the classroom supported, but without an arsenal of ready-made responses to all difficult questions. Instead, in a very real way, teachers would need to search and grieve with students. They were in no position to place themselves above students in grieving, but entered into it with them. This was what the community needed most.

The first day back

Monday morning, teachers knew that Crisis Response Team members were available in the faculty room if teachers needed special support. Support people

were available in the hallways, library, and small rooms for one-on-one or small group time. In consultation with educators, the Crisis Response Team was in agreement that honesty with the students was the best policy. The incident would be explained first as a car accident. If students followed up with questions related to "did she do this on purpose?", the answer was a definitive "yes." Together students and teachers needed to grapple with the "how?" and "why?" Each would discover that these questions were unanswerable.

Students' grief came to different expression than staff members'. Once they had the "facts," some students were able to move through their feelings quickly. This was not always easy for teachers who wanted to talk more than the students did about the event. Teachers and Crisis Response Team members learned through the experience that students have their own way of grieving. Students were given the opportunity to enter the teacher's room and write letters to the teacher and to her family. By the end of the first day, a box had been filled with cards, notes, and artwork. The students now had a place for their grief and then relied on teachers and counselors to answer their tough questions. In particular, current and former students raised questions such as, "How could she do this to herself?" "Does this mean my teacher won't go to heaven?"

A teachable moment

These are opportunities to talk about sin and grace. We talk much about these bookends of our faith but often find it difficult to live concretely with the realities of each. In cases of deep and traumatic loss, communities find themselves opened to realities to which they have long hidden themselves. These can be incarnational moments. During such occasions words such as *sin* and *grace* take on our flesh and sometimes can be experienced for the first time. In a crisis, these words are no longer theological jargon, but concrete realities that can be suspended and proclaimed because *real* reality calls for this kind of truthfulness.

> "Teachers would need to search and grieve with students. They were in no position to place themselves above students in grieving, but entered into it with them. This was what the community needed most."

The darkness of the crisis of suicide calls for us to acknowledge sin. It was neither God's will nor his intention for the school community, let alone this family, to be confronted with this person's death. A fallible teacher and colleague made a regretful choice. This is a reality that is true and devastating; it is a reality with which the Christian school and broader community must now live.

But there is also another reality with which Christians living in community hold to be true. Christians believe that God's grace is more powerful than human sin. God's grace comes to sinners as an undeserved gift. From little on, our children and young people know that there is nothing they can do to save themselves; salvation as a gift of grace is a "given." These words, however, take on new weight when a Christian commits suicide. Rephrased, God's word of love is "There is nothing that you can do to undo what I have done for you in the death of Jesus Christ, not even suicide." The only sin that disqualifies membership in the kingdom of God is unbelief; even self-directed violence does not speak a louder word than the cross. A tragic death such as this reminds us that we do not have all the answers; it is a mystery why this happened. But both sin and grace are unanswerable mysteries too. Just as we are not able to see how deeply sin affects us, we cannot fathom how deep and far and wide is God's grace and love for his children.

I wish there were a happy ending to the story. Instead, we as a community find ourselves in the midst of the story that is still being told and written and lived. We are the survivors of the unthinkable; our bread for the journey is God's grace, our hope, and our togetherness as we go on.■

Listening to Thirteen

by Karen Kalteissen

Karen Kalteissen listens to thirteen-year-olds at the Mustard Seed School in Hoboken, New Jersey.

She never got the chance to "think thirteen" although nobody could have been looking forward to it more. My student Catherine died in a house fire last March on the very night she observed the auspicious occasion she referred to as "Two Months Before My Thirteenth Birthday." She left us—God help us—in a flash, but she has left behind a uniquely Catherine-sized hole in our hearts, a community of caring friends who have instinctively rallied to preserve and protect her memory, and one teacher (me) changed forever, overwhelmed by the depth and wisdom of the lessons I have learned from the last several months of "listening to thirteen."

I can't count the number of times, over the course of twenty-plus years of teaching, I have mumbled something about learning more from my students than they learn from me. Of course, I sort of meant it. I've always delighted in seventh and eighth graders and believed that this awkward, exploratory, new-dawn, child-adult place they dwell in is the most exciting place on earth. Yet I question my sincerity, knowing full well I still hold, down deep, that smug, grown up "been there, done that" attitude that says, "Just give them time. Then they'll see it my way."

I'm thinking, in particular, of the kinds of conversations middle school teachers have about the famous adolescent rage for justice: how we expect the Thirteen-Year-Old Bar Association and Litigation Society to take up every issue from playground time to the fairness of the last question on the math test; how we never expect to get through a day without somebody protesting, "It's not fair!"; how we admire the proactive side of this rage for justice when we see their moral outrage at the Jim Crow South and child labor in Victorian England; how they hear about hunger in Sudan and want to send their lunches. We understand it, we expect it, we respect it; but somewhere back in our jaded minds, we figure, "They'll get over it."

Sadly, perhaps they will. The force, the passion behind the cries of "It's not fair!" in the wake of Catherine's death were so intense that, like the phoenix fire, they may necessarily contain the energy of their own demise. I hope, however, that as long as those adolescents have their unfettered rage for justice and truth, we will have the sense to let them be our teachers. I want to share some of what they taught me this year.

First, adolescents are open to the soul-shattering truths of our faith, but they know the difference between cheap sentimentality and faith tested in fire. They yearn for the real thing so strongly that they are willing to risk asking all the questions that so many adults are too fearful to speak into consciousness. As a matter of fact, the only faith these kids are interested in is that faith that can stand up to the hardest questions life will pose. Nobody wanted the most horrific question of all inflected upon a class full of children—the Herod/Hitler question, "Why would a good God allow . . .?" But that's what we got. It was an elephant sitting in the middle of our classroom. We dared not pretend it didn't exist.

Lack of answers bothered them less than cliches. I panicked as I kept hearing myself say, "I don't know. I don't fully understand" over and over again, but it never made them angry. What made them angry were quick-fix statements: "God called her home to do his special work in heaven." (One well-meaning woman suggested God had bunnies that needed tending on a cloud.) "She was just too good for us here." "She loved God so much that he granted her wish to be with him soon!"

Students' responses to statements such as these were like their responses to all the attempts they heard (and they heard thousands) to remake Catherine in the image of someone she was not—some perfect, vapid, bland, ever-cute Barbie doll. I watched them defend the realness and wonder of both God and Catherine. "We love and take both Catherine and God very seriously," the kids seemed to be saying. "Do not trivialize them and do not make things up about them."

During such crises, it became unfortunately clear that there are many adults whose theology never got past Now-I-Lay-Me-Down-To-Sleep. Some were well-meaning parents, neighbors, or community members, all of whom felt the need to "say something religious." I learned that this was dangerous, that we must not come around middle schoolers with a limp faith that hasn't had a workout since second grade. It is part of our mission and our call to be as fearless as they are in confronting the difficult questions. To do less is to come to our jobs unprepared. If our faith hasn't sparred in the same room with the Holocaust and the Aids pandemic and political torture and breast cancer and dead children, and if we're not willing to put that faith out there for them, then neither we nor our faith are tough enough for adolescents. Ultimately, I learned from the kids this year that to shelter the beliefs we share with the kids from the horrors of life is to relinquish the power to the horrors rather than to the faith.

Many of my students accept and cherish the consolations of heaven, the sacrificial love of the cross, the power of redemptive love. They write Catherine notes, saying, "See you in eighty years!" and "I hope it's really cool there." But, in the truest Gospel tradition, they refuse to arrive at those consolations by a primrose

path that takes a detour around the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

The second most important thing I learned from the kids this year was that if you're going to work with adolescents on a meaningful level, you had better be as clear as they are about the difference between "I" and "Thou." Middle schoolers have always had pretty sharp radar about people pushing their own agendas under the guise of being helpful. They have an incisive ability to go to the heart of the matter and sweep away the superfluous "niceties" with which adults tend to pad the entrances and exits to tough subjects.

In their overwhelming grief, I was very proud of the kids' ability to be gracious to all who came to help, so I suspect I was initially the only one who picked up their outrage when someone tried to get them to watch a fire prevention video the day after Catherine's death. Only at lunchtime when all the visitors had left did they open up: "What was that about? Was it supposed to give us some sort of feeling of control?" (Well, yes.) "It's not about us! The only thing I want to control is that Catherine died." Or: "I don't want to know how to pick a smoke detector. I want to know how to get my friend back."

Sarcasm also surfaced. "If one more person asks why Catherine didn't stop-drop-and-roll, I'm going to scream. What was she supposed to do? Roll into the fire?" A lot of adolescence is about calculating guilt and innocence, about not being blamed unfairly, and they were not going to tolerate anything that suggested Catherine was culpable for not saving herself. Our wonderful team from the hospital burn unit gave us a message to cling to, and I still hear the kids quoting it: "The fire was stronger than Catherine. The fire was stronger than fifteen trained men with thousands of dollars worth of equipment. If she could have gotten out, she would have." Well said. I thought I might hear a lot about faulty smoke detectors, of bad wiring, or emergency response time, or a thousand other bits of looking-for-somebody-to-blame talk, but there wasn't much. The Sweet Hereafter was not written by a thirteen-year-old. Young teens are smarter than we are. All the potential lawsuits in the world couldn't change a thing. What's left is this one, big, ugly, horrifying, unfair, wrenching fact of terrible loss. Just don't pretend it's not so.

The third thing I learned from sharing this loss with the students is that they have a remarkable understanding of the sacred power of memory. We tend to suppose they are too young to value memories, since their lives are lived so here-and-now, their dreams cast so far into the future. After all, what can they remember? The fact is, they can remember Catherine's whole life, and on the morning after the fire, I watched them instinctively rally to the task of preserving that undefiled memory, a task at which most of them are still busy. Immediately, they began collecting photographs and telling stories and jotting down favorite expressions and marking out places and making scrapbooks, and yes, quickly losing patience with anyone who did not "tell Catherine like she is—really is." Again, their unequivocal capacity for honesty has instructed us all.

I hope I have not committed the same sin against their grieving selves that they would not tolerate in others. Have I ignored the differences in their individual responses? Have I made them sound too perfect, more grounded and integrated, less hypocritical and fearful than their adult counterparts? There were also areas in which their adolescent vulnerability and inexperience cost them terribly.

For one thing, many of them didn't know how to "read themselves" well. They didn't know how tired they were or when they were hungry. They didn't know that when they argued with each other over a chair in the circle, it wasn't really about a chair in the circle. They didn't know why they couldn't even concentrate on studying for something as dumb as a spelling test. They didn't know that anger and pain can drive a wedge between people just when they need each other the most. Most significantly, although they were sick of being told to "feel their feelings" (and developed several hilarious if not slightly inappropriate comedy routines on the subject!), they didn't know that expressing feelings comes harder for some people than others. The ones who cried doubted the pain of those who didn't; the ones who talked questioned the ones who couldn't. They didn't know how to respond to their parents' solicitousness or their own needs; after all, the kids had spent the whole year individuating, declaring their need for privacy and independence, not for hugs and nurture. In these ways especially, they needed us to be the grownups, the guides, to know what they didn't know, to be there in ways they couldn't even ask for.

With the first days of agony and services and the first months of memorials behind us, we're having to find new things to do with the pain and loss. As I recommit myself to my walk with the kids through what's yet to come, I am deeply grateful for the wisdom and grace I gleaned form "listening to thirteen." Finally, I must affirm that while this was the hardest year of my life, and it goes without saying that I would gladly trade every joyful moment of my career if I could just undo that one predawn Sunday morning in March, it was also the year in which I most fully lived my mission as Christian school teacher—to stand with children on the brink of life and death, to wrestle with the things that really matter and, together, to feel the breath of God on our tear-stained faces.■

Only His Tool

by Crista Smidt

Crista Smidt is guidance counselor for Inwood, Orange City, and Sioux Center Christian Schools in Iowa.

On a beautiful spring day in May of 1995, I received my first call, as a Christian school counselor, relating to death. Late in the afternoon the principal informed me of a third grade boy whose life was ended after being hit by a car. The next calls came during that same fall of '95; on two separate occasions a teacher unexpectedly died during the night. During the winter of '96, there was the anticipated death of a parent suffering from cancer. And on a lazy Saturday morning in September of '97, again the telephone rang. On the other end was a fellow teacher who informed me of the tragic accident and death of a parent of three of our students.

A common thread running through each of these incidents is that not only did these deaths affect the immediate families, but also a much larger family, the school community.

Being the guidance counselor and a member of the crisis team, I had to console and work with all the school children who were affected. These children reacted to the deaths in a variety of ways: sobbing uncontrollably, withdrawing, or playing aggressively. In order to meet as many needs as possible within a short period of time, I found it important to first meet with the affected students in small groups. The students were given the facts and details, and they were encouraged to talk only about how they reacted and felt when they heard the news for the first time, not all the details they heard. We suggested that they talk with an adult or make a memory card, so they could help themselves and those most affected. This was a draining process, and at the end of the day I sometimes questioned God as to whether our efforts as a team were enough. I knew it was the beginning step, but what was next?

Only through God's leading, I discovered that since children naturally grieve at irregular times and within their play, it was very difficult for them in a group setting to concentrate on how they were feeling. All they knew was that they were feeling "very, very bad." However, they could discuss openly one-on-one how their bodies were reacting to the trauma. For this reason, as my second step in helping these children grieve I focused on treating their physical symptoms. The common symptoms the children experienced included fear of shadows in the night, nightmares, panic attacks, stomach pain, loss of appetite, anger outbursts, and spontaneous crying.

Some of the simple things the children were encouraged to do in order to treat their physical symptoms was to sleep with a light on or with a flashlight to alleviate their fear of shadows. If they had bad dreams, I encouraged them to draw the nightmare with as much detail as possible and then draw something in their picture that would keep them safe, for example, a shield, an angel, special shoes. I encouraged them to tell God about their nightmare and think of the safety item they drew before they went to sleep. If they felt a beginning of a panic attack, a stomach ache, or anger, I encouraged them to play and exercise vigorously to relieve their "adrenaline rush." I urged them to keep a favorite song or memory verse running through their heads instead of thinking negative thoughts. It was okay, I told them, to cry and to help someone else who might be feeling sad. By helping in the treatment of each symptom, the children usually gained the trust they needed to proceed through the grieving process and handle some of their feelings.

The third step involved introducing the grieving process to the children either one-on-one or in a large group setting. To grieve was always presented as a necessity, not a weakness. This was very beneficial because it took the "scariness" out of the unexpected and it gave the students behaviors and feelings to look for in others and themselves. This also became their opportunity to analyze their own feelings and identify where they were in the process. The many feelings that were regularly identified included guilt, fear of another person or themselves dying, confusion, and worry. All such feelings were dealt with in prayer, play, reassurance that such feelings are normal, and encouragement of routine at home and at school.

Finally, the children were led to focus on the hope we have in Christ, that for Christians death is not the end, but the beginning of one's life with Christ. We stressed that for those left on earth there is still work to be done for God. This led into encouraging the children to explore their own interests in life and the possibilities of where God could lead them.

It would be misleading to say that when the students went through all this they were all fine from then on. Usually a child, especially the very young, will have

to grieve at each developmental stage in life to bring meaning to the loss. This is why it is so important that teachers or other adults maintain a friendship with the children. As the emotional needs recur, someone they already trust can support them.

For the educator this whole process can be emotionally exhausting, but it should not be feared. Personally, I've grown tremendously in my spiritual life by helping students through their grief. I constantly find myself "looking up" for the guidance that is needed, for on my own I cannot meet such needs. When I recognize that I am only a tool that God uses to reach out to the grieving ones, my burden of wondering what I should say or do is lifted. His Spirit guides me. For it is true, that when we cast our cares upon him, he will sustain us (Ps. 55:22a). ■

Greta Eckardt and her three children live in Sioux Center, Iowa, where the father of the family died last year in a traffic accident. A number of people have asked Greta to teach others about grief. She writes here from her children's perspective, based on things that they have shared with her.

Dear Teachers, Students, and Staff,

First, fellow students, please don't change the subject when I am talking about my dad who died. Even if I cry, please let me share about my dad. He died and I loved him very much. I miss him so much that it hurts in my stomach and in my head. I really need to talk about my dad and the good memories that I have of him. If you want to help, you can put your arm around me or your hand on my shoulder. Don't be afraid to bring up my dad or mention his name. I love to talk about him.

Teachers, please don't worry if I look as if I am not really there. Please know that sometimes during the day, I need to think about my dad—I need to work on my grief at the strangest times. I cannot always control that work. Can we come up with a sign that I can let you know that I need time to think about my dad so that you don't get upset with me when I look as if I am not really there?

Please let me bring in things to the classroom that I have that are good memories of my dad. Please let me just put them on a back table so that people who want to see them can. I love pictures of my dad. I even love the ones of my dad in the casket—he's still my dad and those pictures are the last time that I saw his body. They are not disgusting pictures. They are important to me. I love my dad still.

Don't tell me that the anniversary of my dad's death is just like any other day. It is not. We may get up and do the same things that we would normally do on that day, but we will also spend time grieving or talking about or thinking about my dad. We may even plan a memorial service. We will probably also try to spend time with the people who have helped us through the year.

Please remember that I still love my dad so much and that I want to talk about him.

Thanks,
Your grieving student

"The Baptism of Harold De Wit"

by David Koning

David Koning teaches grade five at East Christian School in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Harold De Wit stood at the plant table in the back of his empty fifth grade classroom, up to his elbows in compost. His students would be getting back from the library only too soon and he needed to have the plant project materials ready when they returned. It had been a tough month for Harold. He struggled daily to stay one step ahead of this dynamic group of students.

"Hey, Mr. De Wit!"

"Oh—" Harold stopped short. He knew without asking that Mickey Collins had been kicked out of the library and sent back to the room. "Just what I need." He rolled his eyes heavenward as if asking the Almighty, "Why me, why now?!"

"I got kicked outa the library," blurted Mickey, loudly enough to be heard by Principal Feenstra in his office far down the hallway. "Mrs. Dewey said that you would 'attend' to me." And without letting Harold get in a word, "That means you want me to get out a piece of paper and a pencil. Right, Mr. De Wit?"

With flecks of the rich blackish muck clinging to his tie, Harold turned to face the lad. Mickey's reputation had preceded him as the boy's educational career inched him closer to membership in Harold's class. "Practicing member of the 'Totally Depraved Club" . . . A legend in the making . . . The only kid in school with perfect attendance. Figures!" So went the teachers' lounge reviews about a child who, plain and simple, wore out his teachers one-by-one.

Despite the bad reputation and the battles early in his fifth grade year, working one-on-one with Harold, Mickey had been doing quite well. Going well, that is, until about a month ago when his classmate Bethany Sims' leukemia took a turn for the worse. Since then, Harold had become preoccupied with Bethany. Since then, Mickey had become insufferable. Since then, Bethany had died and gone to be with Jesus.

"Yeah, Mickey, a piece of paper," growled Harold. He was in no mood to deal with his daily discipline problem. "Write down what happened in the library, why you got sent back, and what you'll do to fix it. Then—"

"An apology to Mrs. Dewey?" Mickey asked. He knew the routine.

Harold clinched his teeth. "Yeah, that'd be fine. Get started!" He was hoping to buy some time. Mixing the soil with the bucket of compost he had brought in from the school's greenhouse was only part of what needed to be done yet. He had only twenty minutes before the rest of the class would return. He had to get out the other supplies for the class end-of-the-day project.

"I should have had this ready yesterday," he mumbled to himself and Bob, the plastic skeleton grinning in the corner. He was easily distracted these days and he couldn't quite shake off his despondency. Since Bethany's death, nothing seemed to go easily for Harold. In his twenty-some years of teaching he had never before had to deal with the death of one of his students. So in these last few weeks of grieving, he was just going through the motions. His mind was not on his work and certainly not on the "reclamation project in progress" sitting in the front of the room writing. Harold's only educational goals these days consisted of just trying to get to three o'clock each day.

"Death sucks!" Harold thought, wallowing in self-pity as he worked. Harold De Wit, teacher of covenant children for twenty-plus years, knew his theology better than that. There was a clause in the contract he signed that said so, after all. On a better day, Harold would have embraced wholeheartedly the conviction that Jesus "is the resurrection and the life . . . the first-fruits of those who have died . . ." and on and on. But not today, not when one of his prize students had been snatched right out of his class, out of his life. Questions tumbled in his mind like a tennis shoe banging around in a dryer. "Why her, Lord?" Harold looked at Mickey bent over his writing task. "Why not—?" He stopped. He rubbed his hands over his face as if trying to wipe away the guilt of his shameful thought. With a streak of dirt remaining on his cheek, this grieving, bitter, angry man continued his preparations.

Harold mindlessly finished making flower pots out of the day's empty milk cartons. As he opened packages of marigold seeds, he sensed someone

watching him. And there was Mickey, quiet as he'd been in weeks, standing at the side of his teacher.

"Done!" he said, looking at Harold's soil-smudged face and trying to find some way to make peace with his teacher. Harold went on with his work.

"Whatya doin'?" Mickey asked.

"Just getting ready for our project," was the curt reply. "You're all done with that note?"

"Yep," Mickey watched. Harold worked. Mickey asked, "We gonna grow something?"

"Marigolds." Harold looked at his watch.

"Cool!" he grinned. "How come?"

"When they bloom in December they'll be presents for your parents," was the teacher's impatient reply. Mickey watched and pondered for a moment. Harold kept working.

"What's that stuff?"

"Compost."

"What's that?"

"Dead stuff that helps make the flowers grow," was the blunt reply. Mickey rubbed his fingers through some of the humus spilled on the table.

"Why did Bethany have to die, Mr. De Wit?"

Oh, how Harold tried to focus on separating those marigold seeds into piles! How he tried to ignore Mickey as he had unwittingly done in recent weeks. But he couldn't ignore the nagging question. In all his grief, Harold wasn't ready for what Mickey had to say next.

"I'm glad I don't have cancer." He said it matter-of-factly. To Harold, however, it seemed as if he were waiting for some kind of affirmation, some sign that his teacher was glad to still have him around like before. Harold knew what it was he had to do, what he had to say. . . .

"I'll be right back," Harold spoke gruffly, heading out of the room with a bucket to the janitor room slop sink.

"Where ya goin', Mr. D.?" Mickey asked.

"Gettin' some water." He didn't want to talk. He had things on his mind. Things that, to Harold, this week, had justified his r deness to one of those covenant children about whom he could talk so piously. He needed time to think. He needed to be alone for a moment.

In the four-by-eight-foot janitor's room just down the hall, surrounded by mops and brooms, he figured it out.With a few minutes to spare Harold hustled back into his room carrying a bucketful of cool water.

Mickey was in the back of the room moving the skeleton's plastic jaw, helping Bob form words. Mickey turned just in time to witness something that none of Harold De Wit's twenty-some years' worth of students had ever seen—his teacher's baptism. He saw the sleeve of Mr. De Wit's shirt catch on the pencil sharpener handle as he hurried into the room.

Mr. De Wit jerked around as if he were being grabbed by his mother. His shirt ripped. The water went flying. Harold was soaked. Mickey didn't know whether to laugh or hide.

Mickey peeked out through the ribs of the skeleton to a sound he hadn't heard in weeks—his teacher laughing—out loud!

Harold looked at the boy and chuckled. "Help me get this cleaned up, Mickey, before the others come."

"Okay, Mr. D.," said Mickey.

Now on hands and knees the two of them mopped up the floor with paper towels. As the sounds of the returning class echoed up the hall, their eyes met. "Hey, Mr. D.," said Mickey brightly, "that dead stuff got washed off your face, too."■

Education Within the Reformed Tradition: What Are We Really Talking About?

by Jack Fennema

Jack Fennema is director of graduate education at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.

Recently two trends have been affecting many Christian schools that traditionally have viewed themselves as being "within the reformed tradition." One trend is toward a more multi-denominational clientele. No longer is the Christian school primarily for Christian Reformed kids; parents from many different church backgrounds now enroll their children in these schools. As a result the word "reformed" is often dropped from the school vocabulary as being too exclusive, and reformed principles for education give way to broader evangelical ones.

A second trend is the gradual erosion of reformed principles within Christian schools that have been around for twenty-five years or more. In these cases the reformed Christian perspective has virtually disappeared while the primary focus of the schools has turned to academic and athletic excellence, thus creating very fine private schools, but ones with only high moral overtones.

My contention is that in the first scenario the schools are "selling their birthright," for their "reformed" framework is easily the most legitimate rationale for their existence as Christian schools. No one is doing anyone any favor by getting rid of it. In the second case, to use another metaphor, "the emperor has no clothes." Many of these schools tend to be neither reformed nor very Christian, no matter what their promotional material says, but few have the courage to say so.

In both cases, a common ailment has afflicted the schools: too few people can articulate what "reformed" really looks like within Christian education. Thus it is easy to give away that which is not understood. That's a shame, for just as Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and, more recently, Baptists and Pentecostals all have unique traditions within which they educate, so the reformed people have something pretty special to offer. It's time, I think, to review what those special things are.

Before listing principles that are unique to "reformed" Christian schooling, I must clarify that when we use the term reformed, we are not speaking about particular church denominations. Rather, we are referring to a theological position that has emerged from the Scottish Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed traditions, both of which go back to the reformer John Calvin. Today this reformed theology can be found in Reformed Baptist and Reformed Episcopal churches as well. All of these churches could endorse the following principles for education.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

1. God is sovereign over all (in contrast with a dualistic, sacred-secular position).

When John Bratt taught the course on Calvinism at Calvin College, he would begin by asking students to identify the central theme of Calvinism. Many students (including me) chose the five points represented by the acronym TULIP. "Wrong," said Bratt, "it's the sovereignty of God!" That's what Dutch statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper meant when he uttered the now-famous words: "There is not an inch in the entire area of our human life which Christ, who is sovereign of all, does not call 'Mine!'"

Reformed education points to God in every subject, not simply in biblical studies or chapel services. This God-connection is imperative. It allows every vocation to bring glory to God, work to be worship, and life to be religion.

Is it easy to demonstrate this God-connectedness in every subject, unit, and lesson? No. But God must be the starting point or our teaching will succumb to either syncretism—adding religious frosting to a secular cake, or dualism—stating that some things are secular and some are sacred. God forbid! Christian schools within the reformed tradition acknowledge that God transforms learning; he is more than an add-on. He is Sovereign Lord of all.

REVELATION

2. The Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, is creator, provider, and redeemer of the cosmos and all within it (rather than solely Savior of humankind).

In the beginning God spoke the Word or *Logos* Jesus Christ and creation was formed. This same Word "sustains all things" and "holds all things together" in providence and lawfulness (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-20 & 2:2-3; Hebrews 1:2-3). And this Word died for the redemption of the entire cosmos, seeking to restore every aspect of the world (i.e, culture) to his definition of normalcy.

Creation structure bears the fingerprints of God. Because there is order in creation, creation can be known. But to know creation as God intended, the Logos—the "controlling principle in the universe"—must be known.

3. The Word inscripturated, the Bible, is viewed as divine spectacles through which to understand created reality (rather than as a textbook per se).

To understand the world in which we live one must view it through a biblical worldview (e.g., creation-fall-redemption). The Bible serves as the interpretive "bottom line" for the curriculum; it does not exhaustively deal with every aspect of created reality. Textbooks based on creational revelation do that.

The Bible's focus is on God, not people. The question is "What is God saying?" rather than "What is humankind doing (as a moral example)?"

The Bible is to be studied in its entirety, rather than limiting its relevance to certain portions of the New Testament. Francis Schaeffer stated that the omission of the first three chapters of the Bible would decimate his understanding of the world and his place in it. To properly understand God's written Word, one must view it as a whole, beginning with the garden of the old creation (Genesis I & 2) and ending with the city of the new creation (Revelation 21 & 22), acknowledging Jesus Christ as the center of it all.

The Bible is also to be read contextually, rather than in a proof-texting manner. Scripture must interpret Scripture.

4. God has revealed himself through his creation as well (rather than solely through Jesus Christ and the Bible).

God has revealed himself through the creation; thus creation is worthy of study. Psalm 19 states: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (vs. 1-2). A study of creation must always point the student toward God.

The truth revealed through creation is to be understood contextually, against the backdrop of Scripture and a biblical worldview. And the structure or connectedness within creation needs to be reflect ed through a unified and integral curriculum.

"To properly understand God's written Word, one must view it as a whole, beginning with the garden of the old creation (Genesis 1 & 2) and ending with the city of the new creation (Revelation 21 & 22)."

5. The revelation of God always calls for an active response (rather than simply the assimilation of information).

Yadah, the Hebrew word for "knowing," is holistic in nature. Students are to understand God's truth with their minds, they are to believe God's truth with their hearts, and they are to do God's truth with their total being. Lessons are to be taught accordingly, for the goal is to lead students into responsive discipleship. Passive Christianity is an oxymoron. Authentic assessment based on real-life application replaces instruments that test only lower-level factual knowledge.

CREATION-FALL-REDEMPTION

Creation

6. Creation includes all of culture (rather than only the physical realm).

In the beginning of time God issued to humankind the "creation mandate" to be steward over and developer of creation (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). The reformed position has expanded this mandate to include all of culture, thus the term "cultural mandate" is used most often today. Creation is one of the three primary relationships of life, joining relationships with God and one's neighbor (i.e., society). Each relationship contains its own unique responsibilities.

To some degree the cultural mandate is a set of marching orders for the Christian school, for every aspect of creation or culture (e.g., politics, the arts) needs to be both cared for and developed. The multi-faceted creational revelation of God becomes the primary source for curriculum.

Creation norms—God's original intent or desire—exist for each area of creation and thus for each area of study. Unit plans need to include creation norms for each topic being studied.

7. This world belongs to God (not to the evil one).

God has never and will never abandon his creation. Thus the Christian school needs to engage culture, not flee from it as something inherently evil. We sing "This is my Father's world" rather than "This world is not my home." For this reason Christians can live without fear within this world. They educate their children in Christian "bootcamps" rather than in

"cities of refuge." Students are being prepared to engage and redeem culture rather than escape from it. A key word within reformed vocabulary is transformation. The light of God's Word enlightens and "norms" every facet of creation.

Fall

8. The effects of sin are cosmic (rather than solely personal).

When Adam sinned the entire creation was negatively affected, not just human beings. Today the creation groans for deliverance from the bondage of decay brought on by sin (Romans 8:19-22). Unit plans need to include the question "In which ways has sin affected this area of study?"

9. The antithesis runs through people and organizations (rather than around them).

The antithesis is the struggle between right and wrong, between good and evil, between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. No person and no thing is absolutely evil or absolutely good. The world cannot be divided into good guys and bad guys. George Washington did some bad things; Bill Clinton does some things right. Christian schools do some things poorly; public schools do some things correctly.

There are a number of reasons for this. The key reason is that people are both structurally good and morally evil at the same time. They are totally depraved (i.e., tainted by sin) rather than absolutely depraved (i.e., becoming sin itself). Consequently, they can do moral and civil good, but not spiritual good (outside of the Holy Spirit's power).

Because nothing in creation is evil (1 Timothy 4:4-5), at least in its essence or structure (in contrast with direction), because Christians are to "be in the world but not of it," because of common grace, and because culture is to be engaged and transformed for Christ rather than be avoided, the reformed position on such things as film, dance, and alcohol is "all things in moderation." This differs from dualistic Greek thought that declares the body evil and the soul or spirit good, and the earthly realm evil with the heavenly realm good, a position many Christians have adopted.

10. Even though the direction of creation is evil, its structure remains "good"and redeemable (rather than evil and needing to be destroyed).

Again, because nothing in the essence or structure of creation is evil (1 Timothy 4:4-5), even though the moral direction of creation is, the world in which we live is not a throw-away world. It will in fact some day be redirected and renewed. Thus environmental concerns are not simply "save a whale and hug a tree" poppycock; they are eternal in nature, for the creation will be redeemed, not destroyed. To teach about God's "good" creation remains valid even after the fall.

Redemption

11. As the effects of sin are cosmic in scope, so redemption through Christ affects all of creation (rather than only individual parts).

This is a continuation of items 8 and 10 above. God did not create a throw-away world. Creation will be redeemed and renewed rather than destroyed. The entire cosmos is part of God's redemptive plan. At the end times heaven and earth will come together for the full consummation of God's kingdom (Revelation 21:1-2).

The Greek word for "new" used in 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1 is *kainos*, which denotes "that which is better than the old" rather than *neos*, which denotes "that which has not yet been" or "that which has just made its appearance." Believers will spend eternity on a kainos earth that is a new improved version of the one that has already existed. Rather than strumming harps throughout eternity, life in the consummated kingdom will not be dissimilar to life today, except it will be lived out within God's perfect shalom. Christian schools are to be teaching toward this shalom, seeking to usher in the kingdom now, even in a limited way.

A key task of the school is to equip students with the vision and skills for the redemption of all of creation (i.e., society and culture). Unit plans need to include the question "How can this area of study be reclaimed or redeemed for the advancement of God's kingdom and his glory?"

It must be remembered, however, that only when Jesus returns will the redemption of creation be complete.

COVENANT - KINGDOM

Covenant

12. The focus of the Christian school is primarily on the nurture of children who have been consecrated by God (rather than the evangelism of children from non-Christian homes).

The children of believers have been declared holy or consecrated (i.e., set apart for godly purposes) by God (1 Corinthians 7:14). He desires "godly offspring" (Malachi 2:15). These children are to be nurtured (i.e., instructed and corrected) in the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4) so that generations yet unborn will "put their trust in God" (Psalm 78:1-8). This is in contrast with the Christian school being viewed as an evangelistic outreach of the church. Rather, the Christian school complements and extends that which is already taking place within the Christian home.

This covenantal relationship is broadly communal rather than individualistic. The entire Christian community bears responsibility for the Christian nurture of God's children, not just the parents.

These special children require a special education, for they have been "called out" for a special task, that of advancing the kingdom of God.

Kingdom

13. The central focus of Christ's earthly ministry was the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth (rather than the salvation of sinners).

The earthly ministry of Christ was broader than but inclusive of the redemption of humankind. The focus was the reestablishment of the rule of God over every square inch of creation. Through his perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection Jesus broke the stranglehold of sin on creation and laid the groundwork for the redemption of his people and his good creation. The kingdom will be consummated in full when Christ returns. Until then, however, the body of Christ is to occupy in obedience, reclaiming territory lost to the kingdom of darkness because of the fall.

The kingdom of God is at the same time "already" with us and "not yet" with us. One implication of this is that current events can be dealt with at face value for the here-and-now rather than as a part of end-time prophesy. Christians are to live both for the present and the future, not just the future.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

14. The mission of the Christian school is to educate the children of believers toward becoming actively involved in the unfolding and advancing of the kingdom of God on earth (rather than escaping from or writing off the culture in which they live).

There are many reasons why parents enroll their children in Christian schools. Reaction to the evils of the world is a primary one. Some do so out of tradition. Others seek God's truth for their children. Yet the most comprehensive and biblically compelling reason is that children belong to God and are to be educated with his purposes in mind. They are called to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29), with transformed minds (Romans 12:2), seeking to take every thought captive for Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), so that Jesus can be acknowledged Lord of all (Philippians 2:11) and God's kingdom may come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.■

Christian schools within the reformed tradition also can learn something from Christian schools that come from a more broadly evangelical and pious tradition.

1. Christian schools should be places of holiness and personal piety.

The language and conduct within a school should be pleasing to a holy God. The school should also be a safe place, one in which there is zero tolerance for put-downs by other students. Diversity is to be celebrated, not ridiculed. Prayer, Bible study, and songs of praise are encouraged and taken seriously.

The joy and shalom of God should be evident the moment one enters the school building. This is accomplished more from inside-out transformed lives than imposed from the outside-in.

2. Christian schools should encourage commitment to Jesus Christ.

Students need to be directed and encouraged toward conscious decisions to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior from the penalty of their sin and as Lord of their lives. Unspoken expectations and presumptions need to be verbalized.

3. The Bible must in reality become an oft-used book within the classroom.

There needs to be a move from rhetoric to reality when Christian schools advertise the Bible as being foundational to every subject being studied. Students actually need to get into the Word to uncover the foundational principles that undergird all that takes place within the school.

4. The Holy Spirit needs to be a welcomed guest.

The Holy Spirit needs to be a vital part of the learning process as one who provides insight and enlightenment into God's truth. He also is the primary behavioral change agent and motivator. And he is the source of the fruit of the Spirit. This fruit is not learned; it is evidenced.

REFERENCES

Lawrence, David. 1995. *Heaven–It's Not the End of the World!* London: Scripture Union.

Polinder, Ron. 1998. "Reforming Christian Education." *Christian Educators Journal, (4)*. 7-9.

Wolters, Albert M. 1985. *Creation Regained—Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Reexamining Uncle Tom

by Pam Adams

Pam Adams is professor of education at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.

Last summer I read a book that I have been meaning to read for four years, the classic anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Four years ago while taking a graduate course I was captivated while reading several chapters of the novel. Last summer I pulled out the volume and read it in just a few days. While reading the novel, I had to stop at times and take a break because it affected me so strongly. However, I did not stop for long because I wanted to find out what happened to good little Eva and to the Christ-like Uncle Tom. Soon after finishing the book, I suggested to a colleague that we read it for our faculty book club. He replied that he had already suggested the novel a few years ago and that there was little enthusiasm for reading and discussing it.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was a best seller in its time; however, it is infrequently read today. Part of the reason has to do with dramatizations of the novel that have distorted what it is really about. In a popular dramatized adaptation, Uncle Tom is made into a comic character who bears little resemblance to the courageous and loving Uncle Tom of the novel. A false perception of the character of Uncle Tom is so rampant that being called an "Uncle Tom" is equivalent to being called servile, groveling, and submissive. There are of course other reasons why the novel is not part of the canon of highly regarded American literature. Literary critics judge the novel to be moralistic because of the frequent quoting of Scripture, and modern readers, who are used to a psychological emphasis in novels, see the plot-driven nature of this book as a weakness. In addition, Stowe's bold intent to create sympathy for her abolitionist position causes some to judge this novel as being propaganda rather than good literature. Jane Tompkins (1985) also believes that Stowe's gender and lack of literary connections adversely affected the longevity of her novel's popularity. While I agree the novel is a bit sentimental and the characters tend to be stereotypical, I believe there are many very good reasons for reading this book.

Because slavery and its consequences are important to understanding the history of current problems in our society, studying the issue from the point of view of a woman of the time can be very valuable. Stowe, while hating slavery, shared many common racist misconceptions. Recognizing that even abolitionists had stereotyped views of African-Americans will help students understand the grip the prejudice had, and to a large degree still has, on the United States. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law was particularly troubling to Stowe, but as a woman she was limited in what she could do. She could not preach, as did her father and brothers, and she was even reluctant to speak in public. Stowe turned to writing as the one thing she could do. So powerful was her writing that President Lincoln is reported to have said about Stowe, "So this is the little lady who made this big war" (Fritz 105). How very refreshing it would be for our students to learn about a Christian woman who acted out of a sense of righteous indignation and who clearly influenced the course of American history.

This past summer, along with reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I read a number of novels written for children and young adults, several of which are Newbery award winners. Many were excellent, but several of the Newbery winners left me wondering why these books won the award. The Newbery award is given for books intended for children up to age twelve. However a number of the award winning books are, in my opinion, better suited for older readers. By this I mean both the content and the writing style demand a degree of sophistication many younger children do not possess. *A View from Saturday*, the 1997 Newbery winner, is cleverly written from multiple points of view, but I wonder if an elementary age reader can follow what is happening. I was also struck by the dark tone of several of the books. The 1998 Newbery winner, *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse, is beautifully written but is also particularly grim. In this book the pregnant mother of the main character dies after being severely burned after mistakenly using kerosene instead of water on a wood stove fire. The 1996 Newbery Honor book, *What Jamie Saw*, starts out with a scene of a baby being thrown across a room by the father. It is not the portrayal of life's difficulties that bothers me, but the fatalistic tone that characterizes many of the books.

While there are many books worth reading, I would challenge teachers to broaden their canon of literature and consider using *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If the teacher prepares the students with background knowledge about the antebellum days in the United States, the concepts are not difficult. The novel is appropriate for a read-aloud to middle school students, and high school students could read selected chapters or the entire novel on their own. The book is a little long but the chapters are short and the readability level is no higher than the typical Newbery award winner (using the Fry formula, I calculated the readability to be about sixth grade). An excellent source for middle school stu-

dents interested in learning more about Stowe is Jean Fritz's biography *Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.*

Jim Trelease makes the point that children already know how to feel sorry for themselves. He advocates the reading of books that evoke in our children a sympathy for others. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* not only helps students understand the racial climate in our country today, but also helps to make them hunger for justice and learn what true sacrifice is about.■

REFERENCES

Fritz, J. 1994. *Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.* New York: G.P. Putnam.

Hesse, K. 1997. *Out of the Dust.* New York: Scholastic.

Konigsburg, E. L. 1996. *A View from Saturday.* New York: Atheneum Books.

Stowe, H. B. 1938. Originally published 1852. *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* New York: Modern Library.

Taylor, Mildred D. 1976. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.* New York: Dial Press.

Tompkins, J. 1985. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trelease, J. 1993. *Jim Trelease's Read Aloud.* [Video]. (Available from Reading Tree Productions, 51 Arvesta Street, Springfield, MA 01118-1239).

"A Father and Son Christmas"

by Cathy Smith

Cathy Smith is resource teacher at John Knox Christian School in Wyoming, Ontario.

This story was first printed in the Dec. 5, 1997 issue of The Christian Courier.

Dad and I were having coffee with our elderly neighbors, the Rutherfords, when the Hogemans drove past on their way to our farm. "There they are," I announced. Dad nodded that he had seen the gleaming black Coupe deVille inching along the icy sideroad.

"Nice car," George whistled. "Those your friends from Windsor? What's their name, again?"

"Hogeman. Corrie and Adrian."

"They're from your home town in Holland, right?" Mrs. Rutherford asked.

"No, actually, Corrie is from Wilma's village," said Dad. "She and Wilma were friends as children. They don't have any family in Canada so they always spend Christmas with us." Dad sipped his coffee. Then he asked, "How were the roads when you went to your candlelight service last night?"

"Slippery, but we made it. It was a nice evening, wasn't it, Emma?

Though I was now nineteen, I still couldn't conceive of addressing the formidable Mrs. Rutherford as Emma. She plowed straighter than Dad and, at seventy-one, she still delivered calves with sturdy and steady hands.

"Oh, yes," she agreed. She rose and went to the counter. "The tree was decorated beautifully. The Sunday school children trimmed it all in gold. When the candles were lit, it was just lovely." She returned with the coffee pot poised. "More coffee, Albert? Or do you have to be going?"

Dad pushed his mug over to her. I felt it my duty to speak up.

"Dad, didn't Mom say something about coming home before the Hogemans arrived?"

Dad pursed his lips and waved a placating hand at me. "We'll head over in a minute. Mom will get them a coffee. I don't want to run out on George and Emma with all of these Christmas goodies on the table. Emma, you must have been baking for weeks."

Mrs. Rutherford's face shone at this recognition. "How was your church service this morning?" she asked, refilling our cups. "I still can't get used to you folks going to church on Christmas morning. Doesn't seem right to me, somehow. Did you hand out your presents last night, like you always do?"

Dad smiled. They were good friends. Mrs. Rutherford's blunt observations about our eccentricities were easily forgivable. To her, we were Dutch and would be Dutch forever, even though Dad and Mom had been in Canada for almost thirty years.

"Yup, all the kids were over last night for a couple of hours. Ken and Wilma and I got up a little extra early this morning because of the ice, but we got to church without a problem." There was a slight pause. Dad concluded, "Well, whether you're there on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, it's good to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas, isn't it?" To punctuate that thought, Dad dipped a gingerbread man into his coffee.

I was getting fidgety. Mom would be casting anxious glances out the kitchen window to see whether we were on our way. Since the Hogemans always came on Christmas Day, there was no excuse not to be ready for them.

As a boy, I had dreaded their annual visits. Their only child, William, was my age, but he was bigger and meaner. He never failed to break whatever gift I treasured most. He broke my pellet gun when I was ten, and my hockey game when I was eleven. I would complain to Mom who would scold me for being petty. I was supposed to share. It was Christmas, after all.

Even then I had an inkling about why he was careless. He had so many toys, he just didn't understand the value of my few special things. Fortunately, by the time he was fifteen or so, he no longer cared to join his parents for their Christmas visit to the farm, and I didn't have to put up with him anymore.

When the last of the cookies had been complimented and consumed, Dad finally pushed back his chair. We said good-bye and drove home. Mom, already in her apron, met us at the kitchen door. "Albert. Ken. There you are. See, Corrie and Adrian are already here."

Dad poked his head around her to greet them. "You made it, eh? We were just at the neighbors for a little Christmas cheer. Sorry we weren't here sooner." He hung up his coat in the mudroom and entered the kitchen with me behind him. "How are you, Adrian? Corrie? How was the drive from Windsor?" Everyone shook hands.

"I was hoping you'd be home for the holidays, Ken," Mrs. Hogeman said. "You're off to college now, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm at Calvin. I'm just taking a general program for now, till I know what I want to be when I grow up." I chuckled at my own joke, but only half-heartedly because I really had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and it bothered me.

While Mom bustled around setting the table, the rest of us sat down in the adjoining family room. "Well, young fella," launched Mr. Hogeman, "I'm not convinced that there's good value in getting an education these days. You take our William, for example. He already has a good job, straight out of high school, and he's making good money. He's in a position to get a promotion soon. Sells siding,

you know. For AlCan. It's the best on the market. With houses going up as fast as they are in Tecumseh, he's set to do well for himself. He's got a girlfriend too already. Pretty serious, I'd say. What do you think, Corrie? You think William and Nancy are going to get married?"

"Maybe. Who knows? They're with Nancy's family today." Her sprightly tone belied the clouded look in her eyes, I thought.

She gave me an inquiring look. "What about you, Ken? Have you met anyone special at Calvin?"

I squirmed inside. When it came to girls, I was way out in left field. "Nah," I covered. "I'm too busy hitting the books to worry about that yet."

Laughing, Mom came to my rescue. "Leave my baby alone, Corrie. I'm not ready to have him married off yet. Here, Ken, can you help me with this turkey?" I went over to the stove.

"There's one thing that is worth studying, though," Mr. Hogeman continued. "Economics. If you're going to spend all that tuition, Ken, you should learn about the marketplace. Economics, that's the thing."

I grimaced to myself at the thought. I'd been leaning more toward history. Teaching, maybe.

Not waiting for a reply, he directed his attention to Dad. "How's farming these days, Albert? Still rough as usual?"

Dad's forehead furrowed. "Yeah. Same old story. I sometimes think the government is doing its level best to make things difficult for us. Want to hear the latest? I have to register myself as a farmer and pay $150 for the privilege. Then, if I make a special written request, I can get the money back next year. What a lot of paper shuffling for nothing!"

Mr. Hogeman lit up a cigar. Circlets of smoke wafted up to the ceiling. "I'd have to disagree with you there, Albert. I've read about this in the paper. It gives people jobs, for one thing, and it's a way to unite you farmers. You can lobby with one voice."

Dad shook his head. "We're an independent bunch. And besides, what's good for chicken and dairy farmers is not always good for hog farmers. It's just like that free trade thing a few years ago. I still can't see how that was good for our country. How can I compete with farmers down south who don't have to heat barns?"

Mr. Hogeman was shaking his head, too, more emphatically. His ruddy complexion deepened. "No, Albert, I can assure you that free trade was good for Canada. It sparked the business world. You know I've been in retail ever since I came to this country, and it was the best thing for us! You've always disliked the conservatives, that's all." He jabbed his cigar meaningfully in the air.

"Well, I know where their loyalties lie. It's not with the little guy, let me tell you that." Dad's voice was getting edgy.

Corrie rose abruptly to help Mom. There was a palpable urgency in the kitchen to have Christmas dinner under way. Soon all was ready. Dad asked for a blessing on the meal and gave thanks for the birth of the Savior.

The conversation drifted from the outstanding quality of Mom's cooking to the Hogeman's recent trip to The Netherlands. The best part of the dinner was the dessert, Mom's traditional Dutch almond pastry. Afterwards, Dad read the first chapter of Luke. I thought it was an odd choice until he got to verse 51: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Then I knew why. I peered surreptitiously at Mr. Hogeman, but his expression was bland. Obviously, he had not caught on to Dad's subtle one-upmanship.

Almost immediately after dinner, Dad excused himself to do chores in the barn. I looked up from the Time magazine I was leafing through, surprised. He usually didn't go out so early.

Mom and Mrs. Hogeman were cleaning up the dishes and chatting earnestly about Corrie's sister Gertie in Holland who had not been well. Mr. Hogeman lit another cigar and ruminated for a time. Then he fixed a purposeful eye on me.

"You know, Ken, no matter what your dad says, free trade is a good thing for this nation. You take my company, for example. We increased our profit margin by three percent the first year it went into effect." Hogeman owned a franchised lumberyard. Probably how William got his lucrative siding job, I groused to myself. He puffed a few times, and then leaned toward me.

I got up. It seemed like a good time to escape. "Would you like to look at this magazine, Mr. Hogeman? I really should give Dad some help in the barn." Mom turned slightly from the sink, shooting me a curious glance. It was rare for me to offer to help with chores.

I had just remembered, however, that Dad had brought home a trunk of books from a farm auction sale in the fall. He had stored it in the hayloft because Mom wouldn't let him bring any more old books into the house. Maybe there's something I can use at school, I told myself. It was worth a check.

I threw on a coat, walked the short distance to the main barn, and entered the feed room. Through the open door opposite I could make out indistinctly the crates of the sow barn. Everything was quiet and dim. Dad hadn't started the chores, then.

I climbed the short ladder to the hayloft. There was Dad. He was on his knees in front of the trunk, his back toward me, sorting books. There were a couple of piles on either side of him. It was cold, and his vaporized breath hung about his head. He rubbed his hands briskly and then dug in for another book. As I hoisted myself over the edge, he spun around.

"Oh, Ken! It's you. You gave me a start! What's up?"

"I thought I'd have a look to see if there were any books here I could use next semester." I grinned at him slyly. "You should have seen the look on your face, Dad. Like a preacher meeting an elder at a bar."

He smiled and shrugged sheepishly. "Well, one thing I can always count on, son. Adrian never volunteers to come into the barn. Too smelly for him, I guess."

He closed the trunk lid. "Nothing in here but old Reader's Digest condensed Books and Farmer's almanacs. Nothing you would want to take back to Calvin. Except this, maybe." He bent down to pick up the book at his feet. "Look at this Bible I found. It's pretty old, I think."

The title, *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible,* was inscribed in gold on the dark green cover. On the inside leaf, in red and black lettering, was written: "God's Word, Told in the Simple Language of Today for Young and Old." It was definitely old, published in 1904. We paged through it, examining the old-fashioned illustrations. The flight into Egypt was a detailed color plate, while the manger scene was merely a small black and white sketch. Apart from a rugged post in the center of the picture, it was hardly even stable-like. "Look, Dad," I said. "Not a lamb or cow to be seen. No shepherds, or wisemen. Just angels."

We climbed down the ladder with our antique treasure and stood for a minute in the feed room, listening to the contented snuffling and snorting of the sows. "Funny to think that the Son of God was born in a barn, eh, Dad?" I mused. "Though you never see any pigs in a nativity scene, do you."

"No, you don't. Maybe because pigs were unclean, I guess. Good thing pork is okay now, or we'd be out of business!" He laughed and went over to the open door leading to the pens. He stood a brief moment staring down the aisle. Then he turned back to me. "It's humbling, isn't it? God's Son in a place like this. Not too proud for a poor man's barn. Willing to put up with the stench and far worse."

Dad's mood was improving. He slapped me on the back and gave me a wink. "Come on, Ken. We can't be standing here all Christmas Day. We've got guests!"

He latched the feed room door behind us, and we hurried to the house, eager to share our find with the others. ■

Bells and Whistles

Ron Sjoerdsma teaches in the education department at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

There were days, probably even weeks, when Sara Voskamp found herself out of sync with the rest of the Hillendale Christian middle school staff. This particular Tuesday had definitely been one of those days. The eighth grade team had had their initial meeting to review the "curricular implications" of the new Hillendale Christian technology plan recently developed by the school's technology committee. It seemed to Sara that the committee was stacked with those who unthinkingly embraced anything with a glowing screen or seductive shape and frequently made fallacious claims for the technology's ability to transform learning.

She found this to be especially true of her colleague Jim Sooterma, who chaired the school-wide tech committee. Sara was the first to admit that her attitude toward Jim had not been good from her earliest days at Hillendale more than two years ago. But Jim had constantly made things worse with his playfully sarcastic replies to her comments at weekly planning meetings. Most days she let them roll off—but not today. Sara did wonder if these negative feelings were primarily a result of having to teach students who twice during her day came immediately from Jim's class to hers— often from lessons filled with technical bells and whistles. Perhaps, but there still was no excuse for his patronizing behavior.

She had just tried to point out that a number of classroom activities so easily "enhanced with integrated technology" (whatever that meant) could just as easily and far more cheaply integrate traditional classroom materials. She had used the water cycle as a perfect example of how 3-D models or posters could exhibit student learning at least as well as a computer image. Jim had responded, more coldly than normal Sara thought, "There you go again. That would be like saying that horses were a perfectly good mode of transportation; why did we need automobiles?"

Sara remembered blurting something like, "Well that works just fine for the Amish." A foolish remark considering how dependent she felt on her own car—new last year because she didn't want to have to worry about breaking down in a Midwest blizzard.

And Jim wouldn't let the remark pass, "Fine, live any way you want. But don't try to drag the rest of us with you."

Sara quickly backed down, "That wasn't my point. I just think we need to think about what we're doing. I just read this really good article in the Atlantic Monthly that points out how many dollars schools are wasting on technology when there is really no solid evidence that it makes any difference. Just a lot of bells and whistles."

"Yeah, I heard about that article, and I've been following all the noise it generated on the Web as technology-knowledgeable people point out the article's erroneous data and poor arguments. The reality is that we live in a world dominated by technology and our kids had better know how to use it—how to integrate it into their learning—and we'd better be ready to help them." This was always Jim's fall-back position.

Sara had a ready answer, pointing to all the other things within the modern Western culture that schools left well enough alone. But before she could respond, Kate Wells, the team's leader and English teacher, interrupted what could have easily turned into a time-wasting argument.

"We're not going to get anywhere today if we don't talk about how we are going to follow through on the tech committee's recommendations. I'm not overly thrilled by some of these directives—they mess too much with my class and my time—but we've got to respond."

Sara had been surprised by Kate's negative response to the committee's report and decided that this meeting was not going to be as one-sided as she had expected.

And so they had started on Kate's agenda, which called for a little background from Jim before they began working through the recommendations one by one. Jim reported that the technology plan was based on the state's technology plan, an international technology society's standards for teachers and students, and a report from a group of business and educational leaders. The Hillendale committee had looked at many other school technology plans and had wrestled for several meetings with the specific ways a Christian school needed to address this issue. They had even brought in two outside consultants from a local college, whom Jim thought had muddied the waters more.

Tech Talk

Ron Sjoerdsma

As Jim rambled on, Sara grew more and more anxious. It would be virtually impossible to move any direction but the committee-mandated one. Jim seemed to be on a mission in a more intense way than she had ever seen him. But for a time she listened politely, trying to maintain a passive appearance. She did glance over at Kate occasionally, wondering how long she would let Jim ramble on. But Kate appeared to be letting him have his say.

It was Bill Hamilton who interrupted first. "Okay, Jim. I get the picture. The committee did a lot of work. And I think I can see how some of this will fit into my math classes. I'd like a little more explanation of this CEO group report. Is that what that survey was all about last spring?"

Sara wasn't sure this turn was going to be very productive, and she didn't like the eager tone in Bill's voice. She could usually count on him to be her ally at holding Jim's and Kate's bells and whistles tendencies in check. But lately she was concerned that Bill Hamilton had forsaken their cause—the "reasonable" cause. Bill seemed quite content to play along with anything new as long he got the latest attachment for his precious graphing calculators.

As it turned out, Bill's question generated another fifteen minutes of explanation of the rationale behind the Hillendale technology plan. Jim explained how the CEO Forum on Education and Technology had created the STaR chart that was built around the four pillars of educational technology innovation. And after Bill's little joke about the Starr Report that had plagued all their conversations that fall, Jim had to explain that STaR stood for School Technology and Readiness.

All the members of the team, except Jim, glanced at their watches as Jim began to spell out the four pillars of hardware, connectivity, content, and professional development. Jim noted that the survey had been completed by all staff members and the results placed Hillendale in the Mid Technology Range—at a level above almost 60% of the schools in the country.

Sara had interrupted, "So what's the problem? It seems to me we're doing pretty well. But these recommendations call for many more computers—high-end, multimedia ones; much more teacher training—at least 70 hours a year; T1 lines; integrated tool packages—the list goes on and on."

"That's because the committee felt strongly that we needed to move forward toward the STaR's Target School category. We can't just sit with what we've got. Our parents expect more. We're having a tougher and tougher time competing with Hillendale Public—especially with the new school they're building."

It was at that point that the discussion got really heated. Kate insisted that they were not going to justify Hillendale Christian's existence with technology bells and whistles. And Jim shot back that he didn't want to get trapped in a school that wouldn't stay current with the latest teaching tools. Bill might have objected, but he had just purchased with school money the TI-92 Plus Module for his graphing calculator.

Surprisingly, it was Jim who brought them back to their most immediate task. "Look, I'm just as concerned as you with what makes Hillendale Christian unique. I'm just saying, and not very well I suspect, that we need to think about how to best prepare our middle schoolers to be solid and thoughtful Christian citizens in a technological age. What do we think they should be like as they graduate to high school? I think we should begin talking about how our curriculum might need to change to do that; we've never been afraid of change before."

Unfortunately, Sara thought, Jim was throwing out a conciliatory bone after they were too wound up to chew on it.

Kate suggested an alternative. "It's getting a little too late to begin getting down to the nitty-gritty today. I suggest that we take these recommendations home and spend a little time generating a list of ways we might meet them in our own subjects and as an integrated team. And then we'll talk next week. But we do need to wrap this up by the Christmas break.

The suggestion became an informal motion to adjourn, and Sara left for her classroom without talking to the other members of her team. She didn't feel integrated with them, and she definitely was not going to invest much energy in generating her list. When she reached her science classroom, she sensed the warmth of her own space and of the things she loved and that loved her back.

Sara put on her coat and reached for her keys. She pushed the remote car starter her parents had bought for her birthday last month and heard her car start in the distant parking lot. As she gathered up the papers and books she would need for the next day's lessons, she took a little time to look around at individual desks, imagining the students who would be sitting there tomorrow. What did these kids need to be productive Christian citizens?

Sara stepped into the biting December wind and walked toward her warming car. She had to admit that some bells and whistles could be nice even if they were not things she would normally purchase. There might even be a few that would be useful in her classroom. ■

CREEPY CRAWLIES

by Karen Vlieg

Karen Vlieg teaches children in the elementary grades at Langley Christian School in Langley, British Columbia.

In one way or another, creepy crawlies capture the fancy of primary school students. It is easy to motivate them to consider God's purpose for creepy crawlies in his creation because children have played with these little creatures in their own backyards and are also curious about exotic insects and arachnids, some of which are dangerous.

The students in my grade one and two combination class love all the pleasurable activities associated with the study of creepy crawlies.

As part of this study my students look around outside the school for bugs and insects, trying to identify them and sketching them. They have discovered that one of the best places to look is the brick wall of the gym.

The children also enjoy searching for a collection of thirty creepy crawlies that I have hidden throughout the classroom. I hide them during the recess break. Then after recess the children are "let loose" to search the room. This activity leads the students to focus on hiding places and camouflage.

A major assignment in this unit is a home project for the creepy crawlies unit. The goal of this activity is to involve parents and family in the child's at-school learning. The plan and the instructions are simple: at home, each student will choose and create a creepy crawly, with the help of the family. There are no limits to size, materials, or creativity. Not wanting to stifle personal creativity, but wanting to support those families who feel "craft-challenged," I provide a list of suggestions and possible materials.

The resulting projects are amazing. Everyone enjoys the process, and the children are extremely proud of their creepy crawlies. They go to great effort to make the creepy crawlies look physically accurate, and some are very complicated. Our recent collection included caterpillars, black widow spiders, a butterfly, a ladybug, a grasshopper, spiders, a walking stick, and a cricket.

Each child presents a project to the class, explaining the materials, the process, and the involvement of the family. The children who are very independent make their creepy crawlies by themselves, while in other families the parents do much of the work—or even grandparents get involved.

All of the creepy crawlies are arranged in the display case at the main entry of the school. Students, parents, teachers, and visitors respond enthusiastically to the innovative and diverse projects.■

Deconstructing *Poltergeist*

Stefan Ulstein teaches media and English courses at Bellevue Christian Junior High School in Bellevue, Washington.

Just as Hitchcock's *Psycho* traumatized women by juxtaposing their rational fears of traveling alone, showering in an unfamiliar room, and being taken in by a manipulative predator, films aimed at children can change the ways young viewers perceive reality.

In Steven Spielberg's popular, PG-rated supernatural thriller, *Poltergeist,* a middle-class family climbs a rung on the ladder of the American dream by moving into a brand new house in a development the father has worked on. But things begin to bump in the night—and in the day.

For the purposes of my high school mass communications class, I have copied several key scenes so that I have a thirty-minute precis of the entire film. I explain the basic premise of the film and then show my shortened version. After that we go back and deconstruct the film. The whole process can be squeezed into an eighty-minute extended period.

First, we see the work of the poltergeist (German for "noisy ghost"). Our ancestors explained creaking floors and misplaced objects by saying that a poltergeist was moving about. In the film, chairs move and pile themselves up. Note that we see an establishing shot of the chairs, which will later figure in the film's most horrific scene.

Now it's bedtime and junior balks at sleeping while an electrical storm rages outside. Also, he doesn't like the look of the big tree outside his window. He goes to Mom and Dad's room where they are horsing around and smoking a joint. This seemingly hip scene unnerves kids who have been warned about drugs in the DARE program at school. Dad and Mom are supposed to be an oasis of maturity.

The boy is put back to bed. Despite the size of the house, he shares the room with his little sister, an angelic blonde waif who could be considered the sacrificial virgin if you were to push the animistic symbolism. The wind howls and the tree breaks through the window. It looks like a gigantic arm and the boy is snatched up by a hand-like clump of branches. If you listen, you'll notice that the wind noise becomes the sound of a wild, growling carnivore. Also, note that the clown doll has moved into the little girl's bed. It's grinning toothlessly, although it had a row of small teeth a few moments earlier when it sat in the chair. These subliminal changes reinforce the idea that the clown is really alive.

The boy begins to disappear into the growling tree. Slimy tentacles grip his leg. At this point the audience wants the family to abandon the house and flee into the night. But then the growling turns into a windy sound again. Meanwhile, back in the bedroom, toys are being sucked into the closet, which is unnaturally bright, like the bathroom in *Psycho.* We hear a demonic laugh echoing.

Out in the yard, big sister comes out in her nightgown, and the wind exposes her underpants. Notice that it's always the women who are undressed during times of danger. We don't see Pop running around in his skivvies. Again, the film sets up feelings of vulnerability by using real fears. The tree dumps the kid and is sucked into the vortex of a tornado, which inexplicably leaves no real damage. We now have a plausible reason to stay in the house. It was just the wind. The growling, boy-eating tree was just our imaginations running a bit wild.

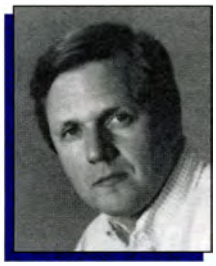
Meanwhile, little sister has disappeared and her disembodied voice can be heard echoing through the television set. Note that the unfinished swimming pool is set up as a place of dread and evil. It will reappear later. They search the closet and find the clown with yet a different facial expression. The demonic laugh turns out to have come from a toy robot, and once again, we are given a sense that perhaps we have overreacted. But compare the two laughs. They are quite different.

A group of parapsychologists are brought in to recover the little girl, but they are completely out of their league. Finally, a small woman with some sort of New Age credentials is put in charge. She knows the score, and in a highly religious scene, replete with a genuflecting "congregation," she delivers a sort of homily about the life force and the world beyond. The audience knows that she is the only one who can pull them out of this mess. She is the equivalent of Clint Eastwood with his .44 magnum. Then she asks the mother something important: "Will you do anything I ask, even if it runs contrary to your beliefs as a human being and a Christian?"

Without blinking, the teary-eyed mom replies, "Yes, I will."

This is important because just as the *Dirty Harry* audience embraces the use of the big gun to solve the problem, the *Poltergeist* audience must assent to this form of spiritual warfare if they are to stay on board with the principals in the story. It's an insidious and probably unintended effect. The question is, does the impressionable younger viewer adjust his or her worldview in the long term? Studies have shown that watchers of violent films change their attitudes about violence. It's worth considering.

The little girl is saved and life goes back to normal. But we know that there's still a half hour or so left, so we brace ourselves



Stefan Ulstein

for the counter-punch. The boy and little sister fight over a toy as Mom draws a bath. As she soaks, the camera pans around her and moves closer in three increments. She is being stalked. We cut to the dog who seems to sense a presence.

As the presence traps the children in their bedroom, Mom, now out of the bath and dressed in tee shirt and panties, is thrown onto the bed where she is violently shaken. I ask my students to tell me what's going on here. They quickly realize that we are watching a sexual assault, although we do not see the attacker. At one point, the camera focuses on the crotch of the mother's underwear as she is bounced on the bed. This is a case-in-point about the limitations of the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) rating system as the final arbiter of the film's suitability for children.

Back in the kids' room, the clown has disappeared from his chair—the same style of chair we saw earlier in the kitchen scene. Junior looks under the bed, and the audience braces as he whips up the covers. No clown. The audience sighs in relief. He sits up and looks under the other side. Again the audience holds its collective breath and exhales just as the boy sits up. Then a much larger version of the clown, with two rows of metallic teeth, assaults the boy and drags him under the bed, confirming every kid's worst fear.

As you watch this film a few times, you begin to see where a doll stands in for the little girl. Also, the dog is obviously just standing around waiting for his Kibble. He sits in the car, tongue lolling languidly as the house is destroyed by demons.

Nonetheless, *Poltergeist* is a powerful film that terrifies many kids by taking their childhood fears of monsters under the bed and trees that are really not trees, and saying, "Yes. You are right. These things are out to get you." Nobody knows for sure what Spielberg's agenda was for this New Age tract. Probably he just wanted to give everybody a good thrill, and he does that very well. Unfortunately, he probably changed the worldviews of a lot of impressionable kids. A multi-million dollar film has much more impact than the best-intentioned flannelgraph story or cheaply produced Bible story video.■

Literature Lives:
A Brief Tribute to Those Who Rejuvenate It

by Matthew McNatt

Matthew McNatt is a student at Dordt College, where he is majoring in English and philosophy and minoring in journalism. Upon graduation in the fall of 2000, he hopes to teach English and journalism.

"This is a work of fiction that reads like nonfiction." That's what one lawyer in the O. J. Simpson case said when promoting his book. I don't know whether he described his book accurately, his quick retraction aside, but I do believe that, had he meant to describe how classic literature appears to many teens, he would have accurately summed up its appearance—fiction that reads like nonfiction. If, however, the rigorous education I received in middle school and high school is any indication, I doubt that teens are entirely to blame.

Before middle school, I had benefited from a wonderful home life. My mother, anxious to spur on her children to excellence, began reading to us shortly after we were born, and she read often. As she rocked me in a stuffed, army-green chair, she would read from the Bible and sing me to sleep with "There's Just Something about That Name." With her guidance, I soon progressed to reading Dick and Jane books, then to Little Golden Books and children's versions of great Bible stories.

My church gave out short versions of some Bible stories with pictures, and I pored over them again and again at home. I remember going with a church group to one roller skating party where they handed out the books, and although I did skate some, I spent a large portion of the night hidden behind a curtain of a comic booth reading the little books, dreaming that I was Noah or Samson or David.

My mom encouraged me to explore academic books, as well, by allowing me to be creative with what I learned. I had fun reading books about airplanes and spaceships and then making my own out of Styrofoam cups and paper plates. Then I read about volcanoes and built one, with Mom's help, out of an orange juice can and papier-maché. Together, my mom and I read about kitchen experiments and then set to work: I can remember powering a toothbrush holder around the bathtub by mixing vinegar with baking soda, and fitting an egg in a glass Coke bottle by first soaking it in vinegar.

Throughout my grade school years, I read piles upon piles of fiction books. My mom would take my sister and me to the library, where we read more books than the school required and always entered the summer reading programs—not so much for the plastic medallions and certificate for cola that we could win, but for the simple pleasure of reading. With few friends and little athletic skill, I found my haven in books.

A move from rural Oklahoma to Illinois suburbia, as well as the onset of Tourette's Syndrome, brought on taunts from bullies and, soon, a challenge to my faith in a loving God. After a hellish time of religious confusion at a Christian summer camp, I spent much of my seventh grade year reading apologetics books. Rather than turning to novels as an escape, I doggedly read book after book in hopes of finding answers—any answer—to the theological problems that vexed me.

Eighth grade I spent reading more apologetics books and some laymen's works on theology. I didn't find many of the answers I so diligently sought, but I realized that I wasn't alone: generations of Christians before me had also failed to find the answers, but they trusted—as I would learn to do—in an always faithful God.

Reading did more than quell my doubts; it changed my theological leanings. So after eighth grade, I left my parents' church to attend one more in line with my convictions. That—changing churches—was my primary act of rebellion in adolescence. I obeyed my parents, and I took the advice of my teachers to heart, including their (Platonic) advice to train the mind. The mantra was, "A good mind is a terrible thing to waste," and frivolous, non-academic pursuits were implicitly, although not explicitly, put in the category of "waste."

In English class, we read the classics to develop an appreciation for good literature, to give us a working knowledge of the American and English canons, and to prepare us for adult life (college and good citizenship). Since nonfiction accomplished this last goal best, and since the other disciplines heavily emphasized learning the subject matter, I couldn't help but think that nonfiction was the way to go, and it was the way I did go—until I met Jim Venckus.

Mr. Venckus was my junior American Literature teacher at Waubonsie Valley High School in Aurora, Illinois. Although Mr. Venckus wanted us to appreciate good literature and have a working knowledge of the classics, he wanted more for us to live, and he knew good literature could help. Only occasionally in his class did we dissect titles or search for specious symbols. Instead, we talked about how the experiences of the characters were like our own. We even watched several movies whose connections with the literature become apparent only later in class discussion.

Before asking us to judge a character, Mr. Venckus would lead a discussion about whether we would have behaved in the same way. Often, instead of giving an abstract assignment such as "compare the actions of the characters in 'The Lottery' to those of modern-day Americans," he would encourage us to step into the characters' shoes, for example, by having us throw wads of paper at a volunteer student, who would then discuss with us how it felt to be singled out.

Second Glance

Mr. Venckus knew that most of his students didn't appreciate good literature—and why should they, if their experiences with it (analyze, criticize, synthesize) were usually worse than their experiences with kitsch? Perhaps that's why Mr. Venckus was so successful at teaching his students to appreciate good literature: he showed us that good literature addresses the issues we live—and since good literature is timeless, the issues we will live.

I learned from Mr. Venckus and his class a multitude of lessons, some which, perhaps, he never intended to teach. I learned that I shouldn't scour the text for meaning without first considering the relationship between the text and myself: where is the text coming from; how can I best meet it; and how does my history converge with the text, which can never be separated from its own history?

I came to believe, after reflecting on my time in Mr. Venckus's class, that my enjoyment of a piece of literature is just as important as my coming through it for details to regurgitate on a multiple-choice exam or my deciphering themes that are supposed to parallel those found by the teacher. These beliefs, I hope, will help to shape my approach to teaching literature—an approach which, if I can ever figure out how to do it, will emphasize that students can learn about themselves from reading a good work just as much as it will emphasize what students can learn about the work itself.

Despite these idyllic convictions, I'm not there yet: before I can teach students to love literature, I must not only learn more about teaching, I must continue to struggle to free myself from the intellectualist baggage of my past and to justify my own reading for pleasure. Such justification is no longer as difficult as it was in high school. Besides, I usually choose a classic: although it's fiction, it usually contains enough meat in it to benefit me, so I feel as though I'm reading a good book—not of fiction that reads like nonfiction—but of quality fiction that reads like life. ■

Query

Q&A

Marlene Dorhout

Marlene Dorhout teaches at Denver Christian Middle School in Denver, Colorado. Address questions to

Marlene Dorhout
Query Editor
325 E. Iliff Avenue
Denver, CO 80210

Q *Divorce affects children's personal lives, but also their academic lives. I have many students who go back and forth from Mom's house to Dad's house. Inevitably, they leave their homework or books at the other parent's place and are unable to retrieve it for a week. As a teacher I feel I shouldn't penalize these students for their home arrangements, but neither should I let it go. Certainly this problem is on the rise, with the increase in divorces. How can I fairly address this issue?*

A Making school books and homework a priority is an important value that both parents can support; therefore, it makes sense to advise a child to have a specific place for all academic "stuff" when packing to go to the "other" house or to school. The more organized the moving back and forth, the better prepared the student feels on Monday morning. Enough stress exists without adding forgotten assignments. Surely, both parents will appreciate the help.

Students shifted from home to home do need a listening ear and even occasional leniency, but the fairest treatment is to expect the best from them. Amazingly, they often adjust better than do the adults. Doting parents and teachers can inhibit responsibility and cast doubts on kids' ability to handle all the changes in their lives. Naïve authority figures can even increase student forgetfulness. Teachers can't put a student's world back together again, but they can help the child organize it so it does not seem so disastrous.

I referred the following question to Sheri Lange, counselor at Denver Christian Middle School and a Christian psychotherapist for pastoral counseling for Denver.

Q *Aside from a few faculty lounge jokes and innuendoes, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal was avoided in our school because of the sexual and political nature of this ordeal. Shouldn't we, however, as educators address these issues? Our church also didn't touch the subject. Do we assume the parents will deal with it and/or the kids will come to their own conclusions, not needing any adult guidance? Please comment.*

A If the current crisis did not revolve around sex, the answer would be somewhat more simple. Unfortunately, the issues of sex, adultery, and morality are critical to understanding the complex crisis at hand. If we vaguely speak about President Clinton's indiscretions or ignore this aspect of the controversy altogether, we do our children a disservice. Input and perspective from parents and educators is invaluable to children's quest for knowledge, not to mention their emotional well-being.

How do children cope with such turbulent political times and interpret the world around them? Many kids I see are scared. Their fear generally comes from not understanding the whole story. As humans, we are all notorious for picking up on bits and pieces of conversations. Couple this with inexperience and a general lack of knowledge, and the impact can be overwhelming to children. Their imaginations and sense of reality are still developing, and the conclusions they come to can be difficult for adults to understand. They don't follow the same logical patterns many of us do. This might be why I see some children bring the crisis at the White House into their own house. They're showing signs of increased anxiety surrounding the stability of their families. "If the President cheated on his wife, does my dad cheat on my mom?" is a question I've fielded a dozen times. So, now the difficult part. How can educators help?

- Listen! Who knows what information the students are aware of, and what conclusions they have come to? Ask students how this whole situation came about. By listening to the variety of fact, opinion, and tabloidish jargon, you'll see how anxious, and sometimes misinformed, many of them are.
- Go back to the basics. Many students don't have a clue what is going on in politics because they don't understand the

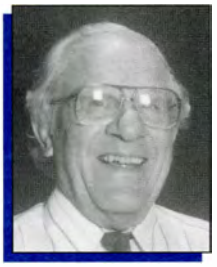
terminology. Don't assume they know it! Define concepts such as perjury, impeachment, censure, and Watergate.

• Get everyone on the same page. Take advantage of this incredible, teachable moment. In an up-front, factual manner, tell them how this crisis began. Avoid using words such as "the President had an inappropriate relationship . . . affair . . . sex . . ." these words are evasive and have many different connotations. This doesn't mean you have to get into an in-depth discussion of sex. You might say, "The President took his clothes off with a woman who was not his wife." Kids of all ages will get a graphic picture of what happened without getting an X-rated education. This opens the doors to discuss adultery, forgiveness, and morality in a controlled environment.

• Create safe space. Kids need a safe space to process these complex and often emotional events. Use some class time to discuss media reports and their significance. Keep in mind that students may be bringing the problems of the White House to their own house. Be aware of their anxiety and encourage them to discuss the political as well as personal nature of the crisis with their parents.

• Be open. The conversation may shift from political to personal. Decide ahead of time how you want to deal with it. Realize that you may be in a unique position to do a great deal of good just by listening! ■

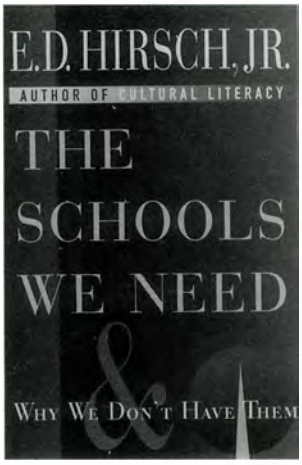
Book Reviews



Steven VanDerWeele

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them.* New York: Doubleday, 1996. 317 pages, $24.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by David A. Larsen, director of advancement and community relations, Timothy Christian Schools, Elmhurst, Illinois.



Education can be a contentious endeavor, a continual debate about issues that divide and points of view that diverge. This situation, after all, is one of the reasons why we take courses in the philosophy of education as undergraduates, often appreciating them only after we've worked in education for a number of years—and, even then, perhaps not fully. But eventually we learn that matters of policy and practice have roots in deeper questions.

This insistence, that pedagogical strategies spring from philosophical soil, is the central argument of the latest contribution from the author of *Cultural Literacy.* He contends that we must challenge the controlling assumptions that have directed American education for the last seven decades because they are based on a flawed, Romantic view of the learner and the learning process, a naturalistic anthropology that has led to disaster. The enemy is "the controlling system of ideas that currently prevents needed changes from being contemplated or understood."

Hirsch, who describes himself as "an educational pragmatist," clearly identifies the source of the present disarray in education. He carries on a running debate with the writings of William Heard Kilpatrick, "whose books and articles were used as key educational tests and who, at Teachers College, Columbia University, directly trained a large number of future professors in the formative years 1918-1940." Hirsch sees Kilpatrick as the chief promoter of a Romantic optimism about human nature and natural development which suggests that education is good only if the child's development is permitted to run its course in a naturalistic setting. As an advocate for the concept of core knowledge as an educational civil right, Hirsch has little patience with the Kilpatrick approach. If it has been a long time since you've worked with the ideas of Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Dewey, this may be a good time to evaluate this debate and ascertain what impact it may be having on your pedagogy.

The antidote Hirsch advocates is "a balanced educational approach that would emphasize high standards, book learning, and hard work in school"—a return to teaching the subject rather than the child. The heart of his proposal may be seen in many charter school purpose statements:

> Schools need to have a coherent, cumulative core curriculum which instills consensus values such as civic duty, honesty, diligence, perseverance, respect, kindness, and independent-mindedness; which gives students step-by-step mastery of *procedural knowledge* in language arts and mathematics; which gives them step-by-step mastery of *content knowledge* in civics, science, the arts, and the humanities; and which holds students, teachers, schools, and parents accountable for acceptable progress in achieving these specific year-by-year goals. (236)

The book has additional value for the feature "Critical Guide to Educational Terms and Phrases." His thumbnail definitions are actually helpful summaries of the book itself, along with the analysis he presents. Though it appears at the end of the book, one would do well to give this appendix an initial examination. If you ever have had a hand in shaping policy based on "multiple intelligences" or "developmentally appropriate" subjects, "critical thinking skills," or "self-esteem," Hirsch either can provide comfort or make your blood boil.

This is the sort of book one needs to read with a newspaper at his or her side. This summer, while I was reading it, the Chicago Public School system announced it was holding back 12,000 students from progressing to the next level until they attended summer school and satisfied the standards for that grade. At almost the same time, the State of Illinois adopted new, more detailed academic standards for the state's two million public school students. The *Chicago Tribune* referred to it as a "sort of state-level version of the popular book *Cultural Literacy.* And recently *Time* devoted its cover story to an analysis of what factors make a school "good." The article recommends national standards and a standardized curriculum. Whether or not you agree with his analysis, Hirsch provides a helpful framework for focusing the issues.

One may rightly ask whether the "educational community" with which Hirsch quarrels is as monolithic and impervious to

reform as he claims. In conspiratorial terms that would please Oliver Stone, Hirsch speaks of an "American thoughtworld" as if there are few, if any, educational leaders still capable of self-analysis.

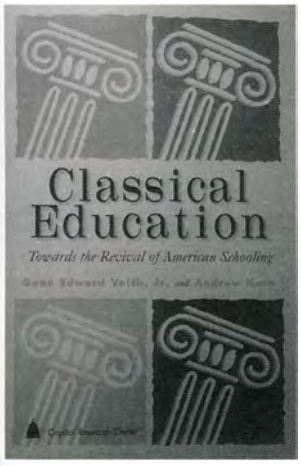
The most intriguing aspect of the book for me is Hirsch's concern that educational philosophies quickly translate into issues of justice and injustice. Whenever someone uses these words, Christians ought to pay attention. Hirsch argues—convincingly, in my opinion—that there is a resource called "intellectual capital," a shared body of knowledge that is tantamount to a civil right:

> What chiefly makes our schools unfair, then, even for children who remain in the same school year after year, is that some students are learning less than others not because of their innate lack of academic ability or their lack of willingness to learn but because of inherent shortcomings in curricular organization. A systematic failure to teach all children the knowledge they need in order to understand what the next grade has to offer is the major source of avoidable injustice in our schools. (33)

If our educational philosophies do, in fact, keep some students from achieving and some schools forever impoverished, we ought to object. Christian educators should be concerned that all citizens find ways to use their God-given abilities. If bad educational choices make for bad schools and poor students, Christians must join the protest.

So, dust off those philosophy of education texts and spend some time with Mr. Hirsch. It's not "a quick read," but it will make you think more deeply about what we do and why we do it. These issues are important for Christians to consider and discuss. Without careful consideration of why we do what we do, we may face a situation where some will look at the schools we have and say why we—and they—don't need them.

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. and Andrew Kern. *Classical Education: Towards the Revival of American Schooling.* Washington, D.C., (1513 16th St., NW, 20036-1401; phone 202-483-6900): Capital Research Center, 1997, 90 pages, $10.00.



Reviewed by Thea Lawrence, former teacher and freelance writer from Ansley, Nebraska.

Anyone who has been watching trends in American schooling for the past fifty years has seen learning and knowledge go slowly down the drain; many are the explanations for the educational failure of our time. Now we have a book that not only addresses this problem but proposes a revolutionary solution; renaissance, not reform.

Dr. Veith is dean of arts and sciences at Concordia University in Wisconsin and author of *Reading Between the Lines.* Mr. Kern is director of classical instruction at Foundations Academy in Boise, Idaho. They suggest that we avoid any further innovations and return to methods that were commonly in use before World War II. Our educational problems, they say, are not primarily caused by "incompetent teachers, uncaring parents, television-dazed children, or social upheaval." They claim that our educational system's underlying problem is intellectual: It's philosophical approach is at odds with human nature and has proved unworkable. This philosophy is called post-modernism; it is the dominant idea on American college and university campuses today. Nearly fifty years of graduates immersed in its principles have gone out to teach children by its methods, loosely based on John Dewey's theories.

The authors spend some time examining the follies of post-modernist pedagogy. Once their case has been established, they direct their attention to the recent move toward the kind of teaching that has been standard in Western civilization for twenty-five centuries. Their defense of Western civilization will resound in the hearts of many parents and some teachers who are heartily sick of the posturing of the post-modernists and want to go back to doing what once worked very well.

Veith and Kern term their alternative philosophy of education "classical," tracing it from the ancient Greeks through the Romans to our century, with special attention to the medieval scholastics who honed it into the two modes of learning known as Trivium and Quadrivium. The founders of our Republic wanted to make of our people the kind of citizens found in the Greece of Pericles and thus patterned our public schooling on the Athenian model, with some adjustments to contemporary requirements. Known as "liberal arts" education, it survived in some form until World War II. It was not until the second half of our century that educators made a concerted effort to eliminate every trace of it.

"Classical education," say the authors, "is neither of one time nor one culture, but is grounded in human nature and in the nature of learning. If offers an intellectual framework that is both disciplined and liberating, open to the past and to new knowledge." To prove their case, they describe four models of the classical school in successful operation today.

The first is represented by the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS), a movement which appeared in the summer of 1993 and whose annual conference last year attracted some 500 representatives from schools across the country. The movement began with one man in Moscow, Idaho. Douglas Wilson, pastor of a local church, established Logos School in 1980 with 19 students. By 1995 it had grown to 275 students, K-12. In 1991 he wrote a book, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning,* which inspired the formation of numerous new schools organized on the Logos model, which uses the medieval Trivium of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. At the grammar school level, children learn to read by phonics, master arithmetic drills, and begin Latin by memorizing vocabulary and inflectional endings. Learning by rote is a lower intellectual skill which young children nevertheless seem to enjoy, performing prodigious feats of

memory which "they frequently learn for the sheer pleasure of it." Mathematics is taught using the textbooks of John Saxon, the renegade educator whose use of drills, systematic repetition of basic operations, and cumulative learning has dramatically increased math competency wherever his methods have been tried. After thorough preparation in the fundamentals of each subject, pupils in the middle grades master the "logic" phase of the Trivium, actually studying formal logic. In high school, students discover self-expression (rhetoric) and are encouraged in independent thought. Through all these stages, the pupils read real literature, ranging from *The Chronicles of Narnia* to *Moby Dick* and including the classic works of Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and modern writers such as George Orwell.

After visiting Logos School, Dr. Veith commented, "Freshmen in college composition courses can barely write a thesis statement, but here are students who employ the *exordium* and *narratio* with style and grace, with well-supported arguments . . . The Logos students were poised, thoughtful, and interesting, concerned about the world and ready to take their place in it. Such are the benefits of a classical education."

Whereas the ACCS program operates through private schools only, the Paideia Group, headed by Mortimer Adler, who, with Robert Hutchins, initiated the Great Books Program at the University of Chicago in 1929, has targeted our public schools. In 1982, Mr. Adler published *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto.* The world *paideia* is the Greek word for instruction, discipline, and upbringing; and the goal is a school system that provides a "high quality of basic schooling for all children." Adler insists that "there are no unteachable children. There are only schools and teachers who fail to teach them."

The group urges immediate public school reform. For this reason, they have encountered hostility from the current educational establishment with its national lobby groups, teachers colleges, state licensing boards, federal mandates, and teachers' unions. The only conspicuous success of the Paideia Group has been in the burgeoning charter school movement.

A man named David Hicks, teacher and administrator in private schools for a number of years, has publicized the third model. His book, *Norms and Nobility*, places special emphasis on morals, which he claims are absent from most of today's public schools. He agrees with William Bennett that education should be the path to virtue. He believes the abandonment of traditional moral values for the merely practical built on value-free assumptions, such as standardized tests, outcome-based education, and goals 2000, will fail because "they exclude those intangible qualities of personality and character that make up the human spirit." He recommends a knowledge-centered and inquiry-based curriculum that makes students work hard. In this respect, he represents all four models of classical education.

The fourth model is perhaps the most dramatic of all, represented by Marva Collins, who has been an object of both admiration and scorn for a number of years. She is a black woman, working with black, under-privileged children on Chicago's south side. In 1975, after fourteen years in public schools, she opened her own school, Westside Preparatory School, with a few non-reading pupils. By the next semester, all could read. By 1976, she had eighteen pupils, all of whom did well on the Stanford-Binet Achievement Test. A local television station gave publicity to her success in teaching Shakespeare, and she finally achieved national exposure from a movie in which she was portrayed by Cicely Tyson. The local media, urged on by the local teachers' union, gave her a bad press. But unfavorable publicity only brought pleas for help from parents. By 1980 the waiting list was 700. Since she has become widely known, thousands of teachers have attended Westside seminars to learn her methods, and she has traveled across the country to help others establish their own schools. She is in perfect agreement with David Hicks in his emphasis on virtue and hard work. Veith and Kern tell us that pupils in her school who do not finish their homework do not eat lunch. They comment that "in an age quick to detect child abuse in discipline, it takes firm conviction to tell a child that there will be no lunch." Westside pupils hear symphonies, look at paintings, and read great literature: the Greeks, the Bible, fairy tales, Shakespeare, and nineteenth century novelists, reflecting the high standards of classical education in general.

In the final section of the book, the authors address themselves to higher education, about which they are not so hopeful, claiming that grammar schools experimenting with the Trivium are far ahead of most colleges and universities. They acknowledge that there are still liberal arts colleges that are doing a creditable job and list a number of them. But most have banished the core curriculum along with the ideal of the liberal arts. "The current intellectual climate," they say, "is hostile to classical thought and undermines all knowledge and ultimately education itself. Postmodernism, which denies all hierarchies of value, deconstructs itself along with every other meaning system. If there is no truth, who needs college? A university teaching such things becomes its own first victim."

In appraising classical education, Veith and Kern warn that, in spite of its merits, it does not have an easy road ahead. "It goes against the grain of much contemporary culture and makes pampered children work hard. It forces the television generation to read. Teachers will have to convince students that the good, the true, and the beautiful have more value than the glittering prizes of pop culture and the easy answers of relativism." Yet they seem to believe in its final success, for they have added in the back of the book a bibliography and listing of organizations and resources for those who are ready to start their own schools believing that classical education is the way of the future. ■