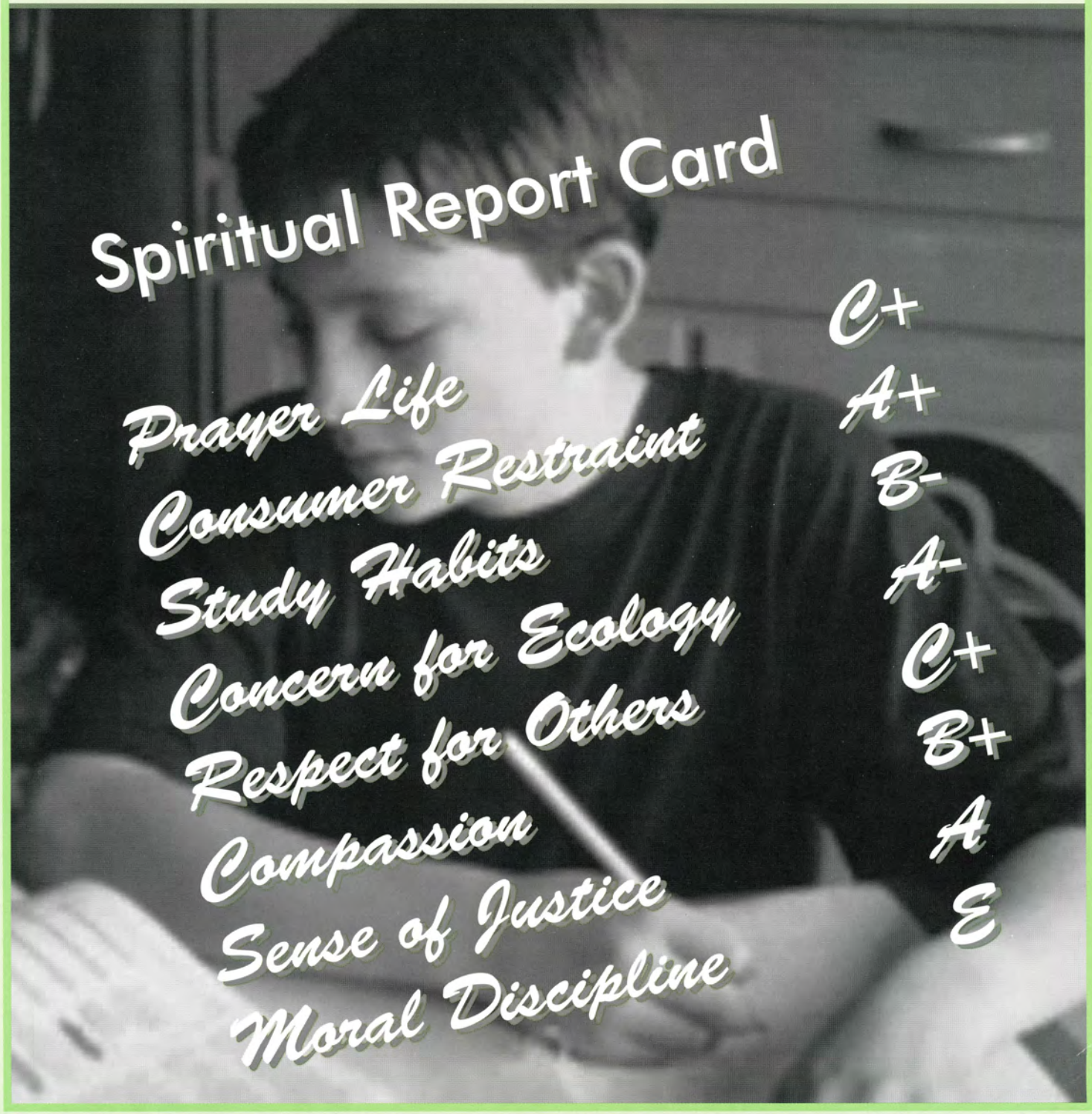
A forum for Christian school educators

Christian Educators Journal

Volume 40 No. 3 February 2001



Editorial

Bert Witvoet

Can These Scholastic Bones Live?

A Reformed understanding of spirituality is a rare commodity these days. We've all been exposed to floods of charismatic experiences — personal testimonies, miraculous healings and praise worship. To be truly spiritual is to be on a constant high, it seems. The tide has washed over our Christian schools as well.

There is today a greater emphasis on prayer and piety in the Christian schools I know than there was, say, 40 years ago when I began teaching in these schools. In the '60s, piety was sometimes confused with pietism and looked at with some suspicion. We believed in a robust Christianity that proclaimed the kingship of Christ and shied away from anything that might look like sentimental spirituality. I like the more mature approach towards piety I see today — an approach that places a strong emphasis on a relationship with Jesus Christ and that is not ashamed of expressing adoration of and devotion to God.

Of course, piety is a slippery quality. The moment we consider ourselves pious, we have lost it. Too much focus on piety as an end in itself, and we have landed ourselves in the quagmire of hypocrisy. Nevertheless, I like it when teenagers and teachers speak of their love for Jesus without being apologetic.

Not that I'm without reservations about what I see. With the current emphasis on piety and devotion has come a form of subjectivism that has robbed us of another important dimension of the Christian faith: God's truth is bigger than we and our feelings are not meant to be normative guidelines. And piety is not supposed to be the sum of our spirituality.

This issue of the *Christian Educators Journal* deals with the theme of spirituality in the Christian school. How do we know that a school has a wholesome view of what constitutes spiritual vitality, a good Christian walk, a buoyant connection with God? How do we evaluate the spiritual component of our curriculum, of school policy, of teacher and student behavior? Do we judge it by the number of chapels we hold? Several of the articles that follow this editorial will help us in this discussion.

A chapel for Eden

But let me illustrate what I think the Reformed perspective on spirituality is by telling you the story of two schools in my hometown.

In our city of St. Catharines, there is a public high school that used to be a private Mennonite high school. It was known as Eden Christian College. About 10 years ago, this school ran into financial difficulties and accepted an offer to join the public system. Because of a very lenient public school board, Eden was allowed to keep its Christian teachers and have some freedom in hiring new teachers (prospective teachers cannot be asked about their religious convictions; only whether or not they are comfortable with Eden's philosophy). Eden had to drop the adjective Christian in its name and was not allowed to teach the Christian faith or hold chapels within regular school hours, but it could do so in an extra-curricular program before or after school. Although Eden has its own advisory board, the ultimate decisions are made by the public school board. Eden is not what in some quarters is called a charter school. It is under a local arrangement that could be challenged in a court of law. Right now, Eden shares a large public school facility with another public high school. Almost all its students come from Christian families. Tuition is free, of course. Since the arrangement, Eden's student population has burgeoned and includes some 100 students from Reformed families.

Just recently, the Mennonite churches in the area expressed a desire to build a multi-million dollar chapel on the school's (public) property. Whether or not it will be allowed to do so is uncertain at this time. No doubt, the Mennonite community is concerned about the spiritual welfare of the students at the school. But what does this gesture say about how spiritual health is viewed? Can a chapel make up for the loss of freedom teachers have to integrate the Christian faith into the curriculum? Does a layer of freshly fallen snow purify toxic soil?

It is interesting to note that the ICS high school in town, Beacon Christian High School, was given the same opportunity to join the public school board. It, too, was a struggling school with fewer than a hundred students. Free tuition would be sure to increase enrolment drastically. But Beacon refused to explore the opportunity. That's because its board saw the Christian faith as an integral part of every-day school life.

That probably is the key difference between a Reformed view and an Anabaptist view of education. The Reformed perspective says that all of life, all of education, is religion, is worship of God. And so a Reformed view of spirituality is far more comprehensive than offering a time of worship and devotions and making sure the staff and students are Christians.

Many-faceted obedience

But let me get back to the question of what constitutes a healthy spiritual climate in the school. Who is that good and faithful student of which Christ will say, "Well done"? Not necessarily the one who speaks most easily about his or her

faith. We don't read anywhere, "Blessed are the extroverts. They will inherit one thousand WWJD bracelets." And let's face it: a school is a school is a school. The first requirement for gaining God's approval in school is to be the most faithful teacher and student one can be.

Let me elaborate on that a bit. The hallmark of a vital Christian learner is that he or she, inhabited by the Holy Spirit of Christ, wants to honor God by showing respect for the creation, by caring for fellow creatures, by accepting the mandate to explore culture and distinguish between what is good and what is evil, by discerning what is materialistic, humanistic or Christ-centered, by using the imagination to reflect God's image, by seeking to know God's will for technology and industry, by wanting to see justice done for the poor and the oppressed, by acknowledging the need for restraint in the consumption of goods and the expression of sexuality, by questioning the purpose of wealth and power, by standing in awe at the beauty of a molecule or a star, by enjoying the achievements of others as much as one's own, by asking probing questions, by showing empathy for the unpopular, by loving the challenge of a math problem and exploring the theme of a story, by walking humbly with God.

An alive Christian scholar sees every human act as a response to God's active presence in the world. The Christian school is a place where students learn to see themselves as respondents.

Can a school provide this kind of spirituality? Not really. It can only create a climate that encourages a full-orbed response to God's voice in creation and Scripture. A lot depends on what happens in families and in the student's own life as well as in the churches, the peer groups and society. Teachers play an important role, too. But ultimately it's a matter of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the supporting community, in the staff and in the students. Come, Holy Spirit, and turn our sometimes weary, fearful, cloying establishments of routine and conformity into exciting and courageous communities of exploration and renewal.

An Unforgettable Licence Plate

Recently, my wife and I had occasion to obtain a new Ontario license plate from the local registration office. When I was handed the plate, I looked at it to see if it was easy to memorize. It read AJCY582. It always takes time to get used to a new identification, especially if it's not a vanity plate with your own choice of text. But how in the world were we going to remember AJCY582? Time for help from the children and their significant partners. I e-mailed them for suggestions, telling them we needed a mnemonic to help us recall. The winner would get to drive the van!

A few days after my S.O.S. hit the electronic highway, our youngest son's girlfriend answered the challenge and demolished the field of competitors. She suggested the following: "Ask Jesus Christ Why Five Ate Two." She was referring to the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 near the Sea of Galilee. Part of the menu was two small fish. Yes, indeed, ask Jesus Christ why five thousand people ate two fish. Brilliant! How can we ever forget our new license plate?

An hour after I had read her e-mail, I was slated to attend a workshop at the local Christian school where I was expected to open with devotions. I decided to use the story of the license plate and the ingenious mnemonic. "Let's ask Jesus Christ why the 5,000 people ate two fish," I suggested after I had recounted the story of the competition. "No doubt, Jesus' answer would be, 'Because they were hungry.' But a little later, Jesus uses the feeding of the 5,000 to illustrate the need for people to work not for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life."

I had my theme for the workshop. "Why are we here on a beautiful late-September Saturday morning?" I asked. "We are here to work for food that endures to eternal life. We can state all kinds of objectives and goals for Christian education, but it all comes to naught if we don't seek eternal life for our children and ourselves."

End of devotions, except for the prayer. It had all centered on a weird Ontario license plate with the nonsensical message "AJCY582" — an arbitrary sequence of letters and numbers. Or is it? The person before us got AJCY581. Hello? What can you do with that? Everyone knows the little boy carried *two* small fish!

Christian Educators Journal

Published four times a year:
October, December, February, April

Managing Editor: Bert Witvoet
Design Editor: Doug Roorda
Manuscript Editor: Nelly Westerhoff
Production Editor: Alice R. Oldejans
Advertising Manager: Don Oppewal
Business Manager: Peter C. Boogaart

Regional Editors:
Robert Bruinsma - Western Canada
Agnes Fisher - Eastern US
Jim & Arda Rooks - Eastern Canada
Myrtle Smits - Southwestern US

Eye-balling Spiritual Health at School

by Paul Theule

Paul Theule is principal of the Calgary Christian School (8-12), North Campus, in Calgary, Alberta.

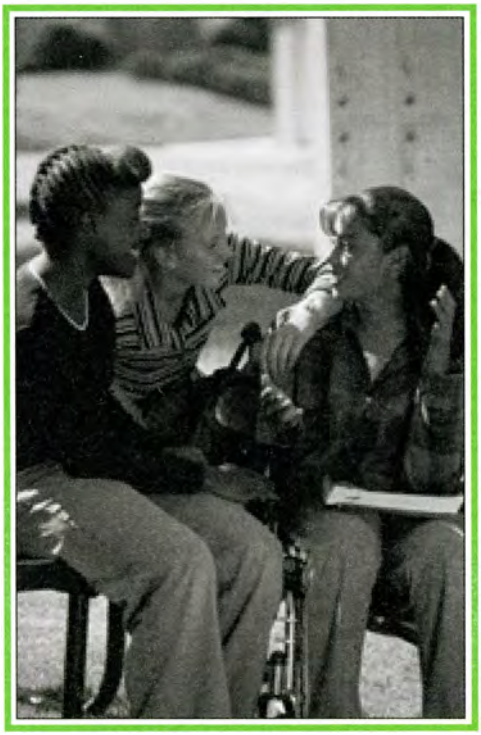
Measuring the spiritual life of students presents quite a challenge because of the wide variety of measuring sticks. Some would measure by how many "missions" trips students take. Some would measure by how much ear or facial piercing walks through the door in the morning, or by counting dyed heads in the hallways. Others would count the naughty words, or what is consumed on weekend parties. Still others would check how many Bible verses are memorized each year or how many personal testimonies are shared in class.

A few weeks ago, one of our high school students ran away from home. She knows she is loved at home but "needs more space." Mom e-mailed her, and soon the girl responded in kind, re-establishing communication. Although amazed at this new use of technology, I became more amazed at her eagerness to return to school. The 12th-grade student had been with us only since this past September, but her new classmates prayed for her in her crisis and demonstrated genuine care for her. She quickly expressed apologies for the anxieties which she had caused and showed gracious gratitude for the compassion and concern extended by her classmates. She experienced community.

I'm proud of my students. A newcomer experienced genuine love of Christ through them. I'm not always proud of my students, but they shine when it's time to show compassion and Christ's love. Generally, I would say that the spiritual life of the students I see is a mixed bag, often encouraging but certainly not always.

Focus on experience

Some say we offer too much Bible knowledge in Christian schools and not enough experience. Modern pedagogy affirms that experience is essential for learning and growth, but I doubt the validity of the statement itself because I don't see all that much Bible knowledge.



Substantial Bible knowledge produces faith, understanding and maturity. It produces an awareness of and sensitivity towards the seen and unseen worlds and how those dynamics are played out in daily experiences. I fear that we educators do not teach the Bible well because we don't know it well ourselves and don't love it, simply love it, as we ought.

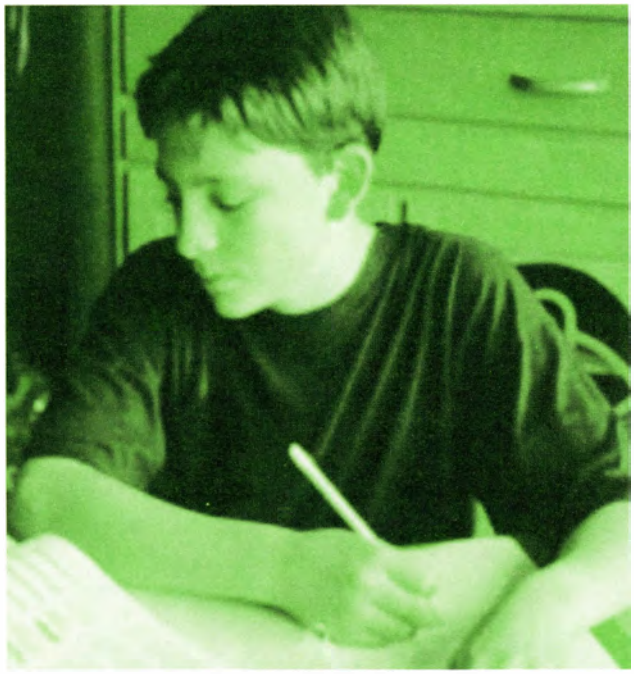
"Train a child in the way he should go...." Fine, but who is to do the training? We all know that the school has been handed parenting roles, including spiritual training, particularly with the phenomenon of absentee parents who seldom have meals with their kids and even more rarely study the Bible or have devotions with them. The church has also handed us some of this training because of time demands. As a result of these shifts, expectations for the experiential have been placed upon the Christian school, including witnessing, outreach, and "Christian youth" activities.

These expectations may be fine, given that all staff of Christian schools are church members, committed to training these young people of Christian families. Quite sadly, though, I recently heard a local youth pastor advise some of our families to leave our school because it isn't doing enough service projects. What I did not hear him ask was how the church and school could work together.

Day-to-day mission

People's expectations and definitions of the spiritual life at a school obviously differ, but perhaps we can find common ground in the Bible. Well-worn biblical phrases and teachings quickly surface: live holy lives, practice discernment, seek justice, offer a cup of cold water, faithfully lift up God's Name in all you say and do, protect the names of your sisters and brothers. Jesus gave the sum: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." This is pretty tough to do in a school which has scores or hundreds of kids shoe-horned in for seven hours a day, day after day. The greatest challenge for our students lies here, right within our own walls. How do our kids do?

Many of our students have a solid spiritual base and Kingdom vision, wisely seeing spiritual dynamics at play both within and outside of our Christian schools. They have a Christian mindset and live their faith.



My heart's desire

In preparation for writing this article, I surveyed my students and found almost all of them professing a deep desire and determination to love and serve God faithfully, both today and in the future. That conviction is a given, for which I am deeply grateful. How to live it? That's the serious question they are asking. "What's wrong with pot?" "Will I tithe better when I gain more income?" "Why Christianity?"

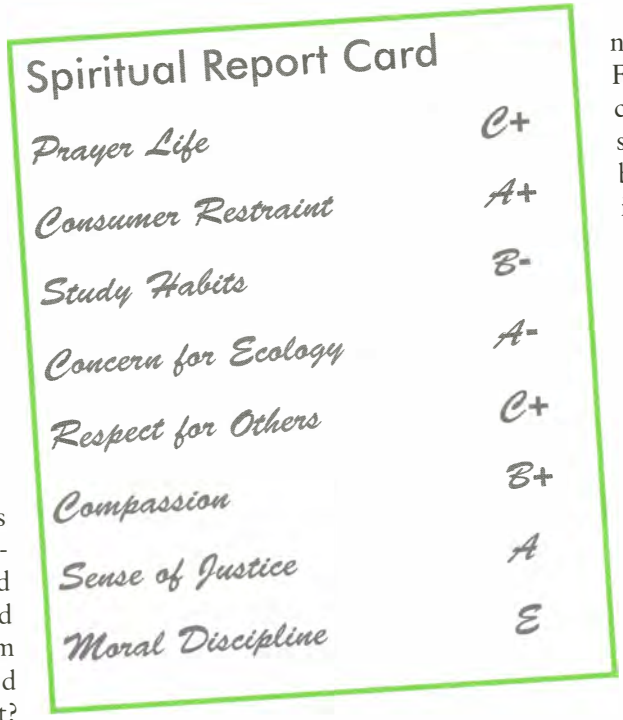
Certainly, some in the crowd show tendencies which may seem rather self-righteous, but usually these students are insecure or need some additional steps toward spiritual maturity. Fine. Let's keep on growing.

I see several students in each class wearing clothing which overtly gives a Christian statement. I am thankful for how they are trying to establish their identity with Christ. A few others choose the chains and spiked hair identity, but even some of those who travel this road are determined that they will help redeem that subculture.

But when the runaway spoke of how she experienced genuine Christian community, I sat up. The postmodern world cries for such community, and it was realized and recognized even within this school.

Blessings and fear

Our school theme for this year is "Blessed to Be a Blessing." The "blessing" which we are examining started with the physical, but it quickly moved to an unexpected angle, coming from the Beatitudes. Who is really blessed to be a blessing? The poor in spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? The merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers? Here lies the spiritual challenge in our Christian school community, opposing peer-pressure and teen culture, opposing Western society. The virtues Christians profess increasingly contrast those presented to them by our Western society because those who are blessed according to the Beatitudes are usually "the dummies" of society.



What complicates the picture further is that as much as our students want to serve God, they hold much fear — fear of the future, fear of failing in their efforts to be faithful to God, to their future spouse, to their future children — because they have seen such failure and experienced it firsthand. Students who are determining their bearings fear losing their way in the darkness of the world and of their own budding self-awareness. While they profess their faith, acknowledging that God has the answers, they are not confident that he will pass the test as they survey the litter of demolished lives about them or recognize their own loneliness or guilt. They want hope as they tiptoe or burst their way into adulthood.

Authentic messages

Our students don't receive phoniness very well; they seek the genuine. For example, the most effective chapel speakers come from themselves, with individual students boldly speaking the truth and receiving the loudest applause. They demand authentic Christianity and very much want to find it and live it themselves.

As educators, we are called to be authentic teachers of hope, modeling a positive and thankful spirit. They look for teachers who have their own identity firmly planted in Christ, as the Bible directs. They need teachers who in their classrooms create a community, which gives a taste of heaven and a model for their lives. We educators are called to be teachers of hope because hope dispels fear.

Student Spirituality:

More Search Than Certitude

by David A. Hoekema

David Hoekema is professor of philosophy, former academic dean and interim vice-president for student life at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. He has served as executive director of the American Philosophical Association.

The nature of religious life on the college and university campuses of the United States and Canadian campuses should be a matter of concern to all Christians. Adolescence is understood in our culture as a time for testing and re-examining one's deepest convictions and values, and the intellectual and personal maturity that should come with college-level study often brings out far-reaching changes in students' religious lives as well. A lively and visible presence of religious groups on campus helps ensure that students take their own faith and that of others seriously. Conversely, if campus religious life is invisible — or if it is dominated by a few groups with narrow perspectives and a combative spirit — students are more likely to develop a lifelong habit of ignoring the spiritual dimensions of their lives.

On the campus and beyond, many today express a distaste for conventional forms of institutional religion, yet declare themselves deeply committed to "the spiritual." A major study of religious life on a cross-section of college campuses found students far more likely to call themselves spiritual than religious, because "spirituality to them connoted a quest, while religion signified something fixed and handed down."[1] There has been a noteworthy resurgence of interest in religion among scholars in fields such as literature, history, and philosophy, and no doubt this development has increased student interest as well. But they have often turned away from the institutional church toward more exploratory and unconventional forms of spirituality.

One exasperated pastor protested the watered-down vagueness of students' search for spiritual meaning in a commentary published recently in a leading weekly of higher education: "Most students are illiterate when it comes to religion. That ignorance makes it far too easy for people to don one of religion's many costumes, a ubiquitous 'spirituality' that is clogging the Internet and cluttering campus bulletin boards. Unfortunately, the garb of spirituality is a bleached, if companionable, substitute for faith."[2]

Easy-going relativism: the notion that "my religion is true for me."

A pastor in the United Church of Christ who has worked with college students, Donna Schaper, is dismayed by "amateurish tai chi and yoga, quasi-Buddhist meditation, and New Age prayers," and she urges that campuses should be places not only for the study but also for the practice of religion — by the faithful and not just the idly curious.[3]

Multi-faith

The movement away from traditional forms of religious expression seems to reflect not a decline but rather a proliferation of religious practices on many campuses. A generation ago, religious life on a large university campus revolved around the Protestant chaplains, the Newman Center, and Hillel House. Today the list is far longer. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, there are 28 student religious organizations, from the Zoroastrian Association to the Chinese Bible Fellowship. In one building on that campus, at various times of the day, one might find Moslem students kneeling toward Mecca, Buddhist students quietly meditating, Christian students at a prayer meeting, and Jewish students praying in Hebrew. [4]

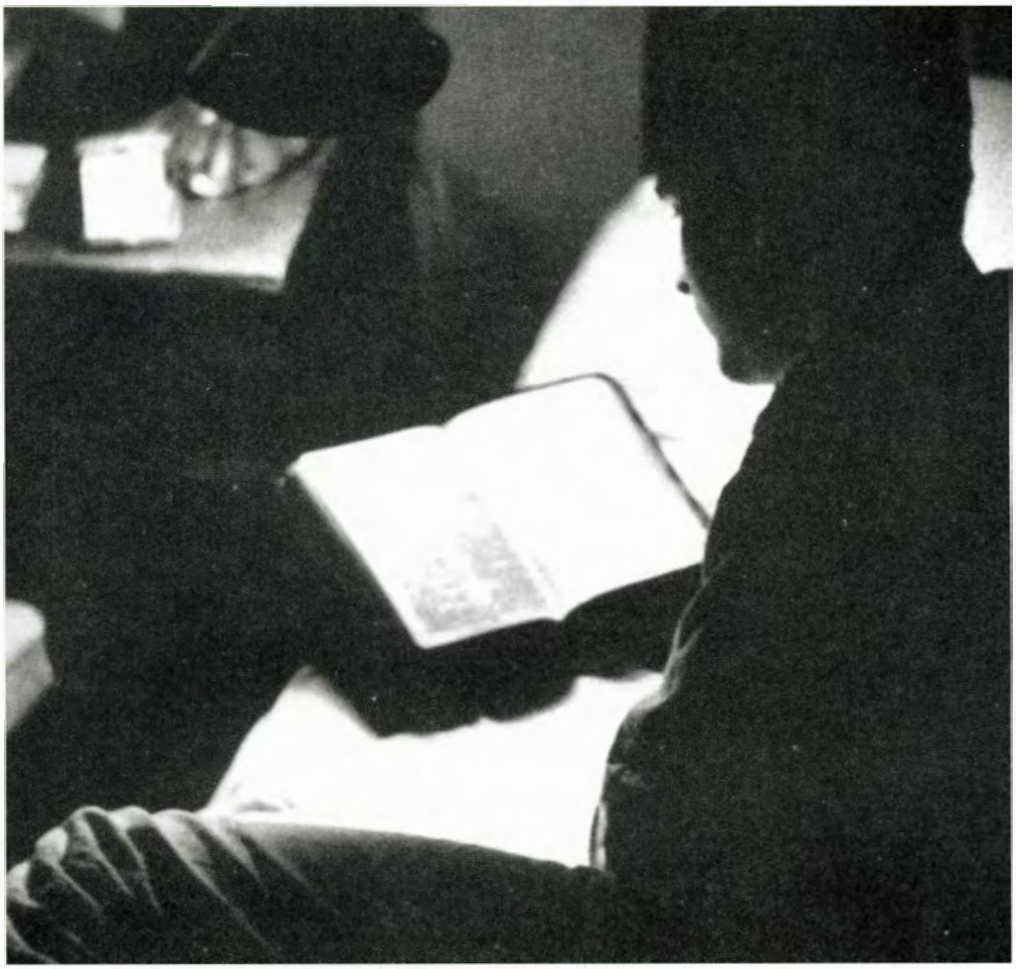
At smaller state institutions, and at private colleges, the range may not be quite so wide, and yet the religious atmosphere has changed substantially. At the Christian college where I now teach, most students are Christian, and daily chapel is well attended. But it is not unusual for someone in a philosophy class to raise his hand and say, "As a Moslem, I disagree with what Steve said aboutGod's omniscience."

Mix-and-match

The nation's campuses, in other words, increasingly mirror the religious pluralism of the nation. Students who learn that their friends and classmates adhere to religious worldviews very different from their own may find themselves wondering whether their own religious views rest on anything more than childhood training and surrounding culture. The popularity of a sort of mix-and-match spirituality, I think, arises not so much from the fact of pluralism as from an attitude of indiscriminate affirmation that it sometimes elicits. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Religious freedom is, after all, a cherished principle of our political order, and it should surely characterize our campuses. All members of the campus community — students, faculty, and administrators — should strive for a climate of mutual respect. But we sometimes fall into the fallacy of supposing that it is intolerant simply to adhere to one religious tradition and proclaim its truth. But this is absurd: to affirm others' right to their beliefs in no way invalidates our own convictions or annuls the differences between them.

As Christians we believe that Christ is the redeemer of the world, not merely of Chris-



tians. God's kingdom of justice and peace, we affirm, encompasses the whole earth. To affirm these truths is at the same time to deny competing claims. Those who believe that "God" names nothing more than deep human longings or that Christ was simply a man with unusual gifts for teaching are entitled to uphold their beliefs, to be sure. Yet, we must add, they are fundamentally mistaken.

For students, a desire to fit in and a superficial awareness of religious diversity may together give rise to a sort of easy-going relativism that affirms the value of religion but makes no distinctions between one and another. The notion that "my religion is true for me" fosters the sort of campus spiritual smorgasbord that Schaper decries. Such an attitude may also arise in reaction against evangelical Protestant students whose zeal for the Lord exceeds their willingness to listen. When Christian students claim to have all the answers, and entertain no questions, they alienate many fellow Christians and do the cause of the Gospel no service. Such narrow-mindedness is by no means characteristic of evangelical student groups, but I have seen it surface from time to time both at state universities and at private colleges.

Listen carefully

How can those of us who interact with students as faculty, administrators, and parents help students cope with the challenges they face on campus today? What can we offer to students that will foster their spiritual as well as intellectual maturity? Let me offer three suggestions.

First, and probably most important, we can offer *a listening ear*. Before we tell students what to do we need to learn what most deeply concerns them and what personal circumstances shape their perception of the world. As an administrator, I often sat down with students in serious difficulty, disciplinary or academic, to help find a way out. Frequently I was shocked and saddened to learn what they had recently had to face, such as a deep-rooted conflict in the family, extended illness, or betrayal by a friend or a trusted adult. Are there any students on our campuses whose lives have not been disrupted by the divorce of some adult dear to them, if not a parent then an uncle or a pastor? I have seldom met any.

Difficult personal circumstances do not excuse irresponsible behavior, to be sure, nor do they prevent spiritual growth. But they can throw up difficult obstacles. Faith is challenged when a revered pastor or trusted relative turns out to be a poor example in the conduct of his own life. God's grace may be obscured for a time by the seemingly pointless suffering of a classmate struck with a rapidly-growing cancer. If we are willing to ask thoughtful questions, and wait untilstudents are ready to give us answers before we assume that we know what they need, we will grow no less than our students through our conversations.

Give space

Second, we can offer *room to explore a variety of religious beliefs and expressions,* along with a fundamental respect for those whose worldviews differ from ours. What the attitude of Christians to other religions ought to be is a complex issue and does not lend itself to easy answers. But one of its elements should surely be a spirit of humility. Because our understanding of God and the world is deeply colored by our own historical and cultural assumptions, we should honor the search for God that is embodied in every other religion and be ready to learn from them how our own vision of the Christian Gospel is distorted or incomplete.

We should, therefore, encourage students to make good use of their opportunities to learn more about other religious faiths. A Christian student who accepts an invitation to a Passover seder with a roommate, spends Saturday mornings learning yoga, and attends an informational meeting on Islam will learn as much about her identity as a

Christian as about religions. Of course, some forms of exploration are inappropriate. A Christian should never affirm a non-Christian creed, for example, or engage in acts of worship that are not clearly directed to the God of Scripture. But attendance at a meeting where prayers from several traditions are offered, or learning the physical disciplines associated with spiritual growth in Hinduism and Buddhism, is entirely appropriate for a Christian. Indeed, for Christian students from relatively narrow backgrounds, such exploration may be a needed antidote to the mysterious allure they hold when they are seen as forbidden.

Humble confession

Alongside our willingness to listen we can offer something no less important: *a forthright yet humble affirmation of our Christian convictions*. As we extend our respect toward others we must also uphold the Gospel of salvation in Christ as a fundamental truth that God has entrusted to us in Scripture. Such an affirmation does not imply disrespect for other religions or for Christianity's critics. We hold the treasure of the Gospel in earthen vessels, and church history offers many examples of the dangers of equating culture with theology. Hence our affirmation must be made in a spirit of humility, and we must welcome the help of others in correcting our own misunderstanding of Christian teachings. At the same time, fulfilling the Great Commission, our lives should show what it means to be reconciled with God and filled with the Spirit.

Both for students firmly committed to Christian faith and for those struggling to know where to stand, the example of trusted adults who hold firmly and confidently to Christian belief at the very core of their lives is of the utmost importance. We cannot hope, nor should we attempt, to reverse the tide of religious pluralism in our society. What we can do is bear faithful witness to the Gospel in our words and our deeds.

In the words of St. Francis, we should preach the Gospel always, using words when necessary. This is surely our most important contribution to the spiritual welfare of students.

References:

[1] "Study Documents Students' Spirituality," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 3, 1999.

[2] "Me-First Spirituality is a Sorry Substitute for Organized Religion on Campuses," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 18, 2000.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] "Pluralism and Prayer Under One Roof," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Dec. 3, 1999.

Allowing the Spiritual to

by David Smith

David Smith is assistant professor of German at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. He is co-author of The Gift of a Stranger *(see review on p. 32 of this issue) and has a strong interest in a Christian philosophy of education and Christian pedagogy.*

In Britain, my home country, there has been much discussion recently about spirituality in school. The discussion was sparked by some recent pieces of legislation which, updating older education acts, stated that a key aim of the school curriculum was the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. The structure of the legislation made it clear that all of these adjectives were intended to apply across the entire school curriculum, and people have been trying to work out ever since what they might mean in practice.

Christian educators have responded with mixed feelings. On the one hand, much that currently goes under the name of spirituality in education is far from Christian. Anyone who inquires very far will find a wide range of competing voices. On the other hand, while there are good grounds for caution, this kind of discussion also provides grounds for self-examination. If we don't like all of what is offered, what do we have to say as Christians about the spiritual dimension of learning? Is our own conception of spirituality, our own vision of learners' spiritual growth, deep and wide enough to provide a rich, life-giving alternative? Are we able to discern the spiritual dimension of the whole of the curriculum, or do we associate spirituality exclusively with devotional activities interspersed among the daily grind of teaching and learning? Does Christian spirituality transform the curriculum, or have we too thoroughly imbibed the modern tendency to make spirituality private, individualistic, escapist and disconnected from the issues of daily life?

Sacred matter

It is worth pausing to recall what a defection from the Christian tradition a reductionist view would be. From a Christian perspective, there are some fundamental problems with the popular tendency to regard the spiritual as the opposite of the material. Christian faith affirms the original goodness of a material creation, the incarnation of God as human flesh and blood, and the resurrection of believers not to an existence as immaterial spirits but to raised bodies and a restored creation. The beliefs that materiality was itself the source of evil or that immateriality was necessarily superior were rejected early in church history as heretical. Pointing to the dignity accorded to simple bread and wine from the earliest days of the church, theologian John Zizioulas states that "unlike ancient Greek and especially Neo-platonic attitudes to spirituality, the patristic mentality, based on a eucharistic approach to life, stressed that being 'spiritual' meant accepting and sanctifying the material world and not undermining its importance in any way."[1]

If we look more closely at the New Testament, we find good grounds for the church's stance. The New Testament writers are comfortable speaking of "spiritual bodies" (1 Corinthians 15:44), a phrase which can be deeply puzzling only if the spiritual and the material are held to be opposites. It has for some time been widely recognized that the Pauline distinction between "spiritual" and "fleshly" is to be read as a distinction not between spirit and matter but, rather, between that which is oriented towards God and that which is not.[2] The "works of the flesh" include such non-bodily sins as discord, jealousy and selfish ambition (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:3), and Paul urges us: "present your *bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *spiritual* worship" (Romans 12:1-3, emphasis added; see similarly Romans 6:13; 1 Corinthians 6:13, 15, 19).

What of more recent times? Philosopher Charles Taylor has argued at length that Christian spirituality, in particular the spirituality of the Reformation, lies at the roots of the modern affirmation of ordinary life as a locus of personal significance. By denying a hierarchy of callings in which clerical vocations brought an automatically closer proximity to God, the Reformers were "denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration."[3]

Spirituality, in this historic Christian view, is to be understood neither as an escape from life in the world, nor as the mysterious something which is left over when all of our everyday human tasks have been given their due. Christian spirituality is rather expressed in a growing patterning of the whole of life ("heart, soul, mind and strength") after Christ, who is the image of God (Mark 12:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Spirituality has to do with how we orient life in its fulness, not with the creation of a small sacred enclosure.

How does this bear upon our view of teaching and learning? If spirituality is conceived with the Reformers not as something which takes place only at the limits but as a change which can penetrate the full extent of mundane life, then we are faced with the challenge of working out how spirituality penetrates the full extent of the curriculum. In the brief space which remains here, I will suggest three

Penetrate the Mundane

areas in which teachers can be alert for opportunities for spiritual growth. For each area, I will offer a concrete example drawn from a particular curricular discipline.

The importance of experience

Much of the current literature on children's spiritual development strongly emphasizes the importance of certain kinds of experience. The educational process can furnish opportunities for learners to experience, for instance, curiosity, awe and wonder, connection and belonging, and mystery. It can also make space for learners to reflect on their experiences of jealousy, anger, alienation, betrayal and failure. These experiences of the wonder and the brokenness of life are close to the heart of spirituality and spiritual growth, and they can arise anywhere in the school curriculum. Consider the following reminiscence by a biology teacher:

"I was fourteen at the time. It was a Thursday afternoon biology lesson. Our teacher gathered us round the front desk and produced a human brain in a large glass container. He proceeded to point out the various regions of the brain and to explain the functions they were responsible for. His words went over my head. I just sat there wondering what this "person" used to think about and what had happened to all those thoughts now that his/her brain was pickled. Thirty-five years later I can still see that brain and the faces of the pupils looking at it. I can even visualize the slightly green color it had turned. I can't remember what else we did in biology that year."[4]

Note that this experience, for all its deep impact and spiritual significance, did not take place during devotions, but during a biology class with the class's attention focused on the facts of human anatomy. A first step towards sensitivity to the spiritual across the curriculum is to be aware of and prepared for such experiences, wherever they might arise, and to reflect on how they can be woven into the learning process.

The place of understanding

This quickly leads us beyond experience as an end in itself. Experience is not enough, for at least two reasons. First, experiences do not bring their own interpretations with them, and their impact upon our lives depends to a significant degree on how we come to understand them. If I have a striking spiritual experience, it makes a great deal of difference whether I come to view it as the voice of God, the onset of mental illness or the effects of last night's pizza.

Second, educators are not in the business of presenting raw experience and leaving learners to make of it what they will. To do so is to abdicate our responsibility as educators to provide learners with increasingly adequate resources for making sense of their experience. Sooner or later (and this is where the current secular attempt to integrate spiritual experience into education while shying away from controversial beliefs must necessarily fall short), questions of faith and truth must arise — questions about what our experience means, about what we believe, about how coherent those beliefs are. Consider the following instance of a class discussion about school rules. The students are working in small groups:

"Their teacher has given them three sets of cards to arrange, each set forming a continuum. On one set are various school punishments, ranging from a mild verbal reprimand to exclusion; these are to be arranged in order of seriousness. On another set are various misdemeanors, ranging from swearing to physical violence and slashing the curtains with a knife (an actual recent occurrence). These are also to be ranked in order of seriousness. On the third set of cards are various kinds of being — rocks, fish, mammals, children, teachers, and others, including God. These are to be placed in order of value, or importance. When the cards are all arranged a discussion begins. The students begin to explore the anomalies which emerge when they compare their sets of cards. Why are people generally considered more important than inanimate objects, yet acts of vandalism are considered more serious in terms of punishments than acts of psychological violence, such as name-calling? Why have many pupils put God at the top of the value-spectrum, but swearing using God's name at the bot-

tom of the range of misdemeanors? Pupils discuss with interest and, at times, with discomfort, the discrepancies between their stated values, and those of the school, and the day to day practice of both." [5] (David Smith, MSSD, p.14, citing *Entry Points*.)

This activity invites learners to reflect critically on their experience and their assumptions, and to examine the coherence of what they believe. It also points the way beyond experience and understanding to the way in which we live from day to day.

Patterns of living

Consider the following as a perspective on what spiritual growth might be about:

"I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Here (the passage is, of course, drawn from Matthew 25) the emphasis is on the way in which spirituality becomes visible in actions, in concrete patterns of living. This and other similar New Testament passages suggest that the shape of our spirituality is revealed not only in how we worship, but in how we spend our money, how we prioritize our time, how we conduct our relationships, how we invest our energies, where we place our trust, how we respond to the world's (and our) hurt. These are questions which are as pertinent to the study of, say, history or science and technology as to religious education. If our spiritual

Have we too thoroughly imbibed the modern tendency to make spirituality private, individualistic, escapist and disconnected from the issues of daily life?

experience and understanding are disconnected from the mundane patterns of our living, they fall short of genuine spiritual growth. Compare the following example from a class of 14-year-olds learning a foreign language:

"A German language class has been learning about the White Rose resistance movement in Nazi Germany. One activity includes contrasting statements from Sophie Scholl, a leading member of the White Rose, and her sister: Sophie expresses willingness to die in opposition to the Nazi regime if necessary, while her sister, calling attention to the fact that the family was already known to the authorities, asked why it should be they who acted against the government. Heroism and prudence stand side by side. One of the questions posed to pupils is: "Are you more like Sophie or more like her sister?"[6]

This unit of work also draws students' attention to the fact that the members of the White Rose acted in part in response to the call in the book of James to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. The Bible is introduced in this instance not for devotional purposes, but to illustrate its impact on historical events and upon the choices made by a group of German students in the 1940s. The emphasis is not on faith for its own sake, but on the connection between faith and concrete historical living. Activities such as the one described above encourage students to reflect on how all of this illuminates their own character and way of life.

Examples such as these return us to the themes discussed earlier. If Christian spirituality is indeed a change which can penetrate the full extent of mundane life, then Christian educators cannot rest satisfied with an education which sees the spiritual only in the devotional moments which may punctuate the school day. Instead, we must seek to discern the relevance of the human interplay of experience, belief and down-to-earth living for all areas of learning in school. In so doing, we may be able to recover some of the richness for which current secular educational discussions appear to be groping and, thus, in our own fashion, hold out the word of life.

References:

1. J. D. Zizioulas, "The Christian Community," in B. McGinn & J. Meyendorff (eds.), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, 23-43, p. 35.

2. See e.g. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*, London: SCM, 1952.

3. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, p.217.

4. Quoted from Cooling, T., (1999). *Considering Values in the School Curriculum*, an INSET pack. Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, p.14.

5. From P. Mackenzie, A. Farnell, A. Holt, & D. Smith. *Entry Points for Christian Reflection Within Education.* London: CARE, 1997.

6. Smith, D. (2000). *Making Sense of Spiritual Development*. Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, p.18.

DANCING WITH THE ANGELS

by James Calvin Schaap

James Schaap is professor of English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. This is an excerpt of a story that was published in last year's January issue of Perspectives.

Sgt. Roger Molsum

At least some of the facts of the story are not clear. We do know she died alone. Whether it was suicide or delirium is anybody's guess, I'd say, but the tracks don't lie — nobody else was there. When we found her, her footprints led from that little grove of pines she'd left for no apparent reason, to the place in the field, 70 yards out, where finally she succumbed. Single set, like scars iced-over in the ground blizzard. If somebody forced her to go out there, he must have walked on the wind.

Poor girl was from Oregon — what did she know about Iowa cold? Sometimes I think the college ought to have a seminar on how and how not to behave in a blizzard. Out here a human being can die just as quick in cold as in a tornado, even though twisters get all the press. Five years ago now, maybe more, we had a victim froze solid less than a mile from his own place. Drove his pick-up in the ditch, got out, went blind silly in the snow, and succumbed not 300 feet from the truck. Could have walked home in ten minutes if the bitter cold wasn't taking his skin off. Young kid. High school stud.

This one? Young and fragile, a singer I'm told, lots of hair. The cap–one of those old-fashioned ones with ear flaps you buckle up under your chin — it was back in the grove.

What do you say to that? Dancing with the angels, someone says. You bet, I say, but count me out of that party.

Lynn Falkema

Leah isn't gone. We prayed together every night, the six of us, and this afternoon when we met again, I swear she was still there. I took her picture along, and we put it in the middle of the floor, circled around it and prayed, and, like, I felt as if we were talking to her, as if she'd found

a way to get closer to God just so that she could take our burdens to his throne.

It wasn't the picture either — I mean none of us were actually praying to the picture. None of us. But we were all talking to her — not like a seance either, but we were, really. When we were praying, she was listening. I know that's true. There's some things you just know. It was like she was packing our prayers in her backpack to carry them to God. All of us felt it. Each and every one of us.

So we went out there — to the sanctuary, I mean. There were other students there, and it was like a vigil, a prayer vigil. It was wonderful. We were all crying.

Leah, we miss you terribly, but we know you were there with us this afternoon. All of us know it. Thank you for being there. You taught me to be Spirit-filled.

Dr. James Addington

I made Jeff do it. Maybe it was cowardice on my part, but I know he had something really strong with Leah's family. He was the right person to call, even though in the whole silly hierarchy, he answers to me. Most likely it was my job. But I knew they liked Jeff, and he is the campus pastor. Leah loved him too.

I asked him how it went and he said terrible. Her mother lost it for a half hour or so. But then it started to get better, when he told her what had happened. He doesn't know, he says, how he could take tragedy without having the Lord. That's what Jeff told me. Sometimes he strikes me as being so very, very young.

He says he thinks that now they're okay with it. They're strong, he says. Both of them have had renewals, he says. Long ago they joined an Assemblies church, even though they were born in the Reformed faith and are graduates of Grace themselves — which is why Leah is here.

And renewal is what we're after. Renewal is what we promise parents who bring their precious kids to visit — "little

Sara or Gregg or whoever will be renewed in their faith here on campus." That's the line. And it isn't a line. For a half-dozen years we've had enough religious enthusiasm around here to light up a moonless night, Grace's own Great Awakening.

But does there come a time when we douse the fires? Does there come a time when you stop and say that young girl shouldn't have been out there, she shouldn't have taken off that cap, she shouldn't have marched out into soul-chilling cold. Is there a time someone says it was stupid and not holy?

Her parents are okay with it, Jeff says. Okay with it. Their daughter is dead, and they're okay with it because she was dancing with angels? She's cold dead, and we're minus a student here, someone with real talents and abilities. They're not okay with it. I don't care what you say — or they do, for that matter. Nobody should be okay with it. Am I supposed to be happy because she's in the heavenly choir when she belongs in A Capella? I want her here — is that a sin?

I'm not okay with it. I'm not okay with any part of it. Jeff is in his office praying. Is there something wrong with me?

Pastor Jeff Summerhill

Lord, I know you have plans for things that we don't. Sometimes we think ourselves capable of knowing your will, and I know that's pride on our part, sheer arrogance. Forgive us for that. I know you have your reasons for taking Leah, but, Lord, forgive my unbelieving heart. Forgive me for second-guessing you. Forgive me for wondering whether you're really in control the way I want to believe you are.

She was everybody's friend, Lord. She was a leader on this campus. We're going to miss her voice in song. We're going to miss her witness. We're going to miss her overflowing love. We're going to miss her so much. Why Leah?

I know you wanted her. I know you spoke to her in the blizzard. I know you were the one to ask her to come outside, but why?

Lord, help me to make this event, this horrible tragedy, into something that will bring glory to your name. Help me mold young hearts and souls into a stronger resolve to be more like you.

No one knows emptiness better than a believer who finds himself estranged, Lord. Right now, I am that believer. Heal me. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Prof. Abigail Vermeer

I was out there this afternoon, late. The sun was nearly down, so far south in the January sky that it stretches the shadows of those pines half a field away. Sanctuary, they called it — a little strip of pines across from the dorm, just east of the football field, two rows of 20-year old trees creating a long arched canopy over a ten-foot wide path running out to the field where she died. Sanctuary, they called it because it's where they prayed — Leah and her circle of friends, probably the most spiritual kids on campus. Somewhere on the other side of the campus there's another little circle not known for righteousness, but Leah's faithful took this one and made it a place for meditation.

If she'd have stayed in that sanctuary — out of the wind and blinding snow, her cap on, her jacket bundled up — if she had stayed there and prayed, she could have touched God all she wanted. But she wanted more, it seems.

All day people had been out there, and by five already there were flowers, stuffed animals, dozens of notes curled up and stuck into the snow at the end of the path. Like Columbine. We have to build monuments, and Leah's was already started. I picked a note out of the snow and read it. It was addressed to Leah, as if she were still there and not someplace else. "Leah," it said, "your witness shines like the winter sun after a storm." That's all. Then wound up tight into roll like a newspaper and stuck in the snow.

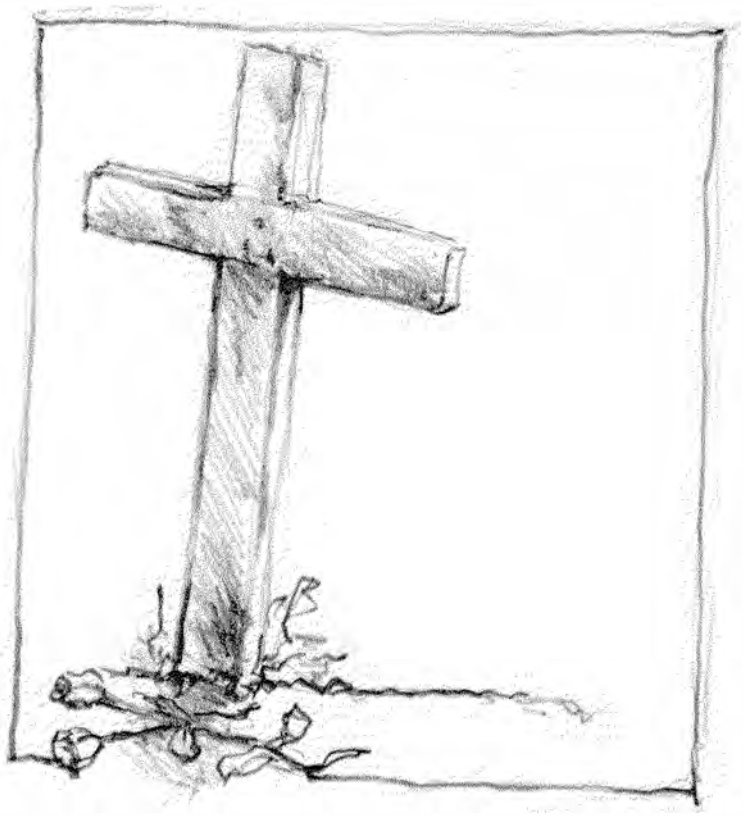
She's become a martyr. She willfully took off her cap, loosened her jacket, and walked out into the killing night, and she's become a hero of the faith. *Hysteria*, some might call it — and I know best that the root word is very feminine.

I stood there this afternoon beside the monument at the sanctuary, and I told myself that although I've taught here for 20 years, it may be time for me to leave the straight and narrow that's become Grace College.

Anna Markham

Oh, how I wanted to be like her. They put us together — I don't know how they choose roommates, freshman year. We were both over-achievers. Maybe that was it. But Leah was unlike anyone I knew — so together, so self-assured, so passionate, so alive. She has magical stage presence, and she was, after a fashion, always on stage. Not that she had a darker side. If she did, I never saw it. I lived with her for the last two years and never saw her bark or scream. Moodiness? Maybe a taste, but nothing to be angered about.

Oh, how I wanted to be like her. Freshman year we were inseparable. Whither she would go, there I would go also. Her people were my people. Her activities were my activities. She sang for GLOW. I sang for GLOW. I lived in the warmth



her commitment radiated. I basked in the selflessness of her spirit-filled presence. I honestly and truly felt joy in my every waking moment.

But that was last year. When we parted for the summer, I found Brent — or maybe I should say he found me. (When you're around Leah as much as I was, everything becomes theological.) With her gone, maybe I needed someone else to sweep me off my feet — I don't know. Not that I was head over heels in love — I wasn't. Brent ended at Thanksgiving.

And I'm not blaming Leah for that either. She never said much about Brent. She was, of course, interested in his faith, always interested in his faith, always wanted to know where he stood with the Lord. I told her he was quiet, and I was working on him. She hugged me.

I had his picture up for awhile, but I swear she never looked at it. Maybe you think I'm being picky or something, but with roommates you get to know things that don't have to be said to be known, and I know she deliberately avoided looking at him. I know it.

Maybe she did break us up — I'm not sure. But I know one thing for certain — it was Brent that broke up whatever Leah and I had, and I know why. In my life there wasn't room for more than Leah.

In October, she came in with something from the *Screwtape Letters*, something she'd read. She'd photocopied it, and she was all excited because, she said, "You have to send this to Brent. You just have to. This is just what he needs to read."

It was after ten, and she'd been out praying with some kids. I took those pages — they were stapled — and that night I read through them in bed. I know *Screwtape*. I read it when I was on a Lewis kick, before I came to college. She was right — it was good. It was one of those about lust, about sins of the flesh.

But I'm lying there in bed that night, my reading light on, when all of a sudden the truth comes to me as clearly as anything because I know Brent wouldn't really get it. He doesn't know Lewis. What's more, you can't just slip one letter out of that book and expect it will make sense to anyone. But that's not what came to me so sharply. What came to me is that Leah didn't know Brent. Maybe she knew him as a soul, but that's all. She didn't know him.

And that angered me. I felt an arrogance about her that I'd never felt before, and when I saw that arrogance, for the first time I looked very closely at myself, dangerously close, and what I saw was someone who didn't so much want to be close to God, as to be close to Leah.

That night I cried in perfect silence because letting her hear me would have meant going back to an addiction. That night, with the angel Leah in my room, I was most alone.

The truth is, in the last few months, I have not been as happy as I was our freshman year. I've not bubbled over like I used to. I've not felt the Holy Spirit coursing through my veins. If true godliness is an absence of self, then I've been selfish, because I've come to believe that I want more for my life than to be a clone.

Not a word of this was ever shared between us. I kept going to GLOW. I kept praying with Leah, kept eating supper with her when she asked. But roommates know things. We're something like sisters, something like lovers, I guess.

Brent ended, too. I told you that.

I'm the only person on this campus who knows that when Leah left this room with her Snoopy cap unbuttoned, her jacket open, she was leaving because she couldn't handle what was happening in here, couldn't take the fact that we were moving apart.

The fact is, what Leah felt was Christian was what Leah was. That's what I've come to believe. It hurts to say it. Others may call her selfless, but she was, in a very strange way, the most selfish person I've ever known.

And I've come to believe this too — although I would say this to no one — that she got what she wanted out there, because there was no one else quite good enough for her here. We all tried, but the only human being who she could finally look up to was the Lord Jesus Christ.

She was my friend — and yet she

wasn't. I don't know how to explain it.

I feel terrible that she died that way, out in the cold, and last night I spent the night in the apartments rather than stay in that room with her clothes and things. I've cried for hours. I'll miss her too — her voice, the depth of her devotion, her regard for other human beings. She meant well with that *Screwtape* thing, I know she did. She wanted Brent to be like her too. She wanted all of us to be like her.

But I won't grieve in the same way that others will. I won't make her a saint. I may well be the only one on campus who knew something about her I'm not sure she knew herself — that even she was human.

Ginger Van Beek

Marlys, Fred, Laura, and I — we sang with her so often, you know. We're the ones that decided we wanted to spend the dawn with her, at the sanctuary. And it was clear this morning, too. We're the ones that were out there first, I guess. We're the ones who saw what happened.

It was gone, all of it. Whatever anybody brought out there, it was like, cleaned up. We looked through the trees. We couldn't believe it. We figured we'd find it boxed up, you know? But it wasn't anywhere. It was gone – all of it. When you got out there, it was as if nothing had been put there at all. There were no stuffed animals, no messages, no journals, no scriptures — nothing.

We cried. We did. We felt like the place was empty, you know? We felt like we came to the tomb and found no one there.

And that's when we thought of it. She's risen too. She's not there.

Isn't that cool? We all came to it, like, at once. Leah is risen too. Leah is on high, where she wanted to be. Leah is singing in the greatest praise band, in front of this whole heavenly student body. It's hard to believe, but Marlys said Leah probably had a smile even bigger than the ones she used to give us when we were on stage. Then we cried some more.

So we stayed. We'd bundled up, and we built a little fire, and the wind was gone. When the sun started to light the sky, the Lord gave us a dawn like you wouldn't believe.

It's funny how the old ones can really get you sometimes. "It is well," we sang. "It is well, with my soul."

"Slouching Toward Bedlam"

Pigskin Piety at the Pole

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Although he originally intended to finish out the semester at John Calvin Christian School in Montana's beautiful Yaak Valley, Jan Kaarsvlam had a bit of a mishap during a field trip and, though all the students made it back, he lost a school bus. The board asked him to leave immediately. Kaarsvlam is now filling in for a teacher on maternity leave. He is teaching family science and textiles at Big Paw Christian Academy in Wyoming.

Rex Kane was often the first one into the teacher's lounge before break. His phys. ed. students needed 10 minutes to change clothes, and Rex saw that time as an opportunity to pick the best treats and settle into his seat at the middle of the table.

Harvey VanPutten, the crusty older member of Bedlam's counseling team, came in a few minutes before the bell, poured coffee into his "Be All that You Can Be" mug (one of the few perks of his job), and stretched out across from Rex.

"I gotta tell you, Rex, sometimes I can't figure out what that Prentiss-Hall kid is thinking. You know what he wants to do now?"

Rex lurched forward in his seat into a position of apparent alertness. He spoke in a hushed tone. "Take kids on a field trip to the petting zoo?"

Harvey blinked twice. Rex's tendency toward non-sequitur could be disconcerting. "No, Rex, he wants to start an *Athletes for Christ* chapter here."

"Sounds like a great idea to me!" said Rex as he grabbed another cinnamon roll and turned his attention back to the sports pages laid out before him. Outside the door, the bell rang.

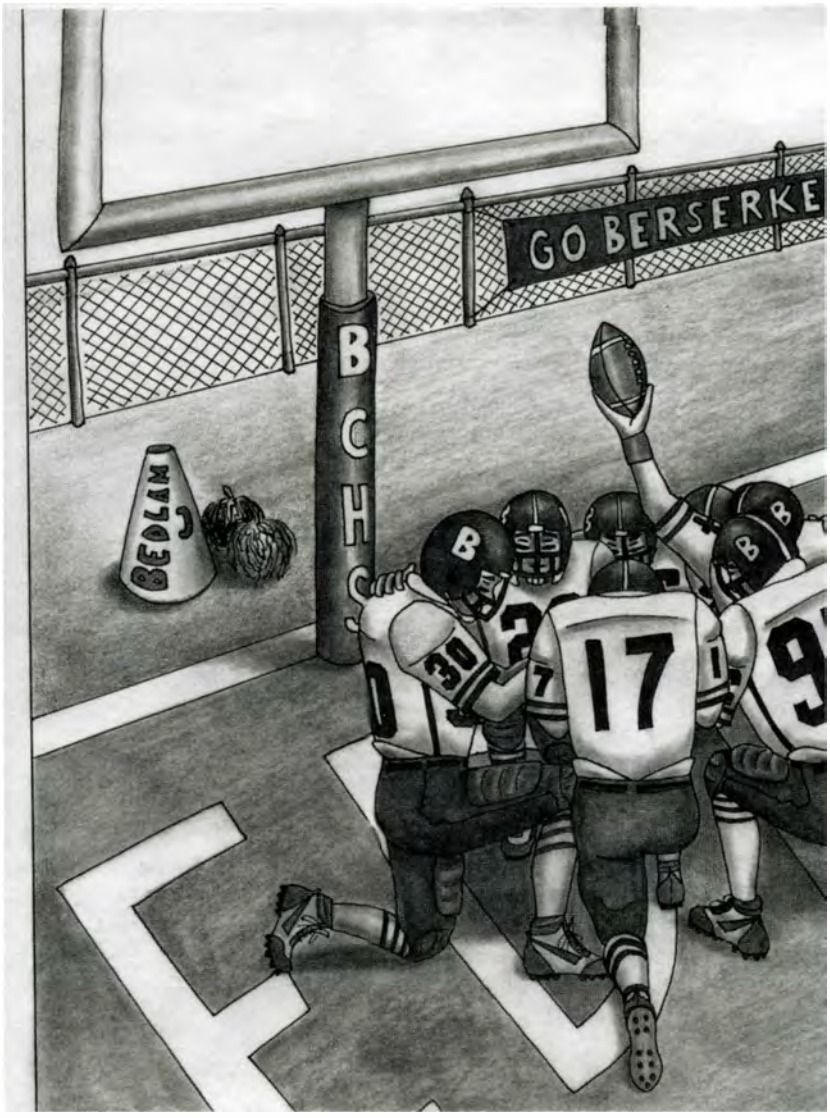
Harvey half-snorted, half-sighed and shook his head. He had known Rex for over twenty years. How could Rex possibly agree with Maxwell Prentiss-Hall? They both knew that he was a wimpy socialist pushover.

Evangelical redundancy?

"Rex," Harley said in exasperation, "*Athletes for Christ* is an evangelical organization. Why do we need something like that in a Christian school?" As the words slipped out his mouth, Maxwell Prentiss-Hall entered the room.

"Something like what?" he asked.

"Sumfin' like 'Affletes for Chris'," Rex said as crumbs rolled down his chin. He wiped at them with the back of his hand, took a slug of coffee, and continued. "Harvey here thinks athletes at our school shouldn't be for Christ."



"That is *not* what I said. I just don't think we need such a group on our campus. *Athletes for Christ* started as a way for Christian athletes in secular schools to join for fellowship and to witness to non-Christians. At a Christian school, it goes without saying that our athletes are for Christ, just like our students are, and our musicians and our actors."

Maxwell smiled slowly, crossed his arms on his chest, and leaned back. "So you think all of our students here are Christians?"

"No," said Harley, looking a bit defensive, "but I really doubt everyone in every chapter of *Athletes for Christ* is truly Christian either."

"You might be surprised," said Maxwell, dabbing a napkin at the corner of his mouth. "No one is forced to join the group. Athletes are in it because they want to be in it."

At the pole

Cal VanderMeer joined in from the end of the table. "I don't mean to be a wet blanket, Max. It always seems to me that any group that involves kids working together is beneficial. But at the same time, don't you think we have enough false piety around here already?"

Prentiss-Hall looked hurt. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Prayer-at-the-Pole, for example."

Rex Kane stood up and glared at Cal. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. You're saying prayer at the pole is bad? I stood outside in the cold for 20 minutes with those kids. Many of them didn't even have hats. I think that's pretty good."

Cal was unsure whether Rex was complimenting the students on their cold-weather stamina or on the choice of headgear.

"I'm not saying prayer is bad, Rex, but a lot of the kids who were there seem to spend more time during the day looking down at those who weren't there than they did praying in the cold. I'm afraid that this *Athletes for Christ* thing would be another excuse for some kids to think themselves better than others. I remember when I was at Kuyper Reformed College, they started an Inter-varsity chapter in my dormitory. To do my laundry I had to walk through the common room where they met. They always stared at me like I was a heathen or something."

Rex Kane grinned. "Well, Cal, maybe you were a heathen."

Cal finally couldn't take Rex anymore. He exploded.

"This is *exactly* what I'm talking about! All these groups do is encourage people to feel superior. True piety is humble and views all of life as religion. That's the kind of piety I try to get my kids to see. In Bible class we talk about the old and the new covenant, about God's dominion over every aspect of our life. I try desperately by my teaching and by my example to convince them that praising God isn't just going to church or to Wednesday night Bible study. That's not good enough. God wants praise through our algebra homework and burger-flipping jobs, through our debate team and through our football team, through ...."

"Absolutely!" Maxwell slapped his hand on the table as he cut Cal off. "We should praise God through football. *That's* what *Athletes for Christ* does."

Shallow Christianity

"No, it doesn't," Cal said, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. "To praise God in football means to play football differently, to play it the way God intended us to play it. It does not mean joining with some group to pray before the game in front of everyone and then to go out and play just like a secular team would. That's a shallow Christianity. It is a mere frosting on a stale, dried-out cake that hasn't changed at all.

"And as for your Prayer-at-the-Pole group," Cal said, spinning to Rex, "I'll tell you what bothered me. The day before they met to pray, we discussed in class how we can even praise God in the types of cars we drive and in how we drive them. You know what those kids did in my class? They laughed. *"Ooh, it's crazy old VanderMeer going off again."* But the next morning I see 200 kids pull into the parking lot. None of them car-pool, and almost one-half of them own gas-guzzling SUVs. But who cares? They are praying, after all. And they are doing it in the open where everyone can see what good people they are. What more could God possibly require?"

It was a rare moment at Bedlam; Cal VanderMeer stormed out of the lounge in a huff.

"Boy, what's his problem?" Rex asked. "He's whining like the cat that got caught in the fan-belt."

But as Rex looked around the table, no one would look him in the eye.

SHINE LIKE STARS

by **John Suk**

John Suk is the editor of the Christian Reformed Church's publication The Banner. The following article is excerpted from his keynote address to the Ontario Christian teachers Convention held in Mississauga, Ontario, in late October of 1999.

A few months ago I was sitting, one evening, on a porch outside my room, in Kibuye, Rwanda. Kibuye is on the shore of Lake Kivu, near the Congo border, just 50 miles from Goma, headquarters for the anti-Kabila rebel forces.

As I sat there, I reflected on some harrowing things I had experienced the past few days, including visiting a church in Ntarama, just outside the Rwandan capital. Four years earlier more than 5000 Tutsi tribe members and sympathizers were slaughtered by members of the Hutu tribe in that church. When I visited, the church's sanctuary was still strewn with the remains of hundreds of dead people. There wasn't any flesh left on the bones, but there was lots of clothing draped over the skeletons, along with hair and sinew. Three skulls sat on the church's pulpit, including a child's.

After visiting the church, I travelled to the Kibuye guesthouse. After supper I immediately fell into a deep sleep — only to be awakened, in the pitch dark, by the sounds of soldiers marching by my bedroom window, shouting at the top of their lungs. Now, normally, soldiers don't spook me, because I know them as men and women who stand to attention at Remembrance Day services or help out with disasters like the Red River flood. In Africa, though, you see far more soldiers than here and I fear them.

So when I was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of soldiers in Rwanda it scared me silly — especially since I knew there were Hutu rebels in the hills who attacked the town just a few weeks earlier. When all was finally quiet again, unable to sleep, I got up and sat in the dark to reflect. I was afraid. In tears. Angry. I had seen more of unnecessary poverty, murder, and corruption in three days than I could handle.

Altar in Ntarama church

Anyway, I sat there on my porch, and what did I see? Stars like I've never seen before, because they're all Southern Constellations. More stars than I've ever seen before, because rural Africa at war makes no light in the evening to compete with the stars of heaven. Those stars shone bright and beautiful and for a moment, in just a flash, I was glad. I had the fleeting sense that just maybe, after all, there was a God. I guess that something in the stars resonated sympathetically with the eternity God set in my heart. And though those stars did not erase the horrors of what I saw, they did distract me for a moment, as if God himself were tapping me on the shoulder, saying, "Even so, I am with you. And I will bring light to the dark of all this wretched mess. I will."

Different stories

"Shine Like Stars," says your convention program. But how exactly do stars shine? Reflecting on my experience in Kibuye, I'll offer three suggestions.

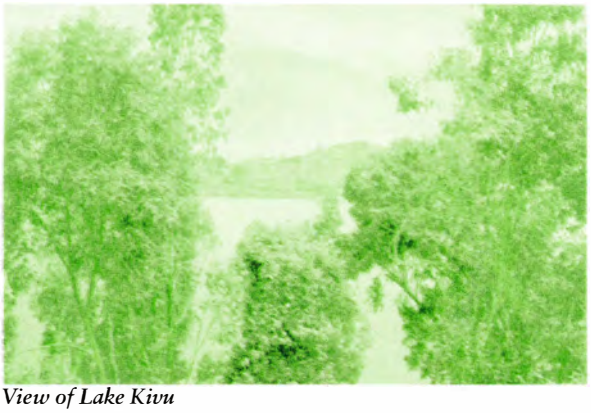
Stars shine by telling stories. Stories have always been associated with the constellations. In the southern hemisphere, the constellations are different and have unfamiliar names: Norma, or the carpenter's rule; Carina, or the ship's keel, and Phoenix. Interesting stories get attached to each constellation's name. Phoenix refers to the myth of the phoenix, a bird that according to Ovid lived for five hundred years. It supposedly ends its life in the ashes of a nest of cinnamon bark and incense. But from its ashes, a baby phoenix arises to carry its parents' nest to Hyperion, the sungod.

The story that you tell — the word that Paul says you hold out as stars — is quite different from the myths we are told to live by. You see, in this post-modern era, what unifies contemporary culture is the MTV model of story telling, where there isn't a unifying narrative thread that holds the video world together. Today every consumer gets to construct his or her own meaning out of the endless array of advertising promises, RRSP plans, superstar role-models, and chicken-soup-for-the-soul religious sentiments. In the postmodern era we're supposed to make our own meaning out of whatever texts or artifacts are out there. Ironically, however, while we think we're making our own meanings, in truth we've become cogs in a huge machine. The result is consumption without regard to where or how products got to us; religion without universal truths, dependable texts, or ethical backbone; politics by polling rather than conviction; and entertainment geared to titillate our basest instincts rather than excite our intellec-

tual or aesthetic sensibilities.

The apostle Paul describes this, in the text from which your theme is taken, as life in a crooked and depraved generation. Mao Tse-Tung used to put it this way: "There is great disorder under the heavens; the situation is excellent." Excellent, that is, for those of us who have a whole and hopeful story to live by. And we do.

Our kids are dying for this story, and for teachers for whom this story burns like those stars over Kibuye. They're dying for a story that resonates with the eternity God set in their hearts, a bright torch of a story that — modeled in the words and actions of their teachers — defines the path ahead as one of adventure and purpose. When you tell the story, share your own heart and soul with those kids, linking your own personal hopes, dreams, and academic adventures to some turn in this story. Demonstrate, day to day, for the sake of those covenant kids, that this story has grabbed you by the heart and defines your life, your loves, and your future.



View of Lake Kivu

Subversive teachers

In the second place, you have to understand that telling the story as a participatory adventure tale means that you, like Christ, are going to be subversive.

I got my first inkling that Christian school teachers were subversive when my father gave up a comfy job with a big salary and our big house with my own bedroom in order to teach at TDCH. He had a vision of some sort — something to do with discipling kids to become followers of Jesus — but I had to follow him to a tiny house in Brampton where I had to share a bedroom and watch my mother go to work to make ends meet. Teachers with vision are subversive.

Of course, he was hired by Toronto District Christian High School in 1969 because the staff there had been let go in a dispute over the direction of the school. The board had refused to let one of them teach *Catcher in the Rye*. This was not a great decision on the part of the board, and it was a courageous — subversive — move on the part of the staff. Ironic, too, because most of the replacement staff, hired after the first group spread out over the country, would have been happy to teach *Catcher in the Rye* themselves. I remember one English teacher hired shortly after that time, who introduced me to Kurt Vonnegut, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. And somewhere along the line, I fell in love with literature, a love that still gives joy and pleasure and not a little bit of insight to my life, even when I read Margaret Atwood or Timothy Findley's novels — which I hope are being taught in all our high schools. Again, not for their weaknesses, but for the God-given insight and art mixed in with everything else.

Real Christian teachers are subversive because they are not afraid to do what their students will eventually have to do every day of their lives — actually look at the world the way it is, rather than the way they wish it was. They need to look at the world the way it is and shine the light of God's word on it. Whether it is theories of evolution, or a novel that is aesthetically excellent though morally reprehensible, or the inner workings of capitalism or socialism, or different ways of preventing AIDS, Christian schools bring the word into places that are light, that are shadowy and into places that are dark.

Shine together

Third, create community. If, from my Kibuye porch, I had seen only one or maybe two cold dots of light in the sky, I'd never have noticed them. At a minimum, it takes the moon, or maybe Mars in conjunction with Venus, to attract attention all by themselves. No, the stars work wonders that take away the breath because they shine in community, all together. It's the heavens (plural) that declared the glory of God and assured me of his presence on that porch in Kibuye.

I knew this intellectually when I graduated from college. But I learned it in my bones when I got to Durham Christian High, in Bowmanville, Ont. Community was a big thing over there, in those days. First day, Principal Ren Siebenga pulled me aside, and gave me the rundown. "Suk," he said, "lunch hour isn't for hiding in the staff room or running errands. Because the kids are in the hallways during lunch and break times. So you'd better be in the hallways too. Talking. Listening. Making it plain that you're accessible. That you love those kids. If you need time to do anything else during the day, use a spare when classes are going on. But don't you dare miss a chance to be out there."

And that is pretty much how it was at Durham. We did journals at the begin-

ning of every English class, not so much to improve writing skills as to give kids a safe place to talk and ask questions. We went on all-school camp-outs to build relationships. We had long discussions around the staff room table about how to include kids on the fringes, and on how to build up the confidence and self-image of kids who were not convinced that they were precious. Durham avoided most school team sports — which are usually for the few and the gifted — to concentrate on intramural sports for all, and a few school team sports like soccer and volleyball where the rule was if you wanted to play, the school would find a way to get you a turn on the team. Kids who displayed antisocial or verbally abusive language were singled out for big time intervention.

I hope Siebenga and his band of dreamers are still at it somewhere. Because that Durham staff believed something that my father also believed. He used to say to me that what makes a Christian school isn't the kids, or even their parents or the curriculum. It isn't, by the way, that these things are not important; it's just that they're a little lower down the list of priorities than the main thing. What makes a Christian school Christian is its faculty. And what makes the faculty recognizably Christian, in scriptural terms, is whether or not by their words and actions they show that love of God and neighbor, that is, love of students, is the number one priority shaping their professional actions.

Adult models

Listen. In today's fractured, lonely secular world, most young people don't get much by way of community, unless it is from their peer groups. And all of you have been teachers long enough, or students yourself recently enough, to know that teen peer groups are at best uneven when it comes to love and nurture. Less than a hundred years ago, 90 percent of kids were still educated, after about grade six or eight, in the context of an adult community, through apprenticeship or working on a farm or as part of a team. That wasn't perfect, but it afforded Christians great opportunities for modeling not only career skills, but wisdom and insight and perspective and knowledge.

Without hardly realizing when or how it happened, we've gone from that informal apprenticeship model for nurturing young community members to the school teacher in front of a class with 20 or 30 kids and peer group model for raising kids. And though kids have gained something great in transition, they've lost something precious too. Christian schools are places that should, as their first priority, be aiming to right that imbalance by focusing on making their schools communities of love.

Panel Dot Edu

Faith and the Curriculum


Clarence Joldersma

Tony Kamphuis recently posed a deep question to the group. He suggested that, with a widening variety of backgrounds of Christian school supporters, students and teachers, the following becomes a pertinent question: How do we ensure that our teachers are being intentional and successful in integrating into the curriculum our commonly held (Reformed, biblical) faith in the classroom? How can we enable staff members — some of whom are well versed in these concerns, others of whom come from different traditions and have rarely considered these issues — to do a better job of something that surely gets to the very heart of why we have these Christian schools in the first place? An interesting three-way conversation ensued.
Clarence Joldersma

Hi Tony,

Many of us in the north-central U.S. Christian school system have been asking ourselves your questions and I can tell you some of the things we have decided to try. First, we made one of our accreditation goals the improvement of our students' knowledge and application of our Reformed perspective. This means that we have to develop school-wide strategies for improvement. One strategy will be to develop a common vocabulary for all staff and students to use. Another will be to develop a common articulation of the Reformed perspective or worldview that we can use throughout our disciplines. There will be other strategies as we go along in this process. Any recommendations?

Second, we have an interest in articulating a Reformed perspective that cycles from the staff to the students. School leadership here comes from the staffs, with lots of outside help from all those folks who have written about and taught this. Staff in-service training is embedded in our accreditation process and could be conducted by our staff members. Curriculum focus comes from our current course content as well as from new curriculum strands. So we are starting from where we are and re-framing as we go along. Does this sound feasible?

Third, as you suggested, in our community we have a healthy tension between being ecumenical and being clearly Reformed that will keep the discussion interesting. But our district administration and board has encouraged us to articulate the differences between our Christian school and those of other faiths for the sake of our parents and constituents. So we have a challenge.

What do you think? Will this work?
Lois Brink

Hi Lois,

Some of what you are trying to do at your school sounds very encouraging! We've gone beyond the times when we can safely assume that this sort of thing will "just happen" on its own. I also think we've become more sophisticated with regard to how we would like our perspective to influence things. Maybe in a later posting I'll share an idea we are trying here in Smithville that I think provides a non-judgmental means for helping each teacher and each department move forward regardless of where they start from, to become more intentional in integrating their faith and their curriculum.
Tony Kamphuis

Hi Tony,

Like Lois, I also think that this is a real problem, especially if we really want to have a united voice amongst our faculties. Our effectiveness with students increases, I believe, when they hear a similar message. I am also concerned that in an age in which diversity is applauded, the unique voice of Reformed Christians can be lost. While wanting to fit in with the wider evangelical community, we can lose the very thing that makes our schools distinctive. When our schools begin to look like every other Christian school then the diversity of Christian schools is stunted and diversity is limited.

At Dordt College, the new faculty goes through an orientation program. They read articles and books and meet to discuss what it means to be teaching from a Reformed biblical perspective. I hear very positive comments from faculty that have participated in this program. Perhaps elementary and secondary schools could think about instituting a similar program. Perhaps new faculty could be released from other committee assignments for the first year so that a program such as this is not a burden.
Pam Adams

Pam,

I understand that Calvin College has a similar program for its faculty and now a new core course for students as well that includes an intensive introductory session and a new "textbook" from Neil Plantinga. This might also be a model for K-12 schools.

One of the problems we are discovering is that we don't have a really clear view of what our Reformed perspective is. Our traditional distinctions are borrowed and blurred. I recently heard a leader in Catholic education encouraging schools and teachers to be transformational, to nurture God's image in

each student, and create a community of caring. Some teachers refer to the heart of our Reformed perspective as a focus on Christian service. Perhaps the trickle-down from Dordt or Calvin or other institutions will help clarify and apply our perspective.

Can you see any benefit to helping our staff and students recognize the blending of other traditions in with our own?
Lois Brink

Lois,

Yes, I certainly do believe we can learn much from other traditions in educating our students. I myself grew up in a different tradition — the Roman Catholic tradition. I attended Catholic schools K to 8 and still appreciate many things from that tradition. I gained a sense of the majesty of God from my Catholic school years that I sometimes feel is lacking in some evangelical traditions. We can and should learn from others because each tradition emphasizes some aspects of our response to God and his Creation and can neglect other aspects. However, as you say, the emphasis on service in all areas of life is unique to the Reformed tradition and, I believe, neglecting this emphasis would be a loss.
Pam Adams

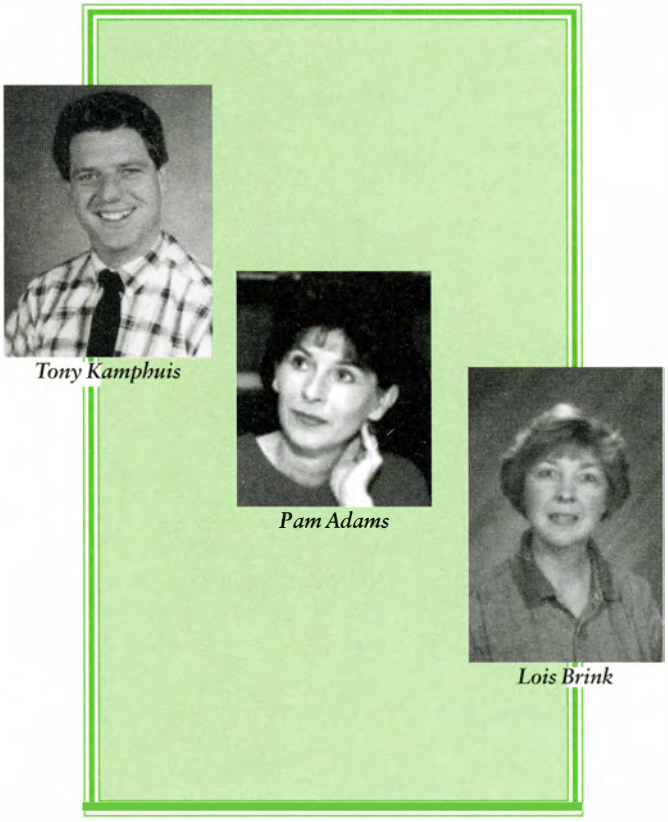
Lois and Pam,

As I suggested I would do in an earlier posting, and if you two are willing to extend your patience a little, let me mention what we are trying here at Smithville DCHS to address this issue. I think it has real potential to provide a way to encourage a more intentional approach to faith/curriculum integration without dwelling on some faculty members' lack of experience or exposure to that line of thought. In other words, it is an attempt to develop a forward-looking means for doing a better job of putting our mission statement to work in our classrooms.

Here's the plan: We are all going to read and discuss Jack Fennema's CEJ article (Dec. '98) called "Education Within the Reformed Tradition: What Are We Really Talking About?" One of our staff will lead this process with an eye to seeing if we can boil all the themes down to a smaller, more easily handled number. Once that's done, another staff member will introduce the common ways in which Reformed educators over the years have attempted to integrate their faith and curriculum. Four of these ways will be drawn from an unpublished article by Clarence Joldersma, and can probably be obtained from him.

We are then going to create a chart on which each staff member can name one unit, topic, or module that he or she would like to expose more effectively to the influence of their faith. They can then take the first theme from Fennema's article and ask themselves, "Would this be a good place to try the first of Joldersma's approaches (The religious perspectives model)?" "What would that look like?" "Would the second model from Joldersma's article (The Influencing Choices Model) affect the way I teach this topic? How so?" and so on. After discussion with departmental colleagues, each staff member will, I think, have at least raised his or her comfort level in dealing with this issue, and will very likely end up doing a better job of faith/curriculum integration. An added bonus is that all participants will become more articulate at expressing how their Christian perspective influences their courses in discussions with administrators, parents and education committees (where applicable).

I know Clarence wants more pithy commentary. Maybe I'll try the "one-liner" approach next time.
Tony Kamphuis



Media Eye

by Lowell A. Hagan
lhagan@mail.bellevuechristian.org

Stefan Ulstein has resigned from this column after many years of faithful dispensing of knowledge and insight into media matters. We thank him for his excellent service to CEJ readers. Stefan's colleague Lowell Hagan has agreed to take over and we present his first column in this issue. Lowell teaches at Bellevue Christian High School in Bellevue, Washington.

After failing in his bid to become his party's presidential nominee, Senator John McCain opened hearings on making it illegal for Hollywood to market R-rated movies to teenage audiences. There is nothing wrong with this proposal except what is wrong with the ratings system itself: it tries to establish rules where judgment and discernment are required. For every *Porky's* or *American Pie* that appeals to teenagers' already raging hormones there is a *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List* that raises important issues teenagers should be thinking about.

Morality is a popular issue, but it would be unfair to accuse Senator McCain of jumping on a populist bandwagon. He genuinely desires Americans to become a more moral people. Like most of us, he fears for the future of America's youth. But in our culture of impatience and self-gratification, we want immediate results without doing much hard work. We want to get more moral children by applying easy-to-understand remedies.

Rules games

The movie ratings system was not designed to help parents make decisions. It was designed to disarm attempts at censorship. Its effect was to place greater reliance on the guidance and discernment of parents as the content of the film becomes more potentially objectionable.

The fact that most parents are unwilling or unable to exercise any discernment is a separate issue and is not the fault of the movie-makers. In some ways, the ratings system has done more harm than good. Parents who look to the ratings system to decide what movies their children should see end up sending their children to see PG-13 movies as if the rating were a certificate of acceptability. As if the offensive bathroom humor in the 1996 Eddy Murphy vehicle *The Nutty Professor* did not make the point, the far more gross 2000 sequel *The Klumps* has Grandma Klump giving Buddy Love oral sex in a hot tub, and a gigantic hamster giving anal sex to Klump's boss. How did this movie get a PG-13 rating?

For better or worse, ours is a market-driven economy. Moviemakers will film what audiences will pay to see. And they know that film ratings are bestowed based on rigid rules, and rules beget behavior that is true to the letter but violates the spirit of the law. In the military we called them "barracks lawyers," soldiers who knew every technicality of army regulations and knew exactly what they could get away with without formal punishment. Teenagers are natural barracks lawyers. So are businessmen. Filmmakers know exactly what they have to do, or rather avoid, to get a particular rating. So *The Klumps*, as worthless a film as ever has been made, gets a PG-13 rating because there are no words or images making the sexual activity explicit, while *Billy Elliot*, a film full of possibilities for worthwhile discussion with young teenagers, is saddled with an R rating because working-class Englishmen overuse the f-word, and two times is the limit for a PG-13 rating.

Learning discernment

Rules can never replace judgment, and laws cannot make people more moral. Christians understand that morality is not the same as good behavior. Good behavior is what we do when we might get caught. Morality is what we do when no one is looking. When working with children and teens, whether as parents or as teachers, we want to get at the heart issue, an action that is a response to God rather than a response to a rule or a threatened punishment. But the heart response is always mediated by what we think. That is why Paul says it is a struggle to make our thoughts "captive to obey Jesus Christ."

As a Christian community we are tending to make the same mistake with respect to child rearing that we made for so long with respect to marriage. Marrying another Christian and being told that divorce is not an option does not make the marriage work. Asking teenagers to take an abstinence pledge does not help them much when they are alone in the car after the prom. Building better barriers to attendance at R-rated movies similarly misses the point.

In Christian schools, we realized this principle long ago with respect to books. The best situation in which to bring up controversial issues is one in which godly guidance can be provided. Christian schools are in a unique position to be able to

go beyond knee-jerk reactions ("Don't read that, it has bad language in it") to examine issues of belief and perspective, issues of the heart. Teenagers need to learn discernment. Forbidding acquaintance with difficult topics makes discernment unnecessary. It also leaves students completely defenseless when they exercise poor judgment.

Educational tools

The problem may be that we do not yet take movies seriously enough. We still see them only as "entertainment." It is time that we stopped treating movies like poor relations. While it is true that most movies are junk, so are most books. Good books have more content, but a good 90 minute film can have as much substance as a 90-minute reading. There are some specific things we can do to help bring movies into the educational process.

* **Become moviegoers ourselves.** Because we cannot control what movies our students see, we will have to bite the bullet and see the movies they are watching. If we do not, we will be missing many a teaching moment.

* **Teach and model the art of reading film reviews.** If we read one reviewer regularly, we will soon learn his or her perspective. We need to know something about the reviewer in order to learn anything from the review. There are some movies I know I will hate because the thing Roger Ebert liked about them is something I find distasteful or despicable.

* **Use movie web sites** to help students learn how to "read" movie ads. The trailer for *Pay It Forward*, which appears on the official web site, is a case in point. It gives no warning of the serious themes touched on in the film.

* **Don't be afraid to ask:** "Did watching this movie help or hinder your life of obedience to Jesus Christ?" and don't to be too quick to think you know the right answer.

* **Don't be afraid to be a leader.** A good Christian school choir director will not give in to pressure to sing only music that students already like. She will continue to give students Bach and Schubert and Lloyd Pfautsch until they discover the beauty of such music through experience. Why shouldn't high school students be watching *Casablanca, Citizen Kane* and *Rear Window*, along with reading *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Night*? Developing a taste for good movies is the best way to crowd out bad ones.

* **Develop lesson plans** for recent movies on videotape or DVD, and don't use only movies with historical and literary connections. Use movies that make their own statements. Communicate with parents in advance; be open about the themes you want to address. Be specific about what earned the movie its rating. And remember that it takes time to build trust with parents; be prepared to take some flak. It's best to have an administrator with guts, something that's hard to arrange. But it is a mistake to try to educate students without attempting to bring their parents along with you.

Of course, there are schools that have abandoned all attempts at educational leadership. Instead of educating parents, they simply give in to parents' demands. Parents' fears are understandable; most of us teachers have children of our own. But Christian schools can become a valuable resource for parents as well as students as we all seek to be in the world without being of it. Nowhere is this more true than in our response to popular culture, including the movies.

Query

Tena Siebinga-Valstar
valstar@telusplanet.net

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, Alberta, T9H 4R2 or e-mail her at: valstar@telusplanet.net

Why not the King James?

Question # 1

We have some parents in our school community who use the King James version of the Bible in their homes and have difficulty with the fact that we use the New International version in our school. Any suggestions?

Response:

A pamphlet published by the Canadian Bible Society of Canada (1997) gave some history regarding Bible translations suggesting that each was made so that God's Word be clearly communicated and understood, resulting in spiritual growth. As a record of Israel's history, of God's dealings with them and their inspired insights and hopes, the Hebrew Old Testament was read in the temple, synagogues and homes. Because Greek was the language most used at the time of the early disciples, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek; and by the fourth century, the church councils, "guided by the Spirit of God," agreed on that which would comprise the Greek New Testament.

As Christianity spread, translations were made in the language of Egypt, Ethiopia and Syriac (north of Palestine). To reach the common people of the western Mediterranean, Latin was used and it was the Latin translation which spread to northern Europe and the British Isles. Believing that the people needed the Bible in their tongue, Wycliffe succeeded in translating the Bible into English, under severe opposition from authorities who did not want the common people to have access to the scriptures. A number of English translations were made prior to the translation accomplished by 54 scholars under the sponsorship of King James of England; thus the King James version of the Bible came about. It held "first place in the hearts of English speaking people" for nearly 400 years. If translations of single books of the Bible are counted, there have been almost 500 translations or revisions of older versions of Scriptures in English. The New International Version is one of these and, as indicated in the preface, was an answer to the need for a new translation of the Bible in contemporary English. According to the Bible Society the NIV is written at a grade 7 to 8 reading level.

If your board has not yet given direction on this matter, that request should be made. Depending on the age level of the students, you might have them research the topic of Bible translations so they learn about it for themselves. You may have to honor the parent's request and allow the child to learn memory work in the KJV or in both versions. An open discussion with all those involved may be beneficial.

Are principals too busy?

Question #2

As a veteran principal I sometimes have a hard time balancing the time I spend at school with the time I spend with my wife. My concern is for young administrators, with young families, who try to balance the demands of the school with their private lives. It is sad to hear a pre-school son say, "Daddy, when can you stay home and play with me?" What can be done to help the situation?

Response:

The job of an administrator in a Christian school is demanding and requires determination in order to achieve a balance between career and personal private life, whether one is married or single. The need for private time becomes more tangible when your child indicates a need for love and attention.

Although the whole school community has a responsibility, the principal should start with him- or herself. We must differentiate between rest and leisure. Rest is a necessity whereas leisure may be enjoyable but can cause pressure as it fills another time slot. MacDonald, in *Ordering Your Private World*, referred to Wilberforce, who, though working tirelessly for social change, found time for Sabbath rest and thus kept his life in proper perspective. God created the world with a rhythm of work and rest. Sabbath rest not only means worshiping with our Christian family, but also looking backward (reflecting on our blessings), upward and ahead. We must take time to reflect on our work and ask questions such as: What does my work mean? For whom do I do this work? How well was the work done? Why did I do this? and What results did I expect, and what did I receive?

True rest happens when we pause regularly to sort out the commitments by which we are living. When we rest in the

biblical sense, we affirm our intention to pursue a Christ-centered tomorrow. By regularly asking the question, "What is my mission today?" you are not leaving yourself open to mistakes of judgment and direction. Although most of us think of rest as something that happens after our work, true Sabbath rest occurs prior to our work.

Having evaluated our life in this sense, it would also be beneficial to chart how we spend each minute of the day. If, after reflection, one finds the principal does not have enough time to rest, the job description of the principal may have to be re-evaluated, with delegation of some tasks to others. The principal may also have to set strict boundaries on the time dedicated to family or self. Open communication about the issue could prove to be helpful. As a Christian community we would be amiss to allow the principal's family or health to suffer at the expense of the school.

Share the school's vision

Question #3

We value the historic Christian vision of our school. We have some parents who also value it, but don't appear to be very excited about Christian education. On the other hand, we have parents who aren't fully aware of why our schools were established, but show lots of excitement and appreciation for our school. How do we deal with this?

Response:

I see positives in both views. Maybe all have to start sharing why they value Christian education in small group settings over coffee. Although some may articulate it quite clearly, others need help to do so. There were times when our parent community gathered for meetings to discuss topics such as this, but for various reasons scheduling meetings is becoming increasingly difficult.

We might also have to consider how we promote our school. What aspect of our school are we presenting as the most important? Parents may come specifically because of that reason. For example, if the school is promoted as an alternative to the public school system, you may attract parents who are dissatisfied with the public school system. Some schools provide a mandatory information meeting for parents prior to enrolling their children. This can be a wonderful blessing, but what is in place if the parents fail to attend? Do you cease enrollment of the student(s)?

Every contact potential parents make with the school should be viewed as an opportunity for informing the parents of the vision of your school. The school secretary is a key person. The promotion of the vision of your school will be paramount in the job description of your public relations officer. Education of teachers is also crucial in this regard, so that teachers show in practice and discussion how the purpose and vision of the school is a reality in the classroom. We cannot underestimate the impact of the short interchanges we, as teachers, have with parents or the education parents receive by helping in the classroom. Our school news letters also show why we exist. Every opportunity for communication has potential.

Epic Episode

Maria

by Ruth Vander Zee
Ruth Vander Zee teaches Middle School at Timothy Christian School in Elmhurst, Illinois.

Thousands of dark long ringlets framed her round cherub face. Her lips were small, usually filled in with dark wine-colored lipstick. When she laughed, her lips opened wide. Her laugh was immediate, high-pitched, somewhere between a cry and a yelp, liquidy and giggly. Long ago teachers had given up suggesting that she soft-pedal her laugh; it was not to be quieted or tamed. Her student records revealed little about her other than standard, impersonal statistics. We knew she was being raised by her grandmother but didn't know why. She had a flair for the dramatic, so it was not unexpected that after distractedly listening to my classroom suggestions of writing poetry based on personal experiences rather than experiences borrowed from someone else, Maria eagerly began writing. "Ooh, I can write the saddest poem!"

The next day she came to my desk with a carefully edited poem which she had worked on the night before. She stood waiting for my approval. Her poem spoke of a forlorn woman whose love had been discarded by the man she adored. In the end the woman died of a broken heart. Dramatically sad, it was. Believable, it was not. As gently as I could, I asked her if she had ever known or talked to a woman who had experienced this kind of grief.

Somewhat defensively she answered, "Well, no. But this would be really sad."

I agreed and then asked, "Maria, have you ever felt really sad?"

"Well, yeah."

"Can you remember when that was? How old you were? Were there colors, or smells? Do you remember sounds that you heard when you were really sad? Were there any other people around you or were you alone?" As I asked her these questions, her eyes looked past me. No giggles, no laughing. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," she replied. "I could try this again." She smiled and walked to her desk. The next day she rushed to class. She couldn't wait for class to start to show me what she had created.

My Dad's Funeral

At Dad's funeral
Six years old
Sitting on a white couch
sad, angry, and confused.
I wanted to know where Daddy was
his coffin wasn't open
I couldn't see.
Maybe Mom was lying.
Maybe Dad was just away.
I wanted to see him. But
He wasn't there and
He never came home.
I looked for him for months but
He didn't come. Then
My mom said she couldn't take care of me any more
So she gave me to my grandma
And left.
I looked for her for months
But she didn't come.

"Maria, this is a very sad poem."

"Yeah. Well when I was six, all I remember is my Mom and Dad fighting. I would cover my ears at night so I wouldn't hear them. But whenever I took my hands away, they'd still be fighting. Then one day my Dad went out at night. And my Mom told me he got killed in a car accident. So, that's what I wrote my poem about."

She told me this, not in the least begging for sympathy. Matter-of-factly. This was just the way it was.

"Maria, this is a very beautiful poem." I tried to respond to her as she had talked to me, but the lump in my throat was getting in the way.

I heard Maria giggle a little later in the hall. Sitting at my desk, rereading her poem, I thought, "Go ahead and laugh, Maria. Laugh your high-pitched, liquidy, infectious, irrepressible, obnoxious, hysterical laughs. Laugh as much as you can. You've lived a lifetime of stinging sadness already."

The prophet Jeremiah once told his very sad people, "The Lord loved you with an everlasting love.... I will turn your mourning into gladness; I will give you comfort and joy instead of sorrow."

I think he may have meant this for Maria, too.

Thinking Thirteen

Nancy Knol
Column Editor
njknol@aol.com

The Dance

When Andy called me that week to say that the doctors had discovered a tumor in his back, I kept thinking back to all the times he and I had talked about his disappointment with God.

Of course, there was that huge disappointment when his prayers were not answered regarding his parents' separation and subsequent divorce. And a short time later, as he tried to recover his earlier child-like trust in God, he said he seemed to come up against a blank wall. I remember that he referred to a passage I had talked about in Bible class the week before — about the lady who kept knocking at the judge's door until he finally answered it just to get her off his back. And Andy said plaintively, "*I* knock like that. I ask God to hear me, and I try to find him — but he just doesn't seem very real to me these days."

I mostly listened, but finally told him that he didn't get to decide when to quit knocking, and that God has ways of letting us know he's still around, but you have to be alert, because sometimes he's subtle and sometimes he's undeniably obvious.

I remember one of the first days in Bible class at the beginning of the year when I held class outside because it was so hot, and we sat under the shade of a huge oak tree and talked about whether or not being angry with God was a sin. And Andy, with tears in his eyes, talked about being furious with God for letting his parents get a divorce, and that he didn't appreciate the way God did things — if he did *anything* at all. Everyone was silent for a while — that "holy silence" that was more frequent with this class ...I think because they were uncomfortable with his tears and at the same time struggling with their own anger and disappointment in God.

Throughout that year, more often than not, it was Andy who "put God in my face" with an honesty and earnestness that have made me love him.

At graduation that year, a beloved fifth-grade teacher was the speaker. She showed large pictures painted by some of the graduates as part of her speech. Andy's was the most powerful to me because it was so much his own profession of faith through all his pain. It was a circle of dancers — all nondescript faces, so that any one of them could have been any one of us, but their bodies were carelessly abandoned to the dance, and all hands were joined. But the circle began with Jesus on the cross, so that he, even in his limp, agonized state, was a part of the dance. And that paradox brought tears to my eyes.

So when I received Andy's phone call, I found myself asking God some questions of my own in terms of how he distributes suffering. Once again this amazing young man was being forced to come to grips with the God who keeps making seemingly negative appearances in his life. And yet Andy will know God better than most. What a tremendous price he is paying! The door he has been knocking on for several years now is open, but Andy must gaze through it to see that behind the door is the suffering Savior. God makes no apologies. He is the Lord of the dance. And Andy is one of his most beloved and most graceful participants.

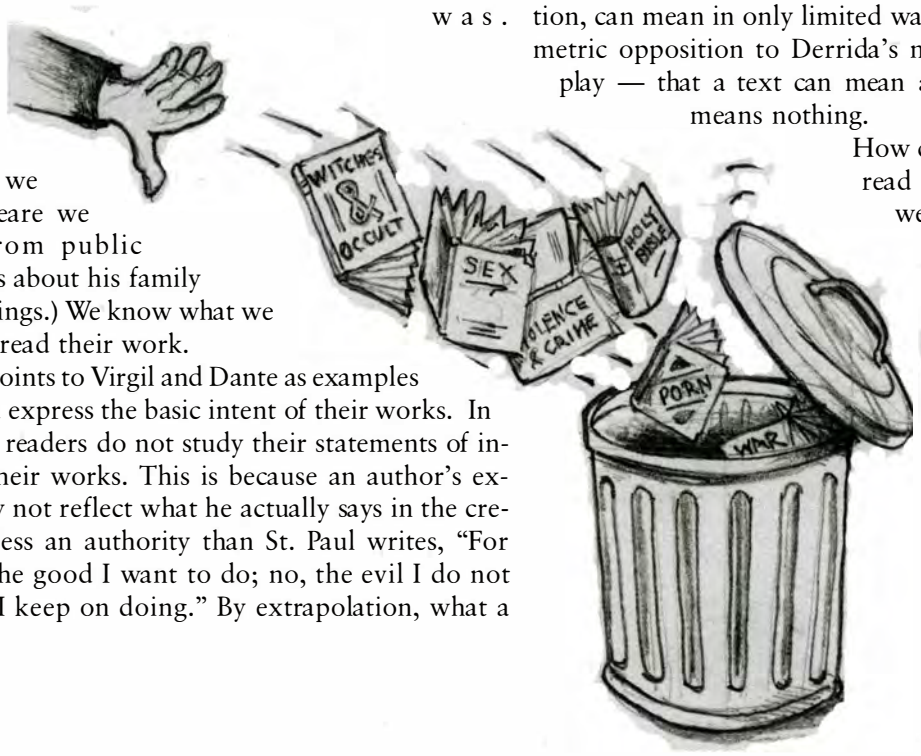
Author's Intent

A response to Steve Van Der Weele's letter in the December 2000 issue of CEJ

We are pleased that such a distinguished colleague as Steve Van Der Weele would see fit to respond to our article "Seeking Order in Chaos" (CEJ, Oct.) about how we should attempt to define Christian literature. We are also pleased that we can clarify a misunderstanding or two that seems to have resulted from Van Der Weele's reading of our article.

We share Van Der Weele's concern about Derrida and other linguistic philosophers who propose that communication is impossible. We agree that if this premise were true, all reading and writing, and perhaps even human life, would be meaningless.

Van Der Weele attempts, however, to connect this notion of the instability of language to a statement that we made that the intent of the author is not as important as what the author actually says. To make his point, Van Der Weele refers to Homer's *Iliad* and Shakespeare's *Henry IV* as stirring works which effectively communicate the intent of the author. We would heartily agree, except we would hasten to point out that it is only the work of these authors we have to go on. No one can say what Homer's intent was, or Shakespeare's either, since neither gifted writer passed on to us a separate piece describing what his intent was. (Indeed, all we know about Homer's life was that he may have been blind, and all we know of Shakespeare we have gleaned from public records that tell us about his family and property holdings.) We know what we know because we read their work.



Van Der Weele points to Virgil and Dante as examples of writers who did express the basic intent of their works. In the end, however, readers do not study their statements of intent; they study their works. This is because an author's expressed intent may not reflect what he actually says in the creative work. No less an authority than St. Paul writes, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." By extrapolation, what a writer claims as his intent might, in fact, be quite different from what he actually writes.

An example to illustrate: a male book reviewer might write of the newest Margaret Atwood novel that "the prose is remarkably powerful and cogent for the writing of a woman." Let's assume the reviewer's intent was to compliment Atwood. (Unfortunately, such chauvinists do still exist though, admittedly, we are unlikely to encounter them in book reviews.) Intent here would be beside the point. The reviewer has cast aspersions upon an entire gender. His intent doesn't matter; his words speak for themselves.

We affirm Van Der Weele's imagined response of Flannery O'Connor to Derrida and his ilk, "The novelist renders his vision so that it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to the reader." It is into the work that this vision is rendered. Indeed, those who wish to distort the meaning of O'Connor's work (and Shakespeare's and Homer's) often do so by claiming to know the author's intent rather than looking to the work for their answers.

For these reasons, we argued in our original essay that Christian literature should be defined neither by an author's intent nor by a reader's response. Rather, we should define it by the text itself. We also argued that texts, while open to interpretation, can mean in only limited ways. That assertion lies in diametric opposition to Derrida's notion that language is free-play — that a text can mean anything and so, in essence, means nothing.

How can Van Der Weele have misread us so completely? Evidently we weren't as clear in our piece as we should have been, leaving our honored colleague in the position of having to guess at our "intent."

William Boerman-Cornell
and Jeffrey De Vries
Lansing, Illinois

Book Review

Margaret Edson, *W;t*; A Play. New York: Faber and Faber, 1999. (Note: strange as it may seem, that is how the title appears on the cover: W, semicolon, t.)
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Professor of English (emeritus), Calvin College.

Steve J. Van Der Weele
svweele@calvin.edu

The play *W;t*, a Pulitzer Prize winner, has been performed in England and the States with great success. The implications of the play for the teaching profession, however indirect, merit some attention in this journal.

The structure of the play is fluid, with the lead character, Vivian Bearing, a 50-year old college English teacher, speaking alternately to the audience, to the medical staff, and, now and then, to herself. Much of the action occurs as flashback. The whole makes for a fast-paced sequence of dramatic interchanges which reflect unfavorably on both the world of academia and medical research.

Vivian Bearing has just been diagnosed with fourth-stage ovarian cancer. She is made to understand that her condition is terminal. But the doctors wish to derive as much medical data as possible before she dies. Dr. Kelekian gets her consent to administer the most powerful chemical weapons in their arsenal and at dosage levels never before attempted. The treatments are to extend over a period of eight months.

The doctors do get their data. Vivian makes medical history. They make her feel like a celebrity — although it is not lost on her that it is the doctors who will reap the honors for what they have learned from the aggressive treatment of her disease. The eight months are one long period of intense suffering, and when it comes time for her to make end-of-life decisions, she opts for no heroics, no resuscitation. Through poor communication, her request is misunderstood, and all the resources of Code Blue — the IVs, the ventilators, the electrical fibrillators — assault her weak body. She revives, only to die once more. Despite all their efforts, her peritoneal cavity still seethes with cancer. As Jason admits, "Smartest guys in the world, with the best labs, funding, they don't know what to make of it."

> ***Her scholarly labors are no more than straw.***

Hard-nosed teacher

And now for the other half of the play, the world of the academic establishment. This world is disclosed to the audience through flashbacks which open up the windows on Vivian's flawed pedagogy as an English teacher. With great dramatic skill, the disclosure of her career as a professor of Seventeenth-Century English Literature with a specialty in Donne's Holy Sonnets serves as a mirror image of the medical protocol which she is experiencing in the hospital. It turns out, too, that Jason, a research fellow, has taken Vivian's course and learned about the methods of achieving disembodied learning, the habit of ignoring the heart, "the excellent command of details" for which Dr. Kelekian commends him, from the very English teacher who is now his patient. No wonder that Vivian feels that all this "is just like a graduate seminar ... I feel right at home."

Uncompromising teacher

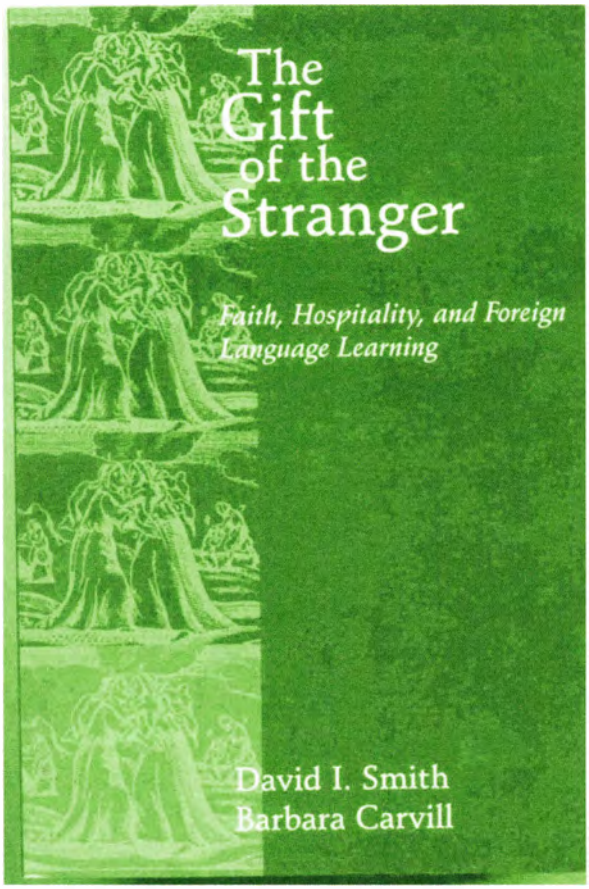
So, what kind of teacher has she been? Her chief interest had been in research. She has hundreds of articles and several books to her credit. She is the top scholar in her field. She has done some good textual work and explained a number of allusions. But her teaching had been a disaster. Few students enjoyed her classes (a cardinal sin for anyone privileged to teach these materials!). They were more of a boot camp than an English class. She had been hard-nosed, abusive, insulting. "I was uncompromising," she boasts to her audience. She had humiliated her students, urged some to drop college altogether. And when it appeared that a student was working her way through an idea that had some potential, she would shut her off, fearful that her own understanding was being challenged. She was an impresario, determined to display her vast learning and her students' ignorance.

Herein lies the irony of her rigidity, her scholarly arrogance. The very sonnets on which she had spent such effort could have been of enormous comfort to her during these long months of her illness. "Death, be not Proud," "At the round earth's imagined corners," "Thou hast made me, and shall Thy work decay?" "A Hymn to God in my Sickness" — those noble lines struck out by a fellow-sufferer with the gift of communicating his experiences for all time — have nothing to say to her in her present condition. She resents the pietistic intrusions of some lines. Her scholarly labors are no more than straw. For anyone who has majored in this area in graduate school, this is a weeping matter.

David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000. 233 pp.

A review of chapters 7, 8 and 10 by seven students at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ont., taking a six-week course called Edu 328, Teaching French: Elementary.

Redeemer College Associate Professor of French Thea van Til Rusthoven wrote that her students reviewed The Gift of the Stranger *on their own in groups of two or three. "They are just starting to think about these questions and the classroom implications; the course alone just starts to get them to see this. They also found it hard to come up with any critical comments since they really liked the book and only one student in the class has had teaching experience in French.*



Chapter 7: The authors, Smith and Carvill, do an excellent job of presenting the conflict that exists between our Christian confession and the philosophies that prevail in current teaching materials. With current eclectic principles being used more in the search for culturally relevant content, Smith and Carvill challenge educators to critically evaluate the materials available to the classroom. As foreign language educators they encourage introspection and pedagogical flexibility in the curriculum.

Can the same eclectic principles be used when choosing material for the primary versus secondary level since the primary curriculum is more orally based?

(Marcia Enzlin and James Bennett)

Chapter 8: In this chapter, Smith and Carvill discuss how one approaches teaching a second language, and how one integrates a personal world view into the classroom. They explore various Christian approaches and criticize the use of the word "method." They suggest that the word "method" is too narrow and quasi-scientific in scope, thus limiting teaching by suggesting that there is or should be only one best "method," instead of encouraging an exploration of the various "ways" of conducting a class. They encourage teachers to experiment with different approaches to see which will work best as there can never be one true Christian method. *(Terri-Lyn Mantel, Tara Riordon and Aileen Vander Deen)*

Chapter 10: Continuing with their theme of embracing the stranger, Smith and Carvill take activities from the Charis Project to exemplify how to integrate moral, spiritual, and linguistic dimensions into a unified language curriculum. They present teachers with various ways of incorporating historical and literary elements into the classroom. One example is the use of biographies, like that of Sophie Scholl, to explore the experience of the stranger. This curriculum challenges students to learn the target language in preparation for future encounters with people in a foreign culture.

(Danyse Riewald and Andrea Hultink)

Excerpt from Chapter Four of *The Gift of the Stranger*

"What Is a Stranger?"

In a famous article on the subject, Georg Simmel points to the paradoxical nature of the stranger, who is marked at the same time by both distance and closeness. People far away are not strangers; they are simply unknown to us. They become strangers to us only when they enter our world and our group. "[B]eing outside it and confronting it," according to Simmel, [the stranger's] position in this group is determined essentially by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imparts qualities to it which do not and cannot stem from the group itself." The stranger's special position in the host culture, being simultaneously outside and near, will be an important aspect of our discussion. As we shall see, it gives the stranger both a particular freedom and a special responsibility toward the people of the host country.

Members of the host culture may receive strangers with either hostility or friendliness. That is to say, they may either feel threatened by strangers and therefore may distance themselves from them, denying them social space, or they may welcome them with open arms, embracing and engaging them. If educators are to prepare students to be strangers in a foreign land, they must teach them about both the tribulations and joys of that role (pp. 58,59).