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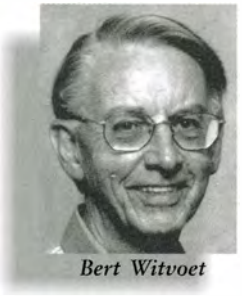
Is Your School a Community of Truth?

Editorial


Bert Witvoet

Teaching That Exceeds Our Grasp

When you read some of the articles in this issue that talk about our schools becoming true communities, you may well roll your eyes at times and mutter something about "idealists" and "stargazers." As people who spend a lot of time in the classroom from day to day, you teachers know what kids are like and what you yourselves are like. Perhaps you find yourself saying, "Come on, be realistic."

How well do we do as schools, especially the larger schools, when it comes to being a true community? Don't selfishness and fear often get in the way? Calvinists, of all people, should know that our hearts are always inclined to evil. Well, that's a theological statement that puts us right next to the perfect law of God. And judged by that law, we don't measure up, not as a community either. But isn't the Lord interested even in the beginning of our obedience? Doesn't he smile when he notices that we try to be perfect? And didn't Robert Browning say, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?"

Without becoming romantic fools we do well to reach a shelf higher than the one we normally go for when we stand on tippytoe. At least, know that it's there and that some day you may be able to reach it. And if not, well, at least you tried. The alternative is to always play it safe, to stay within the boundaries of what you know you can do easily. That will make you a boring teacher, but, hey, at least your dignity is still intact.

Norms are so depressing!

I remember attending a conference where the speakers tried to identify the norms for life. When you do that, you quickly come to the conclusion that we fail quite often. Another conferee told me that she felt depressed by that awareness. Somehow I didn't feel depressed at all. Maybe our different reactions had to do with the fact that she starts from what is, and I start from what can be. Or maybe she was too impressed with the gap between what we are called to do and what we do.

Some people are scared off by Jesus' statement: "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." Perfectionism is not a nice thing to strive for. People who are perfectionists are hard to live with. I believe, however, that the word "perfection" needs a bit of rehabilitation. The Latin root for "perfect" is *per facere*. *Per* means "through," and *facer*e means "to make." So to be perfect means to be made fully or complete. The Dutch word for "perfect" is *volmaakt* — fully made. So what Jesus is asking us to do is being fully human, fully made in the image of God. Be what you are intended to be, just like God is what he intends to be. Answer to the purpose of your life on earth.

I find talks about norms and perfection inspiring. I love being told what is normative in life. I have always loved Psalm 119, especially that section in which the poet breaks forth in a jubilant voice: "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers [these were not Christian day school teachers, of course], for I meditate on your statutes."

But doesn't the law condemn me? Yes, it does. Or, should I say, yes, it did. But in Christ I am set free from the law of sin and death by the law of the Spirit of life (Romans 8). And the result is that we need not "conform any longer to the patterns of this world , but [we can] be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind" (Romans 12). So, not only does the norm not kill us, but, by God's grace and power, we have been revitalized to answer to it again. So why should a high-minded series of articles about being a community scare us off?

Afraid of Kooy?

Why should *I* be scared, even if one of the articles is written by a former student of mine? My goodness, when I read Mary Kooy's article about "Communities of Truth" my mind goes back to my first year of teaching at Hamilton District Christian High School. Wouldn't you know it, Mary Kooy (she was Mary Appel then) was a senior student, and she experienced my first stumbling efforts as a teacher. This was the 1960s, folks, and most of us did not have a clue about all these wonderful pedagogical discoveries that have been made since then. I hadn't even followed all the prescribed education courses at Calvin College because I was planning to go on to the University of Toronto for a Master's degree in English. I did that, and I got my Master's degree, but when I started teaching, I knew very little about lesson plans and about the value of letting students teach me and each other in class.

I honestly thought that I was called upon to pour out all my knowledge into these empty heads sitting in front of me. I had never paid any attention to what adolescence was about. The only saving grace was that I liked students and that I had a lot of fun with them. And, of course, since part of what I taught was literature, the content of poetry, short stories, novels and essays saved me from having to rely too heavily on my own wisdom (I also taught Latin, French and Bible). I was eight years older than my senior students, but I looked young enough to be mistaken for a high school student!

Ah, yes, Kooy is right, "the world of long ago (of Kuyper, Bavinck and other Reformed thinkers) appears only remotely connected to our current world realities." A lot has changed, and

what might have worked fairly well years ago just doesn't cut it anymore. A lot of my teaching was "done in splendid isolation." Think of the opportunities I missed to learn from my colleagues.

I am glad there are people like Mary Kooy, Heidi Wicker, Clayton Lubbers and Gerald Vaandering who raise the bar a little higher for us. They call us, I believe, to greater vulnerability. I do know that one cannot be a good teacher without a good dose of humility. To the extent that these fellow servants mirror God's law for education we should love being shown a better way. When colleagues call us to a greater obedience, let's heed the words of Proverbs 10: 17b : "Whoever ignores correction leads others astray.

Bert Witvoet

Covenant as Rubber Stamp

Years ago I was in the study of a Ukrainian Orthodox priest. He and I talked about what was happening in the former Soviet Union. There was another man in that study — a friend of the priest. I think he was a Pentecostal rather than Ukrainian Orthodox. When he found that I was a Calvinist, he said, "Oh yeah, you Calvinists believe in the covenant."

"You don't believe in the covenant?" I asked.

"I believe in the blood," was the answer.

I should have said, "Would that be the blood of the covenant, by any chance?" but I didn't. (You always get these flashes of insight too late.) Instead, I asked him why he didn't like our emphasis on the covenant.

"Because you people use it to keep others out," he said. "You draw lines around yourself. *You* are the covenant; *others* are out."

Ouch! Was he right? I wondered. Have we perhaps erected Christian schools on that exclusivistic platform in the past? I hope not, but we may well have.

I think that the covenant concept is a rich concept. But it should be presented as an open covenant. And it should come into play when selling a car or buying a farm as much as when we talk Christian schools. Covenant is available to all who want to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus, which Jesus referred to as "my blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:28).

Years ago I had fun with a Dutch children's rhyme by inserting the word "covenant" into it. It goes like this:

On the covenantal mountain
Live two covenantal people
In a covenantal home
With a covenantal steeple.
And those covenantal people
Have a covenantal kid
With a covenantal teacher
And a covenantal grid.
And that covenantal kid
Eats his covenantal bait
With a covenantal spoon
From a covenantal plate.

I guess I did rebel somewhat against this comfortable emphasis we used to have on the covenant.

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Christian Schooling as "Communities of Truth"

by Mary Kooy, Ph.D.

Mary Kooy is Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and the Centre for Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto. This is a revised version of her talk given at the Beversluis Forum on November 15, 2001, at Calvin College.

As a person raised in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, I grew up with Christian schooling "bred in the bone." I attended the first Christian High School in Ontario — probably in Canada — trekking up to four hours daily in a small bus operated by our math and science teacher. Each day we wound our way down the cement steps into a church basement. The lab was in the kitchen. I graduated in a class of eight. Five of us (four girls) went on to study at Calvin College. This high percentage, ten years or so since the post-WW II immigration from The Netherlands arrived on Canadian soil, was nothing short of miraculous.

Later, when our children reached school age, we moved our daughter Tracey from an exemplary public school Kindergarten to first-grade in a Christian school — a clapboard building with few resources and uninspired teaching. It never occurred to us to provide anything other than a Christian education for our family. Yet I recall that it did not take long before we began to see and hear things that left us less than enthusiastic — ambivalent, even. Over time, our convictions, once rock solid, developed hairline cracks. Nevertheless, our two boys joined Tracey in the local Christian school. As a former Christian School teacher, I had expectations and a huge investment — my own children.

What I learned

One day, in the Fall of 1979, Dr. Henry Beversluis of Calvin College came to our Christian school in that little, out-of-the-way West Coast fishing town. I sat on a wooden bench and listened, awe-struck. He opened a vision for teaching and learning, for schooling and educating, that resonated powerfully with me. Indeed, I believe that I accepted Henry Beversluis' invitation to join his journey, his "ever searching footsteps," that very night. I took home his pamphlet on Christian education and read and re-read its pages and saw in my reading possibilities and potentials — "the grace of great things."

From Henry Beversluis I learned about sphere sovereignty: what a school does to distinguish itself as a "school" — neither a Sunday School, nor a hospital, but a school; a Reformed worldview as a basis for understanding, choosing and acting in God's world; respecting and understanding child and adolescent life; examining our times and traditions for new language or reconstituting the old with new and enriched content; being "good": Christian schools must demonstrate "excellence" in academics and pedagogy rooted in a "big religious vision (See Beversluis' *Let Children Come: A Durable Vision for Christian Schooling.* Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Schools International).

What does it mean when teachers and students live and act interdependently?

Rapid changes

In the 20 or so intervening years — though our world still belongs to God — seismic shifts altered and reshaped our landscape. The cataclysmic events of September 11 have stamped an indelible mark on the landscape and our communal psyches.

The world of long-ago beginnings (of Kuyper, Bavinck and other Reformed thinkers) appears only remotely connected to our current world realities — their cultures and contexts. Our forefathers and mothers would be inclined, could they peer into our 21st century world, to spontaneously sing: "I am a stranger here, within a foreign land." For that matter, should we time-travel back, we might be inclined to raise up the same hymn. We moderns are steeped in our cultures — in many ways shaped by it. Our very language, so familiar and deeply ingrained in our identity and Reformed thinking, has changed in style, meaning and vocabulary. Realistically, we can no longer continue to claim: "All I needed to know I learned from Abraham Kuyper." Heroes, history or habit no longer constitute a sufficient condition for Christian education as central to the lives as Reformed Christians.

Language, robust and dynamic as it may be, changes along with cultures and contexts — sometimes subtly, sometimes graphically. Hence, over time, even using the same language cannot assure consistent or shared meanings.

In a speech to the Calvin community five years ago, Nathan Hatch proposed: "However vital Kuyperian language was at the turn of the century and however compelling formulations by Nick Wolterstorff were in the 1960s and 1970s, their perspectives will be found less compelling ... in a new century."[1] The language has changed and, with it, an urgent need to explain ourselves, to re-view our language, thoughts and frameworks for acting in and upon education in this postmodern world.

A changed landscape

In such a changed world, what does

Christian education mean? Claiming a "world and life view" includes regular revisions and re-views. It may mean beginning by daring to ask: "What difference would it make if, in one grand sweep, all Christian schools closed their doors?" What if in this 21st century Christian schools have lost currency? What if they lie limply as anachronistic curiosities on the landscape? The very thought raises the hair on the back of our necks.

Answering the "so what?" question means courageously facing difficult and challenging questions and preparing clear responses regarding the changes and contributions Christian education makes. How do its transformative possibilities represent themselves on the landscape?

For me, a recurring and overarching problem persists — a chasm between theory and practice, beliefs and actions. I suggest that while significant and helpful attention has been accorded to philosophical and theological apologias for Christian education, theorizing educational *practice* has largely been ignored. Bridging the abstract and concrete gives *voice* and *feet* to expressed beliefs and adds meaningful force and currency to Christian education. This dynamic process for answering the "so what?" question reflects how propositions and statements of belief find their way into classes and schools. Actions speak louder than words.

Practice shows truth

Christopher Morley observed in *Kitty Foyle* (HarperCollins, 1939) that "Nobody knows what he really believes; you've got to guess at it by how you find yourself acting." Children, other educators and the world at large, "read" and interpret us by "how we find ourselves acting." The power and potential of Christian education to transform lives and affect education and culture, lies in no small part in its practices and pedagogy.

When I say "practice," I do not mean simply a "bag of tricks for Christian schools" but, rather, sound pedagogical choices reflected in particular theories and belief systems. In other words, creating a symbiosis between *what is said* (statements and creeds) and *what is practiced* in classrooms (pedagogy). This *bridge* between theory and practice — Freire called this "praxis" — graphically connects to and reflects the other.

Divided though Christian schools and teachers are by place, school and classroom, they share a common concern: the quality of teaching and learning. A recent article on Christian education by Gloria Stronks, Calvin College professor of education emeritus,[2] cited evidence of exemplary practices in individual schools and classrooms: actions against injustice, cultivating individual abilities and meta-cognition, integrated curricula, creative scheduling, community pods within one school, for instance. Such promising practices thrive in many contexts ... *in splendid isolation*.

To be currently viable, to leave our imprint on the landscape, Christian schools need to keep pace, to recognize the multi-layered, complex worlds we live in and expect our students to encounter, understand and, indeed, transform culture. Of all educational systems, Christian schools have the capacity to function as "communities of truth" that bear the fruits and experiences "the grace of great things."

Because so much is at stake, the time is ripe for rethinking and, perhaps, reshaping our Christian schools. With a specific focus on how we practice Christian education in and for a postmodern world, I select the issue of *practice* in the social construct of Christian educational *communities* — that is, teachers and students living and learning — together.

A Christian professional community

Community is not something we *build* (as much of the literature espouses); rather, we are by definition a community. Though precisely how "community" operates in Christian educational contexts remains rather vague, Christian schools are ideally situated to emphatically resist rampant individualism as a social and educational norm. We need to provide a workable and specific definition of community as it applies to educational contexts and practices. To adopt one specific definition of "community" over another is no mere theoretical debate but a choice with profound and significant implications. The choice determines pedagogical strategies for teaching and learning. Such activities, in turn, affect the learning and ultimately shape the way any given subject or discipline is perceived and interpreted.

What does it mean when teachers and students live and act *interdependently* (the nature of community), each member both leaning on and supporting the other? A sound educational model of community, says Palmer, "reaches deeper, into ontology and epistemology — into assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know it — on which all education is built."[3] Such understanding of the practice of community builds relational learning and knowing as a matter of course and gives "voice and feet" to its ideals and purposes.

Community in the staff room

Teaching is often a lonely enterprise. As the "final gatekeepers, " teachers close their classroom doors and get on with the educational business of the day. The principal's response to seeing students huddled together around a problem or experiment — "I'll come back when you're teaching" — demonstrates how "teaching" is conceived as teacher talking, students listening and writing notes. The privatization of teaching, Palmer charges, "not only keeps individuals from growing in their craft but fosters incompetence as well."[4] This charge urges us to re-think our practice of community for the professionals that participate in our schools.

Too often, the knowledge that teachers build through experience remains under cover — behind doors. Real professional growth and development, they learn, happens *to* you, not *with* you (courses, conferences and workshops, for instance). This clearly undermines professional capacities and responsibilities and conforms to current trends to reduce teaching to a technical skill. Multiple and layered conversations need to occur where critical teaching experiences intersect and interact, where teachers (re)create the stories of their professional lives, expand their relational capacities, and (re)construct their professional knowledge. Palmer suggests that such community efforts "enhance both our professional practice and the selfhood from which it comes." (*Ibid*) In this shared enterprise, teachers come to know their colleagues and themselves, construct their identities, and know what they know.

Community in the classroom

School learning, according to conventional wisdom and practice, happens singularly and individually and is most frequently articulated in ranks and scores. Students are regularly and roundly criticized for not living up to their parents' or their community's high standards (it seems everyone knew their multiplication tables and history then), and their subsequent declining literacy levels and content knowledge. Parker Palmer suggests that a "cover story" of under-informed, under-motivated, media-saturated students indulging in the *bearable* "lightness of being" produce particular practices:

The caricature that students lack motivation, direction, skill; are bored, passive when action is needed and belligerent and destructive in contexts requiring thought, highlights a truth: our assumption that students are brain-dead leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains. (*Ibid*).

Let me give you an example: teachers ask the questions (in a study I conducted in six Grade 10 English classes, teachers asked 88 questions per hour while students asked only 6), students respond, and teachers evaluate (an Initiate-Respond-Evaluate or IRE pattern) of classroom talk. The greatest majority of these questions require simple, one-word answers ("What is the name of the dog?" for instance). Gripe's storybook, *Hugo and Josephine* aptly illustrates this phenomenon. We meet Hugo during his first day in a kindergarten class.

By late afternoon it is patently clear that Hugo does not know how to behave. Several times the teacher opens her mouth. Then she shuts it again. She looks like a fish out of water. In the end, she has to interrupt Hugo to make herself heard at all. She realizes that Hugo doesn't understand that in school children have to sit still and be quiet. The teacher does the talking and the children just answer when the teacher asks them a question.

Hugo listens attentively but looks frankly astonished. "Now, that's odd," he says.

"What's so odd about it?" the teacher asks.

"There's no sense in our answering questions when we don't know anything. We're the ones who ought to ask the questions!"

Is Hugo learning? You bet. He's learning about "playing school" and who has the right to ask questions. Indeed, who asks the questions, what kinds of questions and what is done with the questions reflect the operating view of knowledge and who "owns" the knowledge in the class room.

What plays out in the classroom in no small way determines understanding and interpretation of the world, the subjects and disciplines, the texts, the learning — the "habits of mind."

At the very least, like the professional teaching community, classrooms consist of groups of students who by definition constitute learning communities. Setting the stage for interdependence informs and recognizes the practices of educational communities. Here, Christian teachers gather their communities *around* a question (as opposed to only fielding questions, for instance) and each other. To bring the practice of community to life invites a "getting to know you, your peers, your subject" through active and inclusive membership.

Invest in students

In a talk given September 1999, Neal Plantinga, then Calvin College Dean of the Chapel, proposed a radical alternative. He pleaded for teachers to

...take an interest in students; ask about them; learn to pronounce their names right. We can make ourselves vulnerable before them by sometimes asking a question we know will reveal our ignorance. We can spend some of our daydream time in dreaming of things that would make our student's heart glad. And we can lift students to God with the prayerful urgency of a lover. In short, we can love our students as ourselves by sharing God's enthusiasm for them.

Investment in students as individuals transforms teachers and learners and sets the stage for cultivating a caring and cared-for community. Thoughtful Christian education creates an ethos of caring and interdependence in a robust and challenging educational context where to educate takes seriously its root meaning — to draw from, and not, as some would suggest, Gradgrind style, to "pour into empty vessels." With all our powers we must resist the more standardized cultural view of education as a kind of "survival of the fittest" (students as individual scores and competencies — A student, "bright" or "needy") and fostering a competitive ethos that pits students against each other (learning as winning and losing) to get to the top — a kind of "dog eat dog" world primarily geared to "looking after number one" (resulting in individualized learning plans for each student, for example). Communities crumble in the face of such expressions of behaviorist worldviews.

A developmental process

This is the time to ask the fundamental twin questions: "Why are we here?" and "Why are we doing these things?" What kind of persons do we mean to graduate? What marks distinguish and characterize the educated Christian person? What will she be able to do, think, act upon, resist and embrace? In other words, what educational goals represent our reasons for establishing and operating Christian schools? If, for instance, we aim to develop thoughtful, critical readers who can not only read text but interpret, challenge, resist and test it against a robust Christian worldview, exactly how do we propose to "realize" and even actualize that aim? How will students "practice" critical awareness and abilities? I suggest moving backward from the goals to spell out the practices and strategies, recognizing that genuine learning is developmental (a process).

The classroom as community needs to be invigorated and "get a life" in the classroom. What does that mean? Minimally, that the "community of the question" functions interdependently, supporting and contributing as the occasion, knowledge or strategy requires. This offers a shift away from learning *from* others to learning *with* others. For many, this disrupts the conventional models; indeed, it sounds a lot like cheating; I suggest it's called collaboration — the "two heads are better than one" theory in operation. It does, however, turn some things inside out. Parker Palmer suggests a provocative and unconventional change in the relationships that comes to light. He cautions:

The real threat to community in the classroom is not power and status differences between teachers and students but the lack of interdependence that those differences encourage. Students are dependent on teachers for grades — but what are teachers dependent on students for? If we cannot answer that question with something as real to us as grades are to students, community will not happen. When we are not dependent upon each other, community cannot exist (139).

Palmer challenges our sensibilities of "school," of authority, of relationships and responsibility to the core. As an educator, I have to ask myself what this means for me and how it affects the promises and purposes I propose for my teaching and learning.

Needing each other

We have to capture the essence of interdependence, of working a "body" model such as the one pictured in Romans 12. Indeed, it reaches far beyond the American Express motto "Membership has its privileges" to include responsibility and accountability. In an authentic community, as the song goes, "you can't have one without the other." When a 10th-Grade student in our Christian High School died some years ago, my colleague Eric spoke at the funeral. "It's not," he observed, "that we won't get up in the mornings and continue our living. But we shall continue our living as though we are missing a limb." That's it! Community reflects wholeness.

Continued across the page

All the World's a Stage:

The dramatic arts as metaphor for teaching and learning

by Heidi Wicker

Heidi Wicker is an English teacher at Holland Christian High School in Holland, Michigan.

Each year my students and I struggle to understand metaphors and wonder how and why writers, poets and playwrights use them. Through discussion we've learned that such imagery can help us to understand the thoughts, emotions and experiences of the authors. As I think about my professional hopes and dreams and my constant growth and change, I see how thinking metaphorically is helping to deepen my view of teaching and learning.

Parker Palmer says, " ... to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (Palmer, *Courage* p. 90). I agree with Palmer that teaching is about creating space, living in community, and practicing truth. With him, I would argue that knowing, teaching, and learning requires relationships among teachers, students, and the object of study. That interconnectedness, or web of relatedness, unites us all in a process — a story. With this in mind, I find my role of teacher and my view of education beautifully illustrated in the undertaking of a *dramatic performance*. Developing the metaphor of teaching as directing, I see that together, whether actors or learners, we are on a journey to create our story in God's kingdom.

Central message

When directors and actors come together to create a performance, they are all connected by an ultimate goal. Their purpose is to take the text and create an image. Neither director nor actor takes centerstage, but instead, it is the message that unifies them in a central purpose. This is the "great thing" that brings together this community; this is the basis for their relationships. Similarly, in education, teachers and students also need a "great thing" around which they gather and with which they have a relationship. In *The Courage to Teach* Palmer clarifies, "By great things, I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered — not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves" (p. 107). Members of this learning community are also developing their story as they engage with God's Truth. As they seek to honor the Author's purpose, the community focuses its energies on what truly matters. When learners (teacher included) allow themselves to center on the subject instead of the "expert" or the "student," then all parts can be transformed.

Every performance must have a stage — a place of openness and imagination — where the play can occur. A director and actor will be limited at times with the availability of space or materials, but it is still a place to play and imagine what could be. Likewise, in a classroom, teachers should provide occasions for openness and imagination. There will be limits, but these constraints should also serve to liberate students to broader, fuller thinking. Too often in education teachers have closed doors on possibilities by structuring the time and place so closely that creativity is stifled. Imagine actors who read their lines exactly from the script without making them real. Now imagine a performance where characters come alive through their understanding of the story, its power for them and their viewers, and the meaning they have developed from it.

Communal interaction

What a difference this could make in the classroom as well. Instead of asking students to sit and listen, we enter into a dia-

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Christian education in a complex, pluralistic, continuously changing postmodern world requires us to think anew ("outside the box,"), divergently, not convergently, to expose and reconstruct the "sacred stories" of education. I envision Henry Beversluis enthusiastically and characteristically endorsing our evolving quest. The question: "What difference will this make?" is more urgent than ever and applies to reviewing educational theories, experiences and practices, as well as the foundational concept of Christian education itself. The credos we prepare, the goals we set, the questions we ask, the practices we endorse, the relationships we develop, and, above all, the graduates we send into the world offer the most "telling" stories and the greatest hope of an irresistible force that seeks to renew the cultures.

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logue with them. What are their interests, hopes, and dreams? Once we've discussed these we can make the classroom a place to explore those topics and not just a place to relay lecture notes for a test. Even the four walls of the classroom are dissolved as students take exploration, discussion, and understanding beyond the physical space of the classroom.

Actors bring to a part their lifetime of experience — joys, sorrows, frustrations, hopes — in order to interact with the character they are creating, the people on stage with them, and the director in the house. So, too, students come to the classroom full of experiences that shape their perceptions. As actors change the characters that they portray and are changed by the characters they play, interactive relationships develop. Likewise, as students apply their perceptions and understandings to what they are learning, they develop and come to new understandings. In seeking God's Truth, one cannot but be changed. Learning becomes transformative.

Creating interdependence

As any director knows, the show is nothing without the actors. However, teachers too often forget the importance of the student in the community of truth. Parker Palmer holds that "[w]hen we are willing to abandon our self-protective professional autonomy and make ourselves as dependent on our students as they are on us, we move closer to the interdependence that the community of truth requires" (*Ibid*, p.140). Learning to be dependent on our students requires vulnerability and a relinquishing of control that many of us don't like. Facing a classroom with only the students and a subject can be frightening but extremely rewarding.

Finding ourselves truly dependent on our students, not just looking solely to strategies and quick-fix techniques, we'll look to our students — just as directors seek the drama in their actors, not their methods. This understanding is absolutely vital. As Joan Wink fearlessly declares, "If learning is not meaningful to students, it is irrelevant what the teacher does" (*Critical Pedagogy* p.123).

Each member of a cast has something unique to offer to the company. So does each student that enters the classroom community. They must be allowed to recognize their God-given talents, interests, and passions, to find their voices and use them. When we allow our students that opportunity, we will see them grow and respond.

As we give students voice through compassion, open doors, and safe environment, we will find that "[t]he broader the diversity of voices, the greater the quality of society" (Wink p. 70). One of the first steps is for teachers to learn to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19). By letting students bring their gifts into the classroom through open dialogue and choices, the community of Truth is strengthened.

The teacher helps students to notice what they haven't noticed even as a director points out nuances in the script, shades of meaning in the character, and details in the technique. The teacher enters into a relationship with the object of study, sharing with students a passion for this "great thing" in hopes of seeing the students' interests come alive as well.

As Davis, Sumara, and Luce say, "[E]ffective teaching is more a matter of listening than telling — that is, of attending and responding to the sense learners are making..." (*Engaging Minds* p. 9). As directors are excited and enthusiastic at the passion and growth of their actors, teachers should seek the same excitement and enthusiasm in their students' growth. For that is the essence of teaching — seeking growth.

For the world

A cast understands the importance of the audience to a performance, but very rarely do learners in today's school imagine an

audience for their learning. They see themselves as the audience — non-participants in the learning process. Instead, students should become active participants and the teacher, other students, parents, administrators, and the world should become the audience. This is not a stagnant role. The audience, too, is influenced and affected by what is happening. Through the story played out on stage, audiences are changed, challenged, and transformed. Just as a play is missing a vital element if it is never performed for an audience, so, too, a classroom is cut off without a larger purpose in the community. Involvement in community events, field trips, and guest speakers all help to tie students to the larger world. Even letter writing campaigns and personal action plans can take the learning outside the classroom walls.

Each time a play is performed or rehearsed it is a unique experience, incorporating the experiences, perceptions, understandings, and selves of the director, actors, audience, and script. Education should also be a unique experience. No single classroom experience can ever be duplicated.

And teacher response to those unique students should also be distinctive. Instead of assigning students only letter grades, which reduces their learning to one single evaluation, we should respond authentically and personally. In a rehearsal, a director values the actors' processes by watching and noting. Then at the end of each rehearsal the director will sit everyone down for debriefing. Through praise, dialogue, explanations, questions, and suggestions, improvements and weaknesses are noted and responded to immediately. If schools could operate on such a principle, what an influence it could have on students' confidence and motivation. Teachers should value the process by writing comments, meeting one-on-one with students, and allowing them to voice their struggles.

Appreciating the journey

Of course, understanding teaching and learning as the production of a play doesn't illuminate the picture completely. The process (rehearsal) of learning is valued and a "performance" standard is not always pursued. Since no auditions are held no one is prohibited from participation in the learning community. In addition, a company of thespians part at the completion of the show understanding that the final performance cannot be changed. Learners, on the other hand, are constantly seeking "the courage and patience to learn, to relearn, and to unlearn" (Wink p. 23).

Like directing, teaching has often been perceived as a lonely profession; but as teachers, we need to be thinking and talking *together* about the big issues surrounding education and our subject matters. We can't bring our students into the discussion unless we've been there ourselves, in our own way with our own understanding. None of this can be done without support and role models — in short, without community! And it is that which ties both images together — the powerful effect of community.

Learners in this community may not find themselves deeply content with their interactions. Meaningful teaching will dredge up the messes in the world. Connecting our students authentically to the "great thing" means acknowledging the problem of sin in our world and our relationships and then seeking to be agents of Christ's redemption in the world. Just as a dramatic performance, story, or narrative, may leave one thinking for days, weeks, months, or even years, a community of learners may experience similar tension. "[For] the most profound learning often occurs long after the time of deliberate pedagogy. Because new learnings — new memories — are always developing, the effects of teaching are often experienced for a lifetime" (Davis, Sumara, Luce p. 259). What a tremendous responsibility and glorious reward!

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Student Respect In Middle School:

Giving and Getting

by Clayton D. Lubbers

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Mrs. Malachi woke up with a headache and the start of a cold. As she poured her coffee, her mug tipped and spilled on her skirt. After a hasty change she was on her way to school. After being stuck behind a slow-moving school bus for 10 minutes she entered the school late. To top things off, the copy machine was broken — again.

As the bell rang, she walked into the classroom with her students and pulled out her Bible for devotions. Explaining the morning she had had so far to her students, she decided to read from Galatians 5: 22-26 — "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." This, she said, was what she needed today — especially peace and patience after the morning she had had.

A bad day

On another day, Mr. Habakkuk's morning went much the same. Late to school, spilled coffee, broken copier (AGAIN!). However, as soon as Mr. Habakkuk came into the classroom, the students knew he was having a bad day. When the students were a bit noisy he responded with three quick detentions for the "troublemakers." He next proceeded to chew out the entire class for the sorry state of their lockers. The students responded by once again speaking of their dislike for Mr. Habakkuk as they left for break.

Who's to blame?

What is the big difference between these two teachers? Respect: respect for the students and respect from the students. One goes with the other. Respect must be given to be gained.

> "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control".

Lack of student respect is a problem that can occur in any school classroom, whether public or private. However, in the Christian school classroom we should see a difference. Respect should be evident in every classroom of our Christian schools. It should, but it is all too often absent.

When we as teachers observe lack of respect, we tend to blame the students or the parents; in truth many times it can be traced back to the teacher. While our students should be respectful when they walk into our classroom, the growth or decline of that respect can directly be traced to the actions of the teacher throughout the year.

In one of my examples, the lack of respect was clearly directed at the student. While Mrs. Malachi may have been an idealized example, her response nonetheless bears elements of truth. There are times for punishment; and the truth is that most often the students themselves recognize when they are deserving of punishment. However, they also recognize when they are not deserving of punishment, as was the case with Mr. Habakkuk.

The importance of respect

Can learning come in the absence of respect? Absolutely. However, as Barry Raebeck states in his article "Structuring Middle Schools for Brain-Compatible Learning": "The more students can connect emotionally with a learning experience, the more they are likely to retain it" (1999). What better way to connect with the student on an emotional level than to have an atmosphere of respect in the classroom?

Respect is far more than obedience. Fear can inspire obedience, but respect can, in addition, inspire learning and caring. In the book from the Northwest Regional Educational Library, *Look Who's Talking Now: Student Views of Learning in Restructuring Schools*, the authors describe several studies on students and the ways that *they* wish to learn.What is one of the main themes brought out? "Relationships are very important to students, perhaps as much or more than particular learning activities. They want a caring and respectful learning environment" (NWREL, 1997).

Christians should serve as models of respect. In 1 Peter 2:17, Peter says, "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king." How much more important is it to show respect for our students? Jesus spoke of the importance of our students (children) in Matthew 18:2-6: "He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.'"

Respect among Christians is always (or clearly should be) a given. However, in our daily dealings with students, we sometimes lose respect for them. This should not be. Respect for our students should be of utmost importance. Since we expect it from them, it is important that we extend it to them. We need to lead by example, as our Savior did.

An atmosphere of respect

Teachers often tend to see themselves as leaders and the students as followers. In this model teachers are the expounders of wisdom and their students eager sponges waiting to absorb the knowledge that flows from their very pores. The problem with this view of the teacher/student relationship is that it does not lend itself to respect.

The key to gaining the respect of our students is to give it. Far from being seen only as the expositor of wisdom, we should allow the students to see us as struggling sinners who, like themselves, make mistakes daily. Many times we fear that in allowing students to see our weaknesses we will lose their respect. Actually, the opposite is true: in showing our weaknesses and revealing that we, too, struggle, we earn their respect and trust. They come to see us not simply as an authority figure, but also as a struggling Christian. If we don't see ourselves as struggling Christians then respect in the classroom may be the least of our problems.

Another key to respect is classroom management. Our management techniques need to exhibit respect. They require consistency — consistency in our rewards and in our penalties. Students need to know where the "line" is — it needs to be clear, and it cannot move. As we all know, there are always students who love to push the boundaries — those who love to walk up to it, and lean as far as they can over it without crossing. We cannot move the "line" based on our mood or the particular student that approaches the line. The point is that when they cross, they need to experience the consequences, no matter if the student is the "clown" or the "brain." When classroom management expectations are clearly spelled out and enforced, management is not a problem, and when students cross the line they know what penalty to expect.

Co-existing with consistent classroom management are appropriate consequences for breaking the rules. Respect is greatly hurt when the punishment meted out depends not on the severity of the crime but on the offender or, even worse, the mood of the teacher. If we go back to our school days, I'm sure we all can remember times when a teacher's foul mood resulted in stiffer penalties for the poor sap that made the mistake that day. Do you fondly remember those teachers? I don't. I do, however, fondly remember teachers who had bad days but still treated me fairly. Even good teachers can have bad days. The difference between showing and not showing respect to our students is in the way we handle frustrations. We *can* tell our students that we had a bad morning, and ask them for patience. A critical part of respect is showing Christian care for one another — that includes student care for teacher and teacher care for student. Christian care comes with respect.

In summary, respect in the classroom is key for student success. As Christian educators we need to understand that mutual respect is not only pivotal for learning but also central to our walk with God. What is most important, respect can bring our students along with us in our walk. As Christian educators isn't that our ultimate goal?

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Rex Guevara, or The Newsman Cometh

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Jan Kaarsvlam has "voluntarily" relinquished his post as poet-in-residence at the Denver Christian Schools following his disastrous public reading of his two poems, "My Love is as Articulate as Balaam's Donkey" and "On Passing by the Denver Municipal Sewage Treatment Plant One Snowy Morn." He is pleased, however, to announce that he will be taking a position as Home Economics Teacher at the Christian Academy of Japan.

When the Bedlam school board proposed a faculty-sponsored bake sale to raise funds for classroom supplies, no one expected it to make the six-o'clock news.

"Is he *still* out there?" asked Jane VanderAsh, pushing through the cluster of teachers gathered at the faculty lounge window that looked out on the front sidewalk of the school.

He was Rex Kane, sometime poet, sometime philosopher, sometime armchair Phys. Ed. teacher, and currently disgruntled employee and union organizer. All by himself, he was picketing. In one hand he held a placard that said, on the side his fellow teachers could see, "Teachers unite!" In the other hand he held a megaphone that he had borrowed from the cheerleaders; with it he was bellowing something at students as they came off the buses and moved through the brisk January air toward the warmth of the school. Bentley Vanderhaar, the school's principal, followed Rex back and forth, a half-step behind him, either pleading with him or yelling at him, no one was sure. Rex ignored him.

"Personally, I'm proud of Rex," said shop teacher Gordon Winkle. He took a slug of coffee from his giant 44-oz. travel mug and then continued. "The rest of us all complained about being forced to do that stupid bake sale, but Rex, he's doing something about it. I'd be out there with him if my lumbago weren't acting up so bad this morning." As if to prove his point, with a pained look he placed his right hand in the center of his lower back. As the others gazed outside, he moved hopefully toward the unattended Dunkin Donuts box on the table. Upon finding it empty, his pained look returned, but with a suddenly ferocious sincerity.

"I don't understand what Rex is so fired up about," said school counselor Maxwell Prentiss-Hall. "Personally, I think a bake sale is a great way to show that we are part of our larger community." He smiled and surveyed the crowd in the teachers' lounge. His cheery countenance was met almost universally by frowns, grumpy looks, and apathetic glazed eyes. Though he always had considered himself a "people person," at this particular moment Maxwell was uncertain whether the teachers disliked what he said, how he said it, or just disliked him. He sank despondently into a chair.

"Mark my words," librarian John Kleinhut interjected into the silence. "This is only the beginning. Next thing you know, they'll have us holding car washes and selling magazines to raise money for our own health insurance. It makes me wonder what that school board of ours is trying to tell us."

Perhaps the smell of baked goods and Aqua Velva wafting beneath the door should have warned Kleinhut, but at precisely that moment school board president Armando, "The King of Cannoli" Rigatoni, walked into the lounge. The top three buttons of his shirt were open, and a St. Anthony medallion nestled in his graying chest hair. Beneath one arm he had a box of chocolate cannoli. Winkle, suddenly forgetting his lumbago, jumped from his seat and rushed across the room to greet his employer and to relieve him of his burden.

"Hey, what's everybody looking at?" Armando asked.

"You must have come in from the back parking lot," sociology teacher Cal VanderMeer said. Armando nodded. "Take a look," Cal said. The cluster of teachers, as if shrinking from something anathema, parted in an uncomfortable silence. Armando looked at the silent faculty, snorted, and moved to the window. When he saw Rex, he clenched his jaw, his face reddened, and the vein running down the right side of his forehead throbbed.

"What's the meaning of this?" he said through gritted teeth. No one answered, so he turned to Cal, who, by being one of the oldest teachers at Bedlam, had become a sort of default spokesman for the group.

"Well," ventured Cal, "apparently Rex Kane is opposed to teachers having to raise money for the school, and, as near as we can figure, he is trying to organize a teachers' union." Armando sputtered a moment. "That bake sale was organized by the board to aid the teachers. It is a chance for you to raise money to reimburse yourselves for the money you spend on classroom supplies. How could anybody get upset about that?"

Jane VanderAsh sighed loudly. "Mr. Rigatoni, you run your own business, do you not?

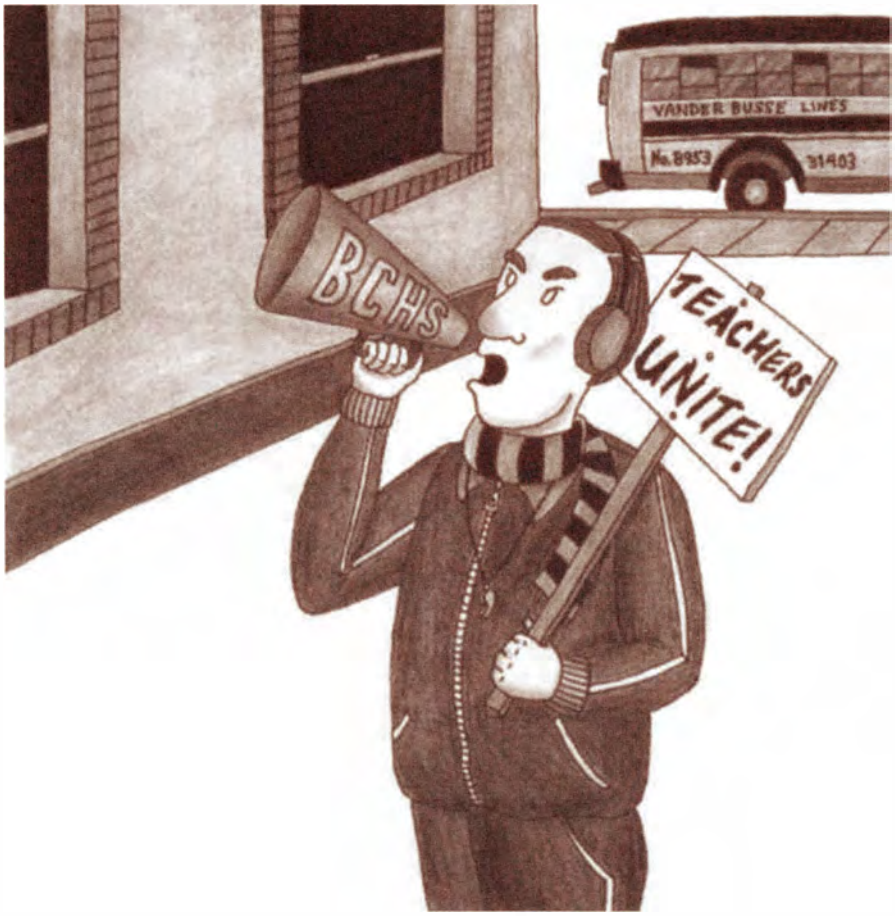
"Of course," said Armando proudly. "There are now five locations of the Cannoli Corner."

Jane continued. "If your cashiers run out of waxed paper, what do they do?"

Armando looked puzzled. "Get more out of the storeroom, of course."

"And who pays for that waxed paper? The cashiers themselves?"

A realization dawned on the school board president, and he



began backpedaling. "Yeah, but this school is not a business. It is a community ministry."

"That isn't what you told us when we had declining enrollment four years ago," put in John Kleinhut. "Back then you said we had to tighten our belts like any other business."

Before Armando could reply, there was a ruckus outside. A white ABC News van had just pulled up, and a cameraman and reporter were getting equipment out of the back of the van. Bentley Vanderhaar hurried across the street to try to dissuade them from turning their cameras on. Rex turned his megaphone toward the reporter and shouted loudly enough that his words drifted to the opened window: "Down with 'the Man!' You can have my picket sign when you pry it out of my cold, dead fingers! Teachers unite!"

"This is ridiculous," Armando muttered. He clenched his fists, crossing his arms over his portly frame and turning to look at the people surrounding him. The knuckles of his meaty fingers whitened beneath glinting gold rings. "This is downright cowardly. If you teachers had trouble with the way we were running the school, then you should have said something."

"But as soon as you say something like *you teachers*, you start to close off the avenue to any meaningful dialogue," said VanderAsh. "I remember at this school when the board and the teachers were co-workers in the fields of the Lord. I don't agree with what Rex is doing out there, but after several years of the board discussing our relationship in adversarial terms, I fear such an action was inevitable."

VanderAsh had opened the gates, and now others stepped forward to show their discontent with board-faculty relations.

"Indeed, what about that goofy Community Vision Committee that VanderMeer served on as faculty representative?" said Kleinhut. As was its wont, his Adam's apple bounced up and down his throat like an over-sugared ADD kindergartner sitting on a bouncy ball. "He dared to disagree with the board members on the committee and, as a result, he was removed. And you call that faculty input?"

"There have been several matters involving the board's discipline committee that I take issue with," said Cal Vandermeer, trying to get things back to a rational discussion. "That De Vries kid skipped over two weeks of school last month so he could snowplow, and the board just gave him a slap and a wink. No penalty at all."

"Yeah," chimed in Gord Winkle, "and what about our alleged hot lunch program?"

Armando raised an eyebrow. "What hot lunch program?"

Everyone turned and stared at Winkle. He shrugged sheepishly and said, "Well, I just thought it would be a good idea to have one."

Cal Vandermeer took advantage of the lull to jump back in. "I guess the point is, if the board and faculty are going to work together as a community, then we have to treat each other with respect all the time. I think one key part of that ...." He was interrupted by those teachers closest to the window, who began yelling that the white van was leaving. A few minutes later Bentley Vanderhaar walked into the lounge.

The faculty peppered him with questions all at once. Cal and Jane wanted to know what had happened. John Kleinhut wanted to know if Bentley knew what sort of "liberal spin" the news guys were going to put on the story. Gordon Winkle wanted to know something, but no one could figure out what because of the three cannolli stuffed in his mouth. Managing only some weak grunting noises, he sprayed a fine mist of confectioner's sugar everywhere. Vanderhaar raised his hands and quieted the throng.

"It's okay, people. It is no big deal. The whole thing was a big misunderstanding. Apparently Rex misheard. He thought that it was a *steak* sale. Ever since reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and turning vegetarian, he's been a little touchy about meat. When I reassured him that it was a bake sale and we would use only vegetable shortening in the recipes, the crisis was over."

Armando laughed. "You teachers kill me."

THE AWARD WINNING

by Gerald Vaandering

Gerald Vaandering (dvring@skyia.com) is an artist living in London, Ontario.

The prophet departed from the school in the forest after his annual visit. He had a smile on his face. He was confident that this unique community was able to accomplish the task of nurturing and educating their young children. This was a school of noble character, virtuous in vision — a beacon on a hill top, and a treasure to the community. This was a school that believed that the students were children of God, the teachers, servants to the pupils, and all were of one mind as to the purpose of their work together as school and community. Love was palpable and all shared equally in the successes and failures of each other.

God's presence

In class, children were seen to be eagerly helping those who fell behind, and those who fell behind were ambitious all the same in their attempts to accomplish their task. When children raced in the school yard, it was fun because those at the front of the race loved being chased and those chasing loved to chase. It also just felt good to run for whatever reason. In all the subjects God was seen to bathe all of creation in his wisdom. God was on the playground racing with the children and in the classroom enjoying the learning that was taking place.

The teachers had a visible passion for opening the eyes of young children to what they had not yet seen. They would work very hard and late into the night, eager to know if the next day would be an "A-ha" day in which, together with the students, they would discover something new to see and the teacher would see a new way of showing it again.

In the staff room, teachers shared ideas and concerns. If one teacher was not sure about how to get a few of his or her students to see a new concept, another was willing to help, and together problems were solved.

A better plan

One day a member new to the school community said, "This is a good and prosperous school. But, surely, we could show all of the world who we are without shame if we were even better. Why, even God would be more proud of us."

The plan that this person suggested would provide a system of measurement. In that plan the teacher who showed the best performance would be given an award at the end of the year. It would be presented in front of all the students so that all would know who the best teacher in the school was. The parents would also be invited to an assembly of community members to applaud this teacher. Three other awards would also be presented to members of the teaching team who were good teachers but not quite as good as the best. If in the second year the same teacher got the award again, then he or she would receive not only an award but also a raise in pay. A plan like this would encourage excellence in its teachers and, in turn, would most certainly produce students of the highest caliber. This was how it would work for the school in the forest.

After much discussion and consideration, some were convinced but others were not sure. All, however, were willing to give the plan a try. Some teachers were already thinking, why not? After all, I do help teachers a lot, and maybe they would be encouraged to work harder if they had to work independently for the recognition of the larger community.

Comparative excellence

When the school year started, the new plan was reviewed and agreed upon. After about three days of school, one teacher noticed that another teacher down the hall had great bulletin boards that were *very* neat. How did that class do such neat work? Every piece of work on the wall strove for the same perfection and was exactly the same in composition. Every piece on the wall had a star on it, but the one that was exceptionally well done got a big star with the words"excellent job!" written on it. This was different, since in the past, students' work had always been unique to the student, and evaluation was not so public.

The same teacher also noticed that the class across the hall was always laughing. They seemed to be having a good time of it over there. This was not abnormal at the school in the forest, but it did make the same teacher wonder whether they were

SCHOOL IN THE FOREST

having enough fun in her own classroom. After all, if you want to win an award for best teacher, you have to be able to convince others that what you are doing is better than what someone else is doing. And what better way to do that than to send your students home telling stories about how much fun they have learning?

Being first

Days passed on to months, and the teachers learned from each other without even knowing it that this way of working did change people. Some teachers expounded charismatically about how the students also benefited from this way of thinking. In the past they never realized that this new philosophy existed, but, once they got the hang of it, they found it quite easy and were certainly convinced that they were happier because now they knew who was better and who was less than better.

Things on the playground were different as well. Now when the children raced on the playground, they grimaced and agonized throughout the race because to be first was the most important thing. It showed who was the best. Oh, of course, after some of these races and games there were a few students who were despondent and some who cried, but this was all a part of the philosophy of the day that said: Competition makes us work harder and a little crying actually shows that we know we have failed, and it will only make us work all the harder the next time.

God's new plan

Then, one day, the prophet came for his annual visit to the school in the forest and saw all that the school had become. He pondered over it. That day he was invited to attend the school's membership meeting and was, in turn, asked to say a few words, for the people knew he was a prophet of God.

He paused a moment as he looked over the community of people, and then he said that he had visited the school and had taken notice of the changes in the school since he last visited. He commented on their new plan and suggested that God would consider changing his way of thinking as well. From now on only the best people in the community would get to heaven. Only the best prayers would be heard, and those who made the most money and gave the most money to the church would actually ever get a chance to see the pearly gates of heaven. No more free forgiveness; it had to be earned. At the conclusion of his speech, the people applauded faintly.

They left the meeting that night somewhat bewildered and not too sure that they liked God's new approach. As for the school in the forest, it was now a school like all the other schools in the land. The teachers were now like all the other teachers in the province who held degrees and certificates. The students learned the same facts as all the other students in all the other schools. The children were tested like all the rest of the children across the land ... and they did well on the tests.

A Crown That Lasts

The "School in the Forest" fable is written on the premise that there really is no biblical mandate to encourage competition in the way that we have come to know it through the secular culture. The biblical texts imploring us to run the good race are not proof texts for justifying competition that measures success the way it is measured when athletes or persons in the work force are rewarded.

In 1 Corinthians 9: 24 we read: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?" But verse 25 puts it all into context: "They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

Christ succeeded in his task while he was here on earth, but not in the way that anyone ever imagined. He said that the first would have to be last, that we need to learn to be a servant to one another. His victory meant that he was beaten, whipped, spat on, and crucified on a cross — the method of dying indicating not only that this person deserved to die but that he was cursed in the process. He was forsaken by friends and God, his Father. What a great victory! By conventional standards of measuring success, he was a dismal failure. We are called to be Christ-like, not worldly.

Biblical texts aside, I imagine that there are any number of psychologists that rate competition as a good and helpful thing. There are probably innumerable academic texts establishing this point. But consider this fable, and see whether it rings true at all.

This fable, instead of focusing on the students, directs itself first and foremost at the teachers and the school community. It may be of interest to the reader that some Christian schools have actually entertained the idea of merit pay for their teachers.

G.V.

Panel Dot Edu

Patriotism in the Christian School

Clarence Joldersma (cjolders@calvin.edu), professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the Dot Edu panel to consider the following question: Is part of our duty as Christian teachers in general, regardless of the specific subjects we teach, to inculcate patriotism in our students, a loyalty that rallies around a country in times of crisis? Or ought we to teach them how to be critical of decisions, actions and values of our government or country that we deem as shortsighted or self-serving? (I'm thinking here, for example, of the US administration's threat to attack Iraq in order to "get rid of" Saddam.)

February 5, 2003


Pam Adams

I have never thought it was my duty as a Christian teacher to inculcate patriotism — especially if we mean by patriotism an uncritical assent to whatever our country or government does. Yes, of course, we should teach our students to look critically at local and national policies. I am thankful that I was born in the U.S., but my loyalty is to God, not country. I put my faith in a powerful and merciful God who loves all the peoples of the world — not just people like me. Our nation was established by humans and is flawed in many ways. Often our policies are driven by self-interest and greed. We need Christians to speak up about what they consider to be right. Our students will not learn to do this unless we do it ourselves.

Pam

February 6, 2003

This is a tricky question! Just this morning I heard a newscaster say something about President Bush and Iraq, with a sneer in his voice. I believe the Bible surely teaches us to pray for those in authority over us, so that they may make wise decisions for our country and so that we may live quiet and peaceable lives as Paul writes to Timothy. We are also to look forward to another country, the heavenly Jerusalem, where our Lord awaits us. There's the tension. How deeply do we settle our roots here on earth? I think we can honor and respect our leaders and at the same time disapprove of their decisions. We should especially uphold godly leaders, as they are in very difficult positions at times, trying to reconcile their duty to God, country and citizens. As to teaching our students to be patriotic, I wonder if that is required of us.

Johanna

February 6, 2003


Tim Hoeksema

Mixing politics and religion is always dangerous. I'll pass on this one unless another contributor writes something that forces me to break my silence.

Tim

February 8, 2003

Ahhh, but Tim, that's part of the delightful danger of a Reformed approach to life! Show me someone who can approach politics without acting out the ultimate answers they hold to, and I'll show you someone who is self-deceiving!

Tony

February 9, 2003


Lois Brink

Adding to your views, Pam and Johanna, perhaps we ought to review patriotism in the school context. Historically, our society has viewed the purpose of schools as patriotic in the sense that they provide for an educated citizenry. I think that we can be faithful to this vision and to our Christian and Reformed perspective by providing opportunities for students to experience careful understanding of complex issues that face each nation. Patriotic schooling can also include giving our students (citizens-to-be) a thoughtful and critical sense of history. For instance, we can give a perspective on current issues by reviewing other instances as well as the background and issues to be considered. In the Iraq invasion scenario, teachers can help student look back on United States history to see where a president precipitated an intervention without active provocation and the outcomes of these interventions. As you say, Johanna, patriotism begins not with a flag or an oath but with a worldview and a belief. It begins with a view of God's


Clarence Joldersma

good world, of the transgressions against the Cultural Mandate and the Golden Rule, of every nation and every era being tainted by sin, and of our role as restorers, in our communities and in our countries . How can we, lovers of the country God has given us, be involved in transforming actions and values that are, in fact, self-serving?
Lois

February 19, 2003


Johanna Campbell

I agree with you, Pam, when it comes to teaching our students to be responsible and educated citizens, who pray for the peace of their country so that each citizen may live a quiet and peaceable life. Jeremiah tells the Jews in his letter to the exiles in Babylon: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). So, too, as Christian citizens, we are to seek the welfare of our country and its people, while at the same time looking for a better country. If I sing my national anthem, I do it for that reason, all the while thanking God that I live in a good land which offers me many advantages. Also, if I prosper in this good land, I am obliged to share the wealth with those countries that need it. My wealth is not my own, but is given to me to share with those in need. So if we can teach our students not to put down their roots too deeply, and to always look forward to our heavenly country, I think we have done well.
Johanna

February 24, 2003


Tony Kamphuis

School systems, like any other human initiative, always serve something. From the establishment of the modern nation state onward, there has always been an element of society that believes schools should serve nationalism, and therefore promote patriotism. While I have problems with that, I do think being aware of it enables us to get way past the "bless everything the country does" and the "teach students to be critical of all the country does" dichotomy. Instead, I think we should teach the biblical norms the state is called to promote, and then we can encourage students to be glad, thankful and supportive when it does so, and to urge other options when it does not. This isn't such an obvious line in a mixed up rough-and-tumble world, however, and I tend to say let's err on the side of support for nations generally committed to freedom and the rule of law, considering all that these principles have done for the world.

I say we settle in! God created us to live on this earth, not to await transport to some Platonic Never-Never-Land. That doesn't mean we can make our peace with the way everything is done in our nations, but it does mean we have a challenge to pass on to our students: to reclaim a world and nations that belong to God. All that bravado aside, working in politics is tough slogging. It's never clear if you are being shrewd or compromised, bringing light or having communion with darkness, being used or trying to be manipulative. Sharing that experience with our students, though, will give them a better appreciation for a Christianity that has work clothes on, and a Christianity that motivates its adherents to make a difference. It gives our faith a genuine hue.
Tony

The panel consists of:

Pam Adams (padams@dordt.edu), assistant professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.
Lois Brink (LBrink@grcs.org), curriculum coordinator and media director at Grand Rapids Christian High School, Grand Rapids, Mich.
Johanna Campbell (ctabc@twu.ca), executive director of the Christian Teachers Association of British Columbia, Langley, B.C.
Tim Hoeksema (thoeksema@hollandchristian.org), principal of Holland Christian High School, Holland, Mich.
Tony Kamphuis (TonyKamp@aol.com), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education. He lives in Smithville, Ont.

Query

Learning to Behave and to Read

Tena Siebenga-Valstar is a former teacher and principal, who recently graduated with a Ph.D. at the University of Alberta. We encourage all teachers and principals to submit a question for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your question(s) to Dr. Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2, or e-mail her at tvalstar@telus.net.

Acting out loyalty to Mother

Question #1

A student new to our school, came from a family situation where social services intervened. The result is that the children now live with their father and grandparents in our city. The oldest child is not happy and wishes to be with her former friends and school mates. She also says she misses her mother; Social Services took her from her mother who lives elsewhere. This girl has on three occasions left home for school but did not arrive at school. She has two siblings, who take the bus with her. On the first occurrence a sibling revealed part way through the day that her sister was not really sick but had gone to meet her friends. On another occasion the girl took a lighter from her pocket and lit it in class. She says she wants to be "kicked out." I have called the father, but want advice as to what to do in this situation.

Response:

This is obviously a troubled situation and one which has many facets. The child is sad and reacting to the situation. Since she appears to be the oldest child she may well have a sense of having to take care of her mother. Although no reasons have been given for the children being taken from the mother, sufficient reason must have warranted the apprehension. Since the children have been released to the father and grandparents, the school must allow them to take the parenting role. Even though your heart is obviously hurting for the child, it is not wise for you as school personnel to overstep the parental role. Social services has left the children in the care of the parents and grandparents, and you must give them the time to take on that responsibility. It may be a new role for them as well.

The scenario you have painted tells me the child is crying out for love, attention, and acceptance. You, as the teacher, can be a primary instrument to exhibit all three. You need not compromise what you have set up in your classroom to establish a sense of classroom community. You may use some of what you already do with the students to help the new student to feel included and accepted. Encourage others in the classroom to embrace her. There will likely be those in your classroom who have a loving, caring heart who will be able to meet some of her needs and yet be strong enough to set her in a positive direction. Pray for her. Ask God to direct your actions and give you wisdom as you interact with her. If you have any counseling services in your school, direct her to those when the situation or need arises.

Since discipline comes from the word disciple or follower, encourage her to be a follower of Christ. If however, disciplinary action is necessary (e.g. repeated lighter incidences), follow your school's discipline policy as you would with any other students. "Skipping classes" or failing to show up for school would require that you take the same action that you would with any other child that chooses to do the same thing. These actions should be taken in consultation with parent or guardians.

May God bless you as you lovingly nurture this child.

No best way to learn reading

Question # 2

I am still confused. Sometimes I hear that we are supposed to teach phonics and on the other hand I hear it is not a good idea. I really can't see how a child can learn how to read if he or she is not taught phonics.

Response:

What you are reflecting is a dilemma which has been part of the "great debate" in the teaching of reading. One approach to teaching reading involves decoding individual sounds and words; the other focuses on relating to the meaning of larger units of text from the outset of the reading process. The former view is sometimes called the basic skill approach to reading, holding that children need to learn, through practice and drill, a hierarchical set of skills in a predetermined order. Those who hold the latter approach believe that students learn these skills while engaged in the act of reading itself. Strong proponents of this view say that children can learn to read without any direct instruction. This has become known as the "whole language" approach.

One result of this debate is that it has become clear that there is no one best way to teach reading and that there are no quick fixes. What is more important, a consensus has developed about the best practices to teach reading — a consensus which calls for a balanced literacy program (Bainsbridge and Malicky, 2000, p. 3). At the same time we must recognize that individual children

Tena Siebinga-Valstar
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learn in unique ways.

Many of the teachers I have observed teach the phonics within the "whole language" approach. Rather than focusing on learning the terminology (consonants, vowels, digraphs, phonograms) or rules (When two vowels go walking ...), the aim is to use the sounds and rules to gain meaning from print. Phonics is not taught as a separate entity or subject, but as an integral part of the reading and writing program. Through class activities such as constructing word walls, word family charts and sorting words, young children become familiar with print. Listening to and reading predictable books helps children use their knowledge of print. By using a cloze procedure in a morning message to the children, the focus can be on a particular area of difficulty that the children may be experiencing (e.g. including a final "e" on a word in which a vowel says its own name). Providing ample time for the teacher to read good literature, and for children to follow along with the reading (e.g. Big books or charts) develops familiarity with language. Scheduling time for paired reading and silent, sustained reading as well as student story or journal writing all give the students opportunities to use their acquired knowledge of print and to gain meaning from it. I trust this has given you some ideas as to how to teach phonics within a context meaningful to your students.

(Bainsbridge, J. & Malicky. G. (2000). Constructing meaning: balancing elementary language arts. Toronto: Harcourt.)

Task within a child's zone

Question #3

Can you explain "Animated Literature"? I have heard about the program but can not find very much information about it.

Response:

My Internet search did not yield very much, but a teacher who has taken a workshop and is using the program was able to provide some information. The creator of the program intends that teachers attend a workshop prior to using the material in their classroom.

"*Animated Literacy* is one innovative beginning literacy program that integrates phonics instruction with rich children's literature in a multi-sensory format that is novel, emotionally charged and action oriented" (Collins, 2000). One of the key concepts on which Jim Stone has based his program is Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, which indicates that a child will be able to do by herself tomorrow that which she is given assistance with today. A task is within a child's zone of proximal development if he or she can imitate or copy a behavior, complete a task that is started by an adult or more capable peer, and can perform the task with assistance (J. Stone Creations, 1999, p. 3). A cast of characters from the Animated Alphabet teaches the sounds, letters and spelling patterns used to read and write.

I observed a kindergarten teacher as she introduced Baby Barnaby. She encouraged her students to talk about babies, showed a Robert Munch video about a baby, read a story about Baby Barnaby, led the children in an action song about Baby Barnaby and then provided seat work. The children colored the "b's" in the text, colored the picture, wrote and again sang with the teacher as together they identified the "b's". This was primarily a class of boys, and they, for the most part, were on task as the teacher reviewed characters such as Farley the Fox, Ollie Ostrich and Max the Ox. She used singable tunes with lots of actions. The students' books showed their drawing and experimentation with letters and words. It was obvious this class was enjoying learning letters, sounds, and simple words through this multi-sensory approach.

(For more information contact J. Stone Creations, P. O. Box 2336, La Mesa, CA 91943-2336. Collins, D. (2001). *Animated Literacy: A Fun Approach to Teaching and Learning to Read.* http://www.cl.hickory.nc.us/library/general/Columns/2001/4262001.htm.)

Service Projects In the School?

by Jason Grootenboer
Jason Grootenboer (jasongrootenboer@chathamchristian.ca) teaches at Chatham Christian High School in Chatham, Ontario.

"I get to help a lot of people, and share my faith with them." I have yet to hear this comment at Chatham Christian High School (CCHS), where I began teaching in September, 2002. One of our students said that to a reporter from Thunder Bay, Ontario's, *Chronicle Journal*, as he described a SERVE project there last summer. Coming from a 15-year-old, that quote hammers home great opportunities for our students to develop life-giving skills and compassionate hearts through service projects. In the quest for life-long service in the community and greater society and for the Lord, organized group projects are invaluable.

Before starting to teach in Chatham, I worked as a youth pastor in Kingston, Ont., for eighteen months. This ministry culminated in Thunder Bay's week-long SERVE project. At my farewell in Kingston, the youth presented to me a scrapbook of our times together. Filled with comments and testimonies, this memento unwittingly gave reasons why service projects should be in a Christian high school curriculum. Besides taking deserved shots at me, they highlighted such spirit-building events as Acquire the Fire, regular meetings, weekend retreats, and fund-raisers. But the bulk of the photographs and personal notes showed how the service project had drastically changed their lives, challenging them to be more lively in spreading the good news of Christ's love and salvation.

Photos: courtesy of Chatham District Christian High School

School task?

Bringing such experiences into our students' lives through personal encouragement and involvement is one thing. However, maybe it is time to include them consciously and thoughtfully in curriculum discussions that echo through our halls, both during and after school and at staff meetings.

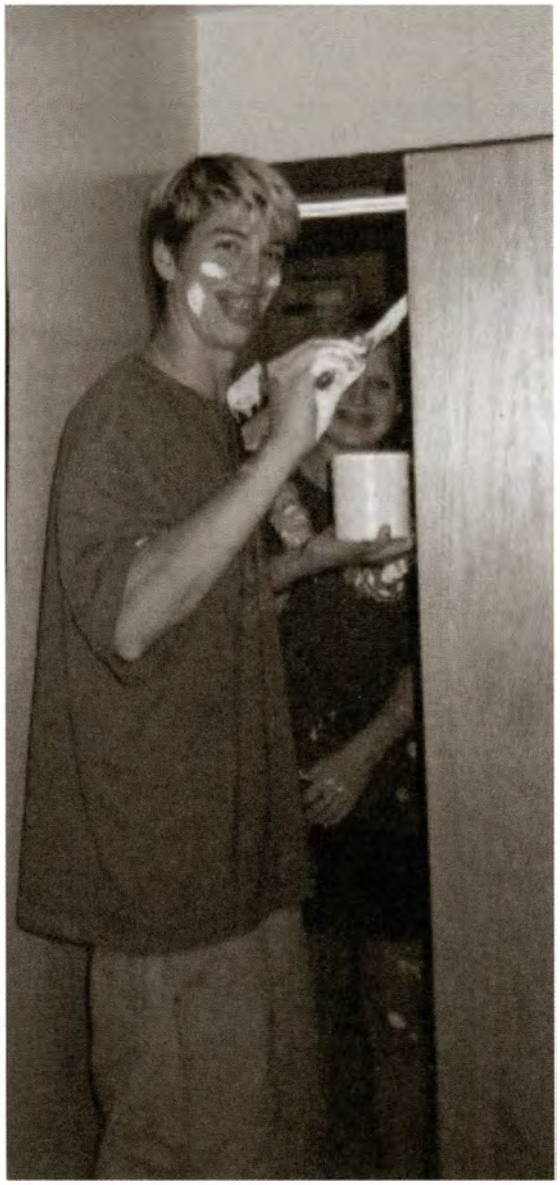
It is tempting to distance service projects from our daily high school regime. Why can't we leave them to church youth groups or even to families who build them into summer vacations? I would argue that since large scale service projects can be challenging, intense, and extremely rewarding, Christian educators do well to bring these faith experiences into the curriculum, even if it means breaking out of safe and comfortable school walls.

The introduction of the CCHS Student Planner lists the school's Ten Educational Goals. Somewhere in the maze of homework, after-school jobs, tests, team practices, students' council meetings and the rest, students are expected to focus on these goals. Five are pertinent here: 1) Become a Disciple of Christ, 2) Deepen Her Love to God, 3)Discover and Develop Particular Talents, 7) Acquire Skills, Attitudes and Habits necessary for the Tasks of Life, 10) Direct This Education Towards Christian Service

Clearly one-half of our goals directly relate to service projects. Although these five goals can be accomplished within school walls, venturing outside could surely reach them with greater depth and breadth.

State and kingdom

All Ontario secondary school students must complete 40 hours of community service. They calculate, negotiate, and finagle these hours out of the way. And why not? Ever since they started, school teachers have been stressing good use of time. So cannot schools provide students with service op-



portunities that will not only serve the community, but also allow students to witness to their faith? This does not mean that pouring coffee at local weekend hockey tournaments is not meaningful service, but at Christian schools we constantly challenge students to live out Christ's Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20, NIV).

To be sure, students could witness at the hockey rink; but chances of talking about Christ while fumbling to make change from a toonie (Canadian two-dollar coin) and desperately attempting not to spill coffee on oneself are rare.

Need for opportunity

How can we prepare students to be ready, able, willing, and excited about serving others? What tools do they need to spread the Word of God while helping others? Our students want to spread Christ's love, but educators and churches need to offer opportunities. One way to reach people who need hope is by cleaning their homes, raking their leaves, or hoeing their gardens. Maybe that's even a crucial step.

Often students and teachers alike see service as something for distant places. Meanwhile, needs in our own communities cry for attention. It is difficult and expensive to take an entire school or class on a two-week service project to Cuba or Honduras. Yet, organizing food drives, establishing community gardens, raking, painting , yard work, and cleaning up garbage all model responsible living. These opportunities for service crowd our very doorsteps. In caring about our cities and their residents, we take seriously Jesus' words, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, NIV). As we serve others our communities welcome us — sometimes directly into neighbors' lives and homes. Often doors and ears open simultaneously as we witness to those who need to hear about Christ's salvation now and forever.

We need to challenge our students with more and present opportunities that cannot be offered within school walls. Teenage Christians, instead of taking meals for granted, need to see children line up with their mothers at food banks. They must hear the elderly woman down the street tell of living through World War II and losing two of her three children to death. Compassionate teachers and schools can present students such opportunities to show people in our community God loves them through their pain and suffering — and beyond, where life overflows with everlasting happiness through Christ's blood.

More than math

Our staff have discussed how to direct Christian education towards service (Goal 10) within our curriculum. Service projects offer a solution. Maybe we can't use the quadratic equation while cleaning a neighbor's refrigerator, but if Christ's light truly permeates our curriculum, his light must be the foundation for students' lives. Burning bright, that light will produce results exceeding those of the Pythagorean theorem.

A final pay-off from service projects is the opportunity for teachers and students to build relationships that differ in quality from those formed, say, while pithing frogs in biology class. Community service invites discussions about how faith is nurtured, and does so more naturally than in a classroom environment. Sometimes discussions of issues with which they (and we) struggle often pop up while raking a yard, serving soup or visiting an elderly man dying of cancer. We cannot afford to miss such "teachable moments" (a worn but useful phrase) to build faith and relationships, even if it means skipping a day of Geography or History.

Over all of life hangs the question: "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" James 2:15-16 (NKJV)

Caring for My Flowers

by Marilyn Anderson

Marilyn Anderson is director of Special Education at Lansing Christian School, Lansing, Illinois. She presented this meditation during a staff devotional at her school in October of 2002.

Last summer was very unusual for our family. Owing in part to the events of September 11, my husband was forced to make a career change. As a full-time student, he no longer had the benefit of his frequent flyer program, and we were not able to travel as we had done in previous years. As a result, last summer, our "vacation destination" was our back yard. We tried to plant a few extra flowers to make it as pleasant as possible. I expected boredom. What I received was lessons from God that I would not have heard if I hadn't been in my own back yard.

I think it's important to note that I love flowers! I take pictures of them when we are on trips. My husband has always known that the perfect gift for me is a bouquet of flowers. My mother has even mentioned that, when they took me to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago when I was three, I didn't care nearly as much about the animals as I did about spending time in the conservatory and walking in the gardens admiring the flowers.

So here we were, my husband and I, puttering around in our backyard. Because we bought more flowers, I needed more pots and more dirt. After planting the petunias and New Guinea impatiens, I sat back to admire them. The petunias grew and thrived. The impatiens shriveled up and almost died. Why? The topsoil I had placed in the new pots held too much moisture for them to grow. I needed to make adjustments and change a few things. To my delight, they began to take off after I had made the necessary changes.

Then there were the bags filled with impatiens I hung on the back fence. Being off the ground, unable to get water or support from the ground, they just sort of "hung there." I really needed to water them a lot! They only had me to care for them; otherwise they were on their own.

The clematis plant on the trellis had been there for several years. It grows every year and never needs any special care. When I bought two more to place on either side of it, I expected the same would be true of them. I was wrong. They needed water — not too much, not too little, but just enough. And how I had to guide those vines! I couldn't force them to wrap around the trellis when they were too short or they would snap off and break. But if I waited too long they might wander and wrap themselves tightly around an object that might bring them harm, or keep them from growing as well as they should. And slowly but surely those two little clematis plants began to produce flowers. It didn't matter that the older plant, which was from the same family, was able to grow and flourish on its own. Each plant is different and deserves its own special treatment and care.

The morning glories were my greatest surprise! I planted them and watched them grow straight up. Not many leaves, no flowers, just lots of vines. And no matter what I did for those morning glories, they still were not getting with the program! I watered them, I daily guided them to cling to the fence, but still not many leaves and no flowers. But suddenly, in late August, after many of the other flowers had already been eaten by the rabbits, the morning glories began to show thick leaves and beautiful flowers. They had made it!

They proudly took their place in my

flower garden. It was a real joy to see them each morning and admire them. They fit in so well.

The time came when we had to visit friends and be away for two days. Whom could I trust to care for my flowers as well as I would? It wasn't just a matter of holding the hose, mind you. It was CARING for them. I decided my next-door neighbor, the man with the lawn like a putting green, would be the best replacement I could find. So he cared for them in my absence.

While watering one morning I thought, "Boy, I'm going to miss this time I've had to spend with my flowers now that school is starting." But a still small voice said to me, "You're a Christian school teacher. Your flowers are coming inside, and it will be your job to nurture them for me until June."

And then I saw the whole picture. The "petunias" are the students that will grow and thrive in any class. They'll grow no matter what teacher they have or what methods are used. The "impatiens" are those that might need some adjustment to their learning before they will be able to grow and produce beautiful flowers, too.

The "bags hanging on the fence" reminded me of the students I had had in earlier years while I served as an educational therapist in a hospital setting. Those who did not have a support system were not deeply rooted and were always just a day away from withering up. I'm sure we have had some of those students in our school, too. And I thought back and hoped I had done enough for them.

The "clematis" made me aware, again, that each child is different. No matter what other family members may be like, each child is a unique creature, created in the image of God, with his or her own strengths and weaknesses. I also learned the importance of guiding and nurturing the tender shoots. If I was too rough, they broke. If I was too lenient, they wandered away. Finding the exact formula for guidance has never been easy. But I will tell you, being there every day and keeping a watchful eye and stretching out a guiding hand seemed to provide the best results.

Then there were the "morning glories." I guess I'd have to say those are "my" kids — the special-ed students who, no matter how often we guide, nurture and water them and make adjustments and modifications, get taller but don't produce the "leaves and flowers" we look for in grade school. But the wonderful part is that later in the growing season they will BLOSSOM! Many of my former students are out of high school now and have taken their place in society. They're working in day-care centers, roofing houses, landscaping, doing heating and air-conditioning work, serving as a beautician in a nursing home, as well as volunteering to be Cadet counselors. They've made it. Not in our time, but in God's. They made it, not because of what we have done, but because God provided the sunshine and the rain, and kept them firmly rooted in homes, churches, and schools that saw them as his unique children.

While I took some time off from working in my summer garden, I needed someone who felt as strongly about my flowers as I did. He would not REPLACE me but just stand in my place while I wasn't able to be there. He would do a great job, but he wouldn't make any major decisions while I was away. He would always remember that they're MY flowers!

These are the lessons I learned by staying home last summer and vacationing in my own back yard. I can't imagine any souvenirs I might have purchased on far away trips being more meaningful in my life!

I hope as you "tend the garden" which God has given you, that you will become aware not only of the many different varieties of "flowers" before you and the awesome responsibility the parents have given you but also of the unique, wonderful gift that each of your "flowers," created in the image of God, presents.

An Indelible Part of My Life

by James Calvin Schaap

James Schaap is professor of English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, and a published author.

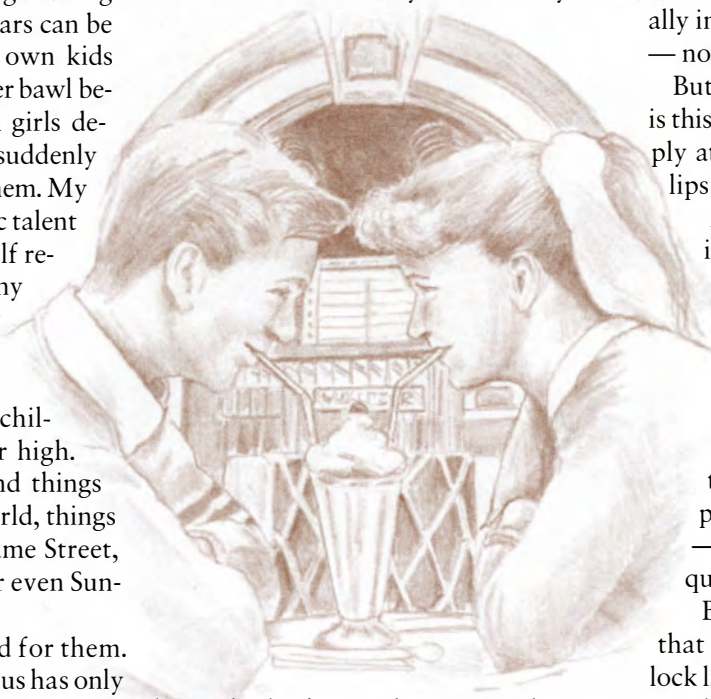
Twenty-some years ago, I became a parent. And now I have a confession to make. If I had a choice, I think I'd shut down junior high schools, just take all the kids of that age and lock them up in some dank dungeon until they're old enough for high school, because junior high years can be brutally merciless. When my own kids grew up, I watched my daughter bawl because some prissy junior high girls decided, on a whim, that Andrea suddenly wasn't quite good enough for them. My son wasn't blessed with athletic talent in junior high, so he got himself retired from sports long before any kid should have to suffer that level of rejection. Some of you know very well what I mean.

And yet, I guess, both my children "grew up" during junior high. They both came to understand things about themselves and their world, things they hadn't learned from Sesame Street, Saturday morning cartoons, or even Sunday School.

Maybe junior high was good for them. Lots of writers say that each of us has only one story — the story of how each of us "grew up," how we came to see that the world of candy and cartoons wasn't the world we were going to live in for the rest of our years. Try to tell a child about this world as a "vale of tears" sometime, the language of the Bible. Watch 'em shrug their shoulders. Today, some of you know all too well what that means.

Like it or not, "growing up" requires a death, because understanding that there's an end to childhood is like coming up on a horrible highway wreck — your own. "When I was a child," Paul says, "I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." There is, after all, a childish way of doing things. "But when I became a man," he says, "I put childish ways behind me." I don't want to overstate, but becoming a real live adult human being means killing off the child we were — that's what Paul says. I guess that means that junior high is a form of abuse we all suffer.

Sort of. Let me tell you about my first



kiss. I think of it now because not long ago I walked past the house where it happened, almost 40 years ago.

The young lady was babysitting in a place that was, back then, little more than a house trailer — four rooms max. The two of us were sitting prettily on the couch, watching television, but I had more on my mind than what was on the screen because I knew this kiss was going to happen — it *had* to. Among the guys I hung around with, I certainly wasn't the first to smack some sweetie; I must have heard a half-dozen play-by-plays from guys who'd left the building with their "couples-skate" partners on their arms and walked down the bridge, where (voila!) it happened. Other guys got their first kiss in once the darkness settled over the newly blacktopped basketball courts right there at the Christian school.

"Making out," as we called it then, was going to happen; let there be no doubt. In fact, its inevitability cranked up the pressure: I *had to* kiss her because I sure didn't want to be the last kid on the block ritually initiated. Seventh grade I was, I think — no older.

But what I wondered was, how exactly is this thing to be accomplished? Do I simply attack her with my face — purse my lips and push them at her? Or do I ask? Asking seemed dippy. "Do you mind if I kiss you?" — makes it sound as if kissing is something she's got to put up with. "Would you like to kiss me?" — ugh, arrogant. "Wanna' kiss?" — stupid, as a third-grader. Asking, I thought, makes the whole operation sound so "first time." Even though it was, I knew it wasn't supposed to look that way. Experienced — that's what I had to be. Suave. No questions asked. Just whale away.

But really, how does something like that happen? Do we just sort of agree to lock lips? Maybe the whole room dissolves in a dream glow as we fall into each other's arms and start pressing lips. But how will I know the right moment? How does someone learn this? Guys said some girls were actually good at it; but if it's an art, what studio gives lessons? What happens if I lay my first kiss on this girl and her brows scrunch or she giggles? How will I know what's good? Does she tell me? — "do this," "don't do that"?

And, good night, what happens if she doesn't want to, or she's scared, or she doesn't let me? What if her parents told her making out was bad, bad, bad. Do we

"Only one life will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."

just sit there and eat popcorn — as if kissing was no big deal at all? If you can't kiss, I figured, what's the point?

Here's what I remember. The television, an old beast, black and white, is in the corner. I haven't a clue what's on — even an hour later I wouldn't have remembered. I slip my arm around her, and she sort of snuggles into it. We're sitting there warm as pie, and I smell her. She wants to be kissed — why else would she wear perfume? My heart's booming a jungle beat, and nothing — really nothing — is registering in my mind because rationally I'm zilch. I could sever my brain stem right then — my mind is that useless. I'm little more than a gargantuan pair of preying lips.

I lean towards her. She understands — it's in her, too. Girls were probably saying the same thing. She knows every volt of my anxiety because the same current runs in her veins. She leans toward me, and once we recognize what we're both about, magnetism does its thing and — va-va-voom — the moment occurs, our lips meeting in topsy-turvy awkwardness that's transcended only by its own glorious immensity.

I've done it, and it is good. Oh, my goodness, it's better than good. So for the rest of the night, we batter each other's faces with merciless junior high abandon.

And when I walk home later, Oostburg's Main Street isn't big enough for me. I'm the Wyatt Earp of the village, the Grand Marshall of the Rose Bowl Parade. I'd walked up that street thousands of times before, but that night, oblivious to anything but the magic on my lips, my inflated ego soared over telephone polls like a titanic balloon from Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

What happened was so stupendous that to my childhood conscience, it obscured everything — and therefore ... it had to be sin. It was shocking in its proportions, but I wouldn't have told my parents I'd kissed a girl that night if they had boiled me in oil. I would have died a martyr to the secret sin of the kiss.

When I say I grew up in Oostburg, what I mean is that on its streets I stumbled into a world I thought not only different from, but contrary to the one my parents had designed for me. The kissing wasn't sin; but the power I felt building in me was overwhelming, even scary, and much more alluring than anything I'd ever imagined the Devil capable of scheming. With that kiss, that night, I knew there was some kind of glorious world outside my parents' supervision. I'd certainly not yet found the "vale of tears," but I knew the darkness of sin — and it glowed, like Las Vegas, gloriously.

For as long as I could remember, a plaque hung from an upstairs wall in our house. "Only one life will soon be past," it said; "only what's done for Christ will last." Was this raging joy I felt done "for Christ"? My child's mind simply wasn't capable of making that jump. I had stumbled into a world I really didn't know existed, and in the process I'd begun to leave something behind — my own innocence, my own childhood.

The town I grew up in is the place I will always call home. Even if it is no more. Because it isn't. That black and white television is long gone, I'm sure. The couch was likely burned in some dump years ago. The house is there, but it's been remodeled and rebuilt and added to time and time again.

What possible echo of that night could still exist in the membrane of its walls? Nothing. Not a trace. Probably the very studs are gone. No commemorative marker sits on the lawn. No one who lives there would ever guess that an event so memorable to me occurred on a spot someone today likely vacuums weekly. I walked slowly past that house not long ago; had anyone been looking, he or she would have thought it odd that a stranger would focus so intently on those walls.

What will stay forever in my memory is completely gone to the rest of the world.

Maybe nothing is important but our personal relationship to Jesus Christ. Maybe it's time we abandon everything and just live in the glorious radiance of his presence. Today, right now, let's shut down your Christian high school — no more soccer, no more volleyball, no more essays to write, no more algebra and Spanish and world history. Send the teachers home. Lock the dumb doors. When you get home, shut off the TVs forever, just hole up in your bedroom with your Bible and work on your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Nonsense. Listen to this: "For God so loved *the world* he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The world. God didn't love me so much he gave his son; he loved the world that much. Your Christian high school doesn't exist to keep you away from the world, to keep you sheltered in the arms of the Lord — although that's part of its mandate; it exists to help you and me and the teachers and staff understand our lives in light of his word — and that even means my first kiss.

Every inch of this world belongs to God — every inch. Nothing stands beyond its control, not the gym or the classroom, not the guidance counselor's office or the world-wide web. It's all his.

That first kiss is an indelible part of my life, even though I'm likely the only one who knows when and where it happened and how I felt afterward. But it's part of

my life; it's part of what makes me me, as God's own child.

God Almighty has given me — and you — the ability to look back, to look forward, and to learn. And I teach in a Christian school — and you attend one — because every last corner of this world is his — even our childhood memories, even the ones that aren't so angelic. Every math problem reveals his glory, even though it can bring headaches. Every last battle of the Peloponnesian Wars, every moment of history is His Story. Every chemical equation is a divine masterpiece.

That's why we're here.

That first kiss of mine, in a tiny little living room of a tiny little house in a tiny little burg on the western shores of Lake Michigan — it's my story, even if nobody else on the streets of that burg knows a thing about it. But today it's yours too, because today you've read about it. Because God's given us language to think about our experience and tell others.

God's given us language. What a gift.

God loved this world so much he gave his son. Don't run away. Our faith in a sovereign God makes every last moment of our lives here dazzlingly precious.

ROOM 219

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Bagel Girl

by Nancy Knol
Nancy Knol is a teacher of English and Religion at Grand Rapids Christian High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Most days you can find her in Room 219.

It's funny how Sarah and I got acquainted. The first year I taught high school she was in my study hall. That is as much classroom contact as we've ever had. Maybe we got into such important conversations because of all the little ones we had over things like explaining something in her homework from other teachers — a story by Hawthorne or how to spell something correctly. At any rate, we forged a pretty easy connection, and gradually she began to share stories about her life, and asked me for some of mine too. We discovered fairly soon that we had something very important in common: we had both known cancer all too intimately. My son had been one of cancer's victims, and her mother had died of breast cancer when Sarah was in middle school. And so, one of Sarah's best stories was about her mother.

Sarah's mother had a very close, caring friend who journeyed with her through the land of cancer, and eventually through the land of dying. And Sarah's mother confided to her that she was so sorry to be leaving her youngest daughter, Sarah, because Sarah, being still in middle school, was at such a vulnerable age. She needed a mother. It occurs to me now as I write this that her need for a mother may have been one of the reasons we connected so easily — Sarah was always on the lookout for potential mother figures to nurture her.

Sarah loved bagels. She and her mom went out for a bagel and coffee sometimes when her mom was feeling up to it. Those were special times of laughter and confidences, times when perhaps the threat of illness and possible death was held at bay, however briefly. Perhaps because of these small celebrations, Sarah's mom asked her dear friend to do her a favor.

During our first Monday study hall together, Sarah was called to the office near the end of the hour. She returned with a bag of bagels. She shared one with a friend in the study hall, and quietly ate hers while she finished her math homework. I began to notice that this little ritual occurred every Monday. After we began talking together, Sarah offered me a bagel every Monday too. One day I casually asked her how she managed to get a bag of bagels delivered so consistently every Monday. She hesitated only for a moment, and then said, "Well, my mom and I loved bagels, and so she asked her friend to bring a bag to me every week during my high school years so that I would remember how much she loved me." Then she added, "When I eat one, I can hear her laugh."

Sarah graduated, moved on to college, and wondered what she might like to be. I gave her a small graduation gift and wrote her a note saying that I think her mother would be very proud of what a lovely person she is becoming. Sarah's mother's friend has now completed her task.

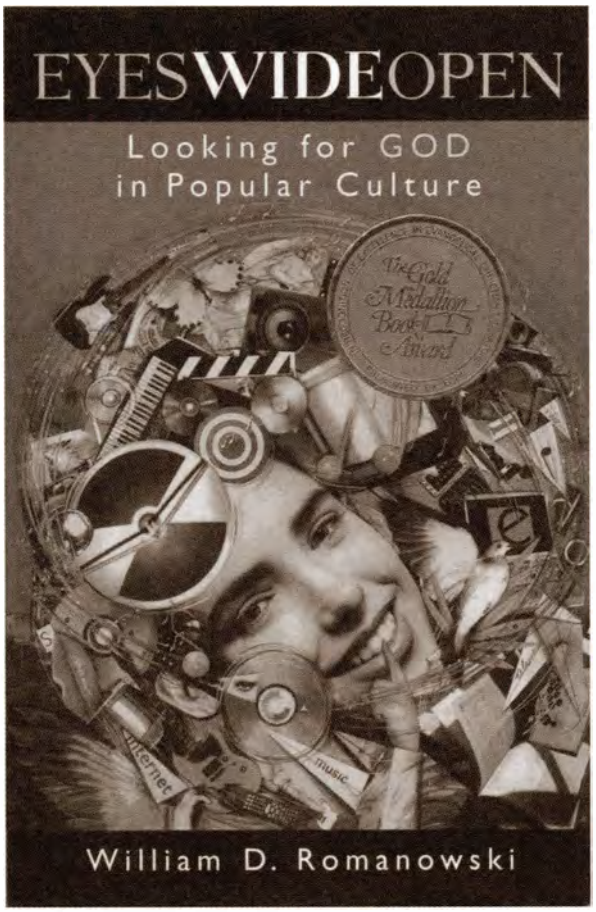
I would like to be able to meet her and tell her that in this small Monday ritual she has taught one of Sarah's teachers why one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is faithfulness.

Book Review

William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture.* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House (Brazos Press), 2001.154 pages plus 16 pages of Appendices, discussion questions. No index.

Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College, retired.

Eyes Wide Open throws out a robust challenge to all comers — a challenge to take seriously the world of popular culture — the art which originates in a democracy and responds to the needs of the masses of society in their quest for leisure and entertainment. The book comes with impressive endorsements, and the publisher's statement calls the book "a road map to popular culture for parents, teenagers, teachers, and pastors."



Romanowski, professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College, carefully establishes his position about the role of culture in the life of Christian faith. He takes on the reactionaries, the Christ-against culture folk (to use Niebuhr's terminology), and those who dismiss culture and the arts as being outside the pale of the Christian's concern. In good Kuyperian rhetoric, he contends that this world, too, falls under the cultural mandate. We need to storm this citadel of human achievement and, with eyes wide open, appraise what we see there of sin and distortion and falsehood but, also, of truth and grace.

Romanowski knows his detractors well. After all, it is a wide-open, volatile, commercially-driven world that he is defending, and to make a case for popular art is not altogether a popular undertaking. This world — and he deals mainly with the visual and musical arts, hardly at all with literature — is fraught with minefields. Carefully guarding his flank, he makes generous concessions to those who are less favorably disposed than he is to take seriously this tumultuous world of violent action, rapid-moving scenarios, naked passion, gratuitous spectacle — often strung on minimal narrative. Romanowski rightly reminds us that our world is now more complex, more diverse, technologically more sophisticated than ever, and that it is religiously disposed on all points of the spectrum. And popular art often does engage social problems to which earlier cultures paid little attention. He quotes a writer who disapproves of the kind of Christianity "that blinds itself to pain and thereby makes a falsehood of its praise." (106)

Romanowski has done us a service by challenging us to examine a world that is here to stay and to assess it responsibly.

Having said this, I trust the author will not mind a few observations and questions. For one thing, though he does make concessions to the pathology of the popular arts industry, his general tone is that these objectionable features come with the territory and must be seen in perspective. Good enough. But where is the rage at the exploitation that occurs when the industry provocatively promotes ideas and attitudes that are hostile to the Christian faith? Not all church choirs sing off key, not all clergymen are hypocrites, not all families are dysfunctional.

Are the Muslims altogether wrong when they resist the importation of these products? Much of this art has as much transformational value as the thin tostita chip in the television ad that breaks upon contact. John Gardner called for us all to be "crap detectors" (I am substituting a polite word here), to rail against those who do not really take consumers very seriously or who have no intention of elevating the cultural taste of the population.

I recall, when I was teaching a course in film, a remark by Pauline Kael, that it is naive to suppose that producers really have in mind a serious classroom discussion of a movie while they are preparing a product for the cinema hall.

We need also to reflect on the series of comments Romanowski delivers about the role of entertainment — entertainment for its own sake. This phenomenon did not develop in any real sense until the nineteenth century. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* addresses this mindset. Surely we should not encourage our young people to go to any movie whatsoever just because it's a Friday night. In an earlier age grappling with a masterpiece which taught while it pleased was supposed to be about as good as entertainment gets. And I find somewhat puzzling the comment that "...it is not the subject matter that makes a popular work Christian, but the perspective brought to bear on the subject." Since selection is crucial in all art, I should think the choice

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of subject matter is of some importance.

A more serious concern is this, that Romanowski argues his case at the expense of high art, which he supposes needs to be taken down a peg or two. He contends that high art was merely a means for the social elite to exhibit their superior status, to assert their cultural superiority. "The only reason for an art work to exist was for people to contemplate its aesthetic features and potential meanings." Well, now. For one thing, let us not slide over the terms "contemplate" and "potential meanings." These suggest that these works could be provocative. Indeed, we are told that, as they left the theater after a tragedy, the Greek audience would beat their breasts and declaim, "Truly the gods are just."

Snobbery can work both ways — upside down as well as downside up. We need a more carefully nuanced definition of high art — and we should not have to apologize for the term with quotation marks. It is high art that has nourished the world for millennia, and its usefulness continues. We are all, when we take the term in the right sense, aristocrats at heart. High art better serves to nurture our regal instincts than does the bulk of popular art. When a work of so-called popular art does make us walk a bit taller, why not designate it as high art? Instead of distinguishing sharply between these two camps, making them mutually exclusive, we are wiser to keep the definitions fluid. It is hard to deny that high art embodies more of humanity, a wider and deeper range of thought and belief, than most popular art and, this being so, it offers us more to be Christian with.

A final comment. In his essay "How the World Lost its Story," Robert W. Jenson reminds us of the legacy of the world's stories. Until recent times storytelling has assumed a narratable world — a world of basic, archetypal motifs that accord with our status as human beings. These motifs reflect the Big Story of biblical narrative (Aristotle anticipated these elements in a remarkable way). Stories need not have happened, but they could possibly happen. Now we get stories that cannot happen in real life, only in the movies. One is not apt to find much wisdom in such works. In a world of limited dollars and days, we ought to become, as Romanowski suggests, discerning critics — with eyes wide open, moved to take second looks and to cultivate our peripheral vision as well.

We need to become at once the most sympathetic and the most rigorously critical of the fare that clamors for our attention.

Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response.* Oxford, New York, and others: Oxford University Press. 2002, 163 pages plus notes and index.

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

In a recent lecture at Calvin's January series, Geographer H. J. de Blij lamented the demise in many place — even at major universities — of the discipline of geography. Presidents and other folk make foolish — sometimes disastrous — judgments through ignorance about where places are and where things happen. All maps are important, he noted, but specialized maps can disclose data (such as where cholera cases were developing in London) which can indicate possible solutions for problems. Since history is to time what geography is to space, ignorance of history can also hurt us and, conversely, a historical perspective can point to solutions.

Our students will be living with the realities of a resurgent Muslim force for decades to come. We need to help them understand the present mindset of the Muslim world — restive, angry, and feeling victimized and betrayed. Lewis's book, as the title suggests, tries to explain when and why the fortunes of Islam changed — when and why it has declined from its status in antiquity and the Middle Ages as the most civilized domain anywhere, to an area of poverty and limited opportunity. Within its brief compass, Lewis's book provides the core information that we need to pass on to our students about at least the history of Islam. He also offers an urgent plea to the region to abandon its cycle of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, so that it can achieve its former status as a major center of civilization.

Lewis's approach is particularly useful in this sense, that he shows the Muslim world as it engaged the world of Christendom during its 1400 years. One gets to see that Western history should not be taught without constant attention to the ongoing tension between the Muslim hegemony and the Christian West. We need to start by recognizing that Muslims served the world by trans-

lating earlier literatures, but also that they did solid work in cartography, geography, astronomy, economics, mathematics, and some arts. During the height of this civilization, Europe ranked no better than the remoter lands of Africa in comparison with other civilizations — China and India, for example. To the Muslims it seemed a land of barbarians and infidels, not to be taken seriously and surely not to be regarded as a threat. The supremacy of the Muslim domain seemed assured.

But history is dynamic, not static. Lewis reports how gradually Christendom successfully curbed the power of the Muslim world and reduced its base of operations. Though the Crusades were unsuccessful, later encounters succeeded, through improved weaponry and other technology, to change the balance of power. At its height no power on earth could match that of Islam. Its armies simultaneously invaded Europe, Africa, India, and China. It was an economic powerhouse as well, controlling commerce in almost every commodity. It was adept at learning from other countries — paper from China, positional numbering from India. But Europeans gradually surpassed the Muslims in technology, culture, science, and the arts. At first the Muslims were oblivious to these changes. But when the Portuguese, Dutch and English merchants began shipping in Asian waters, and when the Muslims suffered a stunning defeat at Vienna in 1683, the rulers began to realize that the glory of Islam had departed. Loss of territory and influence accelerated during the next centuries — and the twentieth. When in 1948 five Arab nations could not prevent a mere half million Jews from establishing a new state under the mandate of the British, the humiliation was even more obvious — and painful.

"Help them understand the present mindset of the Muslim world: restive, angry, and feeling victimized and betrayed."

Muslims have been undergoing an agonizing appraisal of their history to understand their fall from the heights. Scapegoats abound. One version has it that this judgment has fallen upon their world because they have abandoned the true ways of the Koran (Sadam Hussein is seen as one of these apostates). The counter argument has it that the leaders have been too rigid in trying to maintain a way of life proper at one time but no longer relevant to modern life.

Other explanations are attempted: the raids of the Mongolians (but they occurred after the decline was well under way), the Jews, European nationalism, Western imperialism, and, more recently, the Americans. The more astute Muslim observers perceive what is quite obvious to us Westerners — that it is the restrictions on thought and ideas, on freedom of expression and investigation, together with the repressions of women, slaves, and infidels, that have caused the virtual collapse of their civilization.

Lewis provides valuable insights into the mindsets of the Muslim people. Islam tends to be exclusivistic, working for Muslims living in a Muslim state, for "a perfect Islamic order." Many of the past regimes have been militarized, bent on conquest. In 1979, the fundamentalists revived this aggressive posture. They have been weak in the arts of diplomacy. They have relegated women and slaves to subordinate positions, arguing about slavery that "To forbid what God permits is almost as great an offense as to permit what God forbids" (86).

They regard the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as blasphemy. They have no clergy in the strict sense, relying instead on guides and scholars. Thus, orthodoxy and heresy are not part of their vocabulary; they concern themselves instead with right conduct and deviations from it. For a long time they resisted Western science — though earlier they had been leaders in the field. In one of his generous quotations from Muslim writings, Lewis records the amused reaction of a Muslim traveler who dismisses some scientific experimentation he had observed as akin to child's play. Though much has changed, Muslims at one time resisted clocks, standard weights and measures and ways of measuring distances — all in the spirit of some Muslim teaching or other. They were aghast that government bodies like the English Parliament took it upon themselves to pass laws; surely all the laws we need to live by are found in the Koran. Such accommodations as they have been made to Western styles in clothing (though they are sensitive to the symbolism of shoes and headgear) are in the name of "modernization" rather than — heaven forbid — "Westernization." A chief difference is one that Lewis alludes to only indirectly: the Muslim faith is based on a book, the Christian religion is based on a person.

Lewis's conclusion is somber. If the Muslim world continues in its present path, "the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region ...," and the whole area may become a tempting prize to some other force — Russia, or another Eastern country. The choice is still theirs — to shed their pathology of grievances and self-pity and join their talents and resources in a common endeavor so that they can recapture the prominence they once held.