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Editorial


Bert Witvoet

Underneath the Futility of the Secular Novel

Bert Witvoet

About 32 years ago I got into difficulties as a teacher for having selected a then contemporary novel called *The Catcher in the Rye*. J.D. Salinger had written the book 16 years earlier by the time I selected it, but the book had gone through no fewer than 40 printings. It accurately portrayed teenage language and teenage alienation in a time we associate with hippies.

Last year I decided to reread it. I had not done that since 1967! Why not? Perhaps because I wanted to avoid the unpleasant memories I associate with that period. Also the book seemed somewhat alien to me. The more removed I became from it, the less convinced I was that I had made a wise choice back then. I don't know what made me reread it now. Maybe it's because I was coming to the end of my formal working life, and this book represented unfinished business. Maybe I had lost my fear of this episode.

I don't know how I thought years ago that such a book would not upset some people. I was a bit of a naive idealist, and I stumbled into the controversy with the best of intentions. As a Christian teacher who believed that all of life is religion, I was going to lead my students through a book that accurately captures the post-war, nihilistic culture around them. I needed to prepare them for real life – show them that some people are waiting for Godot. What could be wrong with that? I tended to see twelfth-grade students as being mature enough to handle it. My opponents disagreed.

The problem with language

I must honestly say that upon rereading *The Catcher* last year, I was at first bothered by the swearing in the book. God's name is constantly taken in vain by the main character, Holden Caulfield. There is very little foul language in the book, by the way. The protagonist doesn't like the f-word, and he holds people who are preoccupied with sex or perversion in low esteem (actually, he holds most people in low esteem). But he and the author think nothing of throwing the name of God and Jesus around. Had it not bothered me 30 years ago? I wondered.

It probably had then, too, although I had earlier in my life worked in a factory for nearly five years, and I was used to the language. Then, as now, by the time I was a few chapters into the book, the language no longer stood out and bothered me. It became part of the landscape, and my attention was drawn more to the plot, the characters and the main theme.

Need for answers

The more I read and reflected on it this time, the more I thought that my choice of book had not been such a bad choice after all. My notes and explanations of 1967 helped, too.

The fact that I had taught *David Copperfield* that same term and had been able to draw strong comparisons between these two fictional biographies made me realize again the value of the exercise. Charles Dickens had written a book that seemed harmless and constructive, but, in fact, it was a world almost closed to the gospel. The Victorian mindset was so self-satisfied and optimistic that salvation other than social reform made no sense. But Salinger drew a world that was badly in need of answers. His book cries out for love and compassion. The problems of adolescence are well portrayed: boredom, rebellion, insecurity and searching.

Nevertheless, the language was the stumbling block. I remember talking about it with my students. They, too, had to swallow a few times before going on. Some felt tainted by it. But they realized that it was integral to the vision of the author. The criticism I heard later was that I had wilfully led these students into evil – I had caused them to commit "mental sins."

My defense was that I had taken them into the novel not to sin or to get used to swearing, but to make them understand how an important writer of that time saw his society. I compared it to my working in a factory, a place where swearing is commonplace. I did not enter that factory to be tainted by swearing but to do a necessary job.

And I had to learn to survive. The Christian school, I argued, has to help students discern the spirits of their time and teach them to survive.

The call of humanity

But that was not the only reason I had for studying *The Catcher*. The book offered some valuable insights that could teach us Christians a thing or two. What stands out in the book, even now, is the brutal honesty of the main character and the sensitivity he shows toward those he considers "real" (rightly or wrongly, he considers most people he meets phonies). He himself is, by almost all definitions, a misfit. And he knows it. That in itself makes him vulnerable and could help readers relax about themselves.

Holden is a kind of flower child, frightfully alienated from his parents and his society. But he sets high standards for the arts and for personal relationships. In fact, the title explains that he wants to be protective of children when they play in a field of rye near a steep cliff. He wants to catch them before they fall over the edge. He wants to be the catcher in the rye. It's a silly, non-productive occupation, but also a judgment on all those who get caught in the rat race of "respectable" occupations.

That's the paradox of studying worldly "great" literature. While we must reject the dead-end street of *humanistic* secularism so prevalent in modern novels, we must at the same time respect the opening-up quality of the *humanity* so often uncovered by these same authors.

I read somewhere the following summation of themes in *The Catcher*: "the need for love; the search for something other than self in which to believe; the problem of the sensitive man's inability to communicate with his fellows; the contempt for purely materialistic goals and for phoniness wherever it is to be found; the need to accept, and even to love, one's fellows despite their imperfections; and, finally, the knowledge that there is no escape in this world from the ugliness which is reality, which is life."

Underneath the futility of an aimless and seemingly useless life lie these worthwhile themes. It appears that ungodly books can show up our own failures. Doesn't our Christian community often need to be delivered from a bourgeois, pietistic mediocrity or phoniness?

A communal decision

Would I teach *The Catcher in the Rye* again today? I ask myself, especially after what happened to me (I was fired). Not necessarily that particular book. In fact, after so much opposition arose back in 1967, I was willing to change to another contemporary novel. But I would still want to teach a contemporary novel or two in the senior grades of high school. This time I would make the selection with a group of serious, mature Christian readers in the community, something I did not do 32 years ago.

When I read the list of books studied in Christian schools nowadays I can cry. What makes us think that there is safety in studying the humanism of earlier times while neglecting the humanism of our times? Thinking of the students that have missed out on so much, one would almost want to become a catcher in the rye.

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Seeking Order in Chaos:

A Definition of Christian Literature

by William Boerman-Cornell and Jeffrey DeVries

William Boerman-Cornell and Jeffrey DeVries both teach English at Illiana Christian High School in Lansing, Illinois.

Writer James Schaap tells the story of Diet Eman, a young Dutch girl active in the Dutch Resistance during World War II. One night, this teenaged girl, who risked her life every day delivering false identification papers and stolen ration books, sat alone in a dark room, reading by candlelight. The book she read was *Sacred Songs*, a collection of poetry given her by her fiancé. In the midst of her weariness and fear, she found comfort in these words:

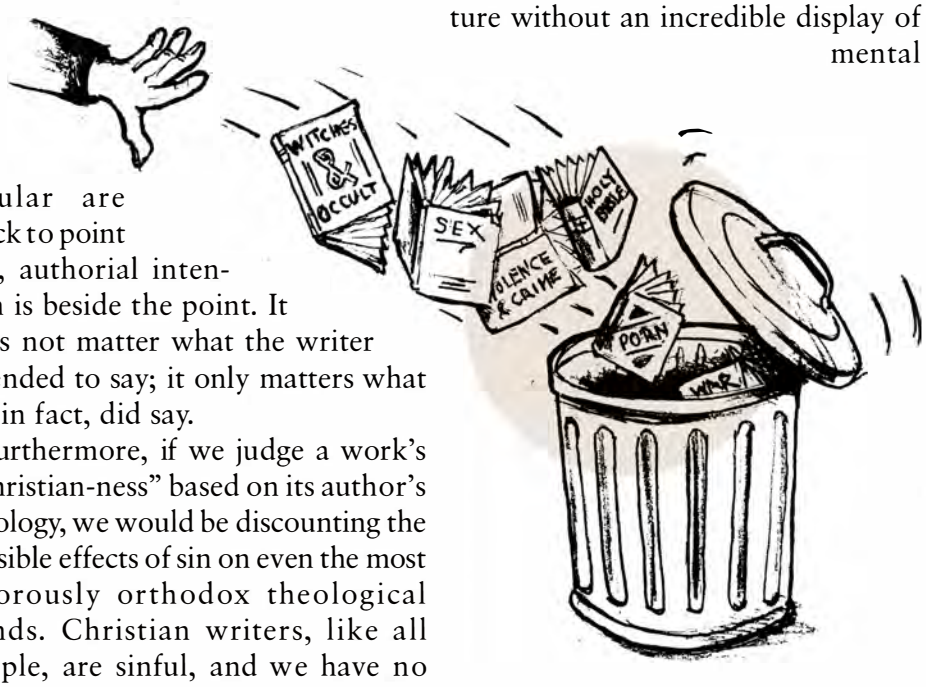
> Those who love me in this world
> always want to keep me secure;
> but your love, Lord,
> so much greater than theirs,
> grants me freedom.
> My friends never let me alone
> for fear I will forget them.
>
> But days pass into nights
> and I don't see you.
> If I don't call on you in my prayers,
> if I don't hold you in my heart,
> still, your love for me remains,
> waiting for mine. (1)

This poem brought comfort to a young Christian woman living in a difficult time. But what's remarkable about the poem is that, despite what many Christian readers might believe while reading, it was not written by a Christian. The poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was Hindu.

The problem

As this story illustrates, literature is not always easy to categorize. Before we can discuss whether we should teach worldly literature, we need to define it. Presumably the antithesis of worldly literature is Christian literature, but both terms are nebulous. And into which category does Tagore's poem fit?

Most people, we assume, would label Tagore's poem as Christian literature, at least prior to learning of its author's theology. But should the author's theology change how we label a literary work? If the poem seemed Christian, whatever that may mean, why would it suddenly become less Christian after discovering the poet is not who we thought he was? As literary critics both Christian and secular are quick to point out, authorial intention is beside the point. It does not matter what the writer intended to say; it only matters what he, in fact, did say.



Furthermore, if we judge a work's "Christian-ness" based on its author's theology, we would be discounting the possible effects of sin on even the most rigorously orthodox theological minds. Christian writers, like all people, are sinful, and we have no more guarantee that literature produced by Christians will necessarily be Christian art than we have guarantee that any conversation a Christian takes part in is Christian conversation. All sin and fall short of the glory of God. Clearly then, we cannot ground the definition of Christian literature in the theology of its creator.

Nor can we ground the definition of Christian literature in the reader. Certainly the fact that Diet Eman was a Christian had an effect on how she read Tagore's poem. No one denies that the reader's experiences and expectations do shape her reading. Still, a text can mean only in a limited number of ways, and the text has as much to do with limiting those ways as does the reader. A Christian reader cannot turn the Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* into Christian literature without an incredible display of mental

gymnastics and, more importantly, without doing violence to the clearest layers of meaning within the text itself.

Toward a definition

Clearly, to find a definition for Christian or worldly literature, we must ground the definition in the literature itself. Thus, Tagore's poem might qualify as Christian literature regardless of his being Hindu. But if that is the case, what in his poem makes it Christian?

Some define the spiritual character of literature by examining its expressed use. Thus, Christian literature is liturgical or devotional. But this definition is too narrow. By extrapolation, we might say that the only plumbing a plumber can do that pleases God is the plumbing he or she does in a church building. Abraham Kuyper reminded us that Jesus is Lord of all, and so to limit Christian art to art made strictly for religious purposes is too narrow. (2).

Other Christians define Christian art by limiting the subjects it encompasses. Thus, for some, Christian literature is literature that examines biblical motifs. For others, who are slightly more broad-minded, the subject of literature may not be directly biblical, but it will be nice — no naughty words, no sex, no violence. Sin may be evident, but it happens offstage. Such a definition is comfortable because it is so quantifiable. Any movie that uses the f—word is clearly worldly. Any poem that deals with incest or rape is worldly. Any book that contains witches or sorcery is worldly. Christian literature is simply literature devoid of these offensive things.

The problem here is that such a definition ignores the sin-plagued reality of our lives. The distasteful facts are that people do cuss and rape and cheat and lie and kill. And these sins affect our lives mightily. Thus, an intelligent reader finds it odd when Christian literature confronts none of these issues. Beyond odd, she probably finds it dishonest. Literature that ignores sin is literature that lies. It is little better than propaganda. Furthermore, if teachers were to teach students only Christian literature (according to this definition), the first book we would have to throw out would be the Bible. God never shrinks from showing sin in all its ugliness, including scenes of incest, murder, infanticide, orgies and drunkenness.

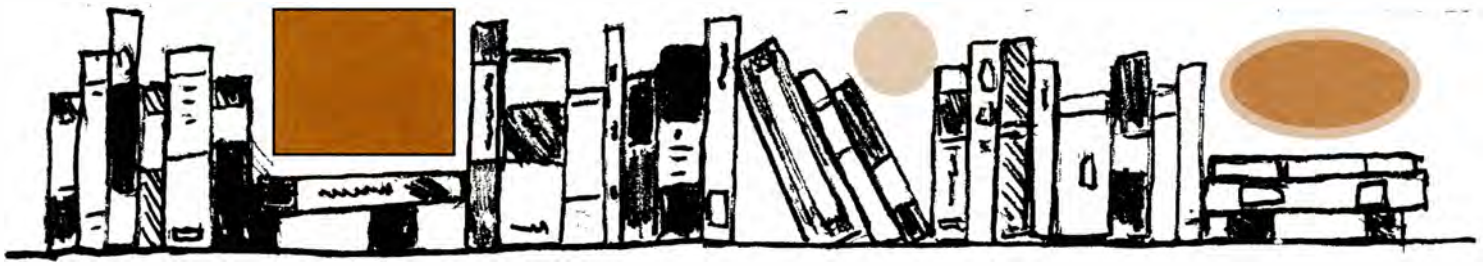
> "Like L'Engle, Seerveld defines Christian art as art that depicts God's order, even as it runs through a broken world."

It is equally true that literature without cuss words or violence is still not necessarily pure. Philosophies of materialism, individualism, and hedonism, to name only a few, might easily appear in such a pleasant form. For example, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, a seemingly innocuous text and standard fare in American literature classrooms, has perhaps done more than any other piece of American literature to advance the myth of the self-reliant individual, a myth that clearly runs counter to a Christian understanding of community.

Look for perspective

We would suggest a definition based not on the purpose of literature or subject, but on its perspective. Christian literature makes sense of the human experience and postulates that a meaningful story lies behind the universe. As writer Madeleine L'Engle notes, "All Christian art is cosmos in chaos". (3) The writers of such art depict both sin and grace, both ugliness and beauty; but in their looking at the jumble of life, they show us order and meaning. Worldly literature, in contrast, interprets life to be a nonsensical farce, a meaningless chaos.

Calvin Seerveld argues something similar when he says, "Christian art charted by the Bible may bring to canvas and book and modulated tones *anything* afoot in the world, in a way that shall expose sin as a God-damning waste and shall show obedient life as a joy forever... ." (4) Like L'Engle,



Seerveld defines Christian art as art that depicts God's order, even as it runs through a broken world. Thus, no subject — not witchcraft, not homosexuality, not murder — is necessarily off limits. What matters is the work's perspective.

And so we arrive at these definitions: *Christian literature* shows God's order in the midst of lives that seem chaotic. *Worldly literature* celebrates brokenness and sin, and suggests an utter lack of meaning behind human life.

Of course, we recognize that our definition does not solve all questions. Literature is an attempt to get at a truth by telling a story. The problem is that stories are open to interpretation (as we see whenever Jesus tells a story to the Pharisees — or even to his own disciples). So one reasonable person might look at a novel and see only hopeless chaos, whereas another reasonable person might catch a glimpse of God's truth.

Where to go?

So are we back to where we started — mired in confusion? Not necessarily. There are clearly some steps that we, as a Christian community need to take.

First, in order to look for God's truth in literature, we need to read literature with an open mind, but, at the same time, a discerning mind. As we have seen from the poem at the beginning of this essay, God frequently speaks through even broken humans who may not realize he is using them. If all of the world is the Lord's, we can read literature of indeterminate theology without fear, confident as we look for glimpses of his grace.

In order to do this, we need to teach ourselves and our students to discern. Discernment is what allows us to see and comprehend the subtleties of a text; discernment is what helps us decide if a piece of literature meets the criteria to be called Christian. Ultimately, learning discernment is what the study of literature is about. If we teach only clearly Christian literature, will our students get any practice at digging into the messiness of life and discerning God's will and truth in it? Furthermore, there is value in understanding the culture around us. Doesn't a Hemingway novel or a Heller novel, even if it is not Christian, reveal to us something substantial about modern humanity, the very people we are supposed to reach with the gospel?

Then, with growing confidence in our and our students' ability to discern, we can approach literature with awareness rather than panicked paranoia. We can discuss calmly with each other what our perceptions are. Literature touches our emotions and sometimes inflames our passions. Though impassioned discussion and argument can be a great way to get at the truth, we must also recognize that there are some questions upon which reasonable people can disagree. Discussing our differences may help us learn the truth. When sometimes we end the discussion deadlocked, we should be willing to admit that both sides have their points.

When feuds over Harry Potter or Madeleine L'Engle, Huck Finn or J.D. Salinger next erupt at their school, teachers need to work as educators not only with students but also with parents, administrators and school boards. By placing individual works into a larger context, such as the differences between Christian literature and secular literature or what we actually hope to accomplish in teaching literature, we can remove most of the angst and ill will from the debate. Indeed, such discussions, besides deciding the fates of single works, will also increase the thoughtfulness of entire school communities. And that, of course, is what we are *all* called to do.

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Grapes of

by Mert Smits

Mert Smits is CEJ's Southwestern U.S. Editor. She teaches English at Valley Christian High School in Verritos, California.

The English Department of Valley Christian High School sometimes lives on the edge. That is, we live on the edge if that means teaching books that are on the list of those censored by public schools, the conservative Christian, the political far right, and a few parents. In other words, we teach such books as *Huck Finn, Lord of the Flies, The Sun also Rises,* and *Grapes of Wrath.* How do we teach these books from a Christian perspective? Are they even worthwhile?

Each year I teach *Grapes of Wrath.* Because we teach all junior literature and history classes in correlation with one another, including our AP (Advanced Placement) History and AP Language and Composition classes, this book is a natural to accompany the study of the 1930s. History discusses the Dust Bowl, the migration of the poor to California, the lack of jobs available there, the attitude of the rich who didn't want to live near them or to care for them, and the reaction of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt to the plight of the poor.

Literature discusses the above historical facts as they relate to the following: the change in Christ figure Jim Casy, the problems of the Okies as they moved to California, the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, secular humanism, a possible call to revolution. And, of course, there are the literary devices which make Steinbeck's novel an exemplary piece of literature.

All of that seems valuable, but the language, the situational ethics of the Joad family, and the problems which arise in the minds of the students over the possibility of Jim Casy being a Christ figure always give me qualms as we begin reading. Each year at the beginning of the reading, I must deal with students who question the value of the book. So I always ask them to wait until we have finished the reading, afterwich we will discuss whether I should have next year's class read the same book.

All this comes back to the question of teaching from a Christian perspective. Although Christian values obviously

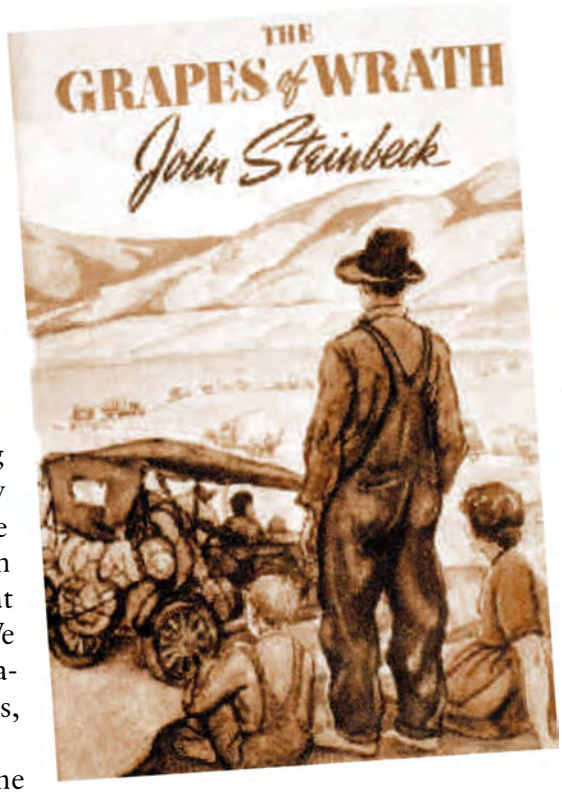
Wrath — *Sweet or Sour?*

are part of some of the aforementioned ideas, it still is sometimes difficult to decide if the ideas or questions raised have any lasting effects on the students. However, this year, our closing discussion on the book ended with a living lesson.

As we were deciding on the value of the book (I have never yet had a class that felt it wasn't valuable), I asked them what relationship we had to the poor in our community. We talked about the cost of sitting in my class (approximately $4.00 per class session), the fact that considering the world's wealthy on a scale of one to 10, 10 being the wealthiest, we were probably a nine. We talked about how we hardly noticed the homeless man who regularly begs for money at the entrance to Cerritos Mall. We talked about the money we habitually spend on lunch, dates, movies and other luxuries.

The crux of the matter came when a student asked, "Well, what can we do about it? If we care, we should do our little part." So for 15 days we decided to tax our luxuries. A group of four students was asked to help me decide which luxuries to tax. Each day I put up the item to be taxed, which included such things as: two cents per owned sweater / sweatshirts, one day's lunch money, one cent per CD owned (one student had to pay $20.00), 10 per cent of your weekly allowance, the cost of one date, one cent for each soft drink consumed during the last month.

Each day we passed around a clear plastic water jug and began saving the money. Each day a student would retrieve the jug from the back



closet and collect dues. Usually the student who requested this task was ardently active in this endeavor, and gently needled those who were not contributing regularly.

Surprising results

At the end of the 15 days, we cut open the jug. The results far surpassed what I had envisioned. When we counted the money, we discovered that 48 students in my two AP classes had collected $511.37! We sent half of it to the CRWRC Kosovo Relief Fund, and half of it to His Nesting Place , a local Christian organization which works with pregnant teenagers.

We also took a half day from school to work at this organization, helping clean out an old school they had just purchased, and sorting clothes donated to the organization. This, too, was an eye-opener. His Nesting Place is in the poorest part of town, and even the most disadvantaged of my students would not have to wear the clothes donated. The school which they helped clean was dirty, with the wallboard coming loose and the light fixtures not working. It was a glimpse at how the poor in society sometimes are forced to function.

Was it worthwhile to read *Grapes of Wrath*? Did our closing exercise bring meaning to the novel? Will the real life experiences deepen the meaning of each participating Christian's attitude towards the poor? Will students be more willing to give? I pray that all these questions are answered positively. The students seemed excited about giving and helping. Their enthusiasm deepened mine. To me, this exercise truly seemed to exemplify "teaching from a Christian perspective." It was an applicable life lesson. My qualms about the novel were removed ... for this year at least!

WHO'S AFRAID OF

by Agnes Fisher

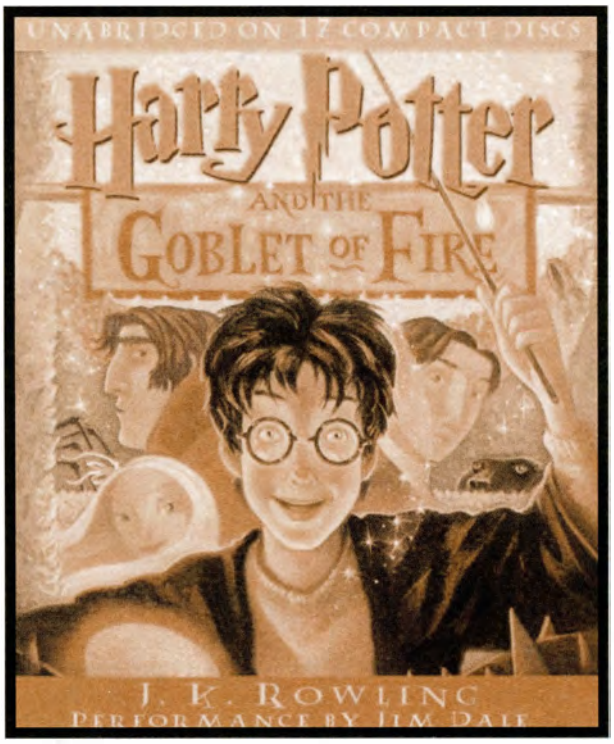
Agnes Fisher is CEJ's regional editor for the Eastern U.S. She teaches English, humanities and art at Eastern Christian High School in North Haledon, New Jersey.

When the first Harry Potter book came out, it was an instant success. Its appeal was specifically to the Middle School age group but also to both younger and older readers. Part of the reason, I would guess, is that Harry Potter has special powers, uses them to overcome evil and is involved in lots of intrigue. He is also an unlikely little wimp who turns out to be a kind of savior figure. This is the stuff of good fantasy, much like such fairy tales as *The Narnia Chronicles, The Hobbit* and others. Although I don't think Rowlings is quite on a par with either Lewis or Tolkien, her stories apparently grab kids and even many adults.

So, who is afraid of Harry Potter and why? Harry is a witch (warlock) and witches have traditionally been evil. The Bible specifically warns against witches (the Witch of Endor and Saul in 1 Sam. 28,"Let no one be found among you who practices divination or sorcery" — Deut. 18:10). Considering the biblical injunction against witchcraft, some may find Harry Potter a character to fear.

Good versus evil

But let's consider what we have to work with. We have a very good boy, orphaned and abused by his living relatives, belittled by his cousin, and called to study his destiny at age eleven since he had been "chosen" from infancy. He is sent off to a magical school to prepare for his mission. Sound at all familiar? It's another story about good versus evil much like *Star Wars,* old tales of magic, and specifically Christian literature. It is also a love story. Love overcomes all the evil perpetrated against Harry during his childhood. "The greatest of these is love" is a theme interwoven through the plot.



At the end of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* good Prof. Dumbledore saves Harry and explains: "Your mother died trying to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort [equivalent to Satan] cannot understand, it is love." The worst guys in the books hate Harry and all good, and the best ones love him and his mission. And guess who wins in the end?

Let us also consider the role of art in the Christian' life. John Calvin said, "... in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from God its creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or contemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the giver" (Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk l, ch.II, pts. 12-13).

The argument would follow that if the book is well written so as to show the author as someone with obvious gifts, we would also have to acknowledge that the gift is from God and that we should not despise it. Furthermore, if this profane author also searches for and exposes truth, which comes only from God, then we have something to which we must pay attention. It is interesting to note that an author who may not know the living God nonetheless pursues truth and practices her gift with integrity. It is incumbent on us both as

HARRY POTTER?

parents and teachers to instruct our students in this truth and to teach them to discern between that which should be taken in and that which a reader would do well to ignore in such an author.

Some criteria

Leland Ryken, a professor of English at Wheaton College for many years and prolific writer on the subject of Christianity and the arts, has offered a very simple checklist to aid in discernment. The following list appears in *The Liberated Imagination*, published by Shaw in 1989.

1. Does this [book] call my attention to something about either reality or modern culture that I need to know?

2. What is the precise nature of the gulf between this work and my Christian beliefs and values?

3. Does my contact with this work have a negative effect on my Christian beliefs or on my moral behavior?

4. Does the overall cultural or intellectual significance of this work exceed in importance the offensiveness of some aspects or it? Can I minimize the impact of these negative aspects in order to appropriate the larger benefits of the work'?

5. If I do not enjoy this work) is there a reason why I should encounter it anyway?

6. Does my contact with this work make me more capable or less capable of being God's person in the society in which he has placed me?

J.K. Rowling has written a series of books which do show an honest search for truth and light. Harry may be called a witch, and that is unfortunate. But he is not to be feared since his quest is to eradicate evil and show the power of love. Pretty godly stuff. This is not to suggest the Harry Potter books are specifically Christian because they are not, but they are not unwholesome or dangerous either. If read and enjoyed with Christian discernment, why be afraid of Harry Potter?

Saying Yes and No to Our Culture

By Daniel Ribera

Daniel Ribera is the principal of Mack Elementary (Bellevue) Christian School in Woodinville, Washington.

A number of parents have approached me with questions about Pokemon cards and the Harry Potter books and about their influence on children. I appreciate the concerns and convictions parents have expressed. There are multiple issues involved and I don't think a quick easy answer will do this subject justice.

Some parents come to the Christian school expecting their children to be shielded from all such influences. There is, however, a broad spectrum of convictions and, thus, different levels of acceptance among Christian school families for games like Pokemon and books like the Harry Potter series. I have seen varying levels of tolerance from one family to the next, and I have seen families change and adjust as their children move from the primary years through to adulthood.

The goal at the Christian school should be to prepare our young people to live fully for God, not to protect them from worldly influences. Children should progressively (age-appropriately) have opportunity to understand, evaluate and transform the world. All of history and literature includes characters (some unsavory) that our children will need to understand and evaluate, and all of life calls for discernment and wisdom. Our mission calls for equipping students, not sheltering them.

Nothing new

Every six months to a year a commercial craze sweeps across the nation's elementary schools. The Pokemon fad will fade in the face of the next rage. In my career as a teacher and school administrator I have dealt with Pogs, Cabbage Patch Dolls, Power Rangers, Care Bears, Smurfs, Furbies, action figures of all types, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, gig-a-pets, and many more. All of these, without exception, had some of the same disconcerting qualities that you find in Harry Potter and Pokemon.

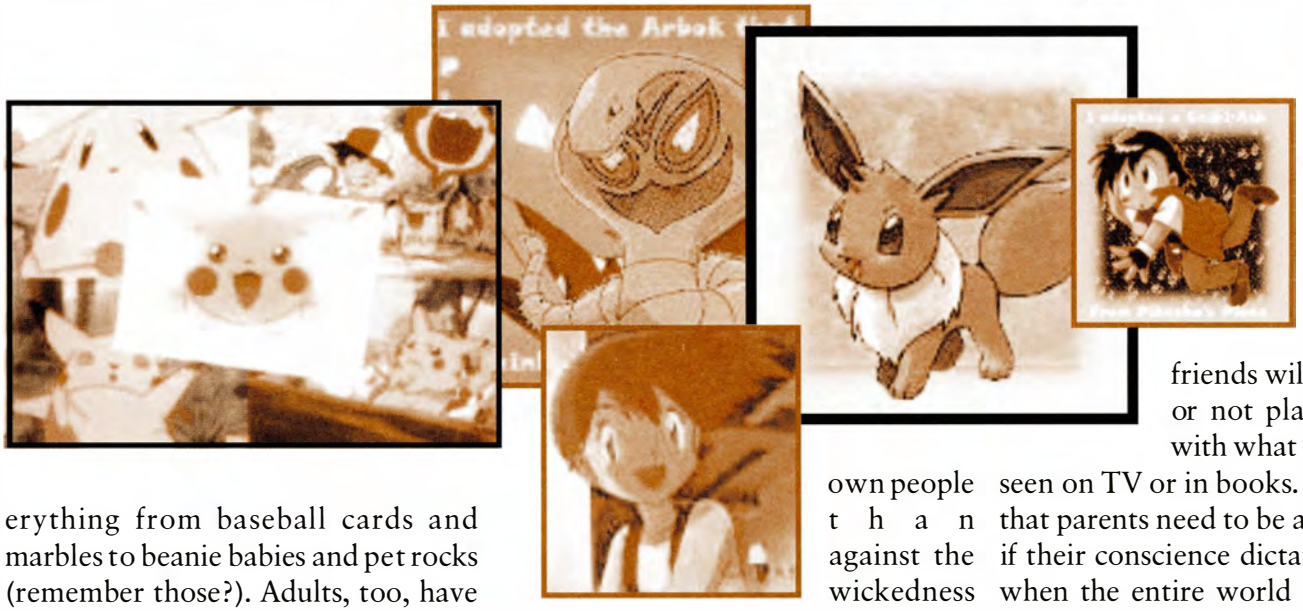
Some of these presented the same challenges of helping our children understand their God and the world he created. That is to say, many of these included themes of eastern mysticism and the supernatural in their use of knowledge and power. Many of these fads became obsessions, and many families and schools expressed concern over children's involvement with the games or toys, and concerns with how their children behaved as a result. The scripture passage is true that says, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Helpful points

Here is some perspective for how we Christians can understand the opportunities and challenges presented by such cultural phenomena as Harry Potter books and Pokemon cards:

1. God's image bearers — One step in the process of discernment and discipleship is to understand how sin affects all of God's image bearers. One great historic Christian creed describes the effects of sin in this way: "Even the very best we do in this life is imperfect and stained with sin." The opposite is also true: much of what unbelievers do bears the mark of their creation in God's image. This allows us to approach issues of how Christians engage contemporary culture with a measure of appreciation for how God reveals himself through all of his creation, as well as encouraging a measure of humility for our own need of the Gospel. It is this recognition that allows Christians to appreciate in Harry Potter the themes of friendship and loyalty, the struggle of the underdog, and the grappling between good and evil.

2. Obsessions — It concerns us when the attention and desires of our children become overly fixed on one toy. They lose interest in all the rest and seemingly become obsessed with having, possessing, and playing with the one object. They become covetous of what their friends have, greedy in not sharing, and even deceptive in taking what is not theirs. This lust of material possessions is not unique to Pokemon. We have seen it with ev-



erything from baseball cards and marbles to beanie babies and pet rocks (remember those?). Adults, too, have their own objects of desire. We share this same nature with our children. The solution here is not to do away with all material possessions that could potentially seduce our children. Since creation, God's image bearers have been exchanging the worship of the one true Creator for worship of the creation. The solution is to teach our children the difference. Collections of all sorts can be a valuable opportunity to teach responsibility on the one hand, while helping children to hold loosely to possessions on this earth.

3. Eastern influences — Our next concern is the increase of Eastern religions in our culture. The world is filled with false religions. But let's be consistent in our discernment. Are we more concerned with the influences of Eastern religions than we are with the influences of equally idolatrous Western commercialism and materialism? Quite frankly, there is not much difference, from a biblical perspective, between the role modeling of Barbie and GI Joe and the role-playing of Dungeons and Dragons and Pokemon. God's Word speaks against all forms of idolatry. In Scripture, Christ and the prophets spoke out more strongly against the hypocrisy and hardness of heart of God's own people than against the wickedness of the nations.

4. Sin and righteousness — We need to be careful about messages we give our children that suggest that it is external influences that cause us to sin. It is not the possession of money that caus ery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Since those external occasions for sin will surround us all our lives, we need to teach our young people how to exercise discernment and wisdom. A second unbiblical message suggests that abstaining from certain games or toys is what makes us righteous. That is legalism. True righteousness is a gift from Christ. No one is righteous by his or her own works, i.e., the abstention from playing with a toy, but by the work of God in your child's life through Christ.

5. Parenting — Parenting is hard work. Sometimes it seems easier to shield our children from influences of which we disapprove than to do battle by saying *no* and teaching discernment. By wanting the school to "make a statement" we won't have to say *no*, and face the possible confrontation with our children. As a parent, it may seem easier and better for our children not to be exposed to those influences, and not deal with the strong desire to have this toy, and not hassle with what friends will think or say, or not play tug of war with what our kids have seen on TV or in books. The reality is that parents need to be able to say *no*, if their conscience dictates that, even when the entire world is saying *yes*. That's the job description of parents. Say *no* with grace and love now, and it will be easier when your child is a teenager. In fact, having our children understand our convictions and values in a loving context, regardless of what others (even good Christian families) do, will make the bigger issues down the road easier.

I hope this article gives some perspective on how we address these issues in our community. I would encourage every family to teach their children discernment, while modeling humility in the presence of a diverse community. In time any fad will fade along with the rest. However, what we teach our young people about the grace of Christ will give them the strength to practice godliness now and in the future.

Which Novel Do You Prefer?

by Bert Witvoet

If we want to understand better what is Christian literature and what is non-Christian literature, we do well to distinguish between what in some Reformed circles has been called *structure* and *direction*. If something is Christian, it moves in the direction of wanting to please God. Non-Christian literature does not have that spiritual intent. To be moving in a direction that seeks to honor God as we craft a story is good, but it does not guarantee that the product will be worthwhile.

Many Christian books that seek to please God are not very good literature. And that's a shame. When I walk into a Christian book store, I see far too many shelves with Christian books that I avoid like the biblionic plague. For literature to be good, it has to follow creational guidelines for sound structure.

Preference

Let me give you an illustration. If someone were to build a house for me, I would prefer that person to be a good Christian who at the same time is a good carpenter. By "good Christian" I mean someone who integrates faith and life, including the work of his hands. By "good carpenter" I mean someone who understands the principles of sound structure and who practices excellent skills. But if that choice is not available to me, I would rather have an ungodly person who is a good carpenter build my home than a Christian who is an incompetent carpenter.

The same holds true for literature. I prefer a novel written by a good Christian (one who integrates her faith) who is at the same time a good writer. But if that is not available to me at a given time, I prefer a book written by an ungodly person who is an excellent writer to a book written by a sincere Christian who does not understand sound principles of good writing and does not practice the skills necessary for producing good literature.

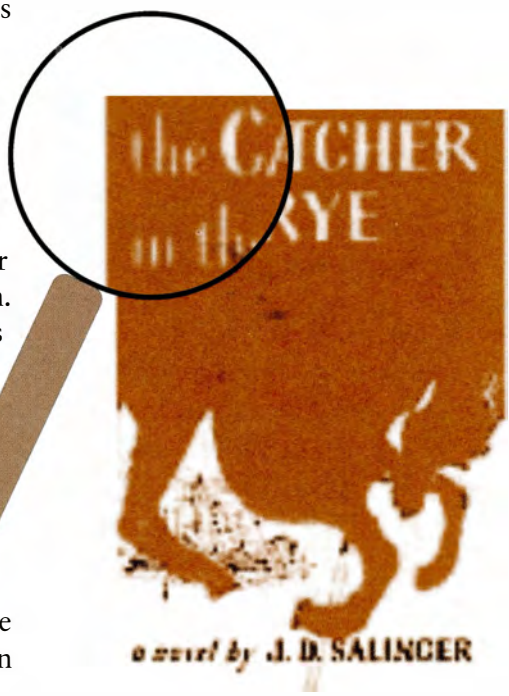
Dynamic influence

Why then is it so important to be Christian? you may ask. To be Christian is to partake in the healing power of the Kingdom of God and to move along with the Holy Spirit. Our world needs those healing powers. A non-Christian spirit is a dynamic power that moves in the direction of breakdown and destruction.

To be Christian is to bring things into harmony with the design God has laid in creation. Christ came to restore us to a right relationship first of all with God, but secondly with God's creation. This creation has its own demands according to God's design. And so we have to understand the structure of things in order to be fully reconciled with creation. Sometimes a gifted unbeliever does that better than a less gifted believer. Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper called that "common grace." Whatever term you are comfortable with, be sure to appreciate the fact that unbelievers can do positive things.

A non-Christian author's skillful use of language, understanding of human nature, strength of visual perception, playful use of irony and images, and unfailing sense of drama can, through the form of poem or story, open reality in a way that leaves us agape with admiration. Nor need his or her work be devoid of moral soundness. But there are times, indeed, when the spiritual direction is so evil and destructive that the result is a twisted mass of skillful writing. There are limits to what we can use in a redemptive way.

There's a lot more that needs to be analyzed and understood before we achieve consensus on what literature we should include in the Christian school curriculum. But it seems to me that making a distinction between structure and direction is a necessary part of the process.



What does our curriculum tell young people?

by Robert Koole

Robert Koole is curriculum coordinator for the Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia.

If curriculum is "what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation" what are we telling our young people?

Any model of curriculum is rooted in a cluster of visions — a vision of humanity, of the universe, of human potential, and of our relationships to the cosmos. These visions have a profound impact on our day-to-day educational practices and on our ways of formulating curriculum guides.

Contemporary curriculum is hollow at its core because it lacks a spiritual center or is based on a misdirected one and, therefore, provides no real alternative to earlier documents. Beyond arguing that new curriculum is based on new and improved principles of learning, curriculum designers are unable to come up with a compelling basis for preferring certain topics over others or particular learning outcomes at one grade level over another. The curriculum is filled with hundreds of skills competing for teacher attention.

Worthwhile knowledge

I believe it is helpful to begin with this question: What will be worthwhile to know and experience in the 21st century?

We can gather ideas and activities, involve students, parents and teachers, and listen to Scripture and to each other. After we offer some broadly stated, general ideas, we will be able to suggest what might be part of a challenging, exploratory and integrative curriculum for a 5-7 year old, for a 8-10 year old, for a 11-14 year old, and for a 15- 18 year old. The answers we develop will guide our reconsideration of current curriculum.

Love centres

What might form the core in that curriculum? I think that we would identify and develop a Christian curriculum around the central characteristics of what it means to be human — to be men and women fully alive, who image their Creator. The central message of the gospel "and the greatest of these is love..." provides the foundation.

Our curriculum would be designed around centers of love: love for God, love for others, love for self, love for animals and plants, love for physical things, love for the human-made world and all its objects, love for ideas, etc. [1] Each of these "centers" would consist of themes, issues, significant questions, concepts that enable students and teachers to explore and expand their understanding of what it means to be fully human, i.e., originally created, currently fallen, and potentially redeemed beings.

Designing curriculum around centers of love, as identified above, will build closer connections between the overall purpose and meaning of education and provide a fuller context for teaching and learning. If I truly love God, all learning would grow out of my faith in him. What do my eyes of faith see when I look at ...? If I truly love others, I will do everything I can to help children learn to read, write, speak, draw, build, calculate, formulate and communicate well.

A curriculum that is designed around centers of love would emphasize three Rs: these would be Relational, Responsive and Responsible.

Relational task

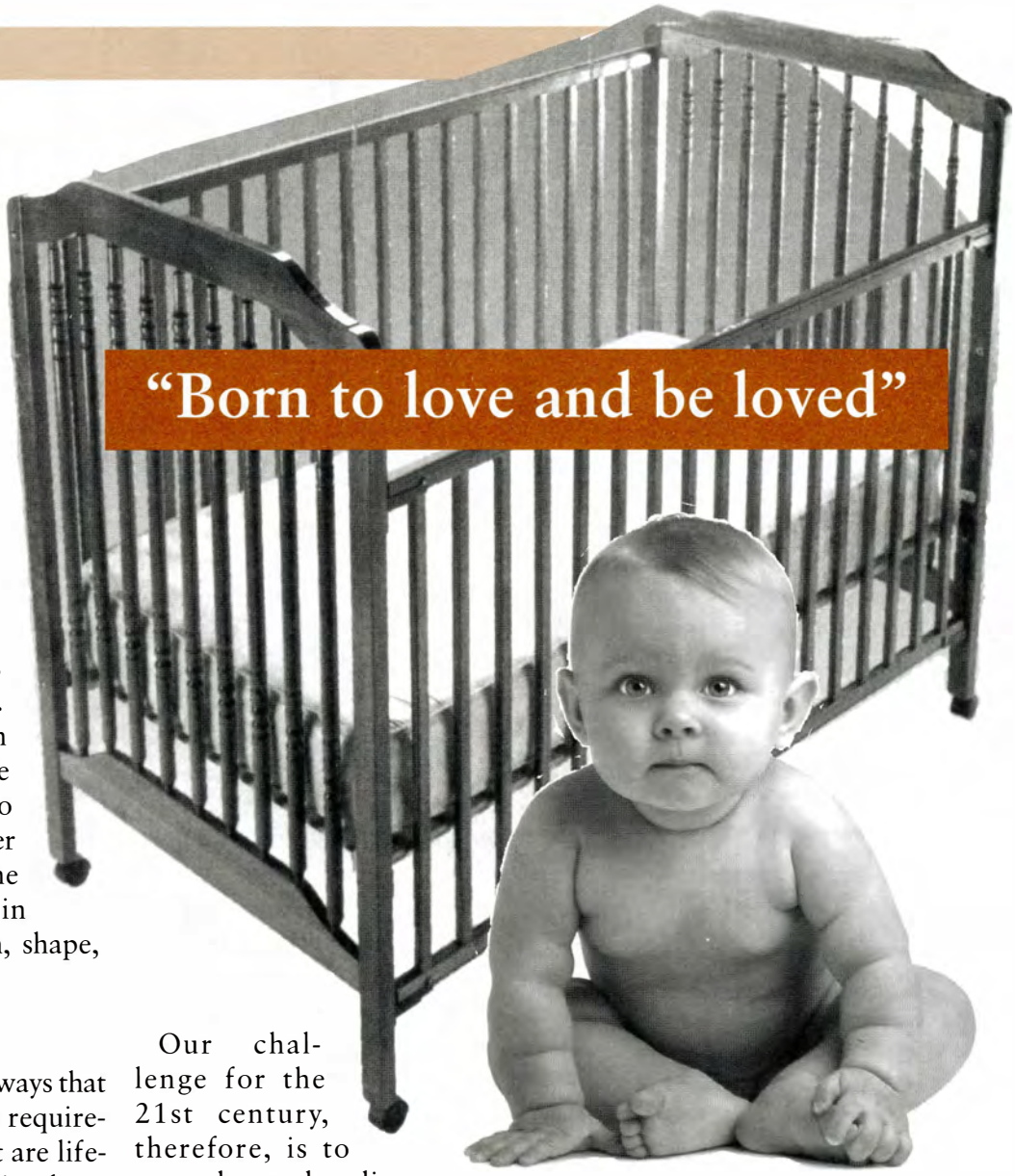
We are created to be in four relationships: with God, others, self and creation. We are born to love and be loved. This relational reality should form the heart of education. All children need to know that someone loves them, values who they are, loves what they write, say, make and do. Love does not come through holding a certain set of values but by living a certain kind of life. The most influential part of the curriculum, therefore, is our character — as teachers we are a living curriculum. W. H. Schubert says it this way: "Live as if your life were a curriculum for others, and balance that principle by realizing that every life you meet could be a curriculum for you if you perceive with sufficient perspective."

Responsive task

We are invited to be co-workers with God in his creation. It's as if he says "come, learn about who I am and who you are; here is my creation ready for your exploration, explanation and expansion." Genesis 1 and 2 can be seen as much as God's *invitation* to see, know, experience and respond to him, as his *mandate* for all human beings.[2] In the same way, a

curriculum should invite students to become full participants in learning, to discover and create knowledge. And teachers should teach in a way that students can respond from the heart.

Responsive curriculum recognizes that *learning happens from the inside out* — it creates a space in which students freely respond to God's invitation to follow his Word. We provide students with learning settings that enable them to flourish, to grow, to experience delight, to discover the blessings of God in the things he has created and in things we may design, form, shape, build, and draw.



Responsible task

We are mandated to live in ways that God intended for us. God's requirements set out directions that are life-nourishing. His mandate is clear. Scriptural and creational guidelines help shape curriculum that recognizes *that learning also happens from the outside in*. Each society sets out its own version of what its youth should know and be able to do at various levels of education. Christians in each culture need to take part in shaping society's answers to what students should know and be able to do. We interpret those requirements in terms of a biblical frame of reference and make adjustments so that our curriculum faithfully reflects whom we are and how we are called to live.

Our challenge for the 21st century, therefore, is to move beyond a discussion of integrating faith and learning to a deeper and broader development of explicitly faith-full curriculum. A faith that so shapes who we are that all our learning and our curriculum grows out of our love for God and his son Jesus Christ, our love for each other and for all creation. The postmodern denial of meta-narrative must be challenged; all curriculum is an expression of one faith or another. Let us move forward, building on and extending what we have, redirecting what has gotten lost, continuing what is good, getting rid of what doesn't fit or isn't needed anymore.

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A Rose by any other Name?

by William J. Vande Kopple

William Vande Kopple is professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich.

For several years, I have begun each class period of my courses for prospective English and language-arts teachers with a brief language game or linguistic exploration. These activities are usually very enjoyable and memorable. In addition, they will help students develop what are often called higher-order reasoning abilities. Much language play demands being able to think on two different planes at the same time.

The idea for this activity, which is one of my favorites since students invariably are able to contribute to it, originally came from my now-retired colleague George Harper. In his work as our departmental liaison with the library, he noticed that some authors carried names that either fitted or clashed with the titles of their books.

Strange combinations

For example, he came across books such as *Riches and Poverty* by Sir Leo Money, *Players' Sceptres* by Susan Staves, *The Glory of God* by J. Dwight Pentecost, and *What People Eat* by Dr. Isais Raw. Such collocations of names and titles led Professor Harper to be on the lookout for people whose names were interesting in the light of what they did for a living. And thus he learned about a man named Graham Rose, who wrote columns in the *London Times* on gardening; a woman named Dr. Annette Goodheart, who offered videotapes on "Loving Better Through Laughter"; a Reverend Cant, who served as a canon of York; a Courtney P. Justice, who was an attorney in Indiana; and a William B. Lawless, who was president of a college of law.

When I show students some of these names, they honk with laughter. I then ask whether they have any names to add to the list. If you ever try this activity, at this point you should be prepared to enter the realms of amazement and delight, for in every group that I have ever used this with, students have been able to add notable names to my list.

I have learned of people whose names seem to fit with their professions: a Dr. Bonk, who is an anesthesiologist, and several people with the last name of Posthumus, who direct a funeral home. On the other hand, the names of some people seem to clash with those people's professions: Students have mentioned both an Amy Drown, a lifeguard, and a Dr. Bonebreak, an orthopedic surgeon.

In the cases of some of the names, it's difficult to decide whether the names fit or clash with the people's professions: Students have told me about a psychiatrist named *Dr. Looney*, as well as about dentists named *Dr. Hurt, Dr. Payne, Dr. Pierce*, and *Dr. Sweetland*.

Say them aloud

As classes warm up to this activity, students start to mention names that are interesting in and of themselves, not because of some relationship between them and a book title or profession. For instance, my students have told me about a boy named *Rick Shaw* and about girls named *Barb Wire, Ella Phant*, and *Tutti Horn*. They have also told me of a girl with the last name of *Schuuring* and the first name of *Rhea*, a girl with the last name of *Stone* and the first name of *Roxanne*, a boy with the last name of *Fisher* and the first and middle names of *Trapper* and *Hunter*, and a girl with the last name of *Lear* and the first and middle names of *Crystal Chanda*.

Some of the names they have brought up really deserve to be said aloud: *Justin Case, Terra Tory, Wilden Wooley, Eunice Eickle*, and the names of twin girls: *Ada Clock* and *Nina Clock*. Do you wonder about the authenticity of some of these names? I have wondered myself at times, but never for very long, since I take it to be a truth acknowledged nearly universally that Calvin College students would never convey false information to their instructors.

If you ever try this activity in a course that you are team teaching, you should ensure that your teaching partner will behave. In a class that Jim Vanden Bosch and I taught together recently, I approached the conclusion of the activity, asking the class what people with the last name of *Hicky* had named their daughter. Before any student had a chance to guess the correct first name, *Ima*, Jim thought it was a good time for him to contribute to class discussion. With a note of triumph in his voice he called out the name *Anita*.

How Do Children Grow Spiritually?

by Marianne Modica

Ms. Modica is assistant professor and director of early childhood education at Valley Forge Christian College. She lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

Have you ever been totally mystified by something a child said? Whether you are a Sunday school teacher, a Christian Education leader or a parent, chances are that at one time or another you have been figuratively blown away by a statement that came "out of the mouths of babes."

I had such an experience a few months ago. Our five-year-old, Matthew, had listened in rapt attention to a Sunday school lesson about the Holy Spirit. For several days afterward he mentioned the Holy Spirit, both in his prayers and in snippets of conversation. I was thrilled! How wonderful, I thought, that my child was showing such a deep awareness of spiritual things at such a tender age.

A few days later, my bubble was burst while riding in the car with Matt. Once again my five-year-old was having deep theological thoughts.

"Mom," he asked seriously, "is the Holy Spirit a planet?" So much for my son's future ministry as the next Billy Graham.

Thinking as a child

Although perhaps a little discouraging, this experience served as an important reminder about the way young children view the world. We learn from the work of noted psychologist Jean Piaget that young children are not adults in miniature; their perceptions of the world are vastly different from those of adults. Likewise, in issues of spiritual formation and faith development, we, as Christian educators, must recognize that children's concepts of God and the teachings of Scripture are not the same as our own.

What exactly do we mean by the terms "spiritual formation"and "faith development?" While faith development looks at how individuals form concepts of God, spiritual formation is the process by which an individual develops a relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship, far from being stagnant, grows and deepens throughout life as the individual becomes more like Christ every day. This process involves a triad: the individual, God and others.

In her book *Joining Children in the Spiritual Journey,* Catherine Stonehouse cites the work of many contributors in this field. Author Larry Richards says, "Christian spirituality is living a human life in this world in union with God" (Stonehouse p. 216). Faith does not develop in a vacuum, but through relationships formed within family, church and community.

Perhaps author John Westerhoff says it best when he notes that religion can be taught, but faith must be inspired within a faith community (Stonehouse p. 37).

Mom and Dad's faith

If faith is formed within the context of community, it seems evident that a child's first spiritual awareness comes in conjunction with his relationship with his parents, caretakers and immediate family members. Perhaps, then, the first step in understanding children is to understand their parents. Stonehouse declares that "People who care about the spiritual formation of children must be concerned about the spiritual formation of the parents, and their finding a place in the faith community" (Stonehouse p. 64).

Late baby boomers and generation Xers (the latchkey generation) have grown up with an ever rising divorce rate, the specter of physical and emotional abuse, the prevalence of drugs and alcohol, and the corruption of political and religious leaders splattered on the front page of the news on an almost daily basis. With dysfunction and trauma as the norm, many of this generation have trouble with issues of trust, intimacy and commitment. Cynicism, lack of self-esteem and feelings of meaninglessness may be the understandable response of many parents in our church families.

It is not difficult to see how these feelings might easily affect the way both parent and child view God, themselves and others.

Primal trust

Fowler, who draws from the work of both Piaget and the psycho-social theory of Erik Erikson, has created a paradigm of stages in faith development that may be helpful in learning how, specifically, children form under-

standings about God.

The first stage, which Fowler calls "Primal Faith," takes place during the first year or two of life. This stage involves something even more fundamental than the possible passing along of attitudes from parent to child.

At the very beginning stages of the child's life, basic needs of food, warmth, and physical and emotional comfort must be met. As these needs are met, the child develops what Fowler calls, "a pre-language disposition of trust and loyalty toward the environment" (Fowler p. 58). The child learns the ability to trust those who care for him to meet his needs, which will later translate into the ability to trust in God to meet needs that are far more complex.

During the early childhood years, Fowler categorizes children as being in the "Intuitive-Projective" stage of faith development. We can learn much about the way children think from the following aspects of both Fowler's and Piaget's theories:

Concrete thinkers

If you want a child to understand that two plus two equals four, give the child four concrete objects to manipulate and experiment with. If you want a young child to understand the changes that take place in the fall season, take the child on a walk through a park during the month of October .

Children learn best by what they see, hear, touch and experience. When you speak of being "saved" to a young child, she will probably picture someone drowning in a lake. Talk of the Lord "living in your heart," may conjure up notions of a miniature Jesus descending through the aorta and taking up residence somewhere in the child's left ventricle.

Because of this, who we are is more important than what we say to the children we teach and lead. Whatever your view, be aware that the images that influence your spiritual make-up will likely influence the spiritual development of a child or young person whose life you will touch.

Intuitive thinkers

Children view the world through how they feel, not through reason and logic. Have you ever tried to persuade a child that his nightmare was not real? Every parent knows that comfort, not logic, is what's needed in this situation. Because of this characteristic in the way they think, young children cannot easily differentiate between fantasy and reality. They form concepts of God through the use of their imagination, and God may be seen as another super hero figure. Hence the age-old question asked by many a little boy in this stage of development, "Could Jesus beat Superman in a fight?"

Egocentric thinkers

This means they lack the ability to see things from the perspective of another person. When we tell a child the story of Zacchaeus, and ask, "How did Zacchaeus feel when he couldn't see Jesus?" the child will probably respond with a monotone, one-syllable answer such as, "Sad." Instead of interpreting this as a lack of enthusiasm, it may be entirely possible that the child doesn't have a clue as to how Zacchaeus felt, or how anybody else feels, either. We must put spiritual truths into the context of what a child has experienced herself, if we want real understanding to take place. Perhaps a more appropriate question would be, "How did you feel when you couldn't see the teacher?" and then, "I bet that's just how Zacchaeus felt, too!"

Lacking reversibility

Children think in one direction — forward. It may be difficult for them to understand cause and effect if they are required to backtrack from the effect to the cause. To illustrate, my son and his friend, Ryan, were busy collecting acorns one fall afternoon. Seeing this as a "teachable moment" in science learning, I asked, "Where did the acorns come from?"

"Over there," my son replied.

This was not the answer I'd hoped for. I persisted in trying to get my son to see the connection between the acorns and the oak trees on which they grew.

"How did the acorns get here?" I asked.

"Ryan brought them over," he said in exasperation. I gave up. Acorns and

oak trees aside, there's an important application here. Is it possible to see how children might have difficulty answering the question, "Why did Jesus die on the cross?" Keep in mind that parroting a response is not a true indication that the child understands the deep meanings and motivations present in the plan of salvation.

Thinking logically

As children grow into the elementary years, they enter what Fowler calls the "Mythic-Literal" stage of faith development. Children at this age begin to think logically, and the fantasies of early childhood now finally disappear. Although these children may still love to engage in pretend or fantasy play, they clearly understand the difference between fantasy and reality. God loses his super hero status and becomes instead the stern, powerful, but fair ruler who rewards the good and punishes the evil.

Perhaps this is why fairness is so important to children of this age. Teachers who respond to a child's complaint with the expression, "Life's not fair," may not realize how important this issue is to a child of this age. Life may not be fair, but we, in our role as God's representatives, should be.

Along with the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, children in this stage of faith development can understand cause and effect much more readily. In addition, they become much less egocentric and are more able to see things from another's perspective. All these factors make these children "virtuoso storytellers" (Fowler p. 61), as kids of this age are drawn and relate well to stories from the Bible. Perhaps this is why virtually all of our early childhood and elementary aged curriculum consists of themes drawn from various Bible stories.

It's important to remember, though, that although more logical, these children are still concrete thinkers. It is still difficult for them to understand abstract points, and they need help in making personal applications from the Bible stories they learn. For example, the concept of the Trinity as found in the story of the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21, 22) may absolutely jump off the page for you, but from the same passage of Scripture, your students will much more easily understand the idea that Jesus obeyed his Father by being baptized.

Role modeling

What can we, as teachers and leaders, do to help children grow through each developmental stage into a deepening and lifelong relationship with the Lord? You've already taken the first step by reading this and other educational information, which will broaden your understanding and help you grow in your ministry to children. We need to continually educate ourselves and apply what we learn in our classrooms. Good teaching theory encourages us to know our audience, in order to do a better job in presenting our content to them.

Even more important than improved educational theory and technique, however, is the role we play as models of devoted followers of Christ and dedicated members of his body, the Church. We share not only our words with children, but our very lives as well. If we want them to grow spiritually, we must be growing, too. Just as children grow physically with the proper nourishment and exercise, they will grow spiritually through the consistent application of God's word and the guidance we provide within the community of faith.

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Clarence Joldersma

Competitive Evaluation?

This first issue of the Christian Educators Journal in the school year 2000-2001 begins a brand new discussion column. Professor Clarence Joldersma of the Calvin College education department has agreed to organize the process. He poses a question to five educators and gleans from their discussion via e-mail the content of our new column. We hope you, Christian educators, will benefit from these discussions as we seek to go below the surface of what you practice from day to day in order to develop or expose your worldview. BW

Clarence Joldersma:

In her book The Challenge to Care in Schools, *educator Nel Noddings advises educators: "Get rid of competitive grading." Should Christian educators go in this direction? What is involved in a Christian approach to assessment?*

Johanna Campbell:

I'd like to explore the biblical angle here. Let me focus on two aspects of assessment — comparison and self-image.

From Scriptures it seems clear that God does not compare his children with one another. In the parable of the talents we see that each servant has been given gifts and is required to work with what he has. Similarly, Paul writes that to every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ, which implies individual gifts and individual responsibility. This ties in with training up a child in the way he should go, i.e., according to his bent, his gifts, his individual endowment from God. If we are to raise discerning disciples for God's glory, we should consider each one's God-given strengths and weaknesses and measure them according to how they use those abilities. We can still honor excellence, but always with a view to glorify our Creator, not to set others with different gifts up to the same standard.

And then there is the issue of self image. Do Christians get a positive self-image from getting good grades? I do not see that in Scripture either. Edlin's book *The Cause for Christian Education* cites four sources of self-concept for Christian students and teachers, including: (i) being created "Imago Dei," (ii) working out his purposes with each person by means of a set of unique gifts, (iii) demonstrating the value of each child by virtue of Christ's death, and (iv) claiming each child as an ambassador of the King of kings. Those four truths suggest teachers should make sure that their ways of assessing students do not tie in to the world's ways of linking self-concept to good grades.

Tim Hoeksema:

Allow me to provide the voice of cynicism. We in the Christian schools have rarely been the leaders in the educational arena. Historically, we have operated our schools following the example of our public school counterparts. We follow their time schedules, imitate their programs and policies, and generally follow their lead — usually about 10 years after they have tried it. Our assessment policies and practices won't change until they change in the public sector first.

At the high school level, parents, students, and colleges and universities want to know if students have performed above state and national norms on all the standardized tests. There is less interest in their behavior on the playground or their attitude in the cafeteria. Let's talk about some issues we could actually do something about.

Tony Kamphuis:

Methinks Tim is ready to throw in the towel a little prematurely! Granted, parents, students and universities are interested primarily in academic capability. Certainly, assessment is still the tail that

wags the dog. But if we want teachers to get beyond making sure their pupils are adequately prepared to jump through the hoop of standardized testing — itself based on a rather lame view of what education is in the first place — we've got to create a means for formally assessing students on more than just that area of life!

Sure, keep a record of students' academic mastery of a subject to give to universities, but let's not stop there! Let's create a new document that will be the primary means of communication with the parents and students, one that reflects a more holistic view of the student and his or her development — a view reflective of a biblical perspective on what humans are really like! If we aren't prepared to tackle the area of assessment and ask ourselves if it, too, falls under the influence of a Christian perspective, then I suggest we scrap the high sounding ideals we often include in our mission statements. Let's then be more honest by saying that all we really hope to do is develop a group of students who can outperform the secularists on their own tests.

Lois Brink:

Does a Christian perspective on grading have anything to do with the purpose of the grades or the consequence of grades? Ultimately, does it have to do with teacher or student? Are we recognizing the diversity of gifts or total depravity? Perhaps the answer is all of the above as we struggle as reformed Christian teachers to transform our school community through our contact with individual students.

As educators, Christian or not, the use of rubrics and progress reports that refer to skills and concepts has become common practice. These take the mystery, subjectivity, and even competitiveness out of grading. That's a good thing for students, isn't it? Doesn't this kind of assessment provide a clear relationship for students between their grades and what they learned, and not just what they "got on that test"? And isn't this one way to avoid the extreme individualism and fragmentation of our assessment system?

Pam Adema:

I think we need a little clarity about what we mean by grading. Tim refers to standardized tests, Tony is looking at ways to communicate with parents about how our children are developing as disciples, and Lois mentions assessment tools such as rubrics. I believe there is a place for all of these measures in Christian schools.

Standardized tests measure how schools meet state or provincial standards and allow our students to apply for admissions to colleges and for scholarships. I think we should continue with this type of assessment.

However, Tony's plea for testing what we value is very important. Parents are, indeed, interested in whether their children are behaving on the playground and in the lunchroom. They want their children to live what they believe. Why else would they be sending their children to a Christian school? How should this be reported to parents? I don't think that letter grades are appropriate. Written notes about specific areas can be included in report cards and discussed at conferences. I really don't think competition should be used to motivate Christ-like behavior. The motivation should come from higher principles of loving God and neighbor.

Lois discusses rubrics and assessments that give children a clear understanding of why they are evaluated as they are. Rubrics include criteria for judgment and help both the student and teacher grade accurately and fairly. Students are then assessed by criteria, not in comparison to another student.

Tony Kamphuis:

Pam is right in her recognition that we aren't clear on what we mean by "grading." I take grading to be any formal evaluation of a student's competency in a given area, with the intention that this evaluation can be communicated not only to the student, but also to interested third parties. If that is what we mean by grading, then I think I should reiterate my conviction that this is a key area because it generates that all important opportunity

for accountability. I think we need to look at everything we want to lead our students towards, as well as create mechanisms that will, perhaps imperfectly, help us assess if we are meeting our goals, our mission. I paraphrase John Carver when I say it's better to do a poor job of assessing the right things than a good job of assessing the wrong things. Do we really want to create discerning disciples? Then let's determine how that is to be done, and assess if it's being done in our schools. I think we may find a few things we'll want to change.

Lois Brink:

If I may continue Pam's synthesis, Tony may also be thinking about both content and performance assessments when he challenges us to develop some methods to assess for discerning discipleship. Perhaps this includes both summative and formative assessment in which case this is an arena for the use of rubrics.

I contend that even the visionary end of looking for evidence of a student's discernment does not always justify using high-stakes academic tools such as grades. A school-based evaluation of a student's Christian perspective could be full of dilemmas and even errors. I don't agree with John Carver on this point. When it comes to doing a poor job of assessing students, if even for the right reasons, we can do damage.

With assessment, our challenge is to be clear and accurate, valid and reliable. A teacher's and school's evaluation is such a powerful statement to students. Our grading affects a student's self-concept, confidence, status, and her opportunities in the school community as well as future choices and directions.

Perhaps Carver's intent is to encourage us to diversify. Use a variety of assessments. Be clear about the intent, weight and content of each. Take the time to explain your philosophy of assessment to students. And develop within your assessments opportunities for students to show their understanding of our Reformed Christian perspective in your grade or subject.

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What We Teach With Grades

by Jeff Hall

Jeff Hall is dean of faculty and dean of the Master of Education program at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia.

Perhaps one of the most powerful communicators in schools today is found in the grading system. Intentionally or unintentionally, we communicate what we value in the educational process by how we assign grades. Some schools have moved away from giving letter grades, but the vast majority of education still is assessed on a five-grade scale from A to F. Scripture instructs us to teach our children to love God through a complete response involving all of life (Deut. 6 and Rom. 12). As we teach them at school, we are showing them what to value in their response to God's creation, redemption, and governing providence. Like it or not, a powerful communicator of what we value is found in how we assess student work at school. Careful consideration must be given to what is taught in the assessment process.

Implicit Instruction

Students learn what we value by the proportionate worth assigned to activities and assignments in the grading process. The teacher's response to "How much does this count?" reveals the instructor's estimation of the relative worth of the student work. Teachers show their value of homework compared to tests, of attendance compared to participation, of neatness compared to length, and the list goes on.

Students begin to formulate a system of value based on "what counts" and "how much it's worth." Distortion can easily develop in an atmosphere where it is easier to measure those things that are least important. Teachers may unwittingly lead students to value what can be counted as opposed to what really counts. For example, students may begin to value the number of books read rather than the fullness of the literary experience, the number of problems correctly calculated rather than creative solutions to difficult mathematical conundrums, or correct spelling and neat hand writing as opposed to profound thoughts well-expressed. Although correct calculations, neat handwriting, good spelling, and the like are the purview of a good school curriculum, to miss the more profound and less measurable learning in a sea of numerical assessment would be a true tragedy.

Three Confusions

There are at least three compounding confusions about the grading process itself: referencing, objectivity, and motivation. The statistical components of grades that result in terms such as "bell curve," "grading on the curve," and "grade inflation" have to do with ***referencing***. Many educators harbor a fundamental confusion regarding criterion- and norm-referenced tests. In order to result in a bell-curve, a test would usually be referenced to a large population with a rigorous implementation of statistical tools. Most often bell-curves result from naturally occurring attributes in large populations such as shoe size, height, weight, some measures of intelligence and the like. It would be inappropriate to expect grades in a small classroom (fewer than 50 students) to be normally distributed on a bell-curve. School grades are usually based on a criterion-referenced scale. The criteria are found in the course or curricular objectives. The teacher hopes that all students will accomplish all of the objectives and teaches to that end. If all students master all of the objectives, it is possible for everyone to receive an A. Conversely, if no student masters any of these objectives, it is possible for everyone to receive an F. The issue of grade inflation is raised when many students are achieving the objectives. Teachers and school personnel must

ask themselves if high grades are true indicators of actual learning, or if they are easily attainable scores because of numerical scales that measure types of learning that are too simple.

Objectivity is impossible and perhaps not even desirable. However, the lack of objectivity makes grading more subjective than we are comfortable with as we strive toward some scientific standard. Polanyi (1954) reminds us that it is impossible for an evaluator to be completely separate from the object assessed. He also makes strong arguments for perceiving the skills we teach as more than the sum of the specified parts. All of this is to say that we must develop methods and rubrics that allow a holistic and professional evaluation of student work otherwise we will be unwittingly advocating a fragmented and incomplete approach to complex learning.

Motivation and assessment are often confused in the grading process. It is not unusual to hear a teacher attempt to motivate a class with a grade – offering credit for some desired activity or offering a deduction of points for undesired behaviors. Kohn (1993) informs us that such motivational techniques may work for low-level behaviors, but serve only to undermine higher-level responses. High-level, critical and creative thought is usually its own motivator. Students engage in solving the problem, creating the story and drawing the picture for the joy of the activity. To offer motivational grades for such activities only makes the desire and the experience shallow. Kohn cites many studies that support the notion that motivating by grades simply results in students who become limited in their responses and attempt to do the minimum to get the desired grade. Students so nurtured will ask questions like "What do I have to do to get an A?" and "Do I get extra credit for this?" rather than learning to spend even their discretionary time in extended activity related to the learning taking place at school.

Two suggestions

Polanyi (1954) offers a number of suggestions in his classic work, *Personal Knowledge.* As a Christian, he understood the need for a depth of response to human knowing in what we might term the Hebraic or the covenantal epistemology. Adding a truly human (*imago dei*) emphasis to the classroom could be initiated by following two of his recommendations: connoisseurship and apprenticing.

As we assign grades, we should pay attention to the whole project and the whole person. Some work with holistic rubrics may be helpful. A teacher should feel free, perhaps obligated, to employ a sense of professional judgement on an intuitive level. Such a perspective would allow grades to give attention to the profound, but would be more dependent on a general trust in teachers. A teacher should be perceived as a ***connoisseur*** to be trusted. I realize that this may be difficult in some schools, but it must be attempted if we are to educate in a God-honoring, holistic manner sensitive to the human condition, rather than in a fashion more suited to robots and assembly lines. In addition, students should be involved in the process of assigning grades and assessing projects so that they learn how to value the work of their hands.

Secondly, teachers should model learning and engagement with the content of instruction. True change in motivation is more caught than taught and more apprenticed than dictated. The enthusiasm of the teacher is contagious to the students. The best of teachers are passionate about God, his people, and his creation. They are so engaged in learning and life that their practice creates ***apprentices*** who share their passions and eventually their skills. Quite simply, we are called to be the incarnation of what we teach (Palmer, 1998). For good or ill, students will learn volumes from the people we are and the fullness with which we embrace learning. The assigning of grades needs to be an informed practice which paints a larger picture of our response to God rather than a small and single-dimensioned perspective.

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Thinking Thirteen

Nancy Knol
Column Editor

Israelites: God's Middle Schoolers

by Dan Voetberg

Dan Voetberg teaches 7th-grade Bible and 8th-grade English at Creston Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan

God knows exactly what it is like to be a middle school teacher. I came to this conclusion after reading Exodus 32:7-8:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I have commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "

Think about it: God has just shown the Israelites his power and might in 10 massive plagues that he sent to Egypt. He has led them safely out of Egypt. He has opened up the Red Sea for the Israelites to walk through and drowned their enemies before they could reach the other side. He has guided them to Mount Sinai. He has given them the Ten Commandments, while the mountain spewed fire and smoke until the Israelites were so afraid that they might die that they pleaded for Moses to go up the mountain to talk to God.

And then they decided to make a golden calf.

The Israelites had forgotten everything they had seen and learned and decided to worship a lump of gold that they had made themselves. They knew full well what was right and what was wrong, and yet went right off and did the wrong. They followed the lead of Aaron, a pretty good guy who really should have known better.

A discovery

I teach seventh-grade Bible. We study this story at the beginning of the year. It wasn't until the third time through this material that I made the connection: the Israelites were just like middle schoolers.

Time and time again, I have seen this sort of thing from the students that I teach. We will be in Bible class, discussing some biblical truth and trying to tie it to the students' own lives. This is never the problem. Then, class is dismissed, and, somewhere, someone will do something so wrong, cruel and irrational that it boggles the mind to think that just moments ago they were nodding thoughtfully while the class was talking about how Christians should live their lives. And suddenly, I have just an inkling of how betrayed God must have felt when he looked down at his chosen people at the foot of Mount Sinai, worshiping a golden calf.

And God knows how I feel, because his reaction is very similar to what mine often is: "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them." Raise your hand if you've been there before. It's not so much hatred as it is frustration borne out of the fact that you want SO BADLY for them to do the right thing, and sometimes it seems they flat out refuse.

Cue from God

As teachers of middle schoolers, one of the most important jobs we need to do is to bridge that bottomless gulf between the knowledge of what's right and the practice of it. If God really was like a middle school teacher to the Israelites, perhaps he can give some guidance here too. While his first impulse was to wipe out the Israelites entirely, God ends up only punishing them. He forgives them in the end and gives them another chance to do the right thing. Which they do. The pattern is repeated time and time and time again. The Israelites mess up. God punishes them. They get another chance. They mess up.

Please take note that there are moments in the Old Testament that must have made God positively sing for joy: Solomon's temple dedication, the first few victories in Canaan, the time when the people had to be restrained from giving because there already was too much gold and linen for the Tabernacle. And this, too, is no different from my experience with middle schoolers. They certainly do have the ability to do the right thing, and to do it so purely that it makes your heart melt.

But as a whole, simply learning how to do the right thing is a terribly difficult thing for many middle schoolers. And for many of us too. But while remembering God's patience with the people of Israel, his middle schoolers, we can perhaps realize something of what we need to do for our own students.

Query ?


Tena Siebinga Valstar

Tena Siebenga-Valstar is a former teacher and principal, working on her Ph.D. thesis. If you wish to submit a question for this column, send it to her at 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2 or e-mail her at: valstar@telusplanet.net.

Blaming Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Question # 1

I am a teacher's aide working with a student who has been labeled a Fetal Alcohol Syndrome child and who was adopted into a Christian family. Often when we are discussing the progress or lack of progress of the child, the parent(s) will attribute the deficiencies to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Sometimes the boy will say, "I can't do that, you know. I have F.A.S." I'm working with the situation but need some encouragement.

Response:

For many students the most powerful influence on their learning is the loving relationship between the teacher and student. You are in a crucial position as you are the "teacher" who is with this student in a one-to-one relationship regardless of which other classroom the student enters. You will likely know him better than the regular teacher does, and in learning situations you will know him better than his parents do. You will be able to see and eventually predict how this particular student will respond to various situations.

As Christians we believe God gives gifts to each one. It is our task to recognize and draw out those gifts and have these gifts affirmed once they are recognized. Part of your task is to help create a safe environment so that learning can take place, one where the student feels free to take risks and where he can share his feelings, inadequacies and joys. Listen for what lies beneath the words. You might have to advocate for him in certain learning/testing situations so that he will meet with greatest success.

You will have to become an expert on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. What is myth and what is fact? To what degree does this child exhibit the known symptoms? Are they insurmountable? Where is he making excuses? How can he compensate if compensation is possible? As with any teaching/learning situations, concentrate on the progress rather than on the failures. Challenge him to do "his" best. At the end of each day review together what has happened and recount the successes or blessings you have had. Share these with the parents on a regular basis so they too will affirm the steps of progress. In loving this child through his learning, you are indeed laying down your life for one of God's children, as well as being an example for others.

Uphold biblical standards

Question # 2:

One of our students used Jesus Christ's name as a profanity. The teacher asked the child to leave the classroom and report to me, the principal. Upon the student's denial, I questioned the teacher, only to find out that this was said within hearing of the teacher as well as all the students. After explaining why, I told the student that he was not welcome in the classroom for the next day and a half. I called the parents, talking with the father who is not a believer. I explained the situation, indicated that the student showed no remorse and had them come for the child. A letter indicated the conditions of re-entry. Upon meeting with the child and the parents, the student said, "But Jimmy [not his name] was bugging me. He made me do it." The parents stood by as the child made his case. I told the child that he was responsible for his actions and was expected to carry out the conditions for re-entry. The parents consented to that decision with the boy apologizing to the teacher and then to his classmates. Could I have done anything differently?

Response:

You showed wisdom in handling this situation. You removed the student from the classroom, indicating to him and others that his was not acceptable behavior. You verified that the incident had really taken place. You explained to the student why you were taking action. I trust that you followed both school discipline policy and any gov-

ernment guidelines which may have affected the suspension of the child. It's important to insure that your discipline policies do not contradict provincial or state educational guidelines. At the re-entry meeting you gave the child opportunity to indicate how he was going to fulfill the conditions.

Although it is not unusual for a student to give the reasons why the incident occurred, you did well to focus on the child's responsibility in this specific incident. Dealing with the provocation could be done at another time, so as not to "muddy" this situation. The apology to both the teacher and the students was appropriate as his actions offended others and affected the teacher's task as well as the classroom learning community.

One thing not mentioned was some type of oral or written confession by the child indicating that he had offended our Savior. There may have been a reason for this. You indicated that the father was not a believer. Did you have questions about the student as well? A Christian school society wishing to include non-Christians within their school community must clearly state in their policies that biblical standards are to be maintained and what the consequences may be if the student violates them. All angles must be covered so that teachers and principals are not left in difficult situations which hinder them from effectively carrying out their primary task of teaching.

Do I *have* to collect money?

Question #3

Sometimes I get upset about all the extras I have to do, such as: collecting milk or hot lunch money, taking book orders, and distributing chocolates and tabulating funds. I wonder, "Why can't I just teach?"

Response:

Yours is a question that probably crosses the mind of other teachers. Some tasks are part of classroom routine, but it is up to us to decide how we are going to handle them. In some schools "room moms" are asked to handle some of these tasks. They, in turn, may delegate these tasks so more parents are involved.

We can also make these situations learning experiences for our students. In delegating responsibilities to students it is important to remember: Never do anything you could have a student do, and never ask a student to do something you are unwilling to do (that you feel is beneath you).

Begin with a class meeting, having students list, analyze, and categorize all the responsibilities that they can think of. Discuss what each job involves and the meaning of responsibility before asking the students what they'd be willing to take on. In the process you will empower students and free yourself, using writing, public speaking, analysis, categorizing, synthesis, decision making, consensus, teamwork, and probably some math — all in a real, personally relevant way.

You could explore with students why we do some routines and how to eliminate, streamline, delegate, or enhance these activities. You can think of what learning theories and research can be applied to simple tasks like taking attendance and lunch count. Explore how you can integrate activities as part of your curriculum, employing basic skills like mathematics, using a more personally relevant and natural way than does the textbook. For instance, a student from each seating group can act as leader taking attendance and recording it in a central location. One student or the whole class can total it, graph weekly records, find differences, percentages, patterns, probabilities, or potential independent variables (depending on the students' level). Putting elementary students in charge of these types of tasks, and giving them ten minutes each morning to take care of them, turns a routine into a learning opportunity.

It may become clear that some tasks are really non-educational interruptions. Collectively as teachers, you can then raise awareness, suggest alternatives, discuss how they help or hinder the vision or goals of the school, and work to change them.

"Slouching Toward Bedlam"

It Was the Best of Art,

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Following some difficulties at his previous school in Muckwannago, Wisconsin, Jan Kaarsvlam has recently accepted a position teaching mechanical drawing and advanced phys. ed. at John Calvin Christian School in Montana's beautiful Yaak Valley.

Sam Toomer was having a bad day. Yesterday had been his thirty-sixth birthday and the faculty member responsible for bringing a treat had forgotten. His freshman biology classes had wholeheartedly forgotten to read the assignment from the book, Rex Kane had elbowed him in the hallway for not knowing what the score of the previous night's basketball game had been (Sam hadn't attended because of a committee meeting at church), and then he had come across Josie Boerma's sculpture in the library. That had really done it. The sculpture.

Sam entered the crowded faculty room, noticed the lack of a birthday treat on the table, and pushed through the crowd to his spot. When he broke through the masses, he was startled to see that one of the new student teachers from Kuyper Christian College was sitting in his seat. He picked up his thermos of coffee from under his seat and walked to a spot by the window. The sculpture had bothered him because he didn't understand how something like that could fit in a Christian high school. He had gone to talk to Gregg Mortis, the art teacher, about it; but Gregg had said that it was "well-executed" and that it "had a lot to say." Sam was confused.

Josie had sculpted a black cylinder about four feet high. Onto it she had painted several famous pictures. There was the one with the Vietnamese guy shooting a bullet through the head of another Vietnamese guy, the picture of the bodies after the Jonestown massacre, a picture of a crying student from the Columbine shootings, and another of a little girl weeping. Sam was no art critic, but it was plain to him that this was a message of despair. How did something like that fit into the Spring Arts Festival for a Christian high school?

Library garbage

He felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Cal Vandermeer, Bedlam's over-committed sociology and Bible teacher. "Hey, Sam, what's the matter? You look like someone just ran over your dog."

Sam felt the explosion moments before it rushed out of his mouth. "No one ran over my dog, but some are run-

It Was the Worst of Art

ning amok over what I hold dear. Have you seen the garbage we're displaying in the library?"

"What do you mean?" asked Cal.

"That sculpture of Josie Boersma's. That's what I mean."

"Oh yeah, I saw that thing," Rex Kane interrupted, having walked by at that moment. "And Mortis calls that art. Hah! I call it a packaging tube with some magazine pictures stuck to it. Might as well call golf a sport."

The last line was a dig aimed at Red Carpenter, the golf coach who also taught English. Red glowered at Rex but said nothing.

"What's wrong with Josie's sculpture?" Cal asked after Rex had departed. "She obviously put a lot of thought and time into it, and it is thought-provoking."

"Hugh Hefner put a lot of time and thought into building the Playboy empire as well, but I don't think you'd defend him on those grounds."

Cal shook his head.

"I'm sorry," Sam said, his temper cooling. "I'm having a bad day. I don't mean to equate Jessie with Hugh Hefner at all. I'm only trying to suggest that, while she may have spent a lot of time working on the piece, the message it is sending is ultimately one of despair. It is a message that seems fundamentally incompatible with a Christian world-life view. We celebrate Easter each year. How can we display art that preaches despair?"

Cal thought about that for a minute. "Well, I guess we need to remember that being a teenager can be a pretty bleak time." He chuckled a minute. "In fact, being a human can be pretty bleak. All those images are of things that really happened. Do you think that we as Christians ought to turn our backs on sin and suffering?"

"No, it isn't that," said Sam, "But I don't think we should rush to embrace sin and suffering either. Why can't we just be happy?"

Cal had to force himself not to laugh – the mental picture was just so funny. A grumpy guy complaining that the world isn't funny enough.

Sam saw Cal's expression. "Okay, maybe I don't exactly seem like the poster child for a happy Christian message, but maybe that's because I haven't seen anything to change my mind. Art is supposed to be beautiful, isn't it? It is supposed to pick me up out of my blues. I look at that thing that Josie made and it just makes me depressed."

Art and beauty

There were only a few minutes left before the bell rang, and Gregg Mortis made his way over to the discussion. Sam winced and wished he could get away. This discussion was getting too involved. He just wanted to get back to the lab, teach the rest of his classes and get home before the day got much worse. Cal called out to Gregg as he neared. "Hey Mortis, come here a second. We were just talking about that piece of Jessie's in the library. Maybe you can shed some light on the subject."

Gregg Mortis grinned. "Oh, yeah. Isn't that a great piece? Really gets at some important issues, doesn't it?"

Sam frowned. Cal picked up the conversation. "Well, actually, we were talking a little bit about what art is supposed to do. Sam was making the point that art ought to be beautiful, and he said that... ."

Rex Kane tipped back in his chair and swivelled his head toward them. "Look," he said, "It is simple really. Art is supposed to confuse people. Get them so goofed up they don't know what to say. It's just a big joke, that's all. Mortis knows it too, but he won't admit it because he is in on the joke. Isn't that right, Mortis?"

Gregg nervously remained silent, unsure of how to respond. After a while, it became clear that everyone was looking at him. He took a deep breath and dove in.

"Actually, sometimes I think art is a big mystery too. I don't always know what I am teaching." He paused while several teachers muttered under their breaths. Gregg Mortis did not have a reputation for unflagging clarity in his teaching. "But I do know this: Christians in the arts are called to try to make connections. You are wrong, Rex, it isn't all about confusion and joking, it is about communicating something that is almost impossible to communicate. Sometimes I wonder, though, if anyone is at all ready to listen – to art's message or any message."

It was a rare moment. The faculty lounge at Bedlam Christian High fell silent. Sam saw the rain on the window and was amazed how dark it was outside. The bell rang and Sam, standing with the others, shuffled back into his dreary day.

Convention News

Teachers Conventions 2000

CEA Convention

The Christian Educators Association (CSI Districts 2, 3 and 4) will be joining with other non-public schools in Michigan for a "MANS 2000" convention (MANS = Michigan Association of NonPublic Schools) on October 26 and 27 in Grand Rapids, Mich. Expected number of teachers: 4,000 to 5,000. The convention theme this year is "Christian Education: A Choice That Makes a Difference." Keynoter Prof. Walter Wangerin, Jr. will speak on "Killing the Hyena: Because We Can, We Must Tell the Story."Attorney General Jennifer M. Granholm will speak on helping children be safe surfers of the net. There will be 300 vendor exhibits, school art displays and musical ensembles.

For more information contact Susan Lucas, CEA Corresponding Secretary, at: (616) 772-2444; Fax: (616) 772-5080; sue@egl.net; 391 Hillview Dr., Zeeland, Mich., 49464.

Heartland Convention

About 450 teachers from CSI Districts 5 and 6 and a couple of other schools will be gathering on the Dordt College Campus in Sioux Center, Iowa, on October 5 and 6 to focus on "Captivating Christian Education" (based on II Cor. 10:5b). Keynoter Rev. Michael Brandt of Free Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, SD, will join over 50 different presenters in addressing the educators. Thursday evening will feature an organ concert on the DC Casevant organ by Rick Koetje.

For more information contact Marion Van Soelen at (712) 722-6216; CSI6@dordt.edu; 498 4th Ave., Sioux Center, Iowa, 51250.

Northwest Convention

Christian teachers of the Northwest United States and British Columbia, Canada, (Districts 7 and 12) will meet in Langley, B.C. on October 5 and 6. Dr. Sylvia Keesmaat will provide the opening and closing keynote address. Theme of the convention: "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done." Expected number of attendees approximately 1050. Glean more details about workshops from the website: www.ctabc-nwcsi-cpc.org.

For more information contact Ms. Liz Tolkamp at (604) 534-2679; Fax: (604) 534-2101; ltolkamp@uniserve.com; 5793-211 Street, Langley, B.C. V3A 2L7.

Benefits of a Convention

Instruction, encouragement, change of pace, encouragement, inspiration, encouragement, friendship, encouragement, new techniques, encouragement

OCSTA Convention

The Ontario Christian School Teachers Association (District 10) will hold its annual convention in two places: at Redeemer College in Ancaster on Thursday, October 26, and at Hamilton District Christian High School (just down the road) on Friday, October 27. Dr. Mike Goheen will deliver an inspirational address in keeping with the theme "Joy in the Journey." Dr. Mary-Leigh Morbey will speak on education in cyberspace. One thousand teachers from over 80 schools in Ontario and across the U.S. border are expected to take in workshops from K-12.

For more information call Sue Miller at (905) 648-1200; ocsta@netcom.ca; 777 Garner Rd. E., Ancaster, Ont., L9K 1J4.

Alberta Convention

Teachers from Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan (CSI District 11) will hold their convention at the Lacombe Christian School in Lacombe, Alta., from October 18-20. The theme is "How Shall the Young Direct Their Way?" Keynoter Dr. Dale Cooper, Dean of Chapel at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., will give the inspirational address. About 300 teachers are expected to attend more than 40 workshops.

For more information contact Denis Hainsworth at: (403) 782-6531; Fax: (403) 782-5760;

lacchris@telusplanet.net; Lacombe Christian School, 5206 58th St., Lacombe, Alta., T4L 1G9.

California Convention

Teachers of the Southwest Christian Teachers Association will spend their convention time aboard the Queen Mary in Long Beach Harbour, California, from October 19 to 20. Theme of the convention will be "Inspired by the Past, Called to Shape the Future." Speakers include Cynthia Ulrich Tobias, president of Learning Styles Unlimited; Dr. Mary Colismo, former professor of educational psychology; Sheri Ippel, presenter on brain research; and Dr. Steven Vryhof, sociologist and author.

For more information contact Bob Van Wieren at (616) 957-1070; Fax: (616)957-5022;

BobVWieren@aol.com; CSI 3350 East Paris Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, Mich. 49512-3054.

Book Review

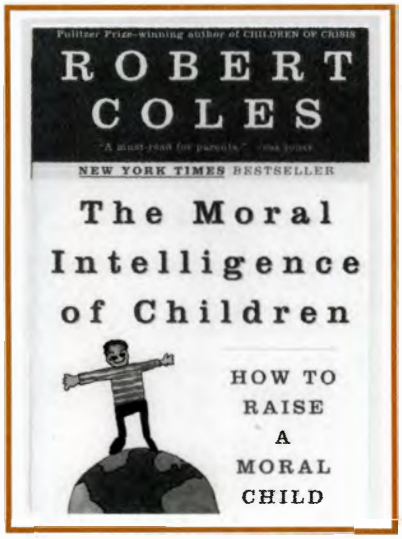
Steve J. Van Der Weele

Robert Coles. ***The Moral Intelligence of Children: How to Raise a Moral Child.*** New York: Random House. (Penguin, Plume book). 1998. 199 pages.

Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Emeritus).

Every book that Robert Coles writes refines what is truly the passion of his life: the art of imparting to our children the moral compass which they will need if they are to become mature adults. The book consists of some autobiography, several illuminating stories, observations of children, reasoned reflection on the daunting task of rearing children from infancy to maturity. But the special usefulness of the book can be found in his summaries of conferences with groups of parents of troubled children.

Professor Coles believes resolutely that character can and must be taught in the home — for the most part unobtrusively, indirectly, taking advantage of moral moments as they occur. And no age is too early to start the process of moral education. The child should be issued hundreds of NO!'s so that it can understand what a YES means. It needs to be challenged in its toilet training. It needs to become part of a human community, in which each family member plays a cooperating role. The child must be taught civility, kindness, altruism. The parents must talk a good line and reinforce their dicta by their own behavior. They must read good books to their children and choose good ones for them (Coles includes an Appendix of recommended books for children, William Bennett's anthologies among them).



Compassionate rigor

Coles goes beyond Dr. Spock's permissive approach, beyond how-to-do-it books, beyond even, his own specialty, psychiatry, as time and again he remonstrates with practitioners in his field, urging them not to stop with the neutral language of psychology but to undergird their analyses with moral considerations. A failure by parents to exercise this compassionate rigor — to adapt a current phrase — will lead to a "not-so-good person," one characterized by a "heightened, destructive, self-absorption, in all its melancholy variations" (p. 22).

The elementary school serves as a laboratory for the working out of how the child has been shaped at home. Its character development continues or ceases during these crucial years. One of Coles's case histories involves a fourth-grade girl, who, though intelligent and usually well behaved, resorts to using a crib-sheet in an arithmetic test. The episode could have been resolved here if the teacher had confronted the girl and imposed an appropriate penalty. But she evades her responsibility and the episode takes on a life of its own.

Pulled in opposite directions

We now move to the high school level, when "sexual magic" adds to the complications of character pedagogy. New moral quandaries arise. Coles wants parents to know that this rebellious teenager, who seems almost a stranger reared in some other environment — is not beyond hope. With careful probing — much of it, Coles reminds us, is common sense — these children can be understood and helped. They may be cynical, but their cynicism already reveals their fascination with integrity, despite the lapses they see around them. The parent must be resourceful in finding common ground in shared activities (attending the student's hockey game, for an opener), in appealing to some adult figure whom the adolescent respects, remembering all the while that the child is probably more lonely and insecure than he or she realizes.

There is an ocean of wisdom in this book. Coles's own training, careful research, diligent observation and professional acuity make this a book that not only every parent but every teacher should read. But it is disappointing in what he does not say, or does not say with sufficient vigor. Although he reports with obvious approval the involvement of some of his clients in their churches and synagogues, he does not elevate this resource above other shaping forces, such as good literature and class discussions. Nothing short of the transcendent defined by Christian faith can ultimately lead to the life of disciplined sainthood, the virtuous and wise person redeemed from sin and motivated by gratitude, to which members of the Christian community aspire.

Kay S. Hymowitz. *Ready or Not*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999, 292 pp.
Reviewed by Raymond Haan, Teacher of English (retired), Calvin Christian High School, Grandville, Michigan.

Though bad education can derive from incompetent teachers and principals, it can also derive from a more powerful and perplexing source: bad philosophy. In *Ready or Not*, Kay Hymowitz reasons that educational theorists, by digesting the false philosophy of such intellectuals as Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, have produced bad educational practice.

Who are these men? Rousseau (1712-1778) held that children are consistently rational, competent and moral, and that they are, therefore, capable of self-direction. John Dewey (1859-1952) asserted that the child's natural impulses of communicating, inquiring and creating provide an appropriate and sufficient basis for a curriculum. Having accepted these ideas, contemporary educational theorists have developed practices consistent with them. Two obvious examples are these: "learner-centered math" and the whole-language approach to reading. Kay Hymowitz reminds us of the results: American 12th-graders scored near the bottom in the Third International Math and Science Study, and during the past ten years SAT verbal scores have fallen as well.

Kay Hymowitz regards the foregoing, child-centered approaches to education as "anti-cultural." By this she means that many Americans no longer believe "that children must be inducted by their elders into a pre-existing society, into a web of meaning — in short, into a culture. Instead, it's up to the children to create the world for themselves." The opposing and older American view of education, which took shape in the early 1800s, the author calls "the republican childhood." Though imperfectly realized, the idea of republican childhood "was based on a number of seemingly paradoxical truths that anti-culturalism ignores: that adults must mold children into free individuals, that children do not naturally know how to shape their lives according to their own vision, and that both democratic government and free enterprise impose especially strong demands on us as citizens and as parents."

The argument of *Ready or Not* is that the followers of Rousseau have led us away from the republican ideal and into a frightening anti-cultural jungle. Ignoring the laws of child development, we treat children like small adults and, by doing so, we endanger their futures and the future of American society.

The progress toward premature adulthood can begin when children are still in the cradle — and even before. Expectant mothers can now purchase programs for "fetal learning," and some authors of books on child-rearing promote very early cognitive development — as do some makers of children's toys. The author notes that in the early 1970s many adults began to regard children as "information processors," with the result that "our baby geniuses do not need 'someone else' to show them how to enter their world. They merely need information and input for their own achievement." It has not occurred to these adults whether mere information may have organization and meaning.

The most potent forces that attack young children are, of course, entertainment and advertising. "Tween" movies typically present child characters as sophisticated, self-governing, and cynical semi-adults. And the advertisements which assault these children in the programs they watch are designed to make corporate America an ineradicable part of their lives.

Complexities and contradictions multiply when the law treats teenagers as adults. The Emancipation of Minors Act (California, 1982) enables teenagers "to sign contracts, own property, and keep their earnings." Judicial bypasses for teenage girls who seek abortions are possible. Such laws substitute authority of bureaucrats and legal institutions for that of parents. Though such laws provide children with the rights of adults, few of them have the moral or intellectual maturity to understand the personal and social implications of their actions. And it is not by this time surprising to learn that anti-culturalists view children of elementary school age as having the right to make decisions regarding "sexual preference" and sexual activity. The authority of parents and traditional morality are secondary resources at best.

What are the costs in the lives of these "postmodern postadolescents"? Popular television shows such as *Seinfeld*, *E.R.*, and *McBeal* present examples of such persons: single, affluent, uncertain, restless and rootless. They are world-weary, disillusioned, alienated, detached. Few of them vote, and their dismal sexual history renders them unfit for any deep and lasting relationships.

The author's well-documented indictment of anti-culturalism has one flaw — the author bases her arguments on a humanistic and rational basis. Christian readers will agree with the pathology of society's illness but will attribute it to another source — along with the proper cure. And that reader will also experience gratitude that churches, parents, and schools can, and do, by God's grace, still produce wholesome citizens. It is a timely, sobering and significant book.