

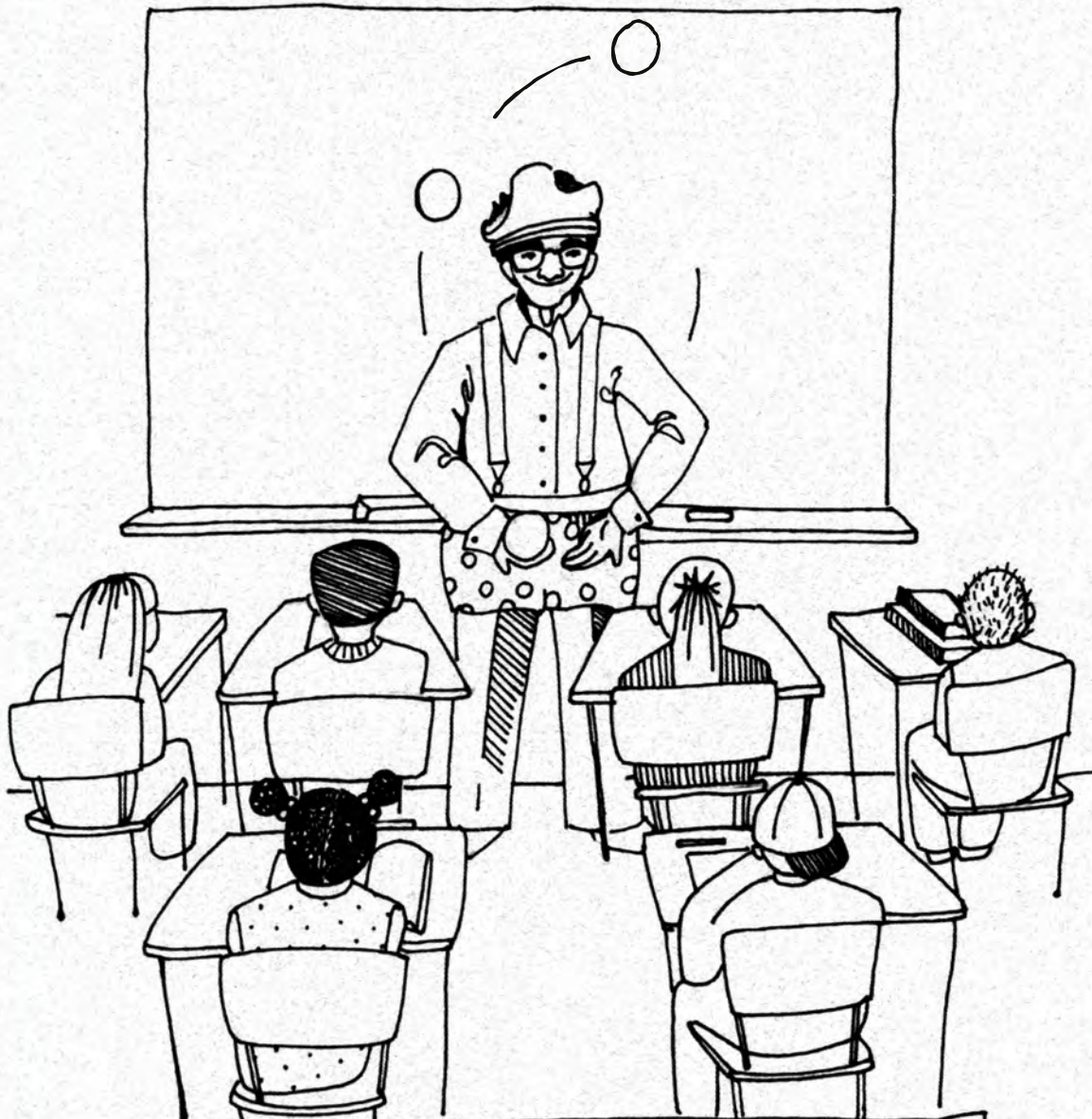
A forum for Christian school educators

# Christian Educators Journal

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## Humor in the Classroom



In an effort to make his class pay attention,  
Mr. Miller gave a whole new meaning  
to casual Fridays.





## Humor — Next to Godliness

For us to devote a whole issue of our beloved *Christian Educators Journal* to humor says something about the importance we attach to it. Some think that Christian humor is an oxymoron, and Calvinistic humor, an acute case of oxyuriasis (infection of pinworms). Sometimes that stereotype is well-deserved; other times it's grossly inaccurate. Perhaps this issue will move the needle over a little further to the good side. Humor, like so many other things in life, often depends for its success or failure on one's personality or upbringing. We tend to make absolutes in judging someone else's sense of humor. There are standards for humor as there are for all of life, but one must be careful not to judge too quickly whether something is funny or not, or whether it violates taste or professional standards.

It's very difficult to pin down what is funny and what is not. We all know that when you explain a joke, it dies on the floor of conversation. That's because it lives and dies by its absurdity. Listen to how one dictionary defines humor: "Humor consists principally in the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. It is frequently used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct." I like that definition. It tells me that you have to be aware of incongruities since life is full of them. We are seldom what we appear to be. Acknowledging *that* can be a subject for either great lament or great hilarity, depending on your point of view. Honest writers will reveal to you that there often is a huge chasm between appearance and reality.

### Divine humor

Tyrants don't like to laugh at themselves. They're too puffed up and easily take offence. In some countries, like North Korea, ridiculing a tyrant can lead to your death. But oppressed people need humor to laugh at the tyrants. According to Professor Gila Naveh from the University of Cincinnati, "Specifically in the case of minorities, humor allows for a chance to attack an opponent without the opponent having the ability to retort. Those who have no power find an opportunity to stand up for themselves, challenge stereotypes and one-up those in power by disarming them."

But, says Charles Henderson in *Christianity — General*, "In the best of humor we learn to laugh at ourselves. For while it's perfectly human to deride one's enemies, it's divine to see the humor in oneself. One of the very first steps on the road to salvation is learning to laugh at one's own mistakes. Only when we are in touch with our own flaws can we truly open ourselves to the saving power of God."

The ability to laugh at ourselves often depends on our character,

our sense of security, but it can even be a cultural phenomenon. It is given to those with little power. Take the

Canadian province of Newfoundland, considered by many a backwater place. This is what a certain Al Clouston wrote about that province and its people:

"Newfoundland is not like any other province of Canada. It has the oldest history, the richest music and folklore ... and the most relaxed life-style, born of a colorful and romantic cultural heritage. But above all, there is the famous sense of humour. Newfoundlanders have the divine gift of being able to laugh at their troubles, at their triumphs, and at themselves." (from *When I Grow too Old to Laugh, ... Shoot Me!*)

Conversely, when you're as powerful as the United States of America, it is more difficult to laugh at yourself, especially when you're at war. It has not gone unnoticed in other parts of the world that the political climate in the US has polarized people to the point at which humor is used more to put down opponents than to laugh at oneself. I long for the day that this will change and America will once again be not only the land of the free but also the land of the self-deprecatory.

### Funny and serious

Humor may also have something to do with gender. One of my daughters-in-law claims that most men find Laurel and Hardy movies funny, but most women don't. She may be onto something. Laurel and Hardy produced slapstick humor, which may appeal more to boys and men because they are action-oriented. Whatever you think of these cultural or gender differences, it cannot be denied that humor is an essential ingredient of who we are.

Not only that, but (this may sound like an oxymoron) humor is a serious matter. "Humor touches upon the most important topics under the sun," says Charles Henderson. "It touches upon politics and science, sex and religion, life and death, good and evil. Comedians, like ministers, must wrestle with the most elementary questions. Commenting upon the importance of humor, one writer put it this way, 'Life is serious all the time but living cannot be. You may have all the solemnity you wish in your neckties, but in everything important you must have mirth or you will have madness.'" I heartily agree. The important things, especially, require mirth. Fourteen years ago, I stood with my siblings and our spouses at the bedside of our mother, who had just passed away. We prayed and sang and we joked. Tears and laughter flowed freely that morning. They are the perfect pair when facing loss.

I remember a retired pastor who once spent time in a concentration camp. He and his fellow detainees were called out

of their beds in the middle of a cold night for roll call. As he stood in formation with all the others, he noticed that the light of the moon was reflecting off another prisoner's bald head. It made him chuckle. It was then that he realized he could survive this horrible experience and that God was real. I have always believed that, instead of cleanliness, humor is next to godliness. As Henderson points out, "a good a sense of humor is an essential ingredient of faith itself."

He continues to say, "That's why the Italian poet Dante titled his great poem of the Christian life, *The Divine Comedy*, and Soren Kiekegaard, the Danish theologian said that the Christian faith is the most humorous point of view a person can take. Why? Because once you're confident of God's presence and power, once you've seen this world as the creation of God, once you know that life at its root is joy and not fear, then your sense of humor is guaranteed."

### Sacred humor

Henderson even talks of "a sacred humor which pokes holes in our posturing, pretension and pride.... The tragedy is that far too few of us live with that kind of humor. Rather than living with a buoyancy of spirit that would free us from fear, we instead follow the dull and deadly habits that have far too often replaced genuine faith. Instead of living the divine comedy, too often we make of our religion a silly farce."

I had the good fortune when I was a child in the Netherlands of growing up under the spiritual care of a pastor who regularly practiced the art of humor in his sermons. I remember how during one sermon we could hear allied planes flying overhead. Pastor Jan Voerman immediately interrupted his sermon and shouted, "There go the Tommies. God bless them." And on he went with the third point of his sermon. He often polished his bald head

with a hankie while making the most serious comment. One time, he said with tears in his eye, "You know, people, what will be the greatest miracle of all when you enter heaven? That Jan Voerman will be there, too." I have never had a pastor like him since. He was a real *mensch*.

### Heaven and earth

I naturally gravitate towards people who embody the doctrine of salvation by laughter. I am freely quoting Henderson in this editorial because I consider him a soul mate in his respect for humor. He writes, "Because humor is tied so closely with everything that is important in life, it has a religious dimension.... For while our minds explore the mysteries of the universe, our bodies are firmly attached to earth.... Life is full of embarrassing reminders that while we are only a little lower than the angels, we are also only a little higher than the worm." Amen, brother angel and brother worm.

Humor is a gift of grace that teachers should avail themselves of at regular intervals. Don't let the weight of your profession prevent you from brightening up your classroom with a few silly antics. "A little silliness can create a better 'feeling tone' in your class," writes Elizabeth Millard in *Humor Can Be a Serious Strategy*. "Andrew Malcolm, an art teacher in my school, feels that sometimes his pupils start taking things too seriously. Occasionally he will fake a heart attack when a student makes a small mistake, then have everyone come to help him up. They correct the mistake as a group. He loves to ask his students, 'You must be really smart students, or am I the greatest teacher? Which is it?' You know the answer he always gets!"

We know from the Sermon on the Mount that those who *mourn* are blessed. But blessed also are those who can laugh at themselves.

Bert Witvoet

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# LAUGHTER IN THE CLASSROOM: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

by Bill Boerman-Cornell and Jeff DeVries

*Bill Boerman-Cornell and Jeff DeVries are teachers of English at Illiana Christian High School in Lansing Illinois.*

Brett appears to be sleeping. His head is cradled in his arms and resting upon his desk. I ask him if he can explain to the class why Hamlet didn't kill his murdering stepfather when he had the drop on him. I figure, at that moment, that I have gotten the drop on Brett, caught him napping. But Brett's head pops up and, with bright clear eyes, he explains how, according to Hamlet's theology, the fact that Claudius was in the church, asking forgiveness, means that killing Claudius would send him straight to heaven, which would be more a reward than a punishment. Brett ends his insightful comment with a smile, and I realize that he has snookered me. I throw back my head and laugh as does the rest of the class, recognizing that Brett is far smarter than he pretends to be. Our collective spirits are lifted.

Two weeks later, it is the end of the cast party, around two in the morning. Finally, the Fall production has closed, and sixty members of the cast and crew, along with four exhausted faculty directors, are celebrating in the gym. When the end of the evening comes, a handful of students are reluctant to leave, including Bob, who has been something of a thorn in everyone's side. In a moment of weakness, and in an attempt to get the students to leave so that I can finish cleaning up and get home to bed, I tell the students that the last one out the door has to give Bob a ride home. There is laughter, followed by a mad stampede to the door, leaving behind a dejected and humiliated Bob. I feel horrible.

As these two scenarios so obviously point out, humor can be both helpful and

harmful to your students, depending on how you use it. We'd like to look at three distinctions between types of humor: stand-up comedy versus making space for your students to be funny; humor that is

we were laughing, not learning. The class's laughter went from being genuine and unrestrained to being forced and resentful in about a week. The problem in each of these cases is that the teacher is using the class for his or her own satisfaction.

Humor must be shared. The best sort of dinner we have ever had is with friends when we tell old stories about ourselves. Everyone takes a turn in the telling, and everyone shares in the laughter. Your class enjoys hearing your funny stories, but they have some funny stories to tell as well. You don't always need to be clever and witty if you can make room for cleverness and wit.

An excellent fourth-grade teacher we know has a joke box in the room, and every day she and her students have "Riddle *de jour*." Students put jokes into the box during the week, and once a day she draws a joke out of the box and reads it to the kids. They laugh each day, sharing in their cleverness. She screens the jokes for tastefulness and humor, and sometimes edits a joke to make it funnier. This creates a safe atmosphere for the students to try out their joke-telling abilities.

We read aloud from journals in my classroom a couple of times a week. Though students can write whatever they wish — and we frequently hear passionate arguments, touching narratives, and inventive fiction — it doesn't take the students long to realize that exaggerated stories often win them laughter from the class. If the humor is at the expense of another person or group of people, I use the humor as a springboard to discuss how laughter can be a hurtful thing, too.

Any time you ask students to turn content from a textbook into a presentation, you provide a space for them to be funny. Some of the driest introductions in our literature



superimposed upon the content versus humor that flows from within the content; and humor that harms versus humor that heals.

## Selfish versus shared humor

Almost everyone can recall from some time in her education, a teacher that thought he or she was funny, but wasn't. I can recall a teacher who told the same joke every year at the same point in the unit, causing the class to groan. I remember a teacher who had only two jokes and used them repeatedly throughout the year. But, actually, the worst of all, was a teacher who was actually quite funny, at least at first. This teacher did a stand-up routine each day that rivaled Seinfeld, but by the third day it got real old real fast. Even as young teenagers, we could recognize that



book have provided the goofiest dramas. One of my favorites was a group of students who presented a game of Win, Lose or Draw as a review of some material. One contestant would draw beautiful, clearly detailed drawings of precisely the thing being reviewed, and his team was unable to guess correctly. Another student drew a very rough sketch of a butterfly each time, and his group would say things like, "Oh, I know: Is it that Voltaire who was arguing against the philosophy of Optimism because he had seen so much pain and suffering and could not accept the humanist notion that this is the best of all possible worlds?" Of course, each time the second group guessed, they were exactly right.

We've included some suggestions about how to make space for your class to be funny, but it may be helpful also to bear in mind these general guidelines as you model humorous techniques for your students. First, stories are generally funnier and more personal than jokes. Second, a little self-

deprecation shows your students you are at ease with your own faults and goes a long way toward winning your audience over (some of the most fertile ground for humor is making fun of yourself — and it provides a good humbling experience too). Third, remember that humor is not the most important strategy in your classroom. Viewing it in such a way will distort your content. Remember the big picture. Help them to see this, too, by teaching them what humor is appropriate and what humor is not. Screen their ideas whenever possible, or, in the event that someone says something hurtful, talk about it in an encouraging, yet firm critique afterward.

#### **Added versus integrated humor**

From whence flows this healing stream of humor? Well, we'd argue that there is more than one tap. An effective teacher knows when to draw from which tap. Like water from different wells, different kinds of humor have a different taste.

The coolest, cleanest, most refreshing waters come in humor that flows from the content itself. Plays like *The Taming of the Shrew* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are tremendously funny and need little or no embellishment from teachers. In such cases, merely helping your class richly visualize what is happening is enough. That done, a good teacher gets out of the way, makes herself invisible.

And, for this technique to work, the material under study need not be comedies by the greatest English playwright that ever lived. Much material that we teach, at all levels, is rife with humor and playfulness. Teaching logic to students? Have them read Thomas Paine's *Crisis*, #1 while trying to identify logical fallacies. They'll soon pick up on his false analogy, comparing King George to a house thief. Such inflammatory rhetoric, at least from a certain angle, is very humorous. And that humor can be underscored by having students write their own false analogies

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## **Practical Ways to Make Space for Humor**

### **The Dating Game with Jane Austen**

This assignment works well not only with Austen, but also with any novel or true event that involves romance and marriage. Have students construct an episode of "The Dating Game" or of "Eliminate" in which the characters play the game.

### **Oprah meets Napoleon**

Again, this assignment works well with almost any book. Have students construct an episode of some talk show (Oprah, Jenny Jones, Jerry Springer) that revolves around the literary, biblical, or historical characters. What issues would the characters be discussing? What other guests might Oprah invite onto the show to promote a lively discussion?

### **The Clothing Makes the Student**

Keep a ready supply of costume and prop items in a file drawer. I have several hats, a cane, two plastic swords, a shield, three

hideous witch masks, costume jewelry, a crown, and several silk scarves. When doing any sort of drama, try to get kids reading in costume. It helps them distance themselves from the character, and they typically are more willing to cut loose from the worries about looking cool. Oh, and drag is always a successful device. I find it almost impossible to do Hamlet without at one point or another asking the biggest, toughest boy in class to play the part of Ophelia.

### **Student-produced Drama on Video**

Nothing makes drama more fun (or funnier) than getting up on your feet and performing it. As a closing project, give students the option of filming one or several scenes from a play you are reading. Encourage them to be creative in devising sets, props, and costumes. Remind them that they can dub in a soundtrack. History or Bible teachers might try the same approach in their work. The results are often surprisingly effective.



about King George. The more outrageous the fallacy, the better. Soon you will be reeling with laughter.

Or if you are teaching Bible, help students see God's sense of humor. The Bible is rife with stories of irony (think of the story of Gideon's pathetic yet triumphant army) and zippy one-liners, too, (consider Jesus' talk of the Pharisees straining at a gnat but swallowing a camel or Paul's call for those preaching circumcision to go the rest of the way and emasculate themselves). Even biology contains its own humorous content. Can anyone look at a duckbilled platypus without smiling?

"But what about math or chemistry?" one might ask. "Can humor flow from content there?" Maybe not (though, neither of us being teachers of those subjects, we are not about to say that it is impossible). Certainly some subjects do not contain a great deal of humor within themselves. In such a case,



a good teacher can superimpose humor from the outside. Perhaps no better example exists than TV personality Bill Nye, the Science Guy. Through witty banter and high energy shenanigans, he has kept both kids and their parents glued to their TV sets while he instructs them on everything from magma to magnesium, from bacteria to brontosaurus. And Bill Nye is merely one reincarnation of that favorite teacher all of us remember, the one who could take even the driest, dullest material and, through



her own vibrancy and humor, burn away the dross and leave behind a lesson of pure gold.

If there is a danger for teachers in this category, it is that we might be inclined to forget that humor is superimposed on material only insofar as it will aid students in learning. Some teachers begin by adding humor to a lesson for the sake of engaging students, but by the lesson's end, they are seeking student laughter simply because it makes them feel good to hear students laugh.

Perhaps one final type of humor is humor at the expense of the material being studied. Here's an interesting question: is it ever appropriate for teachers to mock the material they are teaching? Clearly there is danger here. If we ridicule the very thing we want our students to learn, we may undermine our own efforts. Why, as a student, should I learn something that even the teacher thinks is stupid?

## Puppets

Students can demonstrate their understanding of various texts and historical events, often with great hilarity, when using puppets. The puppets put just enough distance between the students and their audience that they feel free to let their hair down a bit. One has never appreciated Robespierre and his Reign of Terror until he's seen a woolen sock decapitated.

## Decapitated Barbie

This is odd, but it does make the classroom a more inviting place. One of the leftover Barbies from a student project had her head ripped off. That head made its way to my chalkboard where it hung in one corner. We drew a speech balloon off to the side, and Barbie provided both wonderfully clever non sequiturs and other such nonsense ("I think that chicken tastes like ... chicken!") as well as running commentary on school, local, and international news. Great fun.

## Whiteboard Paper Doll for the Post-modern Set

On one end of my whiteboard is a laminated picture of a man's head and face. Every week, someone dresses him in a costume (dragon, astronaut, beggar, clown, lumberjack) and then writes a headline or snatch of dialogue or thought balloon. Whatever is written and drawn establishes a theme. Then all week people are free to add drawings and written text around it. For example, the dragon drawing inspired a Hobbit theme, and all dialogue had to be written in rhyme. The process of starting drawings is fairly organic and is open to all. Like Decapitated Barbie, the Whiteboard Paper Doll takes no class time, but it encourages creativity and makes the classroom a place where students come even during their break.

## The Dumb Show

Ask students to convey some story (the story of David and Goliath) or some concept (the process of evaporation, or perhaps



Recognizing that danger, we would recommend this type of humor be used very sparingly, perhaps not at all. An example: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a fundamental piece of our cultural heritage, and people with a high school education should have encountered it somewhere along the way. They need to know it.

Still, I (Bill talking) dislike allegories in general and *Pilgrim's Progress* in particular. It is tedious, overbearing, and simplistic. To try to pretend that I think it is a great piece of writing strikes me as hypocritical. When I teach it, I tend to mock it. My satirizing helps my students to understand that not all people like the same things, and that's okay. At the same time, however, I make clear that John Bunyan's "masterpiece" is something with which they need to be familiar if they want to be culturally literate.

Is this approach the right way to go? We aren't sure. We are certain that humor flowing from content is indubitably the best kind of humor for the classroom, and that humor superimposed on content, when

used correctly, runs a close second.

### Hurting versus healing humor

Humor has great power to be edifying — to build up not only material but students themselves. Much of education seems to involve defining oneself. Certainly high school, which both of us teach, seems to consist of an endless stream of masks that students try on to see which identity suits them. Perhaps one task that Christian teachers have is to help them to recognize who they really are, or who they can be.

The first way we can do this is by showing how we respond to the masks they select for themselves. Laughter, though it can certainly be derisive, is more often a sign of approval (think about a baby who has just glopped mashed potatoes onto the floor — if the baby's siblings laugh at its antics, what does the baby do next?). Many high school students would do almost anything for the laughter of their friends — even if that involves something dangerous or illegal. So the first step is for teachers to consider carefully what they laugh at. If Josh is

joking with his friends that he has so much homework to do, he won't be able to see a movie until after he has graduated, a wry grin from a teacher can be a good sort of approval, building up in Josh his identity of himself as a scholar. In contrast, if the same teacher comes upon Jeannie, joking with her friends that she worries that she won't be able to tough out her nicotine fit until the end of school, even a quick grin from the teacher, while perhaps meant to convey sympathy, will soon be construed as approval of her destructive habit.

The second thing we can do is sometimes help students construct those identities. If Cody seems painfully shy and we worry he will never be able to talk to anybody, let alone make any friends, but we find out he put in long hours working on the sets for the play, a little exaggeration may help Cody get noticed. Telling the class that if they come see the play, they will be amazed at the detail in the sets. And, further, telling them that Cody put in over a hundred hours a week, actually sleeping on the stage, and using the hot glue guns to heat his coffee

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the transitive property), but they must do so for the rest of the class without using any words at all. This exercise forces students to think creatively, visually, and kinesthetically. It also produces a lot of laughs.

### Composition

Writing assignments are such an easy and valuable way to allow for humor. Here is a list of possibilities:

#### Writing Dialogue

My freshman need to review how to punctuate dialogue, and they need to learn how to use it effectively. After talking about these matters, we practice by writing a conversation between Dr. Kildare, a successful psychiatrist, and Joey Epstein, a hypochondriac and nervous wreck who is also a patient of Dr. Kildare. It seems that Joey is visiting Kildare because he's upset over the tragic death of his pet hamster, Winnie. I don't have all

the details, but the death somehow involved a tweezers, a bowling ball, and a vacuum. Write the conversation.

### Parodies

While studying satire, my seniors read numerous parodies. At the end, students must produce a satire or parody of their own. The parodies of magazine advertisements are usually so funny that students from all my classes flock to the bulletin board where they are displayed. Other parodies that have proven popular include parodies in the style of Anglo-Saxon poetry and, in the drama department, parodies of school plays.

### Vocabulary Practice

This could work for any class, even science classes. Write a list of ten to twenty vocabulary words on the chalkboard. Next ask one student to think of a noun, one of a verb that takes an object, one an adjective, another an adjective, another a noun,



each morning, you will help Cody get noticed in a way that affirms him and the drama program.

If Susan loves pretending to be the ditzy cheerleader, we might gradually begin pointing out to the class times when she is not as ditzy as she pretends, helping them to see past the mask and on to something else.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but in all of these areas, we need to tread carefully and deliberately. Comments we toss off to our students as quickly as they occur to us can result in resentment, and anger, since they sometimes seem more a matter of mockery than a compliment. Oh, come on, we might think, my students need to learn how to take a joke. In truth, though, jokes are supposed to be enjoyable, not something we need to learn to endure somehow.

Humor can also heal in a group situation. Even the most divided class, if it can be



made to laugh together at the same thing, begins to forge a bond. And sometimes the subject students are laughing at can bring forgiveness and apology with it. One of my senior students had made a big mistake his junior year. He had run for class office and then chose to use his final campaign speech in front of the school to make a mockery of the process. Without intending to, he lost a lot of trust that day. When, during his senior year, he read a journal entry mocking his foolishness, then reflecting on how he had since matured, he won a lot of that trust back.



It is useful, too, to talk with students about what makes things funny, and whether laughter is always a good thing. I have talked with my students about dirty jokes, ethnic jokes, and racist jokes, and how they attempt to bring together the people laughing at the joke by excluding the people about whom the joke is made. We have talked about how hard it is to not laugh at such jokes. We have also talked about how insider jokes, though they can bring a group of friends together, can also make them appear to be cliquish or exclusive.

Humor is a gift from God that can help bring people together, heal old wounds, keep us from taking ourselves too seriously, and build brothers and sisters up in the Lord. It can also be a curse, dividing us, opening wounds, causing us to be more self-centered, and causing hurt to our brothers and sisters. All teachers should pray for the wisdom to be able to discern between the two extremes. ☺

and another an adverb. They must keep the words to themselves. After all of them have a word, solicit their words and write them on the board to form a sentence : adj. + noun + verb + adj. + noun + adv.. The sentence is usually silly. Students must then write a story that somewhere includes that sentence and that also includes the list of vocabulary words.

### Writing Business Letters

To teach your students how to write business letters, read sample letters from the Jerry Seinfeld book *Letters from a Nut*. The letters in the book follow all the conventions of business letters, but they make absurd requests. Using these letters as a model, have students write their own business letters to different companies to see if they can get an actual response.

### Parallel Structure in the Twilight Zone

The following idea comes from a book called *Image Grammar*.

Give students the introduction to the classic television series *The Twilight Zone*, noting the use of parallel structure. (*There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears, and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call . . . THE TWILIGHT ZONE.*) Have students create a parody in which they fill in the blanks above (underlined here). Their subject may be a subject from school (math class, history class, lunch, a sport) or from an outside interest (a sports figure, a political figure, a novelist, a mall). A fun way to introduce or to review parallel structure. ☺

Bill Boerman-Cornell and Jeff De Vries



## Last Exit from Bedlam, or VanderMeer's Complaint

by Wilbur Kaarsvlam

*Jan Kaarsvlaam, the usual writer of this column, is in jail for civil disobedience following an action he organized to protest the unfair treatment of lobsters in his local seafood restaurant. To Jan's eternal regret, the lobsters he released from the tank in the lobby of Armando's Seafood apparently wandered out the door and into traffic, causing a trucker to panic and drive his eighteen-wheeler full of hogs into the regional IRS office. Because Jan is under a suicide watch and is not allowed any pencil or paper in his cell, he prevailed upon his older brother, Wilbur, to write this issue's column. Wilbur was a classroom teacher for 28 years, but recently left teaching to start a tanning parlor. Wilbur wishes his readers to know that he likes stamp-collecting and is considerably more serious than his younger brother.*

"April is the cruellest month." The words kept flashing through Christina Lopez's mind as she sat in the hushed murmurs of the faculty lounge at Bedlam Christian High. She had just taught T.S. Eliot's poem on sexual longing and impotence yesterday, and, as always, his powerful words haunted her well after she closed the book. But this April the words stung with a special poignancy. This morning principal VanderHaar had called a special meeting at 7:00 am. At that meeting, a tearful Wally Friedman, the school's business teacher and resident computer technician, had confessed to touching some female students inappropriately in the past. Then, into the stunned silence, he muttered an apology and a request for the forgiveness of his colleagues. Several of them leaped to their feet, eager to show Christian forgiveness to their hurting colleague. With hugs and tears, Wally passed from the room. VanderHaar had explained that a female student had lodged a complaint and that students would be informed of Mr. Friedman's indiscretion and dismissal during chapel that morning.

And now it was the end of the school day. Principal VanderHaar had handled the chapel with surprising grace, but it had, of course, been awkward. The students had looked shocked, hurt, and angry. A few, perhaps, bemused. Christina had found that her colleagues, on the other hand, had seemed more detached. It had been hard to continue through the day, hard to concentrate on journal writing and introducing the research paper to the sophomores. The hardest thing for Christina, however, was this moment at the end of the day, sitting in the teachers' lounge, listening to her colleagues quietly addressing the news of that morning.

"What's hardest about this is what we don't *know*," said librarian Jon Kleinhut.

"What do you mean?" asked shop teacher Gord Winkle.

"Well, a lot depends on the circumstances, you know. For example, what do you think 'inappropriate' touching means?

Sometimes I want to give a student a supportive hug, but in today's politically correct atmosphere, I could end up getting my pants sued off. Pun intended."

"I know what you mean," said Gord. "We don't know anything about the circumstances. I mean, how do we know this girl didn't make the whole thing up?"

Jane VanderAsch looked up from the papers she was grading, "I don't know which student we're talking about, of course, but I'll bet that if you look at the parents of whoever the alleged victim was, you'll know a lot about what really happened. Let's face it, this sort of thing doesn't happen to nice girls."

Kleinhut nodded in agreement. "You know the old saying: it takes two to tango."

"I just feel bad for Wally," said golf coach Red Carpenter. "I mean, his career is over. And now he'll have to move and change churches, or else deal with people talking about him behind his back all the time. Poor guy. One bad decision, and he pays for it for the rest of his life. That just seems unfair to me. Or at least unchristian."

Christina thought about that. She entered the conversation for the first time. "That's what's been bothering me. I wonder if there is some way we can let Wally know that we forgive him, that we still accept him."

Kleinhut had been waiting to talk for some time and jumped in now. "It is just such a crime. Wally's been teaching for what, sixteen years. And just last year he won the Rotary Club Teacher of the Year Award. Seems a shame to flush a career like that down the toilet. And all for what? I suppose the administration knows the whole story, but I am betting it wasn't all his fault. The way some of these girls dress and the way they flirt — it is surprising it doesn't happen more often."

Cal VanderMeer cleared his throat uncomfortably. "You know, Wally is an adult, Jon. I find it hard to believe that an adult man was tricked and manipulated by some teenage vixen. Seems to me it is more likely things happened the other way around."

Gord Winkle followed that one up. "You don't know that, Cal. And how do we know this wasn't a senior girl? She may have been eighteen. Their relationship might have been consensual."

"I don't know if I'd go along with that, Gord," said Christina Lopez. "Isn't any relationship with an authority figure considered abuse? The playing field isn't level, so a consensual relationship isn't really possible."

"But even if that's true, Christina," chimed in Red Carpenter, "Shouldn't this victim, or whatever we are going to call her, have followed Matthew 18 and gone to talk with Friedman, given him a chance to apologize, instead of going to the board and ruining a good man's career? Where's the Christian mercy in that?" The

assembled faculty was quiet for a moment.

But Kleinhut wasn't done yet. "The thing that burns me up the most about this is that he hasn't been given a chance to face his accuser. Where's the due process of law in all this? Maybe this girl had an axe to grind. Maybe she had it in for Friedman from the beginning. Hey, for all we know, she may have led him into this thing so she could get him later. I mean, we don't know anything about her."

Cal VanderMeer had been quiet up to that point. Now he spoke. "I can actually tell you something about the victim, if you want to know." The room fell silent again. Cal cleared his throat again and went on, "The victim is Carla — my daughter."


Christina Lopez drew her breath in audibly. Carla VanderMeer had been an excellent student. A little shy, perhaps, but a good kid. She had dressed a bit more conservatively than most of her peers. Christina also remembered how Carla's grades had taken an inexplicable nose-dive during her senior year. She looked up and surveyed the faces of her colleagues. Kleinhut stared down at his hands uncomfortably. Carpenter's jaw hung open with shock. Winkle, who was a good friend of Friedman, stared back at him with something that Christina thought bordered on contempt. And it looked like Cal didn't care. He had heard enough.

"Two years ago, my daughter was sexually abused by Wally Friedman. She did not 'lead him on.' Nor would most of you who taught her characterize her as 'the little tramp' you keep imagining led poor Wally astray. You want to know specifically what happened, but frankly it's none of your business. She did nothing, NOTHING, to bring this on. And she has suffered enough. We're not going to turn her life into a tabloid to satisfy your voyeurism. Notice your buddy Wally isn't bringing up details of what happened either. He'll pretend that's because he's taking the high ground, but you'd be foolish to believe it."

Cal rose from his seat and leaned on the table with both hands. "Teachers don't touch students. Period. Wally is without excuse, and if you really care about him, you'll stop making excuses for him. Besides, what right do you have to offer forgiveness to someone on behalf of a victim? And, Red, what you are saying about Matthew 18 makes no sense. That passage is talking about disputes between people. This isn't a dispute; it is a crime. Did you ever read Matthew 18, Red? The beginning of that chapter talks about what to do if your hand or foot causes you to sin. Maybe you ought to take a look at that. And if you think Carla hasn't shown mercy, think again. Wally, by state law, ought to be sitting in jail right now."

Cal blew out a deep breath and stood up straight. He wiped back the hair from his forehead with both hands and finished. "I don't expect I'll change your mind on any of this. Fine. Think

what you want. But keep it to yourselves. In your classes, in the hallways, in the teacher's lounge, there are victims of abuse. Think what you want, but shut up!"

And with that Cal departed. No one said a word. Christina began to cry. April is the cruellest month indeed. 







# taking humour seriously

by Jeff Hall

*Jeff Hall (hall@covenane.edu) is vice-president for academic affairs at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia.*

Humor works. It does not take much reflection to realize that those who control various media and advertising have recognized the value of humor. Humor engages the audience, provides release, and inclines a favorable response from viewers. Humor has value — even monetary value. In a social context in which humor is so readily and mercenarily employed, how should teachers think about and use humor? When is humor appropriate in the classroom? How should we shape it in a way that is beneficial to learning and that honors God's desires for our lives?

Humor in the media is ubiquitous. We have grown to expect to be entertained by the humor of television advertisement. Perry (1997) performed a study that indicated humor in commercials promotes recall and purchase intention. Humor engages us and has become profitable for business communication.

Despite our enjoyment of much of the humor in the media, we all know that we are laughing at some things that just should not be funny. The National Television Violence Study (1997) states that humor is present in nearly one-half of violent scenes on television. The people at Mediascope.org (2000) speculate that humor so used minimizes the seriousness of violence. Of course there is plenty of humor which uses for its content sexuality and promiscuity. Much of what we find funny would be condemned when held up to Paul's standard in Philippians 4:8 — those things which are true, noble, pure, lovely, and admirable. In light of this pathology, educators face challenges to use

humor appropriately in the classroom and to shape a godly sense of humor in the hearts of students.

## Benefits of humor

As you may suspect, the decision makers in the entertainment industry are likely on to something regarding the utility of humor. Cornett (2001) lists eight potential benefits of humor for the learning process:



- \* Humor involves problem solving and higher order thinking skills.
- \* Relevant humor increases content retention.
- \* Teacher-initiated humor can create a positive, supportive environment.
- \* Literacy and communication are developed through humor.
- \* Word play and figurative language can be encouraged.
- \* Humor reveals diverse cultural values.
- \* An intimacy arises from spontaneous humor.

Students are motivated by teachers and

settings that have an engaging sense of humor. Positive attitudes and relationships in the social setting help students in their learning and in their friendships. With humor as a lubricant, students can deal with the awkwardness of childhood and adolescence in a way that maintains dignity and enables them to develop appropriate coping strategies.

## Taxonomy of humor

Although humor may be thought of in a number of ways, the three broad categories of unexpected events, unusual puzzles, and the human condition can be used for a rough taxonomy. Unexpected events often strike us as funny. In my first experience as a teacher, I was given a classroom clock that had the habit of unpredictably falling off the wall. When the time piece would drop, the class would erupt in laughter. The sheer surprise of the unexpected broke the rhythm of classroom instruction and gave us a laughter break. As the teacher, I sometimes fully appreciated the event and at others I perceived it as a nuisance.

Unusual puzzles can take the forms of riddles, puns, word plays, jokes and the like. Typically the listener or reader is involved in a three-step process of cognitive arousal, problem solving, and resolution (Cornett, 2001). Perhaps this type of humor is most likely to be a part of a lesson plan. Students can use humorous puzzling to explore and present concepts related to nearly any area of study. An appropriately humorous worksheet or activity will excite the class, leveraging social interactions while drawing attention to academic content.

Finally, the human condition, rightly perceived, can be the source of much laughter. In its highest form, this type of humor is exhibited when someone is



willingly vulnerable and the observers recognize the situation. Bill Cosby's portrayal of a visit to the dentist's office evokes raucous laughter as we identify with his situation. Our laughter affirms his and our human condition. There is a certain level of general acceptance or even hope that we have when we share common experiences in self-disclosing manners. Of course this is fertile ground for a sense of the gospel as we allow the weakness of our imperfections to give testimony to the strength of Jesus.

### Appropriate humor

There are at least two senses in which humor ought to be appropriate: developmentally and ethically. In the developmental sense, our classroom humor ought to be apprehensible by respective audiences. In the ethical sense, humor ought to build up students and convey a faith-based optimism about our future.

As young people grow and develop, their sense of what is funny matures. Cornett (2001) uses the theories of Piaget, Kohlberg and the like to construct a developmental sequence of humor. She says that children two to four years old are likely to find distortions of objects and words, rhyming and nonsense words to be funny. Children four to six years old find body functions and noises, taboo words, clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, chanting, and misnaming to be funny. Surprises and exaggerations as well as simple riddles are funny. Youth who are seven to eight years old start to understand that words are not literal and find practical jokes and other's discomfort funny. Preadolescents from nine to twelve years old begin to enjoy concrete puns, conventional jokes, and deviations from the norm. This age also witnesses the onset of sympathetic humor and the first inklings of laughing at oneself.

Humor is also used for personal ends as a channel for negative feelings. Beginning with the teen years, adolescents enjoy creating good-natured humor, including sarcasm and self-ridicule. A more complicated sense of humor emerges at this stage, such as embracing irony, satire, kidding, joking, parody, and verbal wit. Teenagers and adults are more likely to use humor to save face.

This developmental sense of childhood response to humor has only to do with "getting the joke." Such an understanding helps us to know what students may find funny at various stages. In addition, we must be careful to develop classroom practices that promote a healthy sense of humor that honors those in our community in a manner befitting image bearers. There is a sense in which we simply need to make sure that our humor arises out of our love. As we laugh, we should be celebrating an optimism that originates in the gospel. We can laugh at ourselves or find humor in the midst of our challenges because we know the ultimate outcome and know that we are deeply loved by our God. Laughter should demonstrate a pleasure in life and in its peculiarities.

### Reshaping what is funny

As I mentioned earlier, we sometimes find ourselves laughing inappropriately. It is imperative that teachers take an active role in defining the bounds of humor in the classroom. Rather than an extensive list of do's and don'ts, perhaps one biblical principle can suffice. Humor that grows out of love for God and neighbor is appropriate and encouraging, and humor that does not, is not. "[T]he things that come out of the mouth come from the heart." (Matt. 15:18a)

Of course, there are so many models of inappropriate humor in the society and the media that all students – and teachers for

that matter – have very likely developed some bad habits of heart and humor. The teacher should overtly narrate humor as it unfolds to help students see what is appropriately funny and what originates from a selfish or spiteful heart.


### Practical suggestions

Here are some practical suggestions for enhancing or implementing humor in your classroom:

- \* Have a joke of the day (appropriate to the age level of the class).
- \* Consider adding a dose of humor to routine assignments.
- \* Be aware of developmentally appropriate humor.
- \* Make a habit of laughing yourself.
- \* Tell more stories. Students are attentive to narratives, and you can increase engagement with a humorous twist.
- \* Model humor with other teachers in the presence of your students.
- \* Be patient as students learn what is funny as they try out their "humor wings."

With a sense of grace and assurance, you can use humor to create a classroom environment where learning is more engaging and relationships are more intimate.

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# Cultural or Moral Relativism in CEJ Humour?

by Bert Witvoet and friends

*We received two letters to the editor a few months ago in which the authors complained about a back-page article that appeared in the December 2004 issue of CEJ, an article written by Paul Theule, principal of Rochester Christian School and entitled "Pablo's Putterings." It turns out that two of our readers thought the item was lacking in taste and should not have been published in the Christian Educators Journal. They failed to see the humor in it and basically want either the editor or the writer or both to apologize to the readers of CEJ for stooping low. Apologizing is a painful matter at the best of times, especially, if you're men, as Paul Theule and I are. It is never easy to apologize for one's mistakes, but to ask someone to apologize for his sense of humor is almost like asking him to commit suicide. Don't ever ask a body to admit that his or her sense of humor is wanting. It's the epitome of losing face. What are we to do?*

*Well, since this issue is all about humor, we may as well have it out here. We have decided to use an exchange of letters between the editor and Darryl De Ruyter, principal of Pella Christian High School, as the basis of an article in this issue of CEJ. At the end, we will add the letter of the second reader, Jerry Roukema of the London District Christian High School, and a final response by Paul Theule. That way you, the reader, can judge for yourself whether we made a mistake in publishing Paul Theule's item in the December issue. We don't expect unanimity, of course. Nor do we want to make it a matter of who's right and who's wrong. Humor often is in the ear of the hearer.*

*Here follow the exchanges.*

Dear Mr. Witvoet,

I very much enjoy reading the CEJ but was surprised and offended when I saw the "Pablo's Putterings" piece on the back cover of the December 2004 issue. Although the piece might be considered funny by some, I believe that it doesn't honor the profession and calling of a Christian educator. The references to skinny and fat people and their lunch restrictions are particularly offensive, and the description of what would happen to a teacher who spends too much time in the restroom is very crude and inappropriate, in my opinion, for a Christian education publication.

Another issue that comes out in the piece is the notion that it is the board and/or administration against the faculty. Although this is often the case in the public school setting, particularly at contract negotiation time, Christian schools must work for a spirit of unity and cohesiveness among all

levels of work and responsibility.

I am disappointed that the CEJ would make such a poor choice and print such a piece. And to put it in such a prominent location is equally surprising. I am having a great deal of trouble understanding how this piece "fits" with the Statement of Purpose of CEJ, because it certainly does not communicate to all educators who are "committed" to the idea of Christian day school education ... that they are appreciated or that they hold an honorable "office" in God's kingdom.

Please share this with your other editors and I would appreciate a response so that I know you received this note.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this particular issue.

Darryl De Ruyter, Principal  
Pella Christian High School

Hello Darryl De Ruyter,

Yes, I did receive your letter and I did take a bit long answering you. As a matter of fact, I contacted the author, a fellow principal of yours, to see what his take was. He apologized to me for causing offence. Not that I asked for that, because I take full responsibility for printing his article. But he could see your point, especially after talking to his wife. (Ah yes, we do need our wives to straighten us out once in a while.)

I myself can appreciate your concern also, but only up to a point. I certainly don't think that the profession has been attacked. Irony is a favorite device for humor and is never to be taken at face value.

I wonder if there is a difference between American Christian and Canadian Christian sensitivities. I have noticed that before. What you would consider crude, we would often simply consider down-to-earth. Did you know that in the Bible, in the Hebrew language, one particular passage refers to men as "those who piss against the wall"? Does that offend you? It does not offend me one bit.

Paul Theule, by the way, was a principal in Calgary, Canada, for some years. He was probably corrupted by that experience.

I don't want to argue humor. It cannot be defended against those who don't appreciate it. Besides, different cultures, different humor. But there is one thing I rail against, and that is political correctness. Obesity is a real problem in our society, and it would be helpful if we courageously addressed it as a problem. Once in a while we do need to acknowledge that some people are fat, and others, like me, are skinny.

But I need to take others into consideration. So I do apologize to you for offending you. Sincerely,

Bert Witvoet



Mr. Witvoet,

Thank you for the reply and your apology. I appreciate your response to my concerns and especially your efforts to contact the author to seek his position and context for this piece. You are right, if we would just consult with our wives more often we would probably keep ourselves out of some trouble.

There may very well be a difference in cultural humor between those of us from the States and you fine folks in Canada. All of my uncles and aunts and cousins hail from Ontario (St. Catharines, Strathroy, Simcoe), and I have experienced this "difference" first-hand for years. I should add that I enjoy their humor and love them dearly...eh!

As an avid fitness enthusiast and former health/P.E. teacher and coach I am well aware of the obesity problem in the western world and have devoted much of my life and career to combating this and other forms of "temple-destroying habits." I agree with your comment that "Obesity is a real problem in our society, and it would be helpful if we courageously addressed it as a problem." I don't believe, however, that satire and sarcasm are very "courageous" ways to address it. In fact, it is a cowardly and unloving way to address it. My original comments had *nothing* to do with political correctness. They have everything to do with responsible Christian journalism, an activity which, I believe, should reflect, whenever possible, the Truth of God's love and grace for humankind (even for people who are obese). I'm sorry, but this article does not responsibly address the obesity issue in that context. Perhaps I should write a piece for an upcoming CEJ that does address this issue directly and lovingly.

A final word of caution that comes in

response to your comment about not wanting to argue humor because of "different cultures, different humor." I think it very appropriate and necessary to argue humor if that humor is offensive to God or his children. To "justify" the humor as culturally acceptable borders on moral relativism. Be careful not to tread too closely to that line, because it can be a slippery slope.

Bert, I appreciate the opportunity to electronically "argue" with you about this. I am very fine with the notion that we can agree to disagree. I know that we both share a common faith and a common calling as servants in and for Christian education. I hope that I have not offended you and, if I have, I apologize. What I do hope is that this exchange has prompted both of us to be discerning and to respond appropriately following the principle set forth in Matthew 18. I welcome your response to my response and will give you the honor of having the last word if you want it.

Merry Christmas to you, and may you find joy and peace as you celebrate the light and life that Christ's birth gives to us.

In his love and service,

Darryl

Hi Darryl,

Thanks for your gracious reply. You allow me to have the last word. I don't know whether I want that. I could let the matter rest right here. But I am mindful of the fact that we are going to discuss humor in

the school and classroom in the April issue of CEJ. And that prompts me to think that our little exchange might be useful for that issue. If you agree, then I propose that we carry on a little longer in the same vein of respect your letters have shown, and that, in the end,

you will have the last word. Until I hear from you to the contrary, I am assuming that you are okay with that, and I will therefore respond.

You wrote that you don't believe that "satire, sarcasm, etc. is a very courageous way to address [obesity]." I totally agree. But what Paul Theule wrote in good fun about restrictions on lunch breaks does, in my opinion, not even come close to satire and sarcasm. Satire and sarcasm are biting and vicious forms of critique. What Theule was doing was being a little playful. No way was he launching a destructive campaign against skinny people (like myself) and fat people (like 50 per cent of the population). And he certainly was not being personal in his little piece.

Political correctness invades every corner of our discourse. We dare not speak plainly anymore for fear of offending some overly touchy sensibility. My advice to people who are afraid to refer to people's body shape is "Get a life!"

And as for the reference to restrictions on the use of restrooms, I thought it was hilarious and very decent. As urban elites we have become so civilized that we lose touch with the obvious and common. Wouldn't it be ridiculous if a farmer said that his cow was going to the bathroom (restroom for you Yanks, bathroom for us Canucks) or that his stallion was "sleeping with" a mare? Ah yes, the euphemisms we use to maintain our dignity.

You express a word of caution about my





*...humor. It cannot be defended against those who don't appreciate it.*

statement that I don't want to argue about humor. "To 'justify' the humor as culturally acceptable borders on moral relativism," you wrote. If you mean humor that is offensive to God, I must, of course, agree, whether I like it or not. I can't argue with God, at least not very successfully. But to tie that in with cultural differences goes too far. Of course, cultural differences create relativism, but not of the moral kind. Cultural relativism is a rather pleasant fact of diversity.

I must admit to you, though, that humor is often a tricky thing. It's very playful and, therefore, not as safe an activity as being straight-laced and literal. But I have no intention of always playing it safe. That would make life boring. And boring myself and other people is, in my book, a cardinal sin, next to being self-righteous and legalistic. But as a result of my love for humor, I often get into trouble as a writer.

Some years ago, I wrote about an experience I had while visiting one of my sisters. I stayed overnight and was told that the bed I was to sleep in was my parent's bed that our family had brought over from Holland to Canada in 1950. As I lay in bed, I realized suddenly that I was sleeping in the bed in which I had been conceived on a cold September night in 1933 (I was born on June 11, 1934. You do the math). As I reflected on that in a later article, I expressed the wish that my parents had had fun making me. Well, you should have heard the response of some readers. Did I have no respect for my parents? Yes, I did, and I do. The funny thing was, my mother, when she read it, thought it was hilarious and loved it. My father could not read it because he had passed away in Holland just after World War II. But could he have read it, he, too, would have enjoyed it immensely. His friends used to call him Charley Chaplin because of his humorous dramatic skits at weddings. Need I say

more? When it comes to my "inferior" sense of humor, I blame my parents.

So, Darryl, your slippery slope warning about moral or, what I would call, cultural relativism, has stiff competition from my incurable desire to have fun. My main argument for humor is that those who appreciate it (I have yet to meet a mortal who does not lay claim to a sense of humor), are set free from the desire to take themselves too seriously, which is a slippery slope all by itself. When we playfully joke around, we say to God, "You're in charge, you take care of things. I don't control them." Does that mean we never sin while joking. Is the pope Catholic?

**Bert**

**Hello Bert,**

Thanks for the re-reply. I did get your earlier e-mail prior to the break, but then I was off to California to visit family for the entire break and busy beginning a new semester here.

It is obvious that you and I will need to agree to disagree on this specific attempt at humor and perhaps on humor in general. What you see as "playful" I see as potentially hurtful. And if as a Christian there is the potential to hurt others, especially other brothers and sisters, then I think we need to be extremely careful and cautious. It has NOTHING to do with political correctness in this case, although I agree with you that we have gone way too far with political correctness in many areas of mainstream society.

I still believe that this failed attempt at humor (or whatever else you wish to call it) is very inappropriate mainly because of who the audience is. I also believe that the CEJ should edify and support those of us who have dedicated our lives and have answered God's call to serve as Christian educators. I think for the most part, CEJ does a good job of doing just that. I think CEJ blew it with this one and I think that

an apology from the editor for offending any readers is in order.

I am not fat, obese, or even overweight. In fact, I am a diehard runner (10 marathons) and longtime P.E. teacher and (soccer) coach. I certainly recognize the obesity problem in the West and have worked hard to instill in my students the need to care for their bodies (God's temple) "...which is a spiritual act of worship (Romans 12)." I am certainly not afraid to refer to someone's body shape as fat or skinny or whatever, but it should be done in a proper context, especially in a Christian publication. If we want to make a point about something, then we need to speak the truth, but it must be done in the context of love ... not sarcasm. Again I disagree with you on whether or not Paul's writing is sarcastic. I think it is. If CEJ wants to do a piece on obesity, then publish an article on that subject. I would be willing to write it or help with it.

Now remember that the obesity issue was only part of my initial concern with "Pablo's Putterings." I don't want you (or me) to overemphasize that particular part of the article. I also took offense to the bathroom humor. Again, I think we will simply need to agree to disagree on whether or not that was funny.

But remember that just because something is funny doesn't mean that it is appropriate. There will always be cultural differences, and we ought to appreciate that. It would be very boring if every culture was identical in how it functioned and is fashioned. No argument from me on that one. But for Christians, and particularly Reformed Christians, there is a moral fiber that doesn't have much elasticity.

My fear is that, as mainstream society continues to slide down the slippery slope to moral decay, Christians might slide along with them until that fiber breaks and we get to a point in which we believe we can



say what we want, do what we want, and think what we want, and somehow find a way to justify it in our minds. Perhaps I am beginning to get too deep so I will stop here.

**Darryl**

*This ends the exchange between Darryl and myself. But, just when I thought I had established that Canadian Christian sensitivities differ from American Christian sensitivities, a letter comes along from a teacher in London, Ontario, who shatters my precious assumption all to bits. Apparently irony does not always work north of the border either. Here it is.*

**Dear Mr. Theule,**

The average Christian schoolteachers don't worry too much about their attire; they have far more important things on their minds, like curriculum and working with God's kids. However, should you want to imply that we are paid well, then you ought to do a comparison with what the public school teachers get. I don't know about Rochester, but in Ontario, we do on 67 per cent of what our colleagues in the publicly funded systems get paid. I don't know what Prada sneakers are.

Yes, we get a nice holiday in the summer, Christmas and March break. Then again, I don't see too many other professions where people take their work home with them one to three hours a night. Furthermore, most people work in situations where they have one to four projects going at a time. We've got 23-35 of them going all the time — they are called students. Try that on for emotional well-being 11 months of the year. Then, again, I work at London District Christian Secondary School. This past Saturday, four of our teachers spent the entire day coaching teams at tournaments, not to mention the practices. But, oh, they appear to be "personal days."

I am appalled at your Lunch Break comments. First of all, God doesn't make "unhealthy" looking people, skinny or fat. We cannot, we may not, get into the looks discussion. We have already cursed our young females with the "Hollywood image" of skinny. Slim Fast has never been a healthy option; diet pills are semi-evil.

The sick days item isn't funny. I don't know about you, Paul, but I work with a bunch of Calvinists who drag themselves to work out of a sense of duty and obligation. Perish the thought that we are dogging it.

Your complaint section was simply silly. My complaint would be to the editors of CEJ who think this article is worthy of "our" (it is ours — we do pay for your drivel), usually excellent magazine.

Who is Pablo? He should retire.

**Jerry Roukema**

**London District Christian Secondary**

*Well now, that puts me in a pretty pickle. I'm going to have to contact Pablo and ask him to retire. But before I do so, let me give him an opportunity to respond.*

**Bert,**

Wow. This April Fool thingy, which surfaced a year ago in Rochester, certainly has taken on a life of its own, and now I'm being called upon to both repent and retire. It's all about humor, or the lack of it, either in the writer or the reader.

I reflect upon my teaching in Lithuania each summer. I have students in class each year from at least four countries in the area. This past year they came from Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and the Ukraine. I've had Poles, Estonians, and Belarussians as well. I have worked in many countries of the world and have enjoyed much humor. One type is to poke fun at people bordering each other, and when such folk intermarry, the humor in the home is most delightful.

However, in the post-Communist world in which I teach each summer, such humor is completely absent. I have probed this void several times and find they don't have it. It just doesn't exist.

I've concluded that this void is the result of a history of suspicion and caution, of disappearance and extermination. Perhaps, then, the measurement of the health of a culture is found in its breadth of humor. Canadian culture in that sense is much healthier than that of the US. Costa Rica beats them both hands down. Where else could a radio station hold a contest for who can find the biggest pothole, award the winners, and name the potholes, the first one after the president and the second after the Minister of Public Works!

Please let me try to be clear. First, as a veteran administrator, I fully realize that Christian school teachers are unsung, underpaid servant heroes — totally depraved, to be sure, but heroes nevertheless. Second, I am not laughing at Christian school teachers; I'm laughing at myself as one of them. I know from my own experience how the staff dress code is checked out on the first day on a new job, or the cars in the parking lot. I know very few teachers ever come close to taking their allotted personal days. I know well that a true "lunch break" for teachers is pure fiction for people of any size, and that "normal" means white Anglo-Saxons in Massachusetts. I know that sick teachers more often report to work than call in sick.

And the restroom? Let's be honest: Where else during the amazingly intense school day can one have a moment to himself, to rub the eyes, to take a deep breath, only to have a frantic colleague knock on the door to hurry up. Nowhere can a teacher have a moment of peace!

Just thinking. ☺

**Paul (Pablo) Theule**  
**The Corrupted American**





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## Highlighting God Glimpses

Nancy Knol teaches English and Religion at Grand Rapids Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI. She is co-author of the book *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents. Most days you can find her in Room 219.*

In ninth-grade Religion, we have a small speech component called a "God Glimpse." Basically, the students are asked to give a prepared speech about a time when they were conscious of God's presence in their lives. As teachers, we are well aware of the different levels of spiritual development in high school students, so we include two assurances. One is that there may be some students present who are not even sure if God exists. Having said that, we ask them to talk about doubts, or, perhaps, a time when they at least *wondered* if God was at work in what was happening. The other is that the glimpse may or may not be a dramatic one.

Most of our students have not had vivid God glimpses because their lives have (so far) been spared great suffering. The "megaphone" of pain that C.S. Lewis wrote about has not yet been turned in their direction. These speeches are my favorite component of this class, and, even though it is a somewhat daunting assignment for the students, I think they would agree.

One student spoke of seeing God when he goes hunting with his dad and uncle. He said, "I don't really like shooting that much, although it is kind of exciting, and we enjoy the deer meat later on. The best part of going hunting is being out in the woods." He spoke of feeling God's presence in nature more powerfully and directly than anywhere else, "even church." Perhaps beauty is another megaphone.

Another student was very clever with his God Glimpse. He brought in his clarinet and put it together incorrectly, which resulted in the piece he played sounding pretty pitiful. Feigning surprise, he said, "Oh, I see! I just need to do a little adjusting here. Let me try again." Then he played the same piece, correctly this time, but pretty mechanically. Finally, he said that the music still wasn't quite right because it didn't have any "soul." He played the same piece one last time, interpreting and pouring himself into it this time. It was really quite beautiful. Having done this, he spoke of his spiritual development.

Probably my favorite God Glimpse was given a few years ago by a girl who brought her "blankie" from childhood with her. She sat on a stool in front of the class, spread the tattered grey remnant of a baby blanket over her lap, and smiled. "This is my 'pookie,'" she began. "It has been with me everywhere." Once, when she was sleeping at a friend's house for the first time, she had to call her mom to deliver her blanket so that she could get to sleep. After a bit, she paused, looked over the class, and asked simply, "What is our only comfort in life and in death?" She had caught us, and the remainder of her speech was a simple but eloquent testimony of trust in God's love for her.

Two of my colleagues recently wrote a letter to *The Public*

*Pulse* — the editorial column of our local newspaper. They were writing in response to

an article about charter schools providing a good moral education for children. Allow me to share a few quotes from this fine letter:

"We applaud their emphasis on morality. At the same time, it is important that parents do not get the false impression that ... charter schools are actually Christian schools.... Like public schools, Christian schools teach values; however, they do so from a distinctly Christian perspective grounded in the Bible. Children are taught ... that they are image-bearers of Christ.... Parents make great financial sacrifices to send their children to parochial and other Christian schools. In a faith-based school, children rub shoulders every day with Christian teachers, who have the freedom to say, 'You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If you let your light shine before men, it will give glory to God the Father.'"

This is what we are about. I am thankful to both my students and my colleagues for each and every glimpse of God I was afforded by learning with them. ☺



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# Can Childlike Wonder Be Maintained?

*Clarence Joldersma (cjolders@calvin.edu) professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the Dot Edu panel about wonder. "Often students are pressured by society to go to school for utilitarian reasons only: to prepare for a good job, to make lots of money later, for power or status. That kind of spirit shows up as 'Is this going to be on the exam?' Christian education often includes the goal of getting students to enjoy learning, be curious about life, about the world, and to have an inner desire to know more. How can staff and students alike maintain a childlike wonder about the world we live in?"*

## March 7, 2005

Clarence, the best way I know to do this is for teachers to be genuinely interested in what they teach. This is hard because sometimes we are required to teach subjects that are not our first love. However, I believe we can spark that interest in ourselves by continued study on that topic. The history teacher who is intensely interested in local history will show that enthusiasm by the stories she tells. The reading teacher will share his enthusiasm by telling his students what he read over the weekend. Being genuinely interested in our students is another way of keeping the wonder in teaching. Trying to be people-centered in a materialistic world is difficult but something we all should strive for each day.

Pam



Pam Adams

the sea, a zoo, whatever. Simply talking about the wonders of science, literature, music, art or math does not do the full job. One must take students out of the classroom and expose them to the "stuff" of each subject. This is to create wonder. I have taken an art class to the zoo to draw gorillas. I take a group of students to Europe or to some other far-away place each year. They learn about others, see art and architecture, taste food and experience a multitude of other things they will never forget. These kinds of experiences do not promote wonder about how much money or success there will be in their futures, but they open the eyes of students to the world, to other people, to God, and to his creation. And no Internet site can equal this.

Agnes



Agnes Fisher

## March 9, 2005

Clarence, one way to keep wonder in the students and teachers alike is to involve them in an experiential way in the world of their subject area as often as possible. I would recommend as many hands-on and observational assignments as possible. This might mean field trips to museums, nature centers, a lush forest,

## March 11, 2005

Clarence, I think it is a great deal easier if we don't watch TV very often. Going outdoors, noticing things, meeting people and marveling at them make this important approach to life come out much more naturally! Books are good for this, too.

Tony



Tony Kamphuis





Clarence Joldersma

## March 15, 2005

Tony, I support your idea of the addition of books. Books give us experiences we might otherwise never have as well as entertainment, education and, perhaps even friends. But how do we get the average person (student in our case) to read the whole book?

Agnes

## March 19, 2005

Hi all. Fostering a sense of wonder at God's creation is what Christian education is all about. As you say, Agnes, getting their hands dirty in the 'real' stuff is so important. Psalm 111:2 says: "Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them...." A Christian teacher leads his students to revel in the wonders of creation. As they do this, teacher and student alike will exclaim: "O Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth." The doxology in Romans 11 sums it up so beautifully. This is the God we serve!

Only teachers who themselves have seen this glory can pass it on to the next generation.

Calvin DeWitt from Au Sable sang the doxology of "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...praise him all creatures here below" as part of his keynote address at one of our conventions. A crucial part of our role in praising God is to praise him for his wondrous works and mighty deeds. We saw God's wonders through Calvin's eyes, since he has spent his entire lifetime pondering the works of God. We need teachers like him, who are passionate about their subject and so are able to lead their students in awe, wonder and praise to God.

Johanna



Johanna Campbell

## March 21, 2005

Hi all. The question and the thoughtful responses prompted my thinking about learning, motivation, development and performance — the age-old issues in schooling.

Certainly the reality of motivation and management by grading plays into your question. What other method is as efficient as grades to hold students accountable for the routine practice and time management steps necessary for skill development and

learning assignments? And we do have to be efficient to be effective, right?

At the secondary level, the reality of moving on to college, where admissions and funding filter through GPA and test scores, make these questions a bottom line issue for our students' immediate future. Talk about an authentic application!

Also, I wonder if wonder is all it is cracked up to be? Don't the developmental folks — even Egan and others — remind us that, as kids get older, they learn in a different way. It's about cleverness, humor, intricacy, creating, synthesis, expression, debating, solving problems, resolving issues, more than just wondering. Wonder may be a starting point, but then we move on.

Lois



Lois Brink

### The panel consists of:

**Pam Adams** (padams@dordt.edu), professor of education and director of graduate education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

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

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

**Agnes Fisher** (agnesfisher@easternchristian.org) is a teacher of English, Humanities and Art at Eastern Christian High School, North Haledon, New Jersey.

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



# The Gap Between Vision and Practice in Christian Education

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## Part II

by John E. Hull

*John Hull teaches at The King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta. This article has been gleaned from an article entitled "There's Christian Education and There's 'Not Exactly,'" published in Christian Scholars Review, XXXII: 2, Winter 2003, pp. 203-224. Because of its length, we are publishing it in two installments.*

Does the failure to bring about a different school model signify the absence of Christian education? A definitive yes, it seems to me, would denigrate the past efforts of classroom teachers and researchers dedicated to the transformation of Christian schools. I am not prepared to go that far. I know only too well how much my own teaching was shaped by the biblical perspective implicit in major curriculum projects such as *Joy in Learning*<sup>15</sup> and *Man in Society: A Study in Hope*.<sup>16</sup> In addition to these trail blazing curriculum projects, I am indebted to educators like Al Green<sup>17</sup>, Geraldine Steensma<sup>18</sup>, Harro Van Brummelen<sup>19</sup>, John Van Dyk<sup>20</sup>, and Nicholas Wolterstorff<sup>21</sup> who applied vision, educational philosophy and curriculum theory to particular educational reforms. I have no desire to diminish the significance of these mileposts on the road to establishing a Christian alternative education. Nevertheless, I must remain steadfast in my conclusion that no biblical model of education has materialized because of them.

### Confusing concepts

Let us continue to assume for a moment that Christian education should eventually lead to a new kind of education as the neo-Calvinist, transformational vision implies it must. What prevents those who hold to that vision from developing such a model? Our main conceptual categories certainly

interfere. We habitually distinguish between a "secular" and a "sacred" domain, and our struggle to define and implement Christian education is deeply rooted in our ambivalence about where it fits in this dualism. The term "Christian" primarily refers to persons — those "religious" folk who follow Christ through their adherence to biblical beliefs and their conformity to practices like regular church attendance and daily devotions. Within the confines of the sacred realm, we may also speak meaningfully about Christian art and music, Christian agencies, Christian organizations, Christian relationships or Christian acts.

Problems arise as soon as we attach the adjective "Christian" to activities, roles, institutions, or anything else remotely associated with secular life. Who knows, for example, what Christian jazz, Christian politics, Christian business or Christian plumbing might entail? We may be acquainted with Christians who happen to play jazz, who hold political office, who own businesses or who do plumbing for a living. The fact that they are Christians may make them compassionate, sensitive to justice issues, honest or hard working. But, when we compare what they actually do in these capacities with non-Christians similarly engaged, we assume that jazz is jazz for the musicians, government is government for the politicians, economics is economics for the business owners and plumbing is plumbing for the plumbers.

### Dominant cultural landscape

Conceptually, the relationship between faith and the structure of these tasks is dubious. Thus, when singer Amy Grant made the switch from performing contemporary Christian music to secular pop music a few years back, she stopped being *a Christian musician* and became *a Christian and a musician*. Similarly, the term Christian teacher only has a clear

meaning in the limited context of "religious education." Outside that context the person is an educator and a Christian.

Nothing jars our conceptual patterns when Christian education connotes the teaching of doctrine, ethics, life-style, church history, catechism, and Bible stories. But to stretch the application of Christian education to include the sciences and the academic subjects derived from them makes about as much sense as advocating for Christian plumbing. Concepts like Christian psychology, Christian mathematics and Christian social studies quickly slip through our mental grasp. Even the idea of a Christian view of an academic discipline has proven difficult to explain.

We have trouble grasping the concept Christian education because in our liberal environment education is education, is education. Everyone expects traditional subjects to remain the same for teachers of all persuasions. In fact, faith (or any other kind of indoctrinating impulse) must be de-coupled from learning before one can even claim to be educated. Simply saying the two are harmoniously brought together in Christian schools flies in the face of the way people normally think. Consequently, all our attempts to articulate what a biblically-based Christian model of education means fall outside the comfort zone of our conceptual landscape.

### Limited application

Our inability to conceptualize the scope of Christian education runs parallel to a second obstacle, the inconsistent implementation of our schools' vision statements. Our problem is not that we lack vision but that we are in the habit of setting artificial limits on faith-learning integration. According to Christian education rhetoric, Christian perspective transforms every facet of the school. But



## *“Must education be different to be Christian?”*

Holmes<sup>22</sup> has identified four approaches to faith-learning integration. These four relate to each other like concentric circles, each one more inclusive than the one preceding it. Holmes says that in the smallest circle faith-learning integration impacts our attitudes toward learning. From there, faith ripples out to encompass first the ethical dimensions of education, then foundational perspectives and, finally, worldview.

Christian school educators favor the worldview approach to faith and learning integration, but we typically integrate faith on one of the three smaller scales described by Holmes. According to Badley, this drawing of the line on faith's role typifies even the most outspoken integrationists. He identifies an Evangelical and a Reformed way of copping-out on full-scale faith-learning integration. Evangelicals, he contends, endorse personal transformation to the exclusion of a foundational perspective while Reformed educators are guilty of the reverse.<sup>23</sup> As a result, faith-learning integration rarely combines faith-inspired thought with faith-inspired action.

This mixture of conceptual and visionary ambiguities seriously affects our understanding of Christian education.

### **Degree of distortion**

Consciously or unconsciously, most Christian school educators adhere to Kienel's<sup>24</sup> *principle of decreasing distortion*. According to this principle, the further we move “down” the curriculum ladder from the “higher” studies of theology, philosophy and history to the “lower” fields of biology, physics and mathematics, the less distortion from unbelief we meet. Underlying this principle is the assumption that natural sciences exhibit a normativity that resists human deformation. By contrast, the so-called humanities and social sciences are

predisposed to distortion. Thus, the latter subjects require progressively greater applications of Christian perspective to be redeemed. In this scheme, a Christian approach to social studies makes sense, but a Christian slant to physics does not. Somewhere along the spectrum of academic disciplines the distortion factor must move from the acceptable to the unacceptable, but the discipline that contains this line of demarcation remains a mystery. The need for this line at all reminds us how vulnerable we are before the categories of philosophical dualism.

Without a philosophical framework that accounts for the unrestricted interplay between faith and learning as implied by our vision statements, Christian school educators will continue to confuse *Christians educating* with *Christian education*. We will keep on applying faith in ways that may improve upon, but which do not fundamentally change the basic priorities of education. Until we find what we are looking for, Christian education cannot supply biblically grounded answers to humanity's questions of ultimate educational concern: e.g., What is worth knowing? Who is a good student? What is good teaching? How should the curriculum be organized? What is the purpose of education? How should students be evaluated?

### **Why be different?**

But what if our main assumption is wrong? What if Christian education need not be substantially different from the public school model? Wolterstorff is one of the few Reformed thinkers who seriously argues for this point of view. He thinks it more fruitful to define Christian education by its fidelity, not its difference:

Faithful scholarship will, as a whole, be *distinctive* scholarship; I have no doubt of that. But difference must be a consequence,

not an aim. And if at some point the difference is scarcely large enough to justify calling this segment of scholarship a “different kind of science” — *Christian science* in contrast with competitors which are *non-Christian* — why should that, as such, bother us? Again, isn't *faithful* scholarship enough? Difference is not a condition of fidelity — though, to say it once more, it will often be a *consequence*.<sup>25</sup>

Wolterstorff questions Kuyper's basic thesis that there are two kinds of people, hence two kinds of science in all the disciplines, hence two kinds of education. This manner of thinking, Wolterstorff argues, stems from Kuyper's “one-directional, non-interactionist view of the relation between religion and the practice of scholarship.”<sup>26</sup> Some people are regenerated and enlightened by faith in God, and the rest are shaped by a faith in man. This so-called “expressivist” vision of life dates back to the Romantics who believed human activity and life are simply expressions of the self.<sup>27</sup> Wolterstorff's problem with this Romantic way of thinking is the one-way, one-to-one correlation between the tenets of faith and structural change. What Kuyper's underlying philosophy fails to consider, claims Wolterstorff, is the following:

Science is not solely an expression of the self. It is likewise the outcome of the impact of the world on us, coupled with the impact of the social practice of science. Self, world, social practice: it is from the interplay of these three that science emerges. It is true, indeed, that out of the heart are the issues of life — but *into* the heart go the issues of life as well.<sup>28</sup>

### **A third alternative**

When Wolterstorff rejects the idea that Christian education must necessarily be a different kind of education, he does not opt for Christians educating. If Christian

education should not be defined by its difference, why would he conclude that it should be defined by what it adds? Wolterstorff has a third possibility in mind when he says Christian education should be defined by its fidelity.

The suggestion that Christian education can be faithful without being fundamentally different from public school education could serve as a liberating concept for those weighed down by the responsibility of building a new educational model. Reformed Christian educators, in particular, have grown up with serious misgivings about what Christians and non-Christians share in common. Perhaps the time has come for Christian school educators to see school reform in a different context, what Mouw describes as "our search for the grounds of commonness ... motivated by a faith that cuts against the grain of much of contemporary life and thought."<sup>29</sup> Even so, at the point where educational philosophy meets daily practice, these essential questions still require answers: What does faithful education look like? What obstacles stand in the way of implementing a faithful education? What can we do to remove these obstacles? An unexpected source of wisdom can help our search for these answers.

### Public schools instructive

Christian school educators on both sides of the border have generally ignored efforts to improve the public school. Our apathy may be linked to the reformers' lack of success. But, it probably has more to do with the feeling that whatever ails the public school and resists amelioration does not



hurt the Christian school's capacity to deliver a Christian education. Generally, Christian school educators feel immune from the inherent weaknesses exhibited by the public school. Simply stated, we do not think we face the same kind of problems that public school reformers do. Christian schools have eliminated some of the problems that Christians previously encountered in the public school. Unfortunately, these improvements have also encouraged Christian school educators to underestimate the ability of entrenched assumptions, values and priorities to limit the overall impact of Christian perspective. Christian educators, I believe, can learn from the experiences of public school reformers because they take the obstacles confronting substantive reform more seriously than we do.

When Christian educators step back from their own work and direct their attention

toward the literature on public school reform, they cannot but be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of it. The vast and conflicting viewpoints contained in these writings resist comprehensive analysis. However, virtually every school reformer shares the judgement that "the conventional school must be changed" and makes the empirical claim that "the conventional school defies being changed."

Generally, reformers also hold to the view that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public schools in Canada and the United States have been embroiled in a tug-of-war that pits the advocates of a *traditional* approach against the proponents of a *humanistic* education. In simple terms,

traditional education means formal instruction in the liberal arts. By contrast, humanistic education connotes a child-centered, less structured and open-ended education. Both sides have generated numerous school reform movements in an effort to advance their respective ideals.

### Charges of irrelevance

Reformers with the traditional, scientific bent think educational problems are technical in nature. Their solutions typically involve the careful conceptualization, design development, and dissemination of new curricular packages. Not surprisingly, traditional school reformers hold to the motto: "The better we know how to do it, the closer we come to realizing our educational goals."

Following John Dewey's lead, critics have accused formal, traditional schooling of the following: fragmenting knowledge





and rendering education irrelevant to the lives of students,<sup>30</sup> mutilating the child's spirit,<sup>31</sup> oppressing the creativity and freedom of the individual,<sup>32</sup> subjugating the have-nots by reproducing in the school the social and economic stratifications of society that block upward mobility,<sup>33</sup> breaking down community by sorting students into artificial groupings,<sup>34</sup> promoting one type of knowledge and learning style to the exclusion of others.<sup>35</sup>

Humanistic educators promote individual freedoms for students and less control from teachers. Their qualitative approach to learning substitutes a more diversified, contextual program of study for the customary, measured curriculum with its dependence on percentage-based grades. From the traditional point of view, the humanist program of education leads to lower standards of excellence, a depreciation of culture, and a lack of social

accountability.

Recently, some have recast the long-standing conflict between the ideals of science and technology over against those of personal freedom into the language of paradigm warfare.<sup>36</sup> Those who favor the status quo, modern-objectivist-quantitative-positivist-scientific tradition are vigorously pitted against reformers who seek to implement the ideals of the post-modern-interpretative-qualitative-hermeneutic-humanistic perspective.

### **Much rhetoric**

Rather than dismiss the history of public school reform, Christian school educators should reflect upon its relevance for them. We are naïve if we think the technical tradition in education is easily accommodated or transformed. If the humanist camp, which shares the same ideological lineage, can barely carve out a

space for its priorities within the prevailing technical model of schooling, then the task of Christian school educators to establish a biblically based school model that transcends them both poses a far greater challenge.

When I look at what has happened to the humanist agenda in education, I see the pattern for what transpires in the Christian school movement. Humanist rhetoric is strong in theory — accounting for roughly half of all recent publications on curriculum development. The clarion call for more relevance has opened up temporary spaces for portfolios, diverse learning styles, and integration of students with different abilities, but these additions are quickly throttled by deeper commitments to quantitative evaluation and program prescriptions. In the contemporary classroom, science and technique prevail against the rhetoric of visionaries that seek to make education more human and more relevant.

### **Paradigm wars**

The challenge that confronts those who teach in the Christian school movement is clear and simple: provide students with a Christian education. We know what Christian education means in general; it refers to an education transformed by a biblical perspective. I have argued that Christian school educators habitually settle for something less than Christian education. In practice we implement a smaller vision, what I call Christians educating. Factors from within and without the Christian school movement contribute to this visionary downsizing. Based on insights derived from the literature on public school reform, I interpret the situation in the Christian school movement to be a replica of the one encountered more widely by humanist educators in the public school. Like them, our best efforts to transform

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## “We must engage in paradigm warfare.”

our schools to suit our educational ideals meet heavy resistance from an unreceptive paradigm.

What can Christian school educators do to strengthen their commitment to Christian education? How can we prevent our gap challenge from deteriorating into gap problems? What can we do to make the education delivered by Christian schools more faithful and probably more distinctive? If my assessment of the situation is correct, then we must engage in paradigm warfare. To do that we have to understand the boundaries and limitations presented to us by the reigning educational paradigm. We also have to concentrate our efforts on key battles.

### Concrete terms

Philosophically, we need to reconcile the issue Wolterstorff raises. Will we persist in thinking that Christian education must be different by intent, or should we be content with difference as a consequence only? If the ultimate test for Christian education rests with its fidelity to Scripture rather than adding to or being fundamentally different from the status quo, then we must figure out what faithful education looks like at the school level.

It seems probable to me that a faithful education can express itself in many ways. If faith is another word for biblical perspective, then we need more and better examples of what teachers and students actually “see,” “hear,” “know,” and “do” by faith. Should the impact of faith result in transforming, healing, cleansing, sorting, correcting, affirming, deepening, focusing, separating and prioritizing, then we must be able to show these in our teaching, curriculum planning, student evaluations, goal selection and in the way we structure the school situation. If we cannot describe faithful education in these concrete terms, Christian perspective will continue to

perform like bookends — God talk will appear at the beginning and end of lessons, units, courses and school years, but what lies in between will remain largely unaffected.

### Endnotes:

<sup>15</sup>Arnold DeGraaf and Jean Olthuis, *Joy in Learning* (Toronto: Curriculum Development Center, 1976).

<sup>16</sup>Ary DeMoor, et al., *Man in Society, A Study in Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Schools International, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>Al Green, *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education* (Colorado Springs: Association of Christian Schools International, 1998).

<sup>18</sup>Geraldine Steensma, *To Those Who Teach* (Terre Haute, IN: Signal, 1971.)

<sup>19</sup>Harro Van Brummelen, *Stepping Stones to Curriculum* (Seattle: Alta Vista College Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>John Van Dyk, *The Craft of Christian Teaching* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Task and Invitation,” unpublished conference paper Toronto: Christian Schools International Conference on Christian Education, (July 30 and 31, 1992).

<sup>22</sup>Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>23</sup>Badley, “Two Copouts,” pp. 115-118.

<sup>24</sup>Paul Kienel, *The Philosophy of Christian School Education* (Whittier, CA: Association of Christian Schools International, 1971). p. 34.

<sup>25</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, “On Christian Learning,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, Richard Mouw, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 70.

<sup>26</sup>Wolterstorff, On Christian, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup>Wolterstorff, On Christian, p. 72.

<sup>28</sup>Wolterstorff, On Christian, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup>Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in all That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup>T.R. Sizer, “High School Reform: the Need for Engineering,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 64, June (1983): 680.

<sup>31</sup>Charles Silberman and Ann Silberman, “Hearings, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Part 1A,” in Glenn Smith and Charles R. Kniker, eds., *Myth and Reality: A Reader in Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), p. 39.

<sup>32</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing Corp, 1983).

<sup>33</sup>S. Bowles and H. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

<sup>34</sup>Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine Revisited, Policy Since 1945* (New York: Longman, 1989).

<sup>35</sup>Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>36</sup>Nathaniel Gage, “The Paradigm Wars and Their Aftermath: A Historical Sketch on Research on Teaching since 1989,” *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 2 (1989). Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder, “Curriculum Studies and the Traditions of Inquiry: The Scientific Tradition,” *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, Philip W. Jackson, ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 41-78. [ef](#)





# It's Important to Stay Current

*Tena Siebenga-Valstar is a principal at Fort McMurray Christian School, Alberta. We encourage teachers and principals to submit questions for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your questions to Dr. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2, or e-mail her at tvalstar@telus.net.*

## The extra straw

### Question #1.

What can we do about teacher workloads? Every year we seem to add more and more to our loads (curricular content, teaching strategies, extra-curricular tasks, more at-risk and high-need students), yet we never seem to take anything away. Too many teachers are far too busy and stressed, particularly since we as teachers are not very good at saying “No” or “Stop” because we are so committed to our students and communities. I see this as a huge concern. What can we do?

### Response:

Your concern is likely echoed by many teachers. I believe we first have to separate those school activities that are professional in nature from those that can be done by someone other than a teacher. When it concerns the school's extra-curricular calendar for the year, there needs to be a differentiation between those tasks which require staff or teacher attention and those which can be done mainly by the parent community. As a staff, you may have to decide which activities are essential to the life of the school and which ones can be eliminated. For example, is it essential that your school's junior basketball team be coached by a staff member? Once you have decided that, the next question is, Who should be the person responsible for the activity? It may enhance school spirit to have a pancake breakfast, but who should be putting in the energy for planning, ordering supplies, actually flipping the pancakes and cleaning up afterwards?

Many of the items which have been added to your workload are associated with the professional responsibilities of a teacher — curricular content, teaching strategies, more at-risk and high-need students. It is our task as a professional to continually be learning for the benefit of our students. I empathize with you when it comes to an ever-changing curriculum content. I am thankful that our province always gives us a year or two lead time before indicating that the curriculum changes are mandatory. Although these changes can create stress for seasoned teachers, it can become a major cause of anxiety for an inexperienced teacher. Just when the teacher seems to have acquired the resources, the

curriculum changes. In situations like this, I believe the greatest help we can be to each other is to collaborate with other teachers in our own school, a neighboring school or in our district. Sometimes the unit content has been taught at another grade level. Through research, teachers may find these units and adapt them to their classroom situation. That is less work than creating the whole unit from scratch.

Sometimes the unit content may change, but the teaching strategies or essential learnings remain the same. Before we adopt a negative attitude toward the change, we may have to examine how big a change is really required. How much is similar to what we were doing previously? Dr. John Van Dyk defines a teaching strategy as “a way of intentionally ordering and organizing the classroom and classroom procedures to help students learn ... [with] the ultimate, overarching goal of equipping for knowledgeable and competent discipleship” (*The Craft of Christian Teaching*, p. 145). All of us use teaching strategies, but maybe the strategies we are using are only reaching some of our students. In order to accommodate the learning styles of more of our students, teachers are encouraged to expand their knowledge and understanding of alternate teaching strategies. Most strategies can be used in all subject areas and at all grade levels. At the end of the day it is a win-win situation for the student and the teacher as both experience greater enjoyment in the learning setting.

I realize some teachers have a hard time saying “No.” Before we say “No,” however, we must consider what factors outside of the school setting are contributing to our stress level, and then prayerfully bring these and our school needs before our heavenly Father, expecting him to give us direction.

**Reference:** John Van Dyk, *The Craft of Christian Teaching*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt Press, 2002.

## The camel's back

### Question #2:

Over the past ten or more years, there have been a number of significant developments in the area of educational research (Multiple Intelligences, Emotional Intelligence, Learning Styles, Cooperative Learning, Four Blocks, Six Traits, Backwards Design, Brain-Based Learning, Differentiated Learning, Mel Levine's work...and on and on). How do we address these issues without burning ourselves out? The pendulum keeps shifting, and new ideas keep coming up. It is very difficult to find the time and space to reflectively and authentically do justice to them all. We are so busy already. Help!



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## Response:

Many of us who till the education field can identify with the concern expressed in your question. As diligent as we may be, it seems the new research findings continue to creep up on us and many times overtake us, sometimes making us feel as though we are left behind. As a graduate student I was able to keep up with many of the new findings. Today, as a volunteer administrator, I do not always find time to keep up with the reading. Encouragement came in an article written by an education professor.

Someone who taught for over 40 years told me that education is a lot like fashion. By age 90 she had seen educational practice come "full circle" numerous times. So how do we determine what is worthwhile and what has no real enduring value? What do we know about learning styles, multiple intelligences, how to teach high-order thinking skills, or guided reading? When we work with children we have an opportunity to try out new ideas (Alexander, J. *A Place for Teacher Education in the Schools*, p. 623).

I believe that, as professional educators, we must "keep up" with what is current in education in order to fulfill our task in a responsible manner. I believe God calls us, just as he calls the children we teach, to use our gifts to the best of our ability. Christian school societies, through their policies and compensation agreements, are also expecting us to keep abreast in our field.


The goal of professional development is the improvement of instruction in our classrooms. Whether required by your state, province or school board, each teacher should propose a yearly plan for his or her professional development. By consulting with the administrator, a teacher can determine whether the goals are attainable and consistent with the school's vision. Setting goals helps us to be accountable to ourselves and others.

I believe it is realistic to explore some of these new ideas each year. Becoming aware of them helps us determine which ones require further examination for implementation in the classroom. Knowing involves doing, so the next step to take is "doing" into the classroom. How can our head knowledge become a reality as we work with our students? Think how this new strategy can enable our students to learn more. Try it out. Even if we examine one new idea per year, we can build on this. Imagine the improvements we can make in our classrooms in ten years. The impact on our students' learning will be even greater if we, as colleagues, work together on the strategy or research finding. We can not remain stagnant in our teaching, but we also have to be realistic in what we can accomplish. Although we do not do our

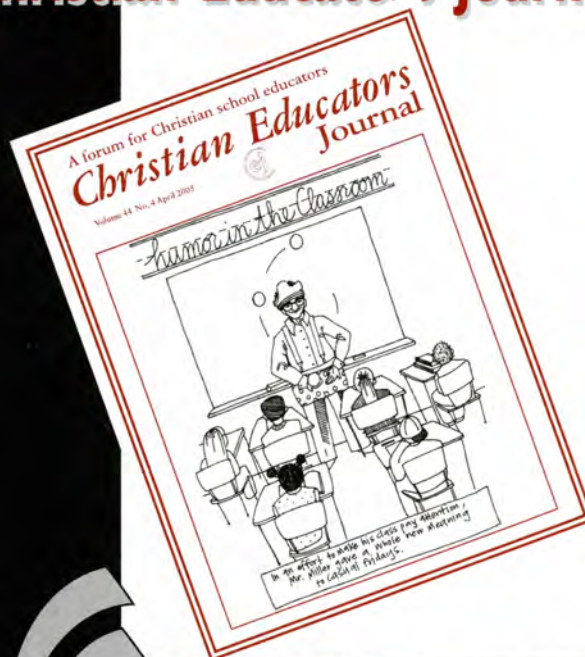
task in our own strength, I believe we do well to accept what Starnes (*Thoughts on Teaching*) says: "Teaching is stressful. It just is. It doesn't matter whether we're teaching preschoolers or doctoral students. Years ago, I embraced the stress as a natural part of the work" (p. 639).

As we rely on the wisdom that comes from God, we can continue in our awesome task. "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit" (Ephesians 3:16).

**Reference:** Alexander, J. "A Place for Teacher Education in the Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, 621-624. 2004.

Starnes, B. "Thoughts on Teaching." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, 639-640. 2004. 

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# Book Reviews

Lester De Koster, *Light for the City: Calvin's Preaching, Source of Life and Liberty*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004. 130 pages + 8 pp. bibliography and index.  
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (Calvin College, Emeritus)

Light for the City flows from the author's lifetime of engagement with the man whom in his family setting he affectionately calls "Uncle John." He has placed us all in his debt through these studies. He has done more. During his tenure as college librarian, he amassed an enormous number of scholarly works and other materials about the Reformation, so that the Calvin Meeter Center has become a site well-known everywhere for its excellent scholarly resources. And his personal collection fills many a shelf in his home. In this book, Lester De Koster invites us to walk and talk with him about the man whom he venerates just short of idolatry.

If you accept his invitation, you had best be prepared for a strenuous workout. In an age when so much of life encourages superficiality, De Koster will enliven and quicken you to think about the most urgent issues humanity confronts — the meaning of creation and of our place and destiny in this world.

Let us accept his invitation, and let him guide us down the corridors of history — history of the Church, of the Reformation, of the West, of the mind and program of John Calvin. Let us listen to him as well as he expands his discourse to talk about the responsibilities of Church and pulpit — especially about the obligation of the preacher to do nothing less than preach into being the true City, modeled, not perfectly, but substantially, on the Geneva which Calvin brought into being through his preaching. The way stations we will encounter on our walk are entitled as follows — with subchapters under each heading: "Who was He?" "Retrospect," "The Sermon," "Some Auxiliaries," "And of Results." But the by-paths attract us as well.

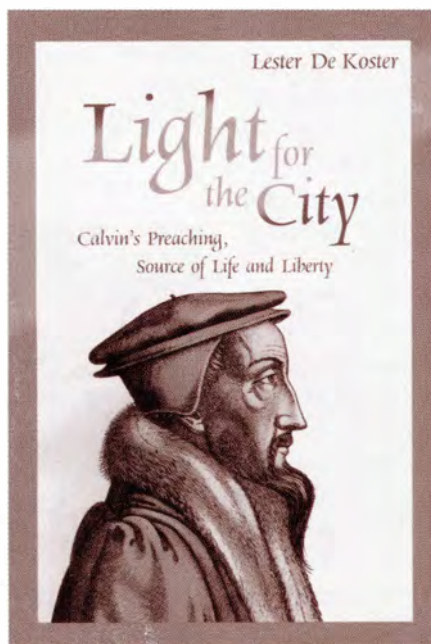
Through his broad reading and mastery of the issues, De Koster illuminates Calvin's biblical vision by comparing and contrasting him, for example, with Karl Marx, who stood on tiptoe straining for some of Calvin's insights but, at the last, forsook his Jewish roots and biblical authority for his self-made program. De Koster also records the affirmations of many — Barth, Troeltsch, Perry Miller, Ford Lewis Battles, among others — who acknowledge that Calvin's system is one of only several viable social philosophies available to us. He is the master of brevity and helps us to understand the genius, goal, and character of Calvin better than do some lengthier biographies. He is adept at distinguishing Calvin's program from the other giant in the land

— Martin Luther. And in agreement with the judgment that Calvin was the most aristocratic of the reformers, De Koster is put off by the mendacity and tawdriness of contemporary evangelical hucksterism.

## In praise or lament

Author De Koster walks a bit faster when he talks about the City — the archetypal vision of what man aspires to at his best — life in community, where people live in amity, balancing their needs with those of their fellows. He acknowledges the pathology of cities, and understands full well that what is best, when corrupted, becomes the worst. Christ weeps over Jerusalem; T. S. Eliot calls the modern city a Wasteland; Dante laments the decline of great cities, such as his beloved Florence, and of Rome. But W. H. Auden thanks the city for its grammar and games and all the other amenities which the city provides for its citizens. And Lewis Lapham (Harper's, February, 2005) reminds us that the appearance of the so-called moral havens of the rural areas is not the same as the reality. So, then, what about the City?

De Koster sets out to baptize the classical sense of the City — Aristotle's polis, Plato's Republic, Cicero's De Republica together with his many orations and correspondence. Augustine's City of God lay open on Calvin's desk as well — the work which distinguishes the community which man builds out of his own self-interest from that in which people are bound to each other in the love of God. All these, and others, perceive that we are wired for life in community. The City disciplines us — through its laws, restraints, common purposes, civic spirit, responsible freedom. Calvin, says De Koster, goes one step further. He would supplement, supplant, and transform this classical inheritance. He would do so by applying the wisdom found in the Bible and preached from the pulpit in such a way that the teaching flows into the very life of the City — every suburb, ghetto, family, household must experience the graces that come from a humanity bound together in communal life. And in insisting on the government's intervention in managing the infrastructure and economics of civil life, Calvin goes beyond Augustine, who emphasized more the structural, hierarchical arrangement of the ideal city.





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### Influenced by fatalism

The author is a friend of mine, from whom I have learned much. I trust that he will be willing now and then to let us interrupt him and to entertain questions — challenges, even. As a career debater, he would best me in any debate. But I take the risk. I say to my good friend, then, aren't you selling short the responsibilities of the Church towards evangelism? Not all evangelism is an assault on our sensibilities, and the New Testament is permeated with a sense of urgency about confronting people everywhere with the loving claims of the gospel. You tie this in with Calvin's idea of predestination — the assertion that the ultimate destination of souls is fixed, and that being so, Calvin is liberated from the task of evangelism to concentrate on the City.

But some of us (I say to him) learned from his friends James Daane and Harry Boer that Calvin was doing some errant speculating under the influence of Greek philosophy when he formulated a doctrine that can be resolved only outside of time. Do you remember (I ask him) Harry Boer's contention that it would be a small matter to assemble several pages of biblical quotations which assume that man is equipped to respond, to choose, when confronted with the gospel?

### Church and State

And about the separation of Church and State. You call this arrangement inimical to man's affairs. In theory, yes. But is it not arguable that, for all the mischief brought about when what God joined together man puts asunder, the condition under which we now live has become a historical necessity — like the divorce that Christ condones for the hardness of hearts?

You also claim that the superiority of the West is demonstrable.

But some of us become uneasy when we listen to friends who have spent some time in China and learn from their students the limitations of Western views. And I must ask you to find a better word than paradox to describe some of the apparent contradictions in our theological formulations. Your injunction for us to live with them discourages the effort of faith seeking understanding. Moreover, the word paradox is a term more applicable to classical thought — to Oedipus's tragedies, for example. His plays, and other works by Greek poets, assume a discontinuity between human agents and transcendent ones. But if we are enjoined to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect, we may assume that God's program and man's response do not contradict each other but, rather, converge.

And why be so hard on Erasmus? True, he didn't inspect housing or order banisters to be placed on stairs in public buildings. But his satires, essays, translations, and correspondence surely abetted the Reformation. And if Calvin had had more scholarly leisure, he might have written a commentary on Revelations. A chapter on the historical context would have been helpful. Calvin had, after all, a double task to perform — to purge the land of the residual, defunct Catholic practices, and to instruct the people in the new wisdom — hence the importance of the Catechism. Would he have done things differently at a different time?

But we have reached the end of our walk. It's time for the hot bath and the towels. Surely we need to resume our conversation, but, in the meantime, we do well to reflect again on how well we are letting this glowing vision of life in The City shape our priorities, loyalties, and loves. Our companion's challenge is bracing — to bring into being the conditions which can make our communities once again Cities of Joy. ☺

Sam M. Intrator, editor, *Stories of the Courage to Teach: Honoring the Teacher's Heart*. Introduction by Parker Palmer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. 338pp. \$23.95.  
Reviewed by Lois Brink, Curriculum Coordinator, Grand Rapids Christian High School.

Parker Palmer, who introduces this anthology of teacher essays, has experienced the despair of teaching. This crisis drove him to re-examine and renew his commitment to his vocational calling. He did this through intensely personal "despair work" in which, to rediscover the essentials of teaching, he peels away the current rhetoric and popular conventions used in education today.

Palmer's pervasive metaphor for teaching is weaving. He sees teachers weaving together their own intellectual, emotional, and

spiritual essences into their teaching. He urges teachers to weave together their love for students and their discipline into powerful learning experiences that include strong connections within the course content, truth seeking, and honest student-teacher relationships. Parker's *To Know As We Are Known* (Harper, 1966) redefines teaching as seeking truth and reconciliation in community. After the bright but terrible early years of teaching, many teachers go through predictable stages. During later stages,



the heart of the teacher may be extinguished or depleted. For some teachers, reclamation and transformation occurs through looking inward, through finding or through restoring relationships and healing through community.

Sam Intrator has been touched by those renewed spirits. His anthology, *Stories of the Courage to Teach*, shares, in the words of teachers, their efforts to reclaim and sustain their hearts so that when they are present in the classroom they can serve their students faithfully, cultivate their own well-being, work towards a common purpose with their colleagues and, despite the many obstacles they face, bring to their work, as Palmer writes, more life and light” (Intrator, l).

### Renewal possible

Intrator selects three approaches which, teachers discover, renew their hearts for teaching. The first section compiles the writings of teachers who in their “despair work” look inward at the source of their former passion for teaching in order to reclaim that passion and focus. Their stories vary. The essence of this section comes through titles like “Experiment with truth,” “Doing small things with great love,” “Despair and Love in teaching,” and “Coming to terms with a lifetime of teaching.”

In the next section of the anthology, the writers voice their efforts to reconnect with students, colleagues, parents, and school. These teachers acknowledge the isolation, vulnerability, and feelings of overwhelming fractures (or, as the writers say, disconnects) in their teaching settings. In response, they discover the power of collaborative relationships which reconnect teachers to their passion for teaching.

Most of this reconnecting occurs with students. Renewal often comes from listening to students, sharing their work, and developing a common sense of purpose. This connecting can occur even from strident encounters. This outreaching prompts responsive teaching. As Intrator puts it, “The emergence of excellent teaching (comes) from a deep center of caring for subject and student.”

The third section looks out at how reconnecting changes teaching and encourages systemic reform. The narratives in this section give evidence of these changes. Palmer’s idea of giving

space for learning is applied to communities of learning for both students and teachers. “Lift every voice” gives examples of how schools work to develop learning communities.

Reconnecting with colleagues changes teaching. There are other connections that also change teaching. A weary principal asks two parents a simple question that leads to The Alaska Discovery

School. The final essay of this section urges educational leaders, from principals to college presidents, to foster these connections.

### Staying in touch

One clear theme in this anthology is the need for members of a connected community of learning to develop strong relationships with each other. Intrator asks, What keeps teachers going in spite of everything? The secret is staying connected and fostering communities where teacher formation can take place. He includes the story of a learning community formed by inquiry groups. Intrator supports Palmer’s idea that communities enable teachers by honoring their hearts. What is a learning community? Why is it so effective? The fourth section of the anthology focuses on how learning community can be developed and why it works. The Jacksons describe the Courage to Teach program that has a vision of personal and professional renewal

for educators. CTT applies principles of teacher formation as developed by Parker Palmer.

The Courage to Teach program offers a staff development model that may significantly change school in-service and school improvement format. What models do we use for staff development? Why have we chosen them? Conventional wisdom? Tradition? “The literature tells us?” As we seek to place all things under God’s Word, perhaps our staff development ought to be shaped by elements that bring us into a reconciled learning community. And, perhaps, as Intrator hopes, participation in learning communities that embrace collegial inquiry, collaboration, listening, responding and support may honor our hearts and transform our teaching. ☪

