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**Encourage Playful  
Creativity**





Bert Witvoet

## Life Without Imagination? Not Worth Living!

Imagine what life would be like without imagination and creativity! You could never understand a joke. You could never escape from the humdrum world you may find yourself in from time to time. On second thought, how could this wonderful world be humdrum, unless your sin-burdened imagination made it so. You could never picture in your mind what a scene described in a novel looks like. The wonderful thing about reading a book without pictures is that you can make up your own world with the given information. No author can give you so much detail that you have no work left for the imagination. Of course, once you see the cinematic production of a book, that more or less destroys whatever you had conjured up in your own mind while reading the book.

No, I am convinced that life without imagination would not be worth living. In fact, the imagination is an integral part of what we mean by the image of God in us. When God spoke all the “Let there be’s” at the very beginning of time, he was using his imagination. The things he wanted to create did not exist ... except in his mind. And then when he spoke the final “Let us make a human being in our image, in our likeness,” he made sure that the imagination and the ability to produce something that did not exist before was included in that image.

George Herbert may not have listed this faculty when he talks about the glass of blessings standing by “when God at first made Man” (“The Pulley”), but he demonstrates that it must have been there by writing such a fine product of the imagination: “Let us (said He) pour on him all we can;/ Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,/ Contract into a span./ So strength first made its way,/ Then beauty flow’d, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.” The world’s riches that he referred includes the ability to picture something not seen with the naked eye.

### Wonderful and weird

The imagination is a very fine but fickle thing. It is both delightful and dangerous. No wonder moralists throughout the ages have been suspicious of it. The problem with moralists is that they take themselves too seriously. And we all know that taking yourself too seriously is the death of playfulness and imaginative living. Humor, too, suffers under this regime of moralism. At the same time we know that humor can also lead astray. A lot of jokes are passed around even in Christian circles that do not belong under the Christmas tree. But that’s no reason to downplay humor and the imagination.

One of the dismal features of a communist regime is that there is little room for humor and for the imagination. There is so little humor because proponents of communism also take them-

selves too seriously. It’s up to them to save the world, and that grandiose task makes them joyless. The imagination is dangerous because it cannot be controlled, and if there is anything communism hates, it’s not being able to control a part of life. The same can be said of a pragmatist or a dyed-in-the-wool capitalist. Art to them is suspect because it does not produce useful goods or capital, except in those instances when great works of art become a major investment; only then do capitalists prick up their ears.

Now, I must add that there is a brand of Christianity that pretty much functions the same way. I am thinking of the ultra conservative branches in Christianity where the wrath of God is almost palpable in the preaching and teaching. There is little joy in these circles because people are so burdened down by sin. And the imagination is also suspect because it takes us beyond the literal meaning of things, and who knows what it can lead to? Works of the imagination are considered frivolous because they are not “real.” Abstract art is especially ridiculed.

### Let’s be playful

In this issue we want to break a few bones in defense of the imagination, of dreaming, of doing art to open up the soul. At the heart of all these activities is the human desire to be playful. And if there is anything we Calvinists have to learn over and over again, it is the need to be playful. God loves a playful Calvinist as much as he loves a cheerful giver.

While reflecting on this topic of creativity and the imagination, I came across an article entitled “Can I Come Out to Play?” published in the July-August 1979 issue of *Vanguard* magazine. (The magazine is extinct now, but I have most of the copies in my possession because I used to be its editor in its final years. That makes it easier to gain permission to reprint, right?) Let me quote from this helpful article written by husband and wife Don McNally and Miki Beldman.

“The kingdom of God and play have this in common: to enter into both we must become as little children. A culture that is bent on denying that kingdom also loses its ability to be playful. Christians, too, although we have some vague notion that play is part of the kingdom, have become preoccupied with the cares of this world” (p. 14).

The authors go on to quote from Proverbs 8: 30-31 (God gave them permission to quote from his book): “I was by his side, a master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world, delighting to be with the children of Adam and Eve.”

Miki and Don go on to write: “The experience of joy in play

— often unexpected and unsought for — is one powerful means by which God nudges us back to himself. Joy and delight are not emotions which we can buy prepackaged, work hard for, or inherit from our parents; they are gifts. Trust and openness, spontaneity and creativity ... arise most naturally from an acceptance of the master craftsman."

### Oh, what a panic!

Good words, them. Biting words, too: "Christians have become preoccupied with the cares of this world." Would this apply to Christian teachers? How much play is there left in your life? And while we're at it, how much play is there left in your students' classroom experience? Is the imagination given enough scope?

English teachers probably have an advantage over teachers of mathematics. They can have fun with Robert Burns' "To a Mouse." Now here is an excellent example of playfulness and an excellent use of the imagination. The poet encounters a mouse after he has turned up its nest with a plough. He begins to talk to the mouse, as if it is an equal: "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,/ Oh, what a panic's in thy breastie!" He admits that the mouse has reason to have an ill opinion of people who break up "nature's social union." He comforts the mouse in its loss by saying that the mouse is not alone in not being able to foresee the reckless actions of a ploughman. At this point, Burns comes up with a phrase that has become a proverb in the Western world: "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men/ Gang aft a-gley." In fact, the mouse is blessed compared to the author because a mouse is touched only by the present, whereas Burns can both look back in time and mourn sad things, and forward in time and be afraid of what may lie ahead.

What a wonderfully playful way of saying something quite profound, actually. And in so doing the author indirectly touches on part of the image of God in human beings: the ability to remember and anticipate. Surely the imagination plays an important role in our calling to reflect God.

Let me end by again quoting from the article "Can I Come Out to Play?" Niki Beldman and Don McNally suggest that "the old hymn "work for the night is coming" should be sung antiphonally with "play for the kingdom is here." Put that in your daily agenda and see what blows!

Bert Witvoet

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# DON'T OVERLOOK THE DREAMER:

## *Highly Imaginative Youth Are Primed for Spiritual Growth*

by Sarah Arthur

*Sarah Faulman Arthur is a writer, speaker, and illustrator who spent seven years in youth ministry after graduating from Wheaton College in 1995. Her first book, Walking With Frodo: A Devotional Journey Through "The Lord of the Rings," is geared for older youth. She lives in Northern Michigan with her husband, Tom, who built her website, [www.saraharthur.com](http://www.saraharthur.com).*

Glance around at the students in your ninth-grade Bible class.

There's the brainy kid who debates with you about whether or not Saul was really crazy. Then there's the emotional teenager who bursts into tears at the least mention of hell. And, of course, there's the athlete who systematically breaks his pencil into smaller and smaller pieces while keeping an eye on the clock, eager to bolt the minute class is over.

In short, your students are all wired differently. Some of them are primed to learn through their minds — through intellectual discussion and debate. Others are primed to learn through their emotions — through powerful feelings of security, love, and encouragement. Still others through physical movement like teamwork or hands-on projects. And the way that they're primed to learn is also the way they're primed for spiritual growth.

Fortunately, you're used to this mixed bunch of characters. You've even planned your classroom projects with their diverse needs in mind. But there's one more person in your class. Let's call her the dreamer. Most days she sits near the window with a glazed expression on her face, lost in some

distant Narnian world. Other times she has her nose buried in the most recent Brian Jacques novel and can barely be persuaded to set it aside — and, even then, you wonder if she's listening. How on earth will you ever encourage her academic studies and spiritual growth in a way that penetrates the fog of her imaginary world?



### Encountering God

Take heart! The imagination — like the mind, heart, or body — is not out of God's reach. I was a teenage dreamer with an over-active imagination. And I grew up to be a youth leader with an over-active imagination. You might think this would have interfered with the Christian educa-

tion of my students — not to mention my own spiritual growth. But the opposite is true. In fact, the imagination has been the very arena in which I've encountered God, with the help of discerning Christians and the writings of people like C.S. Lewis (author of the celebrated *Chronicles of Narnia*). And I know the same can happen for students today.

So what is the imagination, exactly? Imagination is the God-given ability to visualize or experience things that are not *actually* physically happening to us. When an imaginative teenager reads a book, she can picture the characters and feel emotions related to the events of the story. She reacts to the story as if it's really happening to her. The same can happen when she watches a movie, wakes from a powerful dream, or enjoys a vivid memory. The invisible becomes visible, the intangible becomes real.

A teenager often comes away from those encounters with a different perspective on the real world around her — experiences which in turn affects her behavior. Obviously, this activity can have a negative impact if she has been interacting with unhealthy material in literature or film. The imagination is just as prone to sin as any other aspect of human character, and there is plenty of "trash" out there to prove it. But too often we focus on the negatives and overlook the fact that God uses the imagination in healthy, positive ways, in directions that can lead to profound spiritual growth in the lives of our teenagers.

### Faith formation

Janine Langan, Professor Emerita of Christianity and Culture at the University

of Toronto, writes, "My contention is that there is nothing more fundamental than the imagination, and that our loss of respect for it is directly linked to religious apathy."<sup>1</sup> I would add that without the imagination, flawed as it can be, spiritual growth would not even be possible.

Here's why: A teenager's imagination is involved in each of the following activities: (1) vividly remembering her sins and grieving her own unfaithfulness; (2) picturing Jesus on the cross and recognizing that he died for her; (3) seeing herself the way God sees her, as a "new creation" in Christ; (4) catching a glimpse of God's design for her future; and (4) seeing the suffering world with the compassionate eyes of Jesus. All of these are critical components for a faith-filled life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Using her imagination does not mean that she believes in things which don't exist, like make-believe or magic. It means that she is able, through God's creative power at work in her imagination, to encounter the invisible world of the Spirit in ways that transform her worldview and behavior. A healthy imagination is crucial to her spiritual growth.

### Fiction and fantasy

Despite our fears to the contrary, the make-believe worlds of fiction and fantasy *can* "bring to life" spiritual truths that a teenager previously ignored or discounted. Great literature and film — when the author's foundation is Jesus Christ — have the potential to "till the soil of the imagination" for the seeds of faith to be planted. [Note: This does not mean that the author mentions Christ or even God by name. Jesus himself told parables that spoke of God in purely symbolic terms — for example, as the owner of the vineyard, the shepherd, and others. "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15).]

And as far as theologically-grounded fiction and fantasy go, there's no time like the present! Movie adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are priming the teen imagination like never before — and C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* are not far behind. Not only were these authors committed Christians, but their stories embody spiritual truths in ways that challenge the selfish values and attitudes of teen culture. And far from scaring kids off, it's drawing them by the thousands.

It's not hard to see why. Tolkien's epic fantasy is not afraid to call evil evil and good good — unlike much of postmodern culture. Victory hangs by a thread and cannot be accomplished without tremendous sacrifice on the part of small ordinary characters. And even then, they must rely on a "hope unlooked for," a power holier and higher than anything they can muster on their own. By the closing credits, good has prevailed and the long-awaited king has returned.

The spiritual parallels are obvious. And the kid who interacts with the biblical narrative after watching "The Lord of the Rings" is uniquely primed to grasp the major points, even down to professing a life-long commitment to the King of all kings.

### Practical ideas

A healthy imagination can be the greenhouse in which the seeds of faith are planted. It is our job as Christian educators to nurture those seeds, to open the spiritual "ears" and "eyes" of the dreamers in our classrooms, and to help them interpret their imaginative experiences in light of the gospel.

So how can you nurture the imaginations of the kids in your classroom? Here are just a few ideas.

1. Read or watch *The Lord of the Rings* or the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and then discuss the spiritual themes. Ask: What does

this have to do with God, Jesus, and everyday faith? Where do you see evidence of the author's Christian background? For help, you may wish to use my book *Walking With Frodo: A Devotional Journey Through "The Lord of the Rings."*

2. Add works of fantasy by great Christian authors to your reading lists. Some possibilities include George MacDonald's *The Golden Key* and Hanna Hurnand's *Hind's Feet on High Places* (for younger youth) or G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (for older youth).

3. Use movie clips from film adaptations of great literary fiction to illustrate a point in your lessons.


4. Identify the highly imaginative students in your class and invite them to help brainstorm a school-wide event to celebrate the imagination. Perhaps you can host a costume party, a Creative Arts Festival, or a creative writing contest.

5. Start an extracurricular creative writing or visual arts group after school. Find an imaginative teen or young adult to lead it.

6. Celebrate the creativity in your school through a Creative Arts Exhibit or a Writer's Corner in the school newsletter.

Thanks to recent blockbuster film adaptations of literature written by some of the greatest Christian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our job has never been easier! So what will you do to nurture the imaginations of the teenagers in your classroom?

### Reference:

Janine Langan, "The Christian Imagination" in *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing*. Edited by Leland Ryken. New York: WaterBrook Press, a division of Random House Inc., 2002. 



# Fun, Fear, Freedom and Faith

## *in Art With Children*

by June Tenyenhuis

*June Tenyenhuis teaches at three Toronto-area Christian elementary schools. She is a printmaker and an active member of the Etobicoke Art Group. She is married to John Tenyenhuis. Together they have four sons, one married.*

Irene's parents want me to call them. They are concerned because Irene mentioned that I have been showing nude

pictures in her friend's art class. Mr. Saunders needs to be called. He does not want the art class to be a place where sexuality is discussed. The church that rents our school building on Sundays is wondering why we have masks in the foyer. Soon after, they are concerned with graven images of the devil (paper maché snakes and lizards) in the school. Why are some of the eighth-grade girls crying in the washroom and acting so strangely? There is an angry mother in the hallway. She says she feels evil spirits when she looks at the personal testimonies created by grade eight in aboriginal art styles. Why do these face casts look so upsetting and involve eating disorders? This is not the kind of art expected by the worship committee when I offered to bring kids art to church for Lent. It is so dark. Besides, where will the purple silk flowers go which every year are placed on the communion table? They won't even show up against this new background of angst. Reflecting on all of that and more, I remember each dialogue as an opportunity to learn more about one another and art. Most of the conversations ended happily for me, as I felt I could help explain what the art expression and aesthetic meaning

were in each case. The problem in each situation was with the adults, not the children. I love my job, and because it is with children, I have much hope for the future visioning of my students as they enter the world of art.

### Expressions of comfort

Two of the above mentioned situations

the packing of the new computers and announced that they were going to make real angels with true stories. Sarah constructed a life-sized (her own height, exactly) creature with big arms, eyes and lots of frizzy hair. It was, according to her story, the angel who carried Darren to heaven, took her Mom to the hospital, and who helps her sleep now.

Why can't a community absorb expressions like this? This was one of a whole group of student art angels. All were honest, provocative, gripping and inspiring revelations about who these children really were.

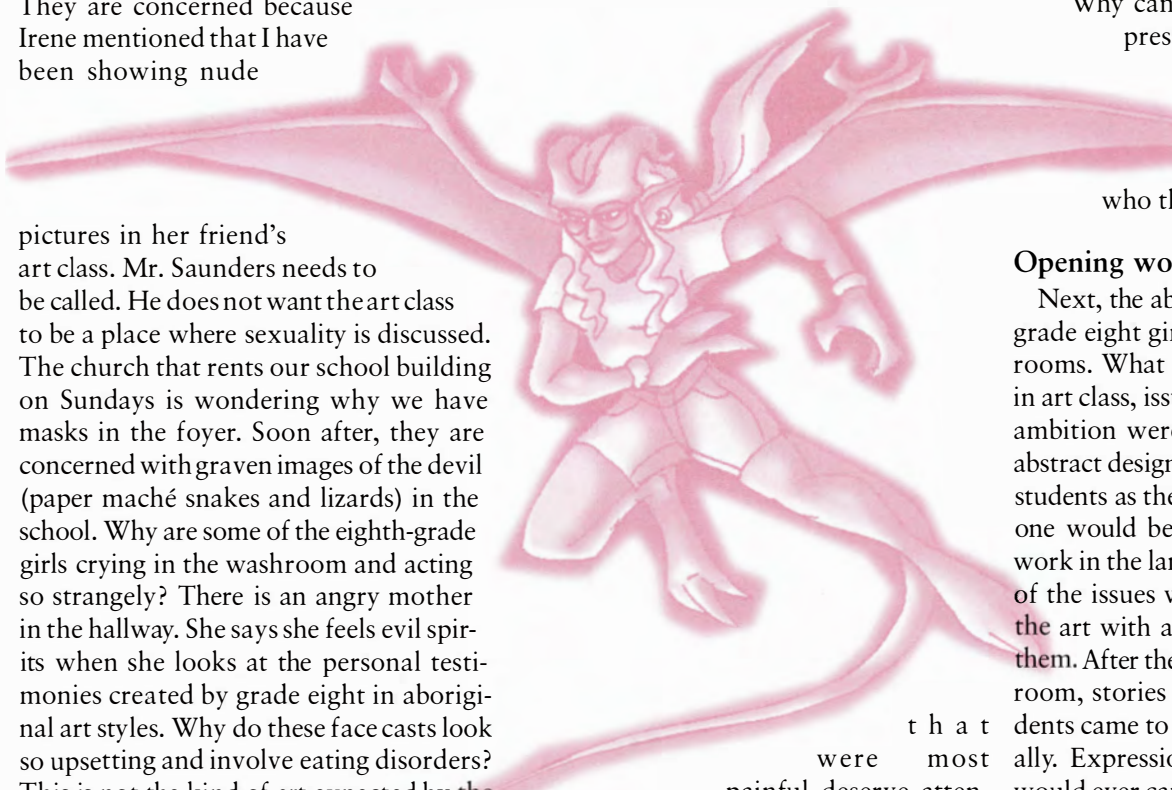
### Opening wounds

Next, the abstract art story. Some of the grade eight girls were crying in the washrooms. What had happened? Apparently in art class, issues of hurt, belief, hope and ambition were instilled into a lesson on abstract design. This provided relief to the students as they were composing since no one would be able to really read the art work in the language of abstract art. Some of the issues were pretty private. "Go to the art with all of your guts," I had told them. After the tearful sessions in the washroom, stories of abuse surfaced. The students came to me in confidence, individually. Expressions like "I thought no one would ever care" emerged. Not cute stuff. Not issues that schools plan for in their curriculum goal setting.

An art program in a Christian school can experience tension. God created children fully equipped to experience the fun and freedom, pain and truth of issues of experience and faith in creative activity. Adults are fearful and suspicious of such attitudes. For children, the creative acts in art making can bring joy and relief. Because they have lived longer in historical contexts of church and concerns about the present cul-

t h a t  
were most  
painful deserve attention at this point. First, the angel story. Sarah had an older brother a few years back. Her Mom walks with a cane today and is very unstable emotionally, but is very articulate about her pain. Mom and Darren were crossing the street on a snowy evening, just after the school Christmas program. A drunk driver hit and ran. Darren was killed. Mom was maimed. Sarah, in Dad's arms, saw the whole thing.

Eight years down the road, the art teacher came into class with tons of styrofoam from



ture in its potentials for evil, adults have concerns about art and its meaning when it involves their own children. They desperately want what is nice for their kids. Whatever exists outside of that box is suspect. Better to deny than to expose.

In this article I want to negotiate the tension between the appropriation of art by children and the rejection of art as truthful expression by adults. I want to show that the tension can be a solid ground, a basis for hope, meaning and trust instead of barriers for the present and future of the artistic expressions of young people

### Aesthetic awareness

Art education involves a lot more than teaching techniques through the elements and principles of design to young students. It is much more the building of children's abilities to speak visually and the community's skills to interpret what the students are saying. When it comes to schooling, parents want what is safe for their kids, and often what they do not know or understand causes fear or mistrust.

Art education may not appear safe to those who believe that aesthetic choices are made like shopping selections. Art is to be beautiful and to make us feel good. The art that kids do in school must make the school look good to the principal, to the parents and to the shopper who is looking for the perfect place for their children. The kind of look desired by adults of children's art often "trivializes human experience instead of enlarging it.... However, popular art works can explore the heights and depths of human experience, illuminate our mundane lives, and get us to transfer artistic interpretations to the real world" (Romanowski pp.105-106). The art of children is honest expression which can speak to us in these ways, along with much popular and professional art of our time. Art making and aesthetic contemplation

belong in the Christian training and nurture of children. A positive Christian view of art will make children sensitive to the rich surprises of God's world and this sensitivity, in turn, will help them to love God, each other and themselves. They will appreciate that God made the sunset because he liked it. An effective art teacher understands the student's needs, believes that the roots of aesthetic experiences are there, and helps to draw, paint, sculpt and compose them out. These are experiences of love, acceptance, nurture and trust.

Art is visual communication. The visual is the first language of a healthy newborn child. According to Dewey, art making and aesthetic experiences are normal human impulses available to all children, not just those with extraordinary talent (*Pledges of Jubilee*, p. 134). Children possess a natural urge to manipulate in material terms. By interacting with materials, children discover who they are and what the world is like. They imagine relationships between countless areas of their lives as they strengthen and exercise their art-making skills. By changing ordinary materials, they generate new relationships and meanings between what is familiar experience and their attitudes about those events and objects.

### Reality tool

An artistic medium provides the means for coming to grips with ideas and emotions of great significance, ones that cannot be articulated and mastered through ordinary language" (Gardener p. 90). Art making is an opportunity for children to give structure, memory and investment to the events of everyday life. Perceptual imagery and retinal imagery (Gardener (p. 90) complement each other to become an aesthetic experience. "All children are artists, and it is an indictment of our culture that so many of them lose their creativity,

their unfettered imaginations as they grow older ... they go ahead and say what they want to say" (L'Engle p. 51). Art making involves thinking skills for problem solving where confidence can be built out of a symbolic control over reality. Young art students are capable of using old meanings, inventing new ones and imagining still others into visual symbols. They are happy to put their own dreams, hopes, fears, and interests into their art creations with their abilities to create imagery. What a child says during the creative process is often as informative as the art activity or product. The task of art or aesthetic training is to help students to embrace visual language and skills for interpretation and to master art-making techniques to say what needs to be said. Christian educators have a concern for the whole child, including emotions and self perceptions. In art education we find out a lot about how children think and how they deal with the world. It is a matter of inventing and of analyzing materials into compositions. Problems and processes are made visible. Invention struggles with issues like a world on a flat page. The process shows the growth more than the product. "Proficiency in the arts entails the attainment of many highly intricate skills, ones that can be acquired only under the direction of a gifted teacher or a practicing artist" (Gardener p. 209). Since children desire aesthetic experiences, they will innocently become attracted to inferior entertainment when they're not challenged. Lacking redeeming imagination, they are already influenced by secular artists. Our children must be taught how to discern, discriminate and engage culture with hope and courage. Our fallen world is not all there is, nor is art a reproduction of a pretty universe. The world belongs to God, and children are part of both its fallenness and its redemption.



## Aesthetic growth

The art classroom is a place of empowerment. There are no single, preconceived answers, and what one perceives as failure can instead be the happy accident to open up new choices or opportunities. The first can be last and the last can be first. The class can share limitless possibilities as they bond into a community. Everyone leaves the room more powerful because they have expressed and connected with someone.

What amazes me is that negative criticism does not come from children when the art is displayed. There is no vandalism or mishandling of art objects. When something breaks, it is an accident, handled with great respect between kids from grades one to eight. When something negative happens, it comes most often from outside the art classroom. The relationships between individuals in the art classroom are fundamentally related to the art-making experiences by the children. As in the body of Christ, each member is aware of her role and attitude in shaping the communal events of the class.

In order for talents to be genuinely exposed, trust, acceptance, love and nurture must exist between all members. It is a time to be cherished — the gentle unfolding of one another, the shouts of glee, the grunts of despair, reminders of techniques and the final wiping up. Students are sometimes shocked at what visually excites the teacher or fellow students about a plateau in their work. This surprise affirmation for them plants joy and encourages them to persevere and push on.

## The role of the teacher

The teacher measures the development of this growth. The teacher's job is to keep an eye out for those primal impulses toward imaginative expression which are the beginnings of any aesthetic experience. "These roots and germs of aesthetic life may not look very aesthetic in themselves, but an experienced teacher, knowing the



leading of experience, must recognize them" (Hart p. 146). This is a very intuitive experience, one that develops over time with the children, as I watch the growth over the years and as the children gain trust in what to say and how to say it visually. The child may trust me with the content and with how it can be said visually with great impact, and I trust the child with the delivery. We might discuss how to keep secrets with visual disguises. It is not my

place to pry, and kids sometimes will practice their method of communication with me, to see if it achieves what they intended.

The kids are the decision makers. I will not question or try to influence the work once we have reached an understanding. Power in creation is as important to a child as it is to an adult. The message can begin with the art work and then later go beyond

to connect where it needs to. But this further connecting with reality is very difficult to achieve effectively in a large group of students, where there is little privacy. For that reason, I make myself available during recess for any child who needs to process more. Still, it is not enough to do justice to all of the children. What they have to say is always so profound and clear. I am at times reduced to tears.

Spiritual development is interrelated with physical and psychological development. And it is crucial to support the child through the first twelve years of his life.

## Adolescent rebellion

A lapse in aesthetic and spiritual growth may seem to appear in adolescence, but this questioning and apparent rebellion is not distant from the upheaval the adult artist demonstrates in art making. The adolescent needs to accomplish these developmental tasks to establish who she is. There will be a purposeful separation of the intellectual from the sensual — a deliberate expression of self contempt, a total awareness of all bodily functions, good and gross, beautiful and ugly. A search takes



place for embodiment of vivid feeling of inner self in cultural icons and media. What a gold mine for an art education!

If education in skill development and critical stance in pre-adolescence is strong, the abilities to perceive and interpret what is actually seen will still be frustrating in art making but will also stimulate a craving for more instruction and direction in art. One hopes that by adolescence the child will have attained sufficient skill and a sense of awareness, as well as "ample ideas and feelings he wishes to express, [so that] he can continue on his own to gain sustenance from whichever artistic medium he selects" (Gardener p. 217). By full-blown adolescence, the child is no longer so highly motivated to produce art and he becomes critical of his own work. At this stage, he becomes acutely aware of outside cultural pressures and images, and the self-deflating keeps spiraling downward. "The adolescent, anxious to please others (peers), discontented with his own accomplishments, tends to give up on creativity.... Many adults have stopped at this stage, and development ... of visual powers, original thought and relating to self and environment through personal feelings may be blocked" (Edwards p. 14). To prevent this decline in art making from resulting in permanent disaster, teachers must meet the academic needs of the student in art education. Adolescents have a historical appreciation, are fascinated by thoughts of the end of the world, apocalyptic literature, and symbolic literature. By creating their own symbols and thoughts about their place in history through concentration on the craftsmanship involved in self portraiture, abstract analogue compositions, book making, clay modeling or tableaux designs, a healthy dose of unselfconsciousness resurfaces. Because this is a time in which children lose the moralistic and legalistic preoccupations of pre-adolescence to have

a better understanding of both conflict and God's grace (Shelly p. 65), their art carries a whole new layer of richness and meaning.

What adolescents say may go against what they perceive about teachings from home, church, school and society. They will naturally both embrace and test these attitudes. I believe that because many adults have not had the opportunity to creatively and honestly deal with this stage in their



own lives, much art of adolescent children and of the secular world frightens them. Most adults have not developed skills beyond the level of early adolescence, a situation which, to me, explains a pervasive fear of art making and of art and aesthetic understanding. Since the phases of earlier child development love rules, regulations, boxes, legalisms, many adult Christians think that, for the children of God, art must remain so too.

## Reasons for hope

From the various traditions of the "frozen chosen" to the attitudes of the "happy clappies," the general attitude toward children in the arts is thankfulness twisted with fear. The lack of education in areas of the arts is discouraging, but biblical dialogue builds community and understanding. Children must be seen as full-fledged individuals with their own expressive rights and abilities to offer significant contributions to culture. This ties into Jesus' references to the place of children in his kingdom.

Adults (Christian parents and educators) like to cushion kids from the searing realities of faith. For children, faith is not always a happy experience. "Attempts to filter out anything frightening or painful seem to filter out anything delightful as well" (Oppenheimer pp. 5,6). When fears are covered up, hopes get buried too. Kids need to know not only that God expects us to keep his rules but also that he loves us at all times and that he understands our art. When hope in the abilities of children to express themselves visually replaces attitudes of fear or judgment, kids will have the confidence to participate in our culture as potential artists. The community that views the art has the responsibility to be sensitive to what is artistically expressed by kids on issues of good and evil and to give it informed attention. The art created by children is presented to parents and school communities within the context of learning about art and self-expression. It is created in the trust that it will be received as simple artistry with a spirit of discipline and sustained concentration. It is confident, free and not restricted by the thinking of others. It is honest and ordinarily expresses a desire for belonging and acceptance. When their art is criticized or rejected, children feel *they* have been rejected.

Viewers should not take their own didactic, culturally naive, cautious and nar-

row theological ways of seeing symbols in what they think is Christian art and lay those expectantly upon the art of the young. The discipline of taking time and listening in a supportive manner to the art with patience "rather than imposing our own requirements on them" (Chaplin p. 162) will be good role modeling for the next generation of aesthetically aware people. Then our calling to create art which the public will understand and to which they can relate will facilitate communal growth.

For Christian education to be possible in a postmodern world, which is predatory on our children, "instilling hope is essential as we anticipate the Lord's return through the birth of a Christian culture" (Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves* p. 79). "When as audience we engage with the arts that are offered us, we need to make sure that we do not leave any of our brains at the door" (Chaplin p. 106). We need to be conscious of the artist children as image bearers of God and realize that it is their lives and what they are saying in their art that is most potent. With the unselfconsciousness of children, we can rethink art and theories of aesthetics, especially as these visualize questions and thoughts about life, death, fear, hope and God.

In paint, or sculpture, the heart of the child becomes visible. Art is a natural expression, a personal impression which makes the objective world more understandable and shows us what the child understands. True expression can communicate at the level in which a child is capable of mastering the medium "if they are not expected to make a jolly picture fitting the popular emotion of the holiday" (Boeve, p. 15). Children are aware of unlimited potential, but they are not conscious of how to achieve happiness or faith. They just put their hearts into what they are doing. They let go of self-control and become open.

The choices made through the medium are real worship and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life. Getting the thoughts said is important in the religious growth of the child. If in our fear of all of this we become suspicious dictators, we close ourselves off to revelation. If we allow children to become visible in their art, we affirm them and the hope that God knows and understands more about them than we can possibly know.

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# The Education of Zelda Roberts *or*

*Jan Kaarsvlam's tenure as campaign director for Beacon Christian Schools in St. Catharines, Ontario, recently ended in disaster. Jan's well-intentioned research on Canadians backfired when his proposed fundraiser, "See How Many Tim Horton Doughnuts You Can Stuff in Your Tuuk, Eh?" lost the school over \$2,000. Jan will be taking a new position as Associate Principal at Kelloggsville Christian School in Michigan.*

Maxwell Prentiss-Hall swiveled his chair around for the third time and experimented with tipping it back while lacing his fingers together. He was attempting to determine the perfect position to take when his committee members came through the door. Principal Bently VanderHaar was busy negotiating with the candy and pop machine representatives and didn't have time to plan the coming in-service for teachers. He had delegated it to a faculty committee and placed Maxwell in charge. Maxwell was so excited about the committee's first after-school meeting that he had canceled his counseling appointments for the last hour of the school day, spending that time getting his blank legal pad arranged on the table and trying to figure out the best way to be discovered by his committee.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the students' day. At that exact moment, Maxwell had two excellent ideas. He thought of leaning casually against the table as if he were just another colleague and not the chair of this important committee. At the same time he had the notion that if he laid back in his chair, his legs crossed in a kind of devil-may-care position, he would emote confidence and ability. As he debated the two positions, he realized that his committee could come through the door any time. In a panic, Maxwell assumed a position that he thought was halfway between the two he was contemplating. It was a tragic mistake. He slid right out of his chair and landed on the floor with a thud.

Zelda Roberts came through the door five seconds later. She was at the end of an exasperating day. No students had showed up for her lunchtime meeting of Advanced Physics Students of America. During one of her lessons, she had caught two students text-messaging each other from opposite ends of the room when they should have been paying attention to Kube-MacDowell's theories of planetary inertia. And now she had to help plan an in-service, which, she had no doubt, would be about the latest touchy-feely educational fads and would get in the way of trying to teach kids. She had to smile, though, when the first thing she saw was Maxwell Prentiss-Hall sitting on the floor in a lotus position.

Before Maxwell could get up, Phys Ed teacher Rex Kane came through the door, right behind Zelda. He was resplendent in a

tie-dyed sweat suit and a stadium hat with dual cup-holders and plastic that looped down either cheek to his mouth. He took in the scene and commented wryly, "Max, I'm glad to see you've taken up that new Chi Tea Twon Mo. I've been meaning to develop a unit on that for my advanced kids. Good for the clavicle, I hear."

The final member of the committee, newly-hired dean of students J. Hillard, was the last to enter. In a short time, he had earned a reputation as a no-nonsense kind of guy who meted out discipline without the corrupting influence of mercy. "Get up off the floor, Prentiss-Hall, and let's get this show on the road!"

Maxwell, still mourning his lost first impression, cleared his throat and began. "Thank you all for being here. I'll try to keep this meeting short. Although we can focus this in-service on anything we want, Mr. VanderHaar suggested we consider covering Imaginative Learning." Maxwell paused and flashed his committee what he thought was a rakish smile, though it actually came out as more of a neurotic tic.

Zelda let her face drop to her hands. Hillard snorted. It was only Rex Kane who managed a response that was anything close to positive.

"Great idea, Maxie! Creativity is the thing. As Basho once said, 'A day without sunshine is like night.'"

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Maxwell reached into the backpack at his feet and pulled out a book. "I did a little research on the topic to get ready for our meeting," he said.

Zelda grabbed the book out of his hand and read the title aloud. "*Play Rhymes with A: Imaginative Learning and Academic Success*." She paged through the book, then dropped it disdainfully on the table. "You've got to be kidding, Max."

"I agree," said Jeffrey Hillard. He was a small black man with a shaved head and a deep, booming voice. Hillard strutted around the school like a bantam rooster, and when he talked, he waved both hands about passionately. He had spent four years in the marines. All in all, Max found him thoroughly intimidating. "I endeavor to run this school much like the real world, Prentiss-Hall. And the real world doesn't have time for pretend games and other such shenanigans. Kids don't need to learn to play. They're supposed to be growing out of that. What they need is to learn respect and responsibility."

Zelda jumped on board. "Exactly. Every year I have students who go downstate to the science fair and win. I think that is evidence of academic success. And they don't achieve that success by playing games. I work them hard. Very hard. Forget 'Play rhymes with A'; I say, 'Work hard and you'll go far.'"

"Hmm, more of a slant rhyme there, really," said Kane. "I like the true rhyme from the book better." He turned to the straw on

# Rex Kane At Play in the Fields of the Lord

his left and took a sip of what looked to be Mountain Dew.

Max was naïve, but he wasn't stupid. Knowing the membership of his committee, he had expected some resistance to the idea. He knew exactly what to say to Zelda Roberts, but he wasn't sure that he could bring himself to do it. The words seemed too hurtful even if they were the truth. He gulped, closed his eyes to gather strength, and then dove in.

"Zelda, you are correct that every year you take advanced physics students downstate. But you do realize that only about 5 percent of our students take your classes, and many intelligent and qualified students choose not to take them because of your teaching style. They know your class is all notes and lectures, and it turns them off."

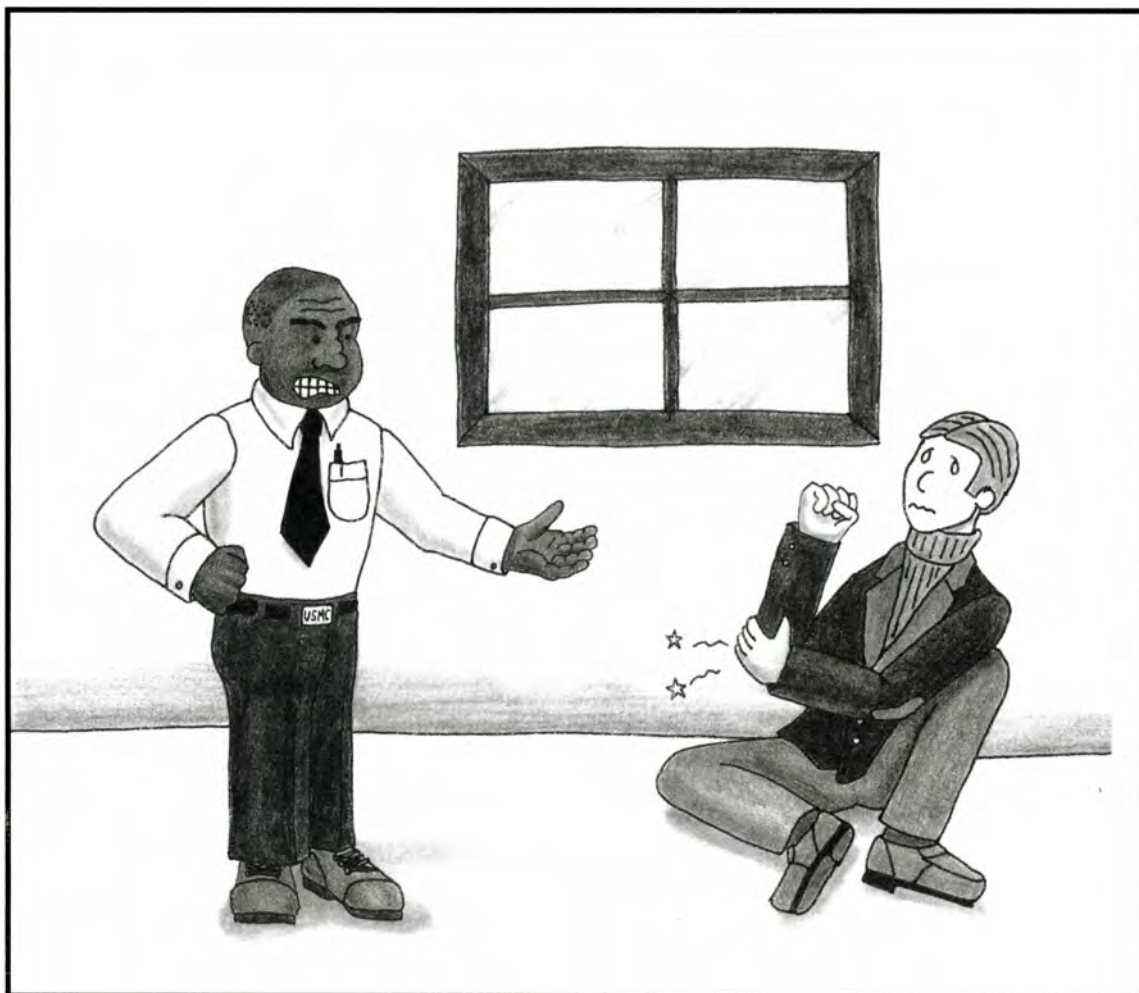
Zelda's cheeks flushed. "Of course it's notes and lectures. We don't waste time playing games. Fact is, my students excel."

"Furthermore," Max continued, a bit more boldly now, "our research into our graduates reveal that more science students from our non-honors track go into science-related fields than do students from our honors track. So while your students do very well in high school, most lose interest in the subject."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," said Rex, scratching beneath his armpit. "You remember that scene in *The Shining* where that guy types that sentence over and over, like a thousand times?"

Hillard, still unused to Kane's non sequiturs, stared at him. Zelda fumed. Max immediately began to feel guilty.


"I'm not trying to hurt your feelings or impugn your teaching," he said. "I just think that maybe you could stand to loosen up your classroom a little bit, that maybe that would get kids more



genuinely interested in the material they're studying."

"You know," Rex said, "Einstein maintained that the greatest faculty of the human mind was the imagination. And Reformed philosopher Calvin Seerveld argues that playfulness is essential to our identity as image-bearers of God. God makes rainbows and tells songs and stories out of a sense of playfulness. If God is not too important and too busy to be playful, how can we argue that we are?"

Max, if he had ever doubted the existence of God, did so no longer. Of all the unexpected places to find aid, none were more unlikely than the mouth of Rex Kane. Yet Rex's words had clearly made both Zelda and Hillard stop to reconsider. Zelda cleared her throat uncomfortably.

"Can we postpone this meeting until next week?" she asked. She looked up at Max sheepishly. "And do you mind if I borrow that book?" 





Nancy Knol  
Column Editor  
njknol@apl.com

## Teacher Meets Parent

As I write this column, I am recovering from our recent parent/teacher conferences. It is a bit of a marathon for us teachers as we teach during the day and then meet parents all evening. In the three schools where I have taught, we have pretty consistently had our conferences in the school gymnasium, with tables set up so that the teacher sits on one side and the parents on the other.... It feels a bit like one of those places in department stores where the clerk is behind the counter and people line up to exchange or return or complain. Except in this case only the latter is permitted ... and hopefully not too frequently.

One time, a good teacher friend of mine spoke with a parent at a parent/teacher conference. At the conclusion of their discussion about the student, my friend realized that she had assumed the mother was someone else. All the things she had been telling her were about another student in her class. She had the humility and grace to acknowledge her mistake, and the two of them proceeded to confer about the "real" student.

There are many funny stories teachers (or parents for that matter) could tell about conferences. A parent complained to me once about the low grade her son had gotten in my English class. I countered this with praise for her son for actually pulling his grade up from the beginning of the semester. "Well, this isn't good enough," was her reply. "What does he have to do to get this grade where it ought to be?" So I told her that his writing needed more polish, and he had to explain his ideas in greater detail than he normally chose to do. She looked at me with astonishment, and said, "But he hates to write!"

In my first year of teaching, I sat through a very unpleasant conference, one I will never forget. The father of a student who was an excellent basketball player sat across from me and asked how his son was doing in my English class. Being rather naive, I told him what I thought he would want to know, namely that his son's performance had been slipping progressively throughout the semester and that I had some pretty solid reasons to suspect that drug abuse was a part of the problem.

The father was taken off guard, and for just a moment I saw fear flicker across his face. But then he pulled himself together and turned instead to defensiveness and even accusation. Basically, he told me that I was young and over-confident and misinformed. And then he threw his chair back and left without giving me a chance to respond. I have no idea how I would have responded anyway.

He was right about the young and over-confident part, but his son was indeed taking drugs, and he was caught and subsequently dismissed from the team about a month later. But I felt almost no

sense of vindication. Oddly enough, I felt shame.

And now, many years later, as I recall that incident, I think I know why that emotion was primary. The reason I know is because I have since had children of my own. What I did not know in my cocky, indelicate position of authority behind that table in the gymnasium was the heart of a parent. Each student we have is, we hope, a treasure to his or her parents. These parents come to conferences with the hope that we will see how remarkable their children are, if not for their academic prowess, then at the very least (or is it the very most?) for their potential as human beings who have something to offer the world.

I didn't have a clue about that reality years ago. I would like to think that I have a better perspective on conferences now. I would like to think that I have gained a better understanding of how much is invested in those three to five minutes when we sit across from each other — parents and teacher.

Come to think of it, my metaphor of the department store at the beginning is a very bad one, although I think that it is easy for both parents and teachers to approach conferences in that frame of mind. Perhaps it would be better to use a metaphor that has something to do with paints and canvas or construction tools. Rabbi Abraham Heschel was once asked in an NBC television interview what our perspective should be regarding today's youth. His reply was, "Let us remember to tell them that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, let us tell them to build a life as if it were a work of art." ☺

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# The Color of Snow

by Wilda Kruize

*Wilda Kruize (wkruize@telusplanet.net) is a Teacher Aid for the Edmonton Public School Board in Edmonton, Alberta. She works with autistic children.*

I go to school with a boy who can see the color of snow. My name is Jamie; I'm a Teacher Aide, and I work with a boy named Aaron. Aaron tells me he's autistic and it makes him bad sometimes. But I tell him anyone who can see the color of snow is good. God notices things like that. He smiles and tells me I'm a nice teacher, but I have a girlie name.

"Hey, is that something nice to say?"

"Snow is alive," he says, "did you know?"

"Do you think so? What does it look like?"

"It's light blue. The color of snow is very light blue. And blue is not as cold as black."

"Really. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Aaron tells me things I never knew. Like the color of snow.

He tells me, "It's dumb to say snow is white."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's not ... like the dandruff in Jamie's hair."

"Hey, is that a respectful thing to say?"

"Okay, it's not like dandruff from clouds in the sky."

The teacher, Mr. A we all call him, because his whole name takes a long time to say, tells the class, "In your notes write: snow is a cluster of flakes...think of the word cluster." Mr. A immigrated to Canada with his family, from India, 14 years ago. When he first came here, he couldn't believe how cold snow was. But it's getting better each year, he says, and summer is just a few months away.

Aaron says, "Snow is light blue ... each time you look at it's different."

The teacher says, "Voices down, please...Aaron."

"But it is, it is, it is...."

"What about rain, Aaron?" I ask him, and he is quieter again.

"Rain is not blue, but silver and gold, did you know. Jamie doesn't know, Jamie doesn't see...."

"Really. Silver and gold. I didn't know it was gold."

"Yes, you do. I told you."

Mr. A tells the class, "In your notes, please write: rain is precipitation." Mr. A loves to talk about different kinds of weather. For the class project on Canada, he asks his students to write and think about all the different types of weather they have in their province, Alberta.

Aaron whispers to me, loudly, "Do you remember I said, 'Rain is not the color blue?'"

The teacher says, "Voices down ... Aaron."

"Yes, Aaron." I whisper quietly. "You said, 'Rain is silver and gold.'"

I go to school with a boy who can see the color of snow, the color of rain, the color of things most of us never bother to see. I know a boy named Aaron who says he can see light. He tells me this as I walk up the stairs to the library.

"So I ask him, 'What color is light, Aaron?'"

"I knew you were going to ask me that." He stops and walks over to one of the three tall windows that fill the stairwell with light. He studies a crack in one of the windows and runs his finger from the bottom to the top, then the top to the bottom, again and again.

He says quietly, so his voice won't echo too loudly and ring in his ears, "Light isn't yellow."

"Is it green?" I ask.

"No, that's just dumb."

"Hey, is that an appropriate thing to say?"

"Light is the color of waves," Adam tells me. "Light is alive."

"And snow is alive."

"Yes."

"And snow makes light, did you know? Did you know, Jamie? Did you know? Jamie doesn't know. Jamie doesn't know anything .... I can move with the light. See? You can't. I can."

I go to school with a boy who sees things in a different way, things most of us would never bother to see at all. But that's not all. I know a boy whose name is Aaron who hears things that we would never hear. He hears the quietest of sounds.

Before we climb back up the stairs to the library he says, "The window is still cracking."

"Are you sure?"

"Can't you hear it?"

"No, I can't."

"See, it used to be cracked only this far, but now it's up to here. I can hear it."

"That's amazing."

We take out a book from the library with funny stories about Canada and slowly go back down the stairs to our classroom. On the way down, Aaron takes his time and tells what else he can hear. He can hear a television that has just been turned off, a microwave that has heated someone's lunch and is finished humming. That's why he always stands beside the microwave. It's warm and keeps humming all day long.

Mr. A says, "Let's finish our notes on weather systems in Canada. We've talked about snow and rain. Now let's talk about hail. Hail is a form of ice stones...."

I go to school with Aaron, who knows the names of a hundred gemstones and crystals. He tells me the names of each one. He tells me all of them in perfect alphabetical order, from A to Z.

"All of these live in Canada, he tells me. These are all the rocks in Canada."

"That's really amazing. Do you have a favorite one?"

"Amethyst," he tells me. "It's purple. Snow is blue, very light blue."

"Yes, you told me that."

"Rain is silver and gold."



"Okay, but what about hail?" I ask him.  
 "Hail is all of them together. All the colors. Hail is gemstones and crystals."

Mr. A kneels down beside Aaron's desk and says, "Good, excellent, Aaron. Maybe we could write that down."

"Maybe," Aaron says.

Mr. A stands up again and continues, "Did you hear that, class? Aaron has just told me how hail is like gemstones and crystals. Now if you look at the diagram on the board you can see that he's right. Look at the interesting shapes you find with hail..."

Aaron smiles and walks outside the room to check the recycle bin for something good. He always finds something — a silver chocolate wrapper, silver tape, blue construction paper bits, and yellow ribbon.

Mr. A says, "I would like you all to bring your reports on Canada's weather systems to the front desk, please."

Aaron makes hail, rain and snow from the bits and pieces he collected. He makes triangles, hexagons, and octagons.

He shows me and says, "See. All the colors." Then he brings his project to the front where it sits on the top of the pile.

My name is Jamie; I have a girlie name; I'm a Teacher Aide and I go to school with a boy named Aaron who teaches me so many things I never knew. ☺

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by John Van Dyk

*John Van Dyk is professor of education at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. He is the author of Letters to Lisa: Conversations with a Christian Teacher and The Craft of Christian Teaching: a Classroom Journey (recently published in Korean).*

Genuine reflection, I suggested in the previous article, should not be confused with simply finding some spare moments here and there just to sit and think. While getting away from it all and putting up our feet helps slow us down, we seriously short-change reflective practice if we reduce it to reviewing and solving an occasional problematic classroom situation. Rather, reflection is a rich, multifaceted process. It includes vision, awareness, discernment, trust and prayer, along with the ability to root all that we do in our fundamental Christian commitments. But how might we go about engaging in such a broad and dynamic kind of reflection? In this concluding article I offer some suggestions for fostering a broader reflective practice in Christian schools.

Reflective practice displays at least three distinct facets: foundational reflection, reflective action, and reflective review. I will describe each one in some detail. Of course, I will run the risk that what follows may be interpreted as yet another proposal for a one-two-three-step technique guaranteed to transform a school into a beehive of productive reflection. But we've got to start somewhere.

### **Foundational reflection**

If our teaching is to be reflective, we must ground it in our fundamental beliefs about the Christian life. No easy task, because doing so requires that we examine these beliefs and make them explicit. It requires foundational reflection.

What is foundational reflection all

about? Essentially it addresses two closely related domains: our fundamental worldview, and our philosophy of education emerging from our worldview. Indeed, although they may not always be consistently aligned, our worldview governs our educational philosophy. For example, our fundamental belief that human beings are images of God has direct implications for our approach to classroom management. Or, to use another example, our confession that our world belongs to God affects our understanding of the content of the curriculum. Since our worldview determines our educational philosophy, we need to articulate the content of both, even if only to check their alignment.

One way to make both our worldview and our educational philosophy explicit is to ask ourselves a series of questions. First, consider our worldview. I suggest the following questions: What are our basic beliefs about God, the world, life, and our purpose for being here? What is knowledge, and what is truth? What do we believe about the scope of sin and of redemption? Useful are the four well-known questions posed by Walsh and Middleton: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? How can it be fixed?

Secondly, we must articulate what we believe about education. Here are some key questions: What are our basic beliefs about educational practice? What, for example, do we take to be the nature and purpose of schooling? What is our view of children? What do we mean by curriculum? Why do we teach what we teach? How do we understand "content" and "knowledge"? What is our definition of teaching and learning? And how do we put these definitions into practice?

Foundational reflection, then, bears a preparatory character. It forms the necessary underpinnings for our practice. Reflective practice will always elude us if we

are unwilling to address the fundamental questions. I propose that principals and teachers covenant together to engage, communally, in foundational reflection at the following three points of time: for two whole days during orientation before the term begins; every other month in specially called meetings; and in a wrap-up session at the end of the school year. Two objectives ought to direct such sessions: to articulate our worldview and educational philosophy, and to equip each other to internalize the articulated beliefs so that they become a part of our teaching consciousness.

### **Reflective action**

Foundational reflections, carefully articulated, may not be left behind when we enter our classroom. They must come along with us and stay with us. They serve to provide the parameters for how we teach. As soon as the link between foundational reflection and our classroom practice is severed, our teaching drifts away into a quagmire of pragmatism. Our classroom activity will then turn out to be *unreflective*, and the vision of a reflective Christian practitioner will die.

What can we do to make sure that this link remains strong and functional? What can we do to keep our worldview and our philosophy of education operative in the nitty-gritty of the daily classroom routines? I suggest four avenues:

### **Attitude:**

We must begin by making a firm, conscious and up-front decision that we will *be* reflective practitioners. Though we may at this point not be entirely clear about the ins and outs of reflective practice, we nevertheless commit ourselves to do all we can to practice our teaching craft in a reflective rather than thoughtless or mechanical style. Such a decision is critical. So



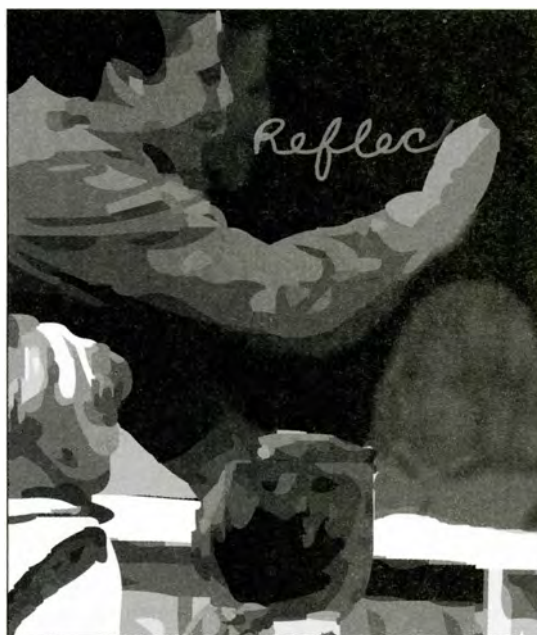
critical, in fact, that we need to recommit ourselves daily, just as daily we repent from our sin and seek anew to do the will of the Lord. Attitude is everything. Without the proper frame of mind, the flame of hope for reflective action first flickers, then goes out.

### Planning:

A second avenue to reflection-in-action (Donald Schön's term) is to revisit our unit and lesson planning. These plans rely heavily on decisions about what we will teach and how we are going to teach it. We need to be more proactive in addressing the questions *why* we teach what we teach and *why* we teach how we teach. When determining scope and sequence, goals and objectives, teaching strategies and learning activities, the question *Why?* must never be far from our consciousness. To ask the question *Why?* should become a habit ingrained in our teaching style. When we ask *Why?* we are really asking another question: Are our in-class decisions in sync with our foundational beliefs and philosophy of education?

### Reminders:

Since classrooms are fast-paced, fluid environments, punctuated by the unexpected, we are easily absorbed by the immediacies of our teaching task. Foundational reflection quickly recedes. So it is wise to surround ourselves with reminders. Some teachers keep such reminders on their desks or readily in view. Even as simple an object as a small pile of stones may serve to trigger reflective consciousness, just as the rock piles by the Jordan served as a reminder to the Israelites. Or perhaps the question "*Why?*" perched on our desk will remind us of foundational principles and parameters. Let creativity blossom! At the conclusion of one of my graduate courses, I ask the participants to



construct a memento to help them remember in the coming school year what they learned in our class. I am regularly astounded by the creative objects the teachers construct. Teachers can exchange these reminders and hold each other accountable for using them to foster reflective practice.

#### A closer walk with God:

Integral to reflective practice is the need to cultivate a closer in-class walk with the Lord. Earlier I suggested that reflection is somewhat like prayer. Just as we learn to carry on a conversation with the Lord throughout the day, so we can learn to develop a thoughtful Spirit-led teaching practice. Johanna Campbell, in the last *CEJ* issue (p. 7), reminded us that reflection is an aspect, indeed, a discipline of the Christian life.

### Reflective Review

A third facet of reflective practice is reflective review. This should not be a surprising thought, since reflection, when defined as visualized thinking, is commonly reduced to just this phase. Recall Janie's reflective review of the unsuccessful fraction lesson described in the previous article.

Reflective review, to be complete, must pass through three levels. We begin by examining the immediate situation. For example, suppose I catch Timmy cheating in my class. I need to address the facts of the

event. But then I must move on to consider, at the second level, the educational philosophy undergirding my initial reflection. At this level I recall my view of children, questions of pedagogy and related issues. At the third and deepest level, I must reflect on what my worldview means for this situation. Here I consider questions of sin and redemption, the purpose of human life, and, ultimately, God's will for the world.

Often our reflective review remains stuck at the first, immediacy level. I will then think only of the action I took when I caught Timmy cheating: I tore up his paper, gave him a zero, and sent him to the principal's office. But leaving my reflective review at this level reflects unreflective practice. At the next, educational philosophy level, I must ask questions such as these: What prompted Timmy to cheat in the first place? Could it be my heavy stress on the need to succeed academically? Is our emphasis on the Lord requiring the best of us interpreted as needing to get good grades? Does my classroom breathe a competitive atmosphere? What social and emotional forces operate in Timmy's life to drive him to cheating?

But even this second level is incomplete. After all, our philosophy of education reflects our worldview. Still larger questions confront us: What do I believe about God's call to justice, mercy and a humble walk with the Lord (Micah 6:8)? What is my vision for the restoration of life and of the creation itself? It is at this deepest level that my foundational reflection informs my reflective review.

### Several tools

Note a certain reversed rhythm: in foundational reflection, we move from worldview to the practical classroom situation, while in reflective review we begin

with the practical immediacies and return to worldview. In some ways the three facets of reflective practice represent a cycle, or perhaps a spiral. They interlock and continually and reciprocally enrich each other.


Asking questions is not the only way to undertake reflection. Other tools are available as well. I think of case studies, unpacking metaphors, or story telling. For example, we could turn Timmy's cheating into a full-fledged case study. Metaphors, too, prompt reflection. The metaphor of the teacher as drill sergeant, for example,


can be unpacked via adjectives like harsh, unilateral, and authoritarian. Parker Palmer (in *The Courage to Teach*) compares his teaching style to a sheep dog in Scotland: like a sheep dog, Palmer's teaching protects, gathers together, and leads.

Narrative serves as an excellent reflection tool as well. In seminars I frequently ask teachers to write a story describing an event that helped them to understand what it means to teach Christianly. Exchanging these stories triggers reflection not easily available by other means.

## The path of wisdom

I return to a point made in the previous article. Reflection and reflective practice are ingredients of wisdom itself. But what is wisdom? Wisdom is a wonderfully rich concept, consisting of a number of key themes. I mention a few: trusting/believing, knowing/understanding, becoming aware of/discerning, evaluating/testing, judging, and acting rightly. Together they add up to a closer walk with God. Of these ingredients, discerning, evaluating, testing, and judging comprise reflection. I suspect that when reflection is missing, wisdom turns into foolishness.

Reflection: An alien in our Christian schools? If it is, let's open our doors and welcome the stranger into our midst and give him a place in our classrooms, school, and our communities. "Examine yourselves," Paul said, "as to how you walk." Fostering reflective practice is one indispensable way to heed his call. 

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# College Preparation



Clarence Joldersma

Clarence Joldersma (cjolders@calvin.edu) professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the Dot Edu panel to comment on the following: A college professor I know voiced what is a fairly typical impression of K-12 schools when he said: "Far too many of our students are stuck in the idea that learning means memorization. Where do they get this? Why do the high schools, even our prestigious Christian schools, let them get away with this?" What characterizes K-12 learning? Is he accurate? What responses might we give to him?

## November 27, 2003

I think this is a problem not only on the K-12 level but at the college level too. The college professor who complained about K-12 teachers ought to visit some of his school's classes and check out the multiple-choice tests given at his or her institution. Why do many teachers equate learning with memorizing? There are several probable reasons.



Pam Adams

First, many teachers learned to teach by recalling what their own K-16 teachers did. Research has affirmed that. Even though they might learn many different learning strategies in their teacher education classes, they practice what they know and are familiar with. It is comfortable and, chances are, they excelled at this type of schooling.

Second, it is a simple way to teach and give grades. The teacher stands and delivers while the student takes notes. No need to read the book, just study the notes and repeat them back on the test. Classroom management is easier too. No disorderly process of forming groups; no noisy small group discussions to monitor; there's nothing unexpected.

Third, trying to get students of any age to think is hard work. Sometimes teachers try different techniques but receive so much grief from their students that they go back to the memorize/regurgitate method just to survive.

Or it might be the parents who wonder what is going on. After all, last year in third grade, Johnny brought home 10 worksheets

each day. Now there are so few. How is the parent to know what is going on in school? One can hardly blame the neophyte teacher for being overwhelmed. Creating new and exciting lesson plans, managing students who won't behave, and simply staying on top of the material wears him or her out. In a state of exhaustion many teachers rationalize that the old methods might not be so bad. After all, they learned that way.

Well, what do the rest of you think?

Pam Adams

## November 30, 2003

Yes, Pam, you are right. We all take the road of least resistance, the road of being sure of the exact "facts," of learning so we can get a high mark, of accepting the status quo and fitting into the system. Memorizing, reciting and regurgitating are the easy way out for teachers and students alike.



Johanna Campbell

But what is the biblical way? If we view teacher and student as having been created "Imago Dei," then learning must involve more than repeating what is disseminated by the teacher; learning must be put into practice; it must have a purpose. The purpose of learning is loving service to God and one's neighbor. Just as faith without works is dead, so learning without loving service is useless. We are to learn so that we can glorify our Creator better. Our entire being is to be involved in this process: heart, mind, soul and strength. The Hebrew word for "heart" encompasses all these facets: our emotions, our will, our intellect, our body — one unit working together to serve our Creator. "He [God] is your life," we read in Deuteronomy 30:20.

Our learning is to have a purpose and we are to do it with all our might. Does that mean memorization has no place in Christian schools? It has a place, but not for its own sake. As teachers we must bring our students to the next stage of learning: what is sometimes called transcendence (VanBrummelen 1994) or other times called the "opening of heaven's gates" stage (Franklin, 2002). Students must take what they have learned, be able to improve upon it, reformulate it, make inventions, and use it to solve challenging problems. This way, they will not forget the knowledge immediately after the test (if there is a test!).

The reformulation is a learning outcome in itself. This process does justice to the student being made in God's image. A student is not a machine which spits out answers.

Johanna Campbell

## December 7, 2003

Sometimes I have a knee jerk response to this kind of provocative question. It goes like this: "We respond to instructional expectations. Where is it written that college instructors do not model teaching and influence learning responses just as much as K-12 teachers do? And who says K-12 teachers in general expect students to learn only through remembering? Is this not more an observation of how teachers may expect students to show their learning through remembering? And then, of course, we get into the tangle of assessment issues.

Okay, that having been said, one or two other questions may help to clarify the issues. One is implicit in the topic: Is school learning a preparation for the next level of schooling, in this case college, and what are the implications of this kind of school view? What are the preconceptions that high school teachers have about college expectations? What are the preconceptions that middle school teachers have about high school? We can domino all the way back to preschool preconceptions.

Another way is to examine our view of learning, as you both have done. Is learning viewed more as an entity in itself? That is, is it a cycle to complete that includes learning new information through relevant, important experiences and tasks that expect reflective thinking as well as accountable assessment, rather than a set of building blocks of skills and content or understandings (or preparation for the next learning stage)? Does that distinction make a difference in what we expect learning to be and how we expect students to show their learning? Is one view more helpful than another? Is there only one acceptable view?

Lois Brink



Lois Brink

## December 13, 2003

Clarence, did alcohol play a role in the formation of your colleague's comments? I mean, really! Here at ground level we see Christian educators working through the implications of Gardner's "multiple intelligences," creating a variety of teaching situations (some more effective than others), working with revamped assessment strategies (because "you get what you inspect rather than what you expect"), striving to implement methods that create opportunities for synthesis and reformulation — all out of a belief that the diversity with which God deigned to create human beings is to be honored rather than ignored.

Meanwhile we fend off charges that we're playing games rather



Tony Kamphuis

than really educating — after all the number of students that can recite the list of Canadian Prime Ministers is down, you know! — and then we get slapped with a charge like the one given by your colleague, which, I suspect, is directed at K-12 schools of 15 to 20 years ago! I admire my fellow panelists' responses, but I find the accusation a little hard to take. Did a student or two in your colleague's class fail to grasp his brilliant metaphors and get nervous about missing something they feared he would want repeated on his mid-term? Perhaps they are students that wouldn't have even been at college a few years back, but have gotten to this point because of the greater appreciation of their gifts at the earlier stages of their formal education.

"Back in his day" the self-selection and systemic selection of those who would have experienced higher education may have meant a professor had a narrower range of student-types in front of him. But those days are past. In my experience at seven different institutions of higher learning, it was a rare occasion that I saw any attention paid to pedagogical methods by professors.

My response to your friend's comments is: "Examine your own house first!" and "Don't curse your new environment. Instead, adapt, adapt, adapt!"

Tony

### Your turn:

*This is a discussion forum. If you would like to respond to this column or to previous ones, we invite you to email a succinct, thoughtful, pointed response to us at "Panel Dot Edu." You can do so by emailing the column editor at [cjolders@calvin.edu](mailto:cjolders@calvin.edu). Please put "Panel Dot Edu Panel" and whatever the column title is to which you are responding in the subject line of the email. Sign the email response with your first and last name as well as the school you are from. We would like to properly acknowledge your response. Depending on the volume of responses, we hope to print as many as we are able in subsequent issues.*

### The panel consists of:

**Pam Adams** ([padams@dordt.edu](mailto:padams@dordt.edu)), assistant professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

**Lois Brink** ([LBrink@grcs.org](mailto:LBrink@grcs.org)), curriculum coordinator and media director at Grand Rapids Christian High School, Grand Rapids, Mich.

**Johanna Campbell** ([ctabc@twu.ca](mailto:ctabc@twu.ca)), executive director of the Christian Teachers Association of British Columbia, Langley, B.C.

**Tony Kamphuis** ([TonyKamp@aol.com](mailto:TonyKamp@aol.com)), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education. He lives in Smithville, Ont. 



# Joy in the Journey

by Mike Goheen

*Mike Goheen is associate professor of theology and religion at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario. The article below is an excerpt from a speech he gave at the October 2000 convention of the Ontario Christian Teachers Association.*

There is the story told of a man who approached four stonecutters while they were at work. He asked the first what he was doing. The man replied: "I am cutting stones." He asked the second the same question, and received an answer with a little more enthusiasm: "I am building a wall." When he asked the third one, the man stopped, and with a sense of satisfaction said: "I am building a cathedral!" Finally he came to the last man and asked the same question. The man's face beamed with radiance and joy as he surveyed his work and responded: "I am building a cathedral in which the glorious God of creation can be worshipped."

Each of the men were carrying out the same task; each cut stones and laid one upon the other. However, their interpretation of that task differed according to their understanding of the big picture. While the first simply interpreted his task in terms of the mechanics of cutting and laying stones, the last man saw the final goal and purpose of his stone cutting—a place for the worship of God. And it was precisely that understanding of the end of his work that sustained him in his work with deep joy.


How would you respond, as an educator, to the question, "what are you doing?" No doubt you are all involved with the mechanics of teaching various subjects in the classroom. But what is the end of your work? What gives meaning and purpose to that work? And (here my illustration breaks down) what is shaping your work? Perhaps you may think such questions are really irrelevant; you would like something more

"practical," like how can I put together Monday's lesson plans.

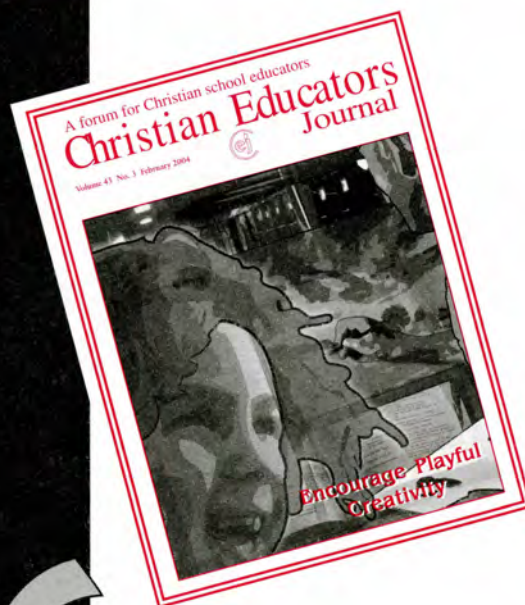
This past week, I received an email from a vice-principal who, along with his staff, had attended a conference. Apparently they had heard a speech painting "the big picture," and the teacher had complained that she wanted something more practical. "Forget about vision and perspective; tell me how to plan lessons." This vice-principal had taken my worldview course and had seen how different stories shape education differently. He also remembered I had mentioned postmodern pragmatism and how the very word "practical" had pagan roots. And so he sought advice. In fact these so-called "big questions" of worldview do have an enormous formative effect. They are extremely "practical" if by that word we mean important for the task of teaching.

"Practical" people who believe they are exempt from thinking about bigger questions of context are in fact slaves to some worldview, probably the prevailing worldview formed and articulated in the history of the West. It is that

worldview which shapes their work.

And this has implications for joy in our tasks. According to the Scriptures joy is a gift that comes from God as we are committed to and involved in his plan for the world. If we do not take the time to nurture and cultivate a vision for this world that is shaped by the biblical story, and the end of history that is revealed there, the sad fact is that we will be enveloped in the prevailing story shaping our culture, and with that we forfeit the gift of joy. 

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# Multiple Intelligence Theory:

## *More Than a Fad*

by Gwen Marra

*Gwen Marra taught elementary school for five years and is the owner and director of Learning Ship Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa. She is pursuing a Master's degree in curriculum and instruction.*

Our God is a wonderfully complex God. Creation's diversity reflects this. It is seen in the many kinds of plants and animals he created, as well as in the six billion human beings that are on the earth. Human beings created in the image of God reflect this diversity in the many talents and abilities they possess. God created so much diversity because he values it. We read in I Corinthians 12 that God has given different gifts to each person, and that each person is important and needs to use those gifts to the best of his or her ability. We educators need to recognize this diversity in our students and celebrate the uniqueness of each child. When we value the diversity of our students, we are reinforcing the idea that God values them as well.

How do we go about valuing this diversity on a daily basis? One way is by using the Multiple Intelligence theory as a guide in planning lessons and learning activities that celebrate the talents and abilities of each student. When Multiple Intelligence theory is put into practice, educators are able to value the strengths of each student because this theory sees intelligence as "an ability (or skill) to solve problems or to fashion products which are valued within one or more cultural settings" (Sternberg & Detterman) rather than a specific academic gift possessed by a small number of individuals. This theory has been developed to include nine types of intelligences.

Multiple Intelligence theory is more than just an educational fad. It is a valuable tool for Christian educators who seek to educate students as the unique individuals that God intended them to be. It came about as

the result of a re-examination of the question "What is intelligence?"

### **Biased test**

Throughout history, scholars have developed many views concerning intelligence. In the early 1900s, Alfred Binet was credited with the development of the first intelligence test. He worked at developing a test that predicted school success or school difficulty for young children. Since Binet's first test, intelligence tests have been "heavily weighted toward measuring verbal memory, verbal reasoning, numerical

educators who questioned whether or not the test truly measured intelligence, but the tests continued to be widely administered.

As years went by, the test was somewhat modified to try to eliminate social and cultural bias. The general public seemed to believe that intelligence was generally inherited, and these tests seemed to encourage that belief (Gardner, 1999). Today, intelligence testing is used less and less frequently. Its use is limited to testing problem cases or in order to identify students for specific programs, such as talented and gifted programs (Gardner, 1999).

### **Emergence of pluralists**

Some psychologists are called *singularists* because they view intelligence as a single factor to be measured. Research continues to disprove this view of intelligence as the complexity of human intelligence becomes more evident. Other psychologists are called *pluralists* because they view intelligence as something that is made up of many parts.

One early pluralist, Charles Spearman, is a researcher credited with being a pioneer in the field of multiple intelligences. He questioned Binet's tests and popularized the idea that if people did not do well on the Stanford-Binet or other standardized verbal or logical tests, they were not necessarily of lower intelligence. He emphasized the role the environment plays in developing a person's intelligence and relied less on hereditary factors (Li and Gerold).

Robert Sternberg is a more recent psychologist who has thoroughly researched what intelligence is. He has looked into problem solving and the reasoning behind the decisions people make during testing. In addition, he has delved into practical intelligence that helps people to be successful outside of an academic setting. He sees intelligence as "mental self-governing"

*"I agree ... that people are given a unique set of intelligences from conception on...."*

reasoning, appreciation of logical sequences, and ability to state how one would solve problems of daily living" (Gardner, 1999). Intelligence was thought of as that mental ability which was able to produce success in school as measured by this test.

Lewis Terman and Robert Yerkes, professors at Stanford University and Harvard University, brought intelligence tests to the United States. Originally the tests were to be administered on an individual basis, but these psychologists developed the tests into a pencil-and-paper, group-administered test. The tests were widely administered and their results were used to develop norms to compare groups and make generalizations. During this time, there were some



(Sternberg & Detterman). According to him, "The essence of intelligence is that it provides a means to govern ourselves so that our thoughts and actions are organized, coherent, and responsive to both our internally driven needs and to the needs of our environment" (Sternberg & Detterman).

I appreciate the analogy he draws between self-government and intelligence and see validity in his theory. I like it that he values the richness and diversity of minds and that he does not reduce intelligence to a score on a test or a single measurement. The fact that he looks for a profile reflecting the many different aspects of intelligence is, in my view, more accurate than the quest for verbal or logical skills.

### Further refinements

John Horn, a psychologist from the University of Southern California, emphasizes the difficulty in defining intelligence. He sees intelligence as a composite of many factors rather than a mixture (Sternberg & Detterman). He holds to a multiple view of intelligence, one which includes areas such as visual retrieval, auditory thinking, short-term acquisition retrieval, correct decision speediness, and reasoning flexibility under novel conditions, to name just a few (Sternberg & Detterman). He believes that more research needs to be done in order for human intelligence to be better understood. I consider his view of intelligence to be somewhat parallel to that of Howard Gardner, although his ideas are much more difficult to understand.

Then there is the theory of Jean Piaget, a scientist who focused more on how intel-



ligence is developed than on what intelligence is. Piaget developed a biological theory of intelligence. He believed that intelligence develops as a human adapts to the environment through assimilation and accommodation. Each person seeks a balance between these two processes, a response which is called equilibrium.

Piaget saw intelligence from a scientific point of view. He stressed the importance of children being allowed to do their own learning. He believed there are four stages in cognitive development: the sensori-motor stage, the pre-operational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage (Huiitt & J. Hummel). I agree with these stages of development, and see some merit in a constructivist learning theory, although I think it underestimates the complexity of the human mind. This theory tends to acknowledge linguistic and numeric intelligence while ignoring other areas, such as musical abilities or social skills.

### Gardner's theory

Howard Gardner believes that each person is equipped with a unique combination of intelligences at conception and that, as the human grows and interacts with the

environment, these intelligences grow and develop as well. The choices each person makes affect the way his or her intelligence develops. Gardner thinks that historical views of intelligence were too narrow, focusing only on linguistic and numerical intelligence. He considers his theory of multiple intelligences to be a more accurate picture of the human mind and its complexity.

Originally Gardner defined intelligence as "the ability to solve problems or to create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings" (Gardner, 1999). In 1999, he revised his definition of intelligence as follows, "a bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture" (Gardner, 1999). He views intelligence not just as something that is inherited, but, rather, as an interaction between genetic and environmental factors (Gardner, 1995). The idea that attracts me most to Gardner's theory is how it values the differences in people and encourages people to learn from each other rather than labeling them as successes or failures based on a narrow, academic definition of intelligence. The theory of multiple intelligences

also appreciates intelligences that may be valued in non-Western cultures.

### The list

Currently Howard Gardner has identified nine intelligences that meet the criteria listed above. (He is also considering a tenth, Spiritual Intelligence, which generates a great deal of controversy in the field of science.)

1) Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence: Those possessing this intelligence have the capacity to use language to express his- or herself and to understand other people.

2) Logical/Mathematical Intelligence: This includes the ability to solve problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically.

3) Visual/ Spatial Intelligence: This intelligence refers to the potential to recognize and manipulate patterns of wide space (such as navigation) as well as those of confined spaces (as practiced by sculptors and architects). It is exhibited differently in different cultures.

4) Musical/Rhythmic Intelligence: This includes skills in performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns.

5) Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence: Those with strengths in this intelligence exhibit the ability to use one's body to solve problems or fashion a product.

6) Naturalist Intelligence: The human ability to identify animals and plants in nature as well as sensitivity to other features of the natural world.

7) Intra-personal Intelligence: Having an understanding of yourself, of knowing who you are and what you can do, what you should pursue, and what you should avoid.

8) Interpersonal Intelligence: The potential to work effectively with others based on understanding the motivations and desires of other people.

9) Existential Intelligence: This intelligence involves the natural inclination to

pose philosophical questions about life, death, and ultimate realities (Gardner, 1999, Carlson-Pickering).

### Towards a Christian Worldview

Howard Gardner, as he puts it, has "no spiritual identity" (Gardner, 1999), even though his cultural identity is Jewish. He thanks evolution for giving each person a unique combination of intelligences. Knowing this, how can I say that the theory of Multiple Intelligence theory fits and meshes with a Christian worldview?

In order to understand this more clearly,

*"God has given  
different gifts to  
each person."*

we first need to identify what makes up a Christian worldview. I believe that God created the world perfectly, including creating human beings in his own image, but humankind chose to sin and therefore all of creation is affected negatively. I believe that God sent his son, Jesus, to save me and because of his sacrifice, my relationship to God has been restored. It is my job as a redeemed sinner to serve God by living obediently and working to transform creation.

In light of this, I need to analyze this theory closely. I agree with Gardner's belief that people are given a unique set of intelligences from conception on, and that these intelligences grow and develop based on each person's experiences with the world he or she lives in. I disagree with Gardner that all of this is a result of evolu-

tion. I believe that God created each person with a unique set of talents or abilities that could be called intelligences. These intelligences are developed throughout our lives, and how we use and develop our intelligences demonstrates our response to God.

The theory of Multiple Intelligence reminds me of the many areas of giftedness that God has given to different people. As a teacher, my task is to educate students for responsive discipleship. If I am taking this seriously, I need to educate the whole child, academically, spiritually, socially, and artistically. When children receive a well-rounded Christian education that meaningfully connects their talents and abilities with the world in which they live, they are on the path to meaningful service to God.

### Realistic approach

Some people say this theory is just a fad that will soon lose its popularity. In education, fads come and go as the pendulum of a clock swings from side to side. In the book *Letters to Lisa*, John Van Dyk discusses this pattern. He sees a fad as something that becomes a problem when its proponents see it as the only solution to a problem (p.50). I do not believe that Multiple Intelligence theory is the only theory to be used in schools. Some proponents advocate incorporating every intelligence into most lessons. Howard Gardner has this to say about this approach: "Most topics can be powerfully approached in a number of ways. But there is no point in assuming that every topic can be effectively approached in at least seven ways, and it is a waste of effort and time to attempt to do this" (Gardner, 1995).

Gardner realizes that it is not realistic to teach each lesson to every intelligence. I suggest a more realistic approach to using Gardner's theory. I suggest teachers take time periodically to analyze their teach-



ing. We need to ask ourselves if we have taught lessons that meet each child's needs. When we teach lessons from a variety of perspectives, we will reach more children. The next step is to plan to incorporate the different intelligences in meaningful ways in upcoming lessons. This may include activities for the whole class to participate in or it may mean allowing students to respond to teaching by choosing a unique format that reflects their intelligences.

### Theory in the Classroom

The theory of Multiple Intelligence needs to be applied to all levels of education in order to maximize learning for all students. The following are suggestions of how this can be done in a way that reflects a Christian perspective of teaching for responsive discipleship.

It is great (and necessary) for teachers to be familiar with Multiple Intelligence theory, but it is equally important that students, become familiar with it so that they become more capable of identifying ways in which they learn more quickly and identifying areas in which they may have difficulty. They will learn to communicate how they come to know. One way to teach students about their different intelligences is to lead a discussion about different ways of being "smart." Thomas Armstrong has developed a pie chart with an illustration for each intelligence. He thinks it is important for teachers to teach their students that they are "smart" in many different ways. When children are taught this at an early age, they are able to value their own intelligences as well as the intelligences they see in other people. Older children can also be taught about the different intelligences. One way to do this is to explore the lives of famous people and learn about how they learned best. Many influential people, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Vincent Van Gogh, and Winston Churchill


had intelligences that were not traditionally thought of as important, yet their work has had a great influence on our culture. In learning about the intelligences of such historical figures, these older students may realize the potential they possess.

Another way to use Multiple Intelligence in the classroom is to set up centers or work stations for each intelligence and allow students to work on individual projects that tie into other curricula. This allows students to explore individually and learn about subjects that are interesting to them. Students could meet with the teacher to set goals and check progress. Final products could be exhibited at a class celebration or some other culminating activity (Armstrong).

Older students could be given choices that reflect their intelligences rather than being forced to respond in a specific way. Teachers may require reports on historical events. Allowing students to write a play

showing the event, or making a visual time line that demonstrates causes and effects of the historical event could incorporate Multiple Intelligence. Students could be allowed to design a computer report using Hyper studio or other software. The options are endless!!

### Conclusion

Multiple Intelligence Theory has been around for twenty years. It is a theory that accepts growth and change, while still maintaining its integrity by valuing the uniqueness of each person. When we apply it to the classroom, we establish an atmosphere that appreciates the intelligences of each student and values his or her differences. As a Christian teacher, this theory encourages me to stand in awe of God who created so many unique individuals. It challenges me to help students meet the potential they possess as they learn to be citizens of God's kingdom. 

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## Expect Professional Growth From Your Teachers

*Tena Siebenga-Valstar is a principal at Forth McMurray Christian School, 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. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2, or e-mail her at tvalstar@telus.net.*

### A carpenter's skills

#### Question # 1

If a teacher is floating just above the competency line but is not really improving after several conferences in which areas of weakness have been pointed out and if improvement is sporadic at best, should a board or a principal nudge such a teacher into retirement or into leaving the profession?

#### Response:

Contracts for teachers within Christian Schools often include a section which pertains to the teachers' professional development or growth plan. A draft of the Indefinite Term Contract authored by the Prairie Association of Christian Schools & Christian Educators Association states: "The teacher shall participate in continual professional development as required by Provincial regulation and Board policy. A personal professional growth plan shall be established and pursued in collaboration with the school principal."

Another tenet of that contract indicates that if the teacher's performance is not satisfactory, the board, in consultation with the principal, will give written notice including the particulars of the deficiencies and expected improvements. If the teacher does not reach a satisfactory level of performance within a reasonable time, there is cause for termination.

Our provincial government expects a certain amount of professional development on a yearly basis. The teacher, in discussion with the administrator, formulates and documents a plan of action for the year. It is the responsibility of the administrator to encourage the teacher to be working to his or her God-given potential and at the required level of competency.

When a situation arises such as you have described, all parties must respond in love, recognizing that many relationships are involved and that many lives are affected by a

less than effective teaching-learning situation. I recently learned an important lesson in separating the person from the job performance. The analogy I was encouraged to use was that of a carpenter and the skills he needs to build a cabinet. If the carpenter cannot measure accurately or saw a board straight, the cabinet will not stand.

And so, in consultation with the employee, I delineated what was required to perform the job. With this completed, we determined the areas in which improvement were required, the steps needed for improvement, and the time frame in which the improvement would take place. A key responsibility of a board or administrator is to document the progress or lack thereof. This documentation should be shared with the teacher so that open, honest communication continues throughout the process.

Provincial or state standards, as well as detailed teachers' contracts, may not have been a part of a teacher's earlier professional life if, as you indicate, the teacher may be reaching retirement. Until recently, most professional development was a private affair. Not only is it the administrator's responsibility not only to encourage all teachers to improve in their teaching practice; he or she must also provide opportunities for teachers to learn in community where love is evident and risk-taking is encouraged.

If teachers are not given time within staff meetings to discuss their own learning and that of their students, a "complacent" staff member may not see that professional development is a priority for the school.

### Between like and respect

#### Question # 2

How important is it for students to like a teacher? Will learning improve significantly when positive relationships are being developed by the teacher?

#### Response:

Are you asking this question at the beginning of the school year when students and teachers are just getting to know one another? If that is the case, I would say, "Wait for a while."

Teachers, as well as students, come with their own personalities. Some teachers are reserved and students may not as readily accept a teacher with a reserved personality as one who is an extrovert. I have seen beginning teachers who





Tena Siebinga-Valstar  
valstar@telusplanet.net

immediately wish to be friends with their students. Some of the students may respond at once, expressing that they “like” the teacher or that the teacher is “cool.” I would caution, however, that there is a difference between like and respect. There may come a time when the teacher will experience difficulty when he or she has to take on the authority that accompanies the role of teacher. As school rules begin to be enforced, a student may begin to “like” a teacher less.

One could turn the question around and get at the crux of the matter. How important is it for a teacher to like a student? *Can* a teacher like all students? Perhaps I should ask another more important question: How important is it for a teacher to love a student? I believe it is of crucial importance that a teacher love all students, even those he or she doesn’t like. In response to this act of loving, some students may end up liking the teacher.

It is the relationship that is important. I believe that when a teacher shows love and respect for the students, there is a greater potential for learning. An atmosphere of love, respect, openness, warmth, fairness and trust fosters greater potential for learning. On the other hand, fear and an atmosphere of non-acceptance stifles learning. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear... We love because Christ first loved us and gave his life for us” (1 John 4: 18,19).

Dr. Al Green in his book *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education* speaks of the formative power of love in relationship to learning: “Love and only love changes us in a positive direction. Our thinking, our understanding, our character — these are shaped by love. If we are Christians, with our sins forgiven and our hearts drawn in some measure to God, this is due entirely to the love God has for us” (p. 230).

Parker Palmer in *To Know As We Are Known: Education As a Spiritual Journey* states, “real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom” (p. xvi). This is not done merely for the sake of warm feelings, but to do the difficult things that teaching and learning require. It means creating a classroom community where trust and respect are evident and where risk-taking and the opportunity to change one’s mind is fostered.

From experience I know that when students feel loved

and accepted, their learning improves. When they know that they are viewed as special because of the gifts with which God has blessed them, when they are made aware of having potential and given opportunity to learn at their own level, and when they see themselves as being capable of learning and allowed to use their own learning style, they strive to reach their potential. May God use us in our weakness to show his love to our students.

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Greene, A. E. (1998). *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education*. Colorado Springs: Association of Christian Schools International. Palmer, P., (1983, 1993). *To Know As We Are Known: Education As a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Harper Collins. ©



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# Book Reviews

*Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* by David T. Koyzis. Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2003. 281 pp. \$18.00 U.S. (paper) ISBN 0-8308-2726-9. Reviewed by Allan R. Horton, Instructor at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ont.

"I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (RSV) Christ reminds us, clearly, in John 14:6 that we are to seek no other way to redemption and reconciliation; there is no other way. In *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, David Koyzis, Professor of Political Science at Redeemer University College, delves deeply into several humanly constructed belief systems that have been advocated by their champions as avenues to salvation. Not salvation as a Christian would understand it, but salvation nevertheless.

One dictionary definition of salvation is "preservation from destruction or failure." Koyzis shows how the world has sought this goal in the political world through systems of thought that filter the world's experiences through various distorting lenses. These have included classical liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy and socialism. As Koyzis readily acknowledges, each contains a measure of truth and insight into the human condition and should never be dismissed out of hand. Because of this spectrum of ideologies, each approach has been readily adopted by large parts of the world at various times over the centuries.

But each also, whether explicitly or implicitly, also promises a salvific vision of human affairs. Liberalism celebrates and makes sovereign the will of the individual. Conservatism celebrates varying traditions and makes them sovereign. Nationalism celebrates and makes sovereign the national identity of one group or another. Democracy celebrates and makes sovereign the "near infallibility of the *vox populi*" (124). Socialism celebrates and makes sovereign the aspiration to economic equality.

However, where socialism promises liberation through economic redistribution and liberalism seeks freedom endorsing the individual vision, they fail to recognize the created nature of the world. This elevation of one aspect or another of creation is tantamount to idolatry, in Koyzis' view. Each political vision mistakes illusion for reality and disappointment is inevitable.

Koyzis encourages the use of these historical and contemporary ideologies as portals for insight into the nature of humanity. But he alerts the reader to the dangers of misplaced trust, using

not only scriptural injunction (Exodus 20:3: "You shall have no other gods before me"), but also political commentary: "If Marx, Mannheim, Arendt, Crick and Havel are correct in asserting that ideologies represent fundamentally flawed conceptions of the world, then we Christians are obligated to take them seriously and to try to discern in exactly which ways they go wrong" (22).

The reader may get the impression that Koyzis is perhaps being a little too dismissive of political ideology and too grudging in his allowance for the insight political theorists do bring to the political debate. But patience is needed, I would suggest, to understand where he is going to take his argument.

## Two Christian views

He presents two major historical Christian approaches to the political ills of the world — Catholicism and neo-Calvinism — analysing with great skill their core concepts, *subsidiarity* and *sphere-sovereignty*. The idea of pluriformity, the "multiplicity of creation," describes God's creation — the world and its people. "God is one, but his works are manifold." (208). Since the world is created thus, Christians are bound to honor its created nature, but not to worship one or another aspect. If they do, then society incurs injustice.

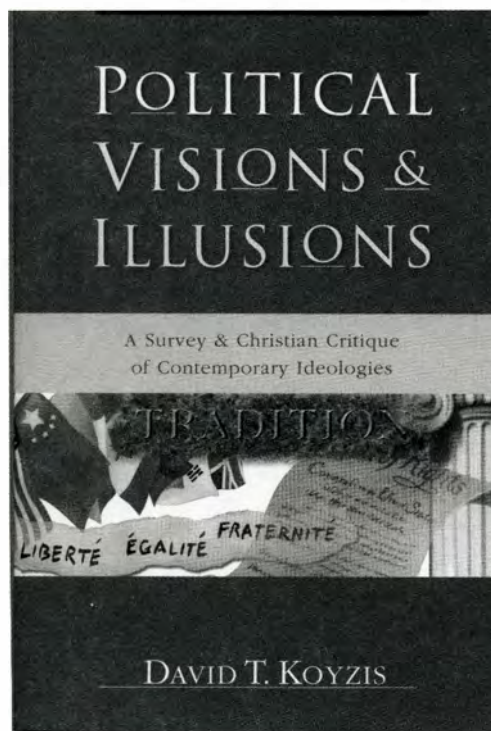
Ameliorating the human condition is a right and proper activity of all human-kind and especially Christians. God placed us in a world of his making, and participating in the redemption and reconciliation of creation is part of the Christian calling. But political ideologies promote a distorted vision of creation and therefore an illusory vision of what will rescue that creation. Placing inordinate faith in political ideology leads to a treadmill of disappointment and disillusion.

Idolatry has no power to either save or satisfy.

The Christian then, in Koyzis' view, must seek the answer to how to participate in the redemptive project while avoiding the espousal of one of these illusory, idolatrous worldviews.

What, then, is the Christian's political task? It is to seek justice in the political community. While this may seem a simple answer at first hearing, it is one of immense complexity. The simple answers, or, rather, the erroneous but seductive paths to

(Continued on bottom of next page)





Douglas V. Henry and Bob R. Agee, editors, *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003. 178 pages. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Emeritus).



Steve J. Van Der Weele  
svweele@calvin.edu

Faithful Learning consists of ten essays on the role that Christian colleges and universities need to play in the life of our churches, our society in the broadest sense, of our students, throughout our multi-civilizational world, and, ultimately, of course, in the Kingdom of God — sanctified work at its most complete. These discourses were delivered as annual lectures in the series endowed in 1971 by Hubert Inman Hester, longtime professor and administrator at William Jewel College. The invited lecturers come from diverse backgrounds — Lutheran, Church of Christ, Christian Reformed, Baptist, and others. Joel Carpenter and C. Stephen Evans (now at Baylor) from Calvin College were two of the speakers invited to the annual meeting of the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools. The difficulty of doing justice to each essay is obvious. It may be helpful, therefore, to isolate several recurring themes in these essays, as a way of demonstrating the overall unity in the diagnosis of academic pathology and the cure for the same.

### Shallow thinking

The essays, to begin with, constitute an assault on the Enlightenment legacy — its claim to an epistemology based on empiricism, the insistence that not only nature but the humanities as well can be understood only by the methodologies of science. This legacy detached fact from value, substituted reason for theology, and marginalized God in this “best of possible worlds.” As a group, they anatomize the shallowness of the academic cul-

ture of our day, a culture which discourages first-order questions, reinforces the status quo in terms of societal structures, and which trivializes academic studies by pressures of political correctness, postmodern approaches to the disciplines, and the mindless popular culture as accessible as the food we eat.


They point out, in addition — and liken this revolution to the one which occurred when Christianity replaced the classical world — that university teachers see the world with different spectacles than the older ones did. They see not a world which God created good (even the classicists acknowledged the goodness of this world) — but one with a variety of resources which we can put to any use we wish, a world where individuals live out their lives in pursuit of personally-formulated goals. Modernity has eschewed the philosophical and theological legacy of the past, denying the traditional structures which provided a basis for meaning and morality.

Writing as Christian educators, the authors offer a variety of responses to the conditions outlined above. Their counsel is designed to strengthen the commitment and performance of Christian higher education and of Christians in secular schools. Their passion for the crucial role our colleges must play in our world appears on every page. Faculty are critical. They must be recruited, mentored, supported, encouraged. Deficiencies existing from their graduate school preparation — deficiencies in addressing the great questions of meaning, of calling, of commitment — need to be remedied. And these teachers must model for

### (Continued from previous page)

redemption were proposed in the political ideologies propounded over the many years of political debate. Christians must instead choose the difficult task of identifying all the differentiated needs, desires, wants, legitimate claims of persons and communities.

God created a world of multitudinous identities and possibilities. We honor that pluriformity by not dismissing parts of it and by not assimilating any part of it into a unitary ideal. Moreover, we are created as community-creating beings. It is the vital task of the political community to balance the claims of all human communities and people, and to do so in an evenhanded way: “It is a matter of the state fulfilling its divinely appointed jural task, that is, adjudicating the respective claims of the various multiple spheres of society, weighing these claims carefully and coordinating them in such a way that society develops in balanced, proportionate fashion” (265). Applying principals of equity, compassion and fairness are not to be confused with weakness, timidity and compliance. It is complex and perhaps daunting but we must not shrink from the call.

We are charged with a difficult task. Justice is to be sought where it is not being done. It will require boldness. It may require sacrifice. But the call is unequivocal. “The mandate to seek justice is itself non-negotiable, particularly for those claiming to follow Jesus Christ” (264). Some Christian traditions have called for setting oneself apart from the political fray, suggesting that to be involved in the discussion is to be distracted from the true calling of the redeemed. But to do justice cannot be more central to our call to serve the world by heralding God’s kingdom. It will most certainly require of us to be both patient and confident in approaching the political realm (267). But Koyzis reminds us that by doing so we will be “more in tune” (266) with God’s creation, whereas ideologies are skewed and can be facile. Nothing can be more challenging, but nothing can be more fulfilling. Koyzis has given the Christian community a fine and sturdy primer for preparing ourselves to undertake the call to do justice. 

the students the life of the mind at its highest reaches — academic disciplines in the context of theology. They must work in partnership with churches and other agencies to emphasize that the Christian faith is expressed in relationships and that learning, therefore, must be placed at the service of community and church.

Several of the essayists call for the Christ-transforming attitude towards culture, one of the options outlined by Richard Niebuhr. Several call for teachers to regard themselves as missionaries and to challenge their students to adopt a missionary mentality as they plan their education. The field, they observe, is a world increasingly desperate for a gospel which responds to the human condition.

### Theological reflections

Richard Hughes leads off with a very helpful essay, “Christian Faith and the Life of the Mind.” He outlines the contours of the several worldviews operative in various Christian fellowships — Reformed, Mennonite, Catholic, and the Baptist model. He sizes up the strengths and perceived weaknesses of each. The doctrine of “soul competency” in the Baptist tradition, for example, underscores the importance of a believer’s internalizing Christian wisdom for himself or herself, but the assertion of human freedom almost as an end in itself provides too tenuous a basis for higher education. Such declarations “lack the power to nurture a sustained commitment to the academic enterprise and the life of the mind.” (20) Hughes puts his weight behind the Reformed position, as being the most comprehensive, as providing the most robust basis for the integration of faith and learning.

Stephen C. Evans makes several helpful observations in his essay. One of them is his distinction between implicit and explicit Christian scholarly work. He emphasizes the importance of the biblical drama, or framework, for all of education — the “big story” ignored in secular education, but the view which imparts meaning to the whole human venture.

Martin Marty, writing about higher education in the new millennium, observes that our lives are shaped by basic tensions — material and spiritual, sacred and secular, privileged and exposed. But it is in Christ that all things cohere. Moreover, in the intellectual landscape of our day, these tensions are becoming blurred and often overlap.

Joel Carpenter, in his “The Mission of Christian Scholarship

in the new Millennium,” writes as a historian in one part of his paper, providing a helpful summary of the history of higher education as it developed in Christian Europe. These phases constitute high drama. Christianity now has many competitors for allegiance, notably, scientific naturalism and postmodern antirealists. The results of these ideologies spill into our streets — and with harmful consequences — in the courts, in business, in entertainment, in education. Our nation has become vulgar, mean, and pagan. The Christian college represents one of our best hopes — and, he notes, a modest renaissance is occurring at various places: “We as Christians are to be agents of cultural discipleship.” (68) And we need to maintain a lively relationship with the churches.

Parker J. Palmer calls for a “gospel epistemology” — a way of learning through personal appropriation of material rather than the arm’s length, objective, detached approach which is the reigning pedagogical strategy of modern education. This approach, he claims, “deforms” the learner, whereas true learning should be constructively formative.

*“Their counsel is  
designed to  
strengthen  
commitment.”*

### Challenges and opportunities

Part I provided theological reflections. Part II is entitled “Challenges and Opportunities.” Nathan Hatch, in his “Christian Thinking in a time of Turmoil,” reflects, among other matters, on the loss of confidence among the public in higher education. He sees this situa-

tion as an opportunity for Christian colleges to assert their distinctiveness. But Christian colleges must be diligent and flexible and astute as they confront what Charles Krauthammer calls “the Balkanization of American education.” (93)

Anthony Campolo calls for a radical, Christian college — with a counter-cultural ethos, and with all departments subject to the tutelage of the Religion and Theology Department, whose task it would be to bring biblical insights to the several disciplines. Our free enterprise system, though to be preferred to other systems, needs foster greater justice and compassion.

And Denton Lotz, General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, in his two essays, catapults us into the global world, where the several civilizations confront each other, where Christianity is losing its grip in many countries, and where new tribalisms are emerging. Once again, the Christian colleges and universities need desperately to confront, and educate students to confront, these rival hegemonies in appropriate ways. Otherwise we are doomed to extinction or irrelevance. A straightforward, sober analysis indeed. 