A forum for Christian school educators

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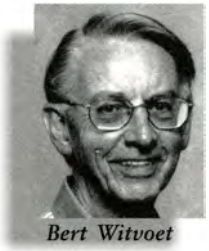
Weighing Success

Editorial

Failure: A Perfect Antidote to Idolatry


Bert Witvoet

It was the evening of May 26 this year when I decided to watch the final episode of the TV series American Idol, even though I had not watched the earlier episodes. Finals always appeal to me because there's lots of excitement in the air. So much is at stake. And you get the outcome of whatever the contest is about that very evening. Besides, since that is the end of the series, you're not likely to get "hooked on" to the whole of it. A perfect formula for someone who is looking for a brief distraction, as I was that evening.

Actually, I missed more than half of the two-hour program, mainly because the superficial nature of the event grated on my dyed-in-the-wool Calvinist soul. But I did tune in again 15 minutes before the end. This half-hearted participation in the event allowed me some freedom of spirit, the kind of indulgence which, in turn, allowed me to remain detached and to reflect on what I saw on television.

The sheer size of the event did not escape me. Apparently 500 million people had sent in a vote! Either people had sent in multiple votes or else lots of people other than Americans had also voted, or both. An estimated 500,000 people were glued to their television sets to hear the outcome. (I was one of them. Yikes!) The tension was thick. The final moment had arrived. Two people were left standing — twenty-two-year-old Oklahoma country singer Carrie Underwood and twenty-nine-year-old Alabama rocker Bo Bice. More than 100,000 applicants had been discarded along the way. From these, only one was to emerge as the American Idol: Carrie Underwood.

Recipe for trouble

Being voted the fourth American Idol is no mean feat. It means instant success. Instant recording contracts. And instant idol status.

It's the idolization of a person that really struck me. This is not an innocent use of the term "idol" that I was witnessing. All the hoopla of adoring crowds, bombs bursting in air and spinning disco balls that surrounded the final song "Inside Your Heaven" (another confusion of the divine and the human) told me that I was witnessing a violation of the Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." The glorification of an admittedly beautiful young woman with a wonderful voice and a warm personality took place not in heaven above or in the waters below, but on the earth beneath (in the Kodak Theater in Hollywood).

I also realized that this young lady's life had changed forever, and possibly not for the good. In fact, her life had become a greater challenge than it had ever been before. With her gigantic success she will now have far more difficulty passing through the eye of the proverbial needle than half a dozen camels.

The whole idea of creating American and Canadian idols fits perfectly into our Western rejection of the truth that the first shall be last and that the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong. Time and chance happens to all winners. Yet we are often led to believe that the only thing that counts in this life is to come first. Why? Because we measure greatness by fallible standards. And when you measure greatness that way, you end up missing the whole point of our purpose as human beings, which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Learning for success

All of this brings me to the theme of this issue: a tendency in our nations' schools to stress academic success so that our children and young people can achieve economic and social success, so that they can glorify themselves and enjoy their life forever. If the philosopher king of Ecclesiastes is right in saying that "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting," would that also not apply to failure and success? Maybe it's better to fail than to succeed. Dare we say that?

Some educators dare to say that, as you will find in the article "Everybody Fails" on page 7. The writer tells about a school in Toronto that encourages students to court failure. The idea behind the school's philosophy is that you learn more from failure than from success. Wow, is that ever true. Success can go to our heads and make us see ourselves as bigger than we are. What does it profit a person if he succeeds in everything he does and loses his soul! Failure, on the other hand, is a testing ground for the spirit. It can build character, it can teach us about who we are, what we are able to do and not do, and it can teach us to be more dependent on God. Sometimes failure defeats us beyond what we can bear. I'm not recommending that we ask students to engage in a never-ending string of failures. We all need encouragement from achievement and success. Nor should we place much stock in failure that comes about because of lack of effort or interest.

Otherworldly standards

It all depends on how you evaluate failure. We need to remember that what passes as failure in the eyes of people is not necessarily failure in God's eyes. From a worldly point of view, Jesus was a failure. He could easily have defeated his enemies by the faith powers that were at his disposal. But he chose to seek first God's kingdom. In the same way, we are faced daily with choices that may suggest failure in the eyes of this-worldly people. Our students need to learn about those choices through good literature, Scripture, examples around them and the way we evaluate them.

I think, and I'm treading a little bit on dangerous grounds here, that the area of sport is both the most difficult and the most opportune place to learn about the positive side of failure. The best phys. ed. teachers use their subject to inculcate the idea that sport is not about winning at all; it's about getting the most out of yourself and being the best team and opponent you can be. I read an article some time ago that pointed out that kids tend to single out one sport early in life so that they can excel in that sport. What this early selection means is that kids miss out on learning about other sports and enjoying the variety of skills needed for them. One high school coach says that you can't even talk anymore about athletes — kids are basketball players, baseball players, football players. They don't lift weights. They "basketball lift" or "football lift." Parents can put a lot of pressure on their children, too, and make the life of a coach hell because she is not giving enough play time to their star offspring.

But I suppose the area of academics is as much a testing ground for the ethos of ultimate success as is physical education, not to mention the socializing that takes place in schools (think of clothes and looks). All of life is a testing ground. We will throughout life be measuring ourselves against certain yardsticks. Schools can be the instruments to point students to the most excellent yardstick of all. Happy are those teachers and students who measure success by looking at the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. A learner who pursues such fruit in his quest to know and to become always comes out a winner. **BW**

Letter to the Editor

Hi Bert,

Hope things are all well with you. I am very glad that you are the editor of CEJ, and I do enjoy most of every issue. The back cover of the last issue did trouble me. I do not think it is funny, or appropriate. I did not talk to my children this way, I don't think your mother talked to you this way, and I doubt Alice talked to your children that way. Many of the items were rather violent. Number10 in "Things My Mother Taught Me" reads: "I brought you into this world and I can take you out." Can you perhaps explain to me the reasoning behind your decision to put this on the cover?

Friendly greetings,

Christine Aay
Creston-Mayfield Christian School
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Hi Christine,

Thanks for your note. I appreciate your honesty. No, certainly our mothers did not talk that way. They were not into that kind of humor.

I must admit that I sometimes enter into that mode of joking, saying things I don't really mean, but counting on people's understanding of irony to search out the real meaning. Let me give you an example.

A few years ago, I was high up in the crabapple tree in the back, pruning branches almost out of reach. It was hard work. So I shouted down to Alice: "I have four sons, and they're totally useless to me!" This has become a family joke whenever I do something alone, like reshingling the back shed the other day. Of course, our sons live too far away to be able to help me with that. So I joke about it. Send them a picture of me on top of the roof contemplating my "useless sons."

Not everyone will appreciate that kind of humor, but our family does. And since the April issue was about humor, I thought I may as well probe the subject a bit more.

This probably does not answer your dislike for what we published, but it's the best explanation I can give at the moment.

Sincerely yours,

Bert

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The Fallacy of Measuring Success

by Paul Theule

PaulTheule(ptheule@rochesterchristianschool.org) is principal of the Christian elementary school in Rochester, New York.

"So, Paul, what are you going to be when you grow up?" the visiting elder asked.

"I'm going to play baseball for the Detroit Tigers," I immediately replied as my mother winced.

"But professional ballplayers need to play on Sunday," challenged the churchman.

Confidently, I retorted, "But I'm going to be so good that they'll let me take Sundays off." Then I cited that "The Deacon" Vern Law of the Pirates didn't have to pitch on Sundays, and I would be as good as Law.

Apparently, my concept of "success" did not match that of the Church. Yet, I pursued my goal unabated. Winning, and a high batting average defined success for me for many years, to be replaced eventually by other pursuits and measures of success.

After college my young bride and I taught as missionaries in West Africa. One time our mission director in Nigeria returned from Minnesota and reported on his visit with his mother, who was suffering from dementia. Being one of many brothers, he was asked, "Which one are you?" He told her. She then asked, "What are you doing now?" He reported that he was a missionary and that he was the director of the mission work in Nigeria. The dear life-long believer replied, "Ah, I always knew you wouldn't amount to much." Her failing mind was impressed by neither the "missionary" label nor the position of "field director." Of course, neither label should impress any of us, but her dementia was on display.

What should impress us? How do we define success in life? Perhaps success is not attaining a certain position but achieving certain results. Missionaries, for example, are sent to get results. When my wife and I returned from Africa after eight years, one mission director in the home office quipped, "We sent you there to work on church growth, and you return with four kids. That's not exactly the kind of church growth we had in mind."

What is success? Is it beating out the competition? Is it gaining a respected position? Is it producing new Christians, whether by evangelism or procreation?

Confusing times

My wife and I teach in the Baltics each summer. In our explorations, we have twice visited The Museum of the Occupation in Riga, Latvia. The displays document the 60 years of occupation, marked most horribly by the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin. When the Nazis took over from the Russians in 1941, Latvians were relieved, until they realized that up to 100,000 Jews were being murdered, along with many tens of thousands of others. On a further note, Latvian youth were conscripted into the Nazi army, but when Russia occupied again in 1944, the upcoming youth were conscripted into the Russian army, to be placed at the front lines against their own countrymen and even brothers.

After the war, hundreds of thousands more Latvians were murdered, or they were sent to Siberia, most never to return. More than 40 percent of those living in Latvia today are of Russian descent, some demographic drama which indicates the number of people "replaced."

So, who were the successful ones? Those who could lay claim to wealth, education and position? The ones who were destroyed? Or the poor who were left in their homeland? The prophet Jeremiah reports a similar case, "But Nebuzaradan left behind the rest of the

poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields" (Jeremiah 52:16). Certainly, success in this world is hard to pinpoint.

Christians don't always agree on what constitutes success either. As a veteran missionary who has worked on four continents, I've seen "successful" missionary work defined in various ways. Bureaucrats count baptism and church starts. Denominationalists count the number of "our churches" in Nigeria, Honduras, and The Philippines. A common but patronizing framework sends work teams to build Christian schools and churches in places of poverty and high unemployment. Their aim is to encourage local Christians, but at the same time they very often do for others what they themselves can do.

Even in Christian organizations, motivations vary and lack purity. I've worked with enough Christian organizations to realize that each one has its soft underbelly because they, too, are made up of totally depraved folk — pilgrims stumbling along and sometimes into each other. Nevertheless, God uses sinners to build his Kingdom. Thankfully, he tends to use us in spite of ourselves.

Numerical success

What makes for a successful church or school in our circles? Usually, increasing numbers do, whether those numbers are members, students, budget, staff, test scores, computers, or square footage of a current or anticipated facility. My denomination now has a "scorecard" by which it numerically measures successful programs and agencies. And numbers, in our data-driven society, don't seem to lie. As products of the Age of Reason, we are comfortable in dealing with numbers. We understand them.

I fear we often let our culture rather than the Bible define success for us. We are results- and product-oriented, and results

and products must be tangible for us. Numbers sell; not purity, not piety, not "the poor in spirit," and not the merciful. We are too often tempted to prove our success by counting how many preachers, Christian schoolteachers, and missionaries have their roots in our schools. And we also are quick to add those who have gotten rich and now fund specific ministries. We value money and power, position, fame, and product.

Perhaps success, like most concepts and even words in our post-modern society, is defined by each individual, each definition holding true for that person. Even we Christians define it differently, and our definitions often vary from one setting to the next.

Worldview oriented

As I pen these words, I'm flying 35,000 feet above the North Sea, returning from teaching in Lithuania with forty other North Americans, some feeling great success in the past month because of the high student involvement in "spiritual life" activities, others because of positive responses to their work in the classroom, and a few others because they have "survived" living and working in a Baltic country for over a month. Each of these short-term missionaries came with a different expectation and left with a different analysis of success. But while we need to evaluate, perhaps we can't really measure success, at least not as an end product in the way our culture dictates.

Success is defined by one's worldview. While the worldview of each individual and each Christian group may differ from the other, we do generally agree as Reformed folk on three main pillars for our worldview: "we see God's law governing every element in the universe, God's word constituting its orderly structure, God's truth discoverable in every field" (Nancy Pearcy, *Total Truth*, Crossway Books, 2004). Within this worldview, then, adherence to God's law is success. Living within and promoting his order and the restoration of it is success. Discovering and embracing God's truths is success.

But is this what we teach in our Christian schools? Can we teach this? Are any of us Christian teachers qualified to teach this? How can we teach that every inch belongs to God, that every moment belongs to God, when, truthfully, not one of us has clear enough spectacles to walk down this path we profess? And, ironically, the fact that we are paid to have and teach this worldview may be our greatest barrier because being "professional Christians" undoubtedly blurs our vision.

Our temptation, then, is to fall back on numbers: How many Tsunami victims have we helped? How many mission trips have our kids gone on? How many service projects have been done?

How can we assess worldview when it is so intangible? How can we measure attitude and Christian maturity? We are dealing with abstracts that don't show reliable, measurable results because such

results may come just as easily from other motivators, some of which do not fit into a Reformed worldview. On this side of heaven, we cannot escape our culture's definition of success, but we can, as agents of Christ's restoration, work toward redeeming the definition of success.

Successfully chosen

Such redemptive work comes from knowing our identity and purpose. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, so that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9). Such "belonging" is success, then, but it is not success from our own efforts. Furthermore, if we are truly servants of God, then "success" doesn't even enter our mindset because we serve the King! Success for servants is not a product but, rather, the action of faithfully serving.

Success for us and for our students is to be part of that church which is a catalyst of the kingdom. In other words, we don't exist for our own aggrandizement; we exist for the benefit of the Kingdom of God, something bigger than ourselves. Of course, the church must grow, numerically and spiritually, but that growth matters so the church can become more and more catalytic for the Kingdom of God, for the good of the world. This means that the world doesn't exist for the benefit of the church, as if the world were a mountain that we strip-mine to get ore to process our spiritual factory. No, the church exists for the world — to be God's catalyst so that the world can receive and enter God's Kingdom more and more (Brian D. Mc Laren, *A New Kind of Christian*, Jossey-Bass, 2001, p. 84).

Success in weakness

Success, then, is being an integral part of God's catalyst, the members together increasingly understanding, embracing, and living out a strategy which stands in contrast to our cultural norm. The task, then, for the Christian schoolteacher is to prepare and develop members of that catalyst.

Jesus defines success for the catalyst and its members as follows (allow me to put his words into our context):

The successful are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The successful are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

The successful are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

The successful are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

The successful are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

The successful are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

The successful are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

The successful are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

You are successful when people insult you, when they persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Everybody Fails

by Anne Marie Owens

Anne Marie Owens wrote this article for the National Post *on November 13, 2004. We reprint it with permission from the* National Post.

Wendy Mogel has listened to teachers' groups insist that the only way to keep the peace at school track and field meets is for all children to be awarded ribbons so that the losers don't feel bad. She's also heard a litany of parental complaints about schools choosing plays that include big and small parts rather than producing those in which all the acting roles are equal.

Wendy Mogel

"What I say to them all is they've got to remember that school isn't a cruise ship," says Dr. Mogel. "I want the kids to be bored, frustrated and uncomfortable for at least a few minutes in their school lives. I want them to feel what it's like to fail."

From her vantage point as a Los Angeles-based psychologist and a straight-talking speaker who has visited hundreds of school groups across North America, she has witnessed the fallout of a self-esteem movement that began with the best intentions of protecting children from the emotional harm that comes from undermined confidence but which has, instead, left schools hamstrung by constant ego-protecting manoeuvres and children with wrapped-in-cotton-batten lives.

She has documented what she calls "the outbreak of specialness" afflicting schools, like the Grade 3 newsletter she read that used the word special five times in two pages to describe everything from The Spellathon to The Pie Drive.

As adults, we know that we've been shaped by our failures as much as by our successes: We know that we may not get the job we want, don't always get the boy. Yet this generation of parents seems less willing than ever to accept the merits of such losses for their children. In the zeal to protect children from harm and ensure their childhood is trouble-free, we seem to have lost sight of the virtues of failure.

Free to fail

That is what makes Richard Wernham and his Toronto private school seem so heretical.

Mr. Wernham, a businessman who made nearly $300 million when he sold his financial business four years ago and decided to pour a big chunk of it into founding Greenwood College School, espouses an educational philosophy that completely upends the prevailing view of the self-esteem age.

This is a school where children are actually taught to court failure, and prompted to seek out those opportunities where failure is possible and even highly likely.

"We should be talking about the fact that there are things that matter other than success," Mr. Wernham says. "It seems to me that it's important for kids not to come away with the idea that life has to be an unbroken string of accomplishments.

"Too many schools create this intense pressure-cooker situation to always be successful, where it's not OK to fail.... It seems to me that while you can have some level of success in your life by playing to your strengths, to really achieve something extraordinary in life, you have to be willing to try things where there is a real chance that you might fail."

At Greenwood, they do it through the forced sports participation that is structured into the middle of every school day. All students have to spend 40 minutes on a rotation of various sports and physical activities, and are forced to play those sports they may not be very good at, rather than allowing them to opt out or pick their specialty in the traditional school schedule that slots sports in after school.

Richard Wernham

They do it through the regular Outward-Bound-type adventure trips — sea kayaking in the Bay of Fundy, week-long canoe trips on the Sunshine Coast, scaling a high aerial course at the school's affiliated Kilkoo Camp in Ontario's cottage country — which offer the kind of "forced adversity" ideal for students who otherwise would never encounter such physical and academic hardships.

"Even in the campfire stories on these trips we constantly talk about these values of trying something where you know there's a real chance you're going to fail," Mr. Wernham says. "We try to celebrate the kid who might have been cold or afraid in the sea kayak but who eventually made it. It's not about the winner."

Beyond academics

The school also tries to ensure that its admissions policy extends the philosophy beyond mere platitude by refusing to rely on academics as a screening tool for who gets in and who is rejected, attempting instead to get a sense of a family's

commitment to the philosophy.

Mr. Wernham says they would be content to have students graduate to whatever post-secondary program best suits them, rather than the typical private-school measure of success of the number of graduates who go on to Harvard or Queen's or whichever other university is considered to be at the top. He says the Greenwood experiment will be deemed successful if its graduating class goes on to a range of places, from the Ontario College of Art to a community college to Harvard.

Where the self-esteem philosophy maintains everybody is a winner, this approach concedes that everyone knows full well there is just one winner, but insists they should also know what the loser may have triumphed over to reach this point or what the failure has taught those who didn't succeed.

In his Closing Day address this past summer, a day typically set aside to revel in the academic and sporting glories of all the winners, Mr. Wernham devoted his talk to notable failures.

He wove together the seemingly disparate narratives of the Calgary Flames, the ragtag team that made it to the Stanley Cup but lost out; Rocky Balboa, the boxer who in that long-ago first movie came from nowhere to convince the crowd he would beat favourite Apollo Creed but didn't convince the judges; and Robert Falcon Scott, the British explorer whose harrowing two-year journey to get to the South Pole ended when he discovered a Norwegian had beat him to it.

"What is it that we admire about each of these examples? They were failures. All of them," Mr. Wernham says.

Greenwood College School

The power of failure

"It seems to me that it's very easy these days for children to get the message that the ultimate value is success. It's very easy for parents and for educational institutions and for society in general to convey that message. And graduations or closing day ceremonies, which naturally have to do with success, seem too often to be a ritualistic confirmation, a kind of morality play ... and the kids can go away with all of this very much confirmed in their minds."

Although some aspects of his experience would have suggested a different philosophy — after making his millions, he sent his children to traditional private schools and delivered to one of the country's most traditional bastions of privilege, Upper Canada College, the largest single donation in the school's history — his own history also speaks to the power of failure.

A smart student, with a university professor father and a mother who was a teacher, he breezed through his own school years with so much ease that he opted to enroll in a university course during the summer of his Grade 12 year. The course was supposed to be an easy introduction to sociology, and so when Mr. Wernham did so poorly that he barely passed, he was shaken.

In foreshadowing the success he would later enjoy in a domain that rewards risk-takers, he used this first academic setback to embolden his efforts and confront the failure directly by heading to university early, rather than returning to the comfort of high school for Grade 13.

"You never want to convey the message that accomplishment is inconsequential....

But part of what I'm trying to say, what Greenwood is trying to say, is that success is not the only value and that it's OK sometimes to fail — in fact, there's something noble and admirable about trying something where there's a real chance you're going to fail."

These ideals would be scandalous at any school. What makes them revolutionary is that they are being applied to a group of youngsters whose lives thus far have been shaped primarily by privilege.

The inner life

Dan Kindlon, a Harvard University psychology professor who has explored this topic in his book *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*, says the impact of the enduring economic boom cuts a wide swath across North America, shifting the priorities of all but the poorest of families — and no longer just the rich — toward achievement and success, and away from the development of an inner life.

He quotes a psychotherapist friend who describes his caseload this way:

"Their lives have often been too easy. I think that there has to be some adversity in one's life. I think it develops an inner sense of the capacity to adapt and prevail."

In his book, he probes parental indulgence in its practical sense — indulging children's every desire to have their bedrooms stocked with televisions and computers, their bank accounts filled with money, their night-time activities unencumbered by such hindrances as curfews — and also as a larger philosophy that shapes the way children are protected and sheltered from failure and all unpleasantness.

As an example, he mentions the conversation he had recently with a friend who said that when his son first told him he wasn't enjoying the company in his school car pool, his initial reaction was to try to juggle his own schedule so he could drive the boy himself.

"But then he thought, 'Wait. My father would have called this a character-building moment.' So he made his son stay the course."

Dr. Kindlon likens the importance of experiencing failure to an exposure to disease: If children are not exposed at a younger age to those failures that seem end-of-the-world at the time but in retrospect are merely stepping stones to the inevitable larger setbacks in life, he argues, they will have built up no immunity when the big hit happens.

Don't avoid difficulty

That's why Dr. Mogel, from Los Angeles, always jokes with parents that they would be better off putting their children in the path of a "crabby, unenlightened, miserable Grade 5 teacher," because otherwise they'll never be prepared for the day they encounter a boss like that in their working lives.

She says the caution that follows any attempt to avoid failure at all costs runs as an undercurrent throughout the daily lives of the children and parents she encounters:

"I see it in students afraid to try a sport in middle school because they feel if they haven't done it since they were four they'll be left behind. I see it in parents coming in to rescue their children from the slightest inconvenience.

"And, most of all, I see it in the vast group of students who go off to college unable to fend for themselves," she says.

"If we don't do something about this, they're going to file the biggest class-action lawsuit against us as a society, saying we sold them a bill of goods by not preparing them for failure."

Slouching Toward Bedlam

IT WAS THE BEST OF PLANS
IT WAS THE WORST OF PLANS

*Jan Kaarsvlam planned to spend last summer attending a special seminar on service learning held at the headquarters of Focus on the Family in Denver. Due to an incorrect online map, however, he ended up cleaning toilets for three weeks at the Jeweled Jackal Casino in Toledo, Ohio. Regrettably, this has resulted in yet another postponement of his "**Slouching Toward Bedlam**" series.* b@nal .edu

Jarence Clodersma, professor of education at Abraham Kuyper University, convened a special guest b@nal.edu panel that consisted of a group of teachers from Bedlam Christian High School. Jane VanderAsch has been teaching math for sixty seven years. Rex Kane teaches physical education and a course on eastern religions. Gordon Winkle teaches Applied Arts and volunteers his free period helping out the Home Ec. classes as a recipe tester. Carrie Wellema is the school's choir director. Clodersma asked the following question: "Sometimes failure is just failure, but often it is the first step to success. Respond."

August 22, 2005

Jane VanderAsch

Jarence, even though I'm a graduate of a public university, I can't seem to find a question here. I don't want to sound crabby, but shouldn't you be more careful with your language? What does this kind of sloppiness teach our students? Oh, wait, I get it. You made the mistake on purpose to see if we could catch it, right? Your opening "question" was an object lesson in failure as a stepping stone to success. Am I right?

Jane VanderAsch

August 24, 2005

That is an interesting point, Jane. But I'd rather take a look at what I consider to be my top ten failures and how I have learned from them. Number Ten: my first year of teaching, in an attempt to make physical education more "educational," I ran a ten-week unit entitled "Eastern Religion, The Muppets, Tae Kwan Do, and You." After two students were hospitalized, I knew I had made a mistake.

Rex Kane

August 26, 2005

Right you are, Rex. And I think the trick to being a good teacher is to learn from your mistakes. I remember early in my career I tried assigning students to make a cedar chest. It was an ambitious project, and it included learning woodcarving to put a scene on the top. I suggested pictures of their favorite meal, for example. I figured all that work was worth it, though, because it would give them a sense of achievement, and they would be building something they could take pride in.

Gordon Winkle

It turned out, though, that it was just a lot of work for me. The kids needed more help than I felt I could give. Later I hit on the idea of building an elephant clock from a kit. It is a much easier project, and probably safer, and, besides, I don't need to spend nearly as much time supervising them. What do you think, Rex?

Gordon Winkle

August 29, 2005

Number Nine: flooding the faculty parking lot for my ice skating unit. How was I supposed to know Carrie would break her arm getting out of her car?

Rex

August 30, 2005

Sometimes failure is not just failure. Sometimes it's stupidity. Anyways, Gord, I'm not sure that your cedar chest unit was a failure on the way to success. It sounds to me like the chests were a useful project. I remember two boys in choir who were showing their cedar chests off in the halls after school. They couldn't wait to give them as a gift to their mothers. They had built something beautiful and useful. Don't let some hard work on your part get in the way of a student's sense of accomplishment.

Carrie Wellema

September 2, 2005

Number Eight: The health unit where I tried to teach them about the effects of alcohol on baby pigs. First of all, we had a dickens of a time catching those little fellers. I didn't realize that drunken pigs are so hard to kill. Besides, after the students had bonded with their porcine pals, they weren't very excited about the dissection part. From that I learned that you should always sign out the biology room a week ahead of time.

Rex

September 6, 2005

Carrie Wellema

Oh, Rex. What I think Professor Clodersma is asking for is how failure can sometimes help us – even propel us onward. I remember when I first tried a music appreciation unit and it bombed. I felt horrible. The kids had never heard of most of the music I was playing for them – not even the modern stuff like Air Supply. But it got me thinking, and the next time I taught it I started by asking them to bring in their own music to start – then I could go on and make connections between the music they listen to and its classical forbears. I am disappointed that I never did end up playing Air Supply for them again, though.

Carrie

September 8, 2005

Numbers Six and Five: This one failure led to two successes. One day last fall, I took my annual field trip to the Woodcarvers Museum so we could study snapshots of the human physique frozen in isometric action. I accidentally forgot to count off students when we left. Poor Timmy Hobbs had to jog home ten miles. The two successes? Timmy became an avid runner, shed thirty pounds, and became a star of the cross-country team. In addition, Timmy found a shortcut, so now when we visit the museum, we can stay an extra five minutes.

Rex

September 13, 2005

I don't know what to make of all this. Failure is just failure, Carrie. You argue that your first attempt at music appreciation was a failure that ultimately led to success. But it didn't. Your course was a failure. Though you fixed it, it would have been better if you'd never planned poorly to begin with. And for that first group of kids who passed through your classroom, your failure was simply a failure. Period.

Jane

September 15, 2005

Number Three: After the principal complained about the lack of a hot-lunch program, I encouraged my students to bring healthy crock pot meals. Unfortunately, I didn't check out whether the gym circuits could handle over a hundred crock pots attached to power strips.

The real disaster happened when the kids found out that they had cold lumpy food for lunch. I didn't really learn much through that, but the food fight was spectacular. I'm still picking oatmeal chicken out of the ceiling fans twelve years later.

Rex

Rex Kane

September 16, 2005

Really? Sounds tasty! How much is left up there?

Gord

September 20, 2005

But, Jane, I think sometimes, in order for your teaching to get better, you need to experiment, be willing to try new things. Otherwise you fall into predictability, and the problem with that is, after teaching the same thing for years, it becomes hard to care about stuff. That, or you get really bitter.

Carrie

September 22, 2005

Number Two: When I was making this list, I forgot Number Four.

Rex

September 26, 2005

Absolutely we need to try new things. I suppose that does mean a certain number of failures are likely. Still, a failure is a failure, not a success in disguise.

Jane

September 29, 2005

And the Number One mistake of my career: Refusing to sponsor the student bonsai-tree club for moral reasons. Only late in my career have I learned the value of meditative gardening as a channel for inner peace. Oh yeah, and I would have picked up a sweet $400 honorarium as well. I could have bought a new bowling ball with that. The kind with the sparklies.

Rex

Saint Louise and the Teaching of Literature

by Dave Schelhaas
Dave Schelhaas (dschel@dordt.edu) is professor of English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa

She was 100 years old when she died this past February. Three months earlier some of my English Education students heard her speak at the National Council of Teachers of English convention. Although I have never seen her or heard her speak (a personal conflict kept me from the convention), I have read her and the effect she has had on the way I teach literature has been significant.

We all have our personal saints (if you allow me to use the word loosely) — colleagues and mentors and writers and thinkers who have had a strong positive influence on our thought and behavior. I have been teaching English for forty years, and among my personal saints are St. Leon, St. Nancie, St. Henry, St. Clive, and St. Wendell. But none has had a greater influence on my teaching than St. Louise.

Louise Rosenblatt wrote a book on the Reader Response approach to literature teaching in 1938 called *Literature as Exploration,* having come to realize that the "New Critical" approach to literature instruction that she had experienced in college had not prepared her "for helping the average student discover why one should read literary texts" ("Retrospect"1990, 100). In the same year, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren published *Understanding Poetry,* perhaps the most influential of all the books espousing a New Critical approach to the teaching of literature. For the next twenty-five years, the New Critical approach, not Rosenblatt's Reader Response approach, dominated the teaching of literature in both high school and college classrooms.

Objective meaning

The New Critics, as we know, attempted to treat the text as an entity in isolation from both the author and the reader. The aim was complete objectivity; a text had a single correct meaning, and it was the job of English teachers to lead their students to the correct meaning of the text. As a beginning teacher in the mid-sixties, I used

Louise Rosenblatt

a variation of that New Critical approach. I recall with chagrin the time I asked a student to say what he thought the theme of the story was, and he replied, "Why should I say what I think the story means — you'll just tell me why I'm wrong and what the 'real' meaning is." I'm afraid he was correct in his analysis of the situation. In most literature classrooms at that time, poems and stories were riddles to which only the teacher and a few very bright students had the answers.

By the late sixties, however, the New Critical approach to literature instruction was in decline at the college level, and Rosenblatt's version of Reader Response was being touted by the National Council of Teachers of English. Over the next forty years, more and more high school English teachers were converted to a Reader Response approach. In spite of that, the perception that a literary text is something to know about rather than something to experience still seems to dominate literature teaching in American high schools today. Rosenblatt offers a refreshing alternative.

Reader Response

Rosenblatt describes the act of reading as a "transaction between the reader and the text" (*Exploration* 35). She states that since the reader comes to the text from life, with problems and concerns, "even while he is reading, these things are present as probably the most important guiding factors in his experience" (35). She asserts that "the same text will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances" (35). This emphasis on the emotional, mental, cultural, and sociological circumstances of the reader is essential in reader-response theory and totally foreign to the textual emphasis of the New Critics.

Rosenblatt argues that the poem or story does not consist of the words on the page but is made in the transaction between text and reader, hence the title of her other book, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem* (1978).

The literature teacher, says Rosenblatt, is more like a voice teacher than a biology or history teacher. The text, like the notes and the lyrics of a song, is there on the page. But for the song to exist, the student has to sing it. Similarly, for the poem to exist, the reader must read the text. And the teacher gives guidance to help the student evoke the text most effectively. In other words, the teacher's task is to equip the reader to play the instrument of himself and thereby evoke the literary work. For

me, the best analogy she uses is a line from Yeats' "Among School Children" taken slightly out of context:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Dancer and dance are inseparable, and so are reader and poem. The poem/story is a "formed substance" consisting of the words of the text and the reader's knowledge, experiences, beliefs, etc. And since readers are different people with different life experiences, the story or poem one reads becomes peculiarly one's own story as he reads. Oh, we might see many of the same themes and feel many similar feelings, but we will also think and feel different things as we read.

Not only subjective

Now, whenever I say this to students or colleagues, I get a response such as, "Do you mean to say, then, that a poem or story means whatever any reader says it does? Is it totally a personal thing?" And I answer, "Of course not." Rosenblatt takes pains to distance herself from "reader response theories such as the psychoanalytically based ones [that] tend to over emphasize the reader and treat responses as a means to self-interpretation" ("Retrospect"105). According to Rosenblatt, thinking of the poem as something made between the reader and the text will enable teacher and students to develop *criteria* for discerning the relative validity of students' interpretations. The literature classroom can help students "acquire mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment and ethical and social understanding" (*Exploration* 75).

For years I have taught Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," a poem about a young boy's rough and wild dance with his father in the kitchen. Because the father has been drinking, because he handles his son roughly, and because the boy hangs on "like death," many students, with beliefs or experiences that associate whiskey with an evil such as physical abuse, assume the father is abusing his son. But other students will think, as I do, that it is really a boy's affectionate remembrance of a wild dance with his hard-working father. These students might point to the title and its use of the endearing term "papa" rather than "father" or "old man." They might note that the boy clings to his father rather than trying to get away. They might note that alcohol can lead to violence but does not necessarily do so. In a reader response classroom, the teacher would allow both viewpoints but encourage the students to look carefully at the language of the poem and also their own preconceptions about whiskey and child abuse. The teacher might also pair-up this poem with Lucille Clifton's "Good Times," a poem which celebrates a family's singing and dancing and drinking in the kitchen.

The goal of the Reader Response teacher is not first of all to have the students leave class with a "correct" interpretation of the literary text. Rather, the teacher wants the student to continue to value her own responses but also recognize that these responses must at times be modified in the light of other readers' responses or a deeper knowledge of sociology and ethics or a more careful reading of the text.

A safe place

One of the first questions I ask the prospective teachers in my Methods of Teaching English class is "What do you want to happen in your literature classes?"

I hope they answer that they want to develop life-long readers who go to literary texts for delight, but also for help in understanding some of the mysteries of the human condition. The next question, of course, is "How can you make that happen?" One obvious answer is to make the students' experience of literature in the classroom a positive one. If students' responses to literary texts are not valued in the classroom, then the students will probably quit reading literature the minute they get out of school. But if the experience of literature is one where their responses are valued, then it is likely they will continue to read after they leave school. Rosenblatt's original impetus to writing *Literature as Exploration,* you recall, was the question, "Why would the average student read literature texts at all?"

The literature classroom of the Reader Response teacher is, first of all then, a safe place for readers to share their responses with other students — thus, one of the first things a literature teacher must establish is a setting for spontaneity. But it will also be a place where a reader's responses will be compared to other readers' responses and examined in the light of the written text. It will be a place where students are made aware of the underlying cultural and sociological assumptions that they bring to the text. It will be a place where students become acquainted with literary devices like irony, symbol, metaphor, with literary genres and structures; it will be a place where esthetic values are cultivated. And it will be a place where students are encouraged to give both oral and written responses in a variety of ways.

It works for me

In the introductory course to literature at Dordt College, a course we call, significantly, Responding to Literature, I ask my students to e-mail three response letters to me during the semester. I have found that a letter is far more likely to elicit a personal response than a "paper" is, and it requires of me, the teacher, not so much a grade as an answer.

The following excerpts from a response letter on Hemingway's "A Clean Well Lighted Place" are, I think, exceptional (and

therefore not typical), but they illustrate the best of what can happen in a response-oriented literature class. Notice that the letter touches on style, character and theme, but that its ultimate concern is the effect the literary text had on the reader.

My favorite passage occurs when the old waiter, talking to the younger waiter, finally states, "We are two different kinds" and goes on to talk about how he dislikes closing early because people may need the café, people like himself, perhaps. "You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, there are shadows of the leaves." And the old waiter is right, the other does not understand. "Good night," he says quickly and leaves, certainly annoyed and negligent to the old waiter's point. Hemingway is so discreet here, but you just know; there's something about those shadows, about how quiet and pleasant this place is — of course that's why the old man goes there....

I've had nights in which I didn't want to go to bed, many of them, in fact. It's not because you're having too much fun, or you're waiting for something to come on late night television. For me it was because of a general disappointment and dissatisfaction with the day, and even though I was sitting alone in my basement, I delayed going to bed simply for the hope that something good would happen yet; something that would brighten my day. It's hard to go to bed when you've been awake for 15 hours and don't feel that you've accomplished a thing to be proud of. So there you sit, waiting for that special moment, or an epiphany that might make sense of it all. This is what I see in this story; I see the distinct feeling. You can say it's about loneliness, about meaningless-ness, about war, loss of love, or questioning faith — certainly you could argue all of those things. But to me, all of this ambiguity, this vagueness about what Hemingway is trying to say, is described in the simple theme of avoiding the end of a (so far) worthless day. If you've experienced that, you already know all of the things it means.

Any teacher who gets a response letter like this would, it seems to me, be pleased. Over the years I have wrestled with the question of how to teach non-Christian and even anti-Christian literature in a Christian college classroom. I don't want to simply attack it, but I don't want to ignore the nihilism of a story like this one by Hemingway. (You may recall that this is the story with the famous paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada.") This response letter opens the door for me to not only discuss the nihilism of the story but also take note of the deep insight into the human condition that Hemingway gives us in this story.

Still, the doubtful teacher might ask, "Does this mean that a student must make a deeply personal response to everything he reads?" Again, the answer is, "Of course, not." Often the response will focus

on matters of theme or style or character or world-view. But it will still be the individual reader's response to the text, not the teacher's.

The Mystery of Story

Rosenblatt calls the reading of stories and poems *aesthetic* reading, and she distinguishes this from what she calls *efferent* reading, that is, the reading of a sociological essay or medical report where the reader must "focus attention primarily on the impersonal, publicly verifiable aspects of what the words evoke" (*Exploration*, Preface xvii).

I thought of that on a recent Sunday evening, after hearing a wonderful story-telling-sermon on the Elijah story and talking with a friend about that sermon. We discovered that while we both liked it, we liked it for different reasons — that, in fact, while we had not heard different things, we had made from the text of the sermon and our own experience slightly different sermons. Suddenly, it occurred to me that this was reader response times two. First, the pastor had drawn from the text in I Kings 19 *his* particular interpretation. Then, as he passed it on to the congregation, we each made from the text of his sermon, *our* particular reading.

In other words, the Bible (and even the occasional sermon) is an *aesthetic* text. Eugene Peterson says this eloquently in *Leap Over the Wall*:

Story is the primary way in which the revelation of God is given to us. The Holy Spirit's literary genre of choice is story.... Story is the gospel way. Story isn't imposed on our lives; it invites into its life. As we enter and imaginatively participate, we find ourselves in a more spacious, freer, and more coherent world.... Story is the primary means we have for learning what the world is, and what it means to be a human being. (3)

If story is as important as Peterson says it is, we will not teach it simply to transmit a cultural heritage. Nor will we teach it merely to prepare students for some comprehensive literature test that requires them to know the names of lots of authors and the content of their literary works. Rather, we will want to help our students become lifelong readers who read with confidence and delight, seeking to understand "what the world is and what it means to be a human being in it." To aid us in that endeavor, a journey to and through one of the shrines of St. Louise (*Literature as Exploration, The Reader, the Text, and the Poem)* would be a valuable pilgrimage.

Wave of Grace

Friday morning chapel, when students and teachers
with arms upraised higher than usual praise God and sing
"waves of mercy, waves of grace, everywhere I look I see his"

his face: even now I see it, John's, that is, who
during the first stanza walks up the dark aisle on the right,
past hundreds of waving arms, to the bright stage, with a

lurching, jerky step, practiced and careful, but comical
to one who doesn't know better, beloved John
to each of us who do, John of the big heart

the instant smile and the high five in the hallway
he of the warm eyes and "ya," his single-syllabled vocabulary of love
that only Jesus in all his barrier-free humility

could have pulled off; in the spotlight now John smiles big
and shuffles to center stage where, amidst electric guitar and saxophone
pounding drum and soaring chorus of student voices, he sings his

his song, he of below-average intelligence
and even lower pride, singing a silent song that silences me
his one arm waving left the other right in a rhythm only he

could keep, singing because inside this silenced saint
is the ocean-deep urge to rejoice, to praise God almighty
who years ago took his words and sentences

in a farm accident, took some of his mind too, but left his, ah
his heart, his beating heart, surging with a love so pure
that we of the dictionaried minds we wonder

we do, what's left to sing when John, God's holy soloist
has sung it all, when everywhere I look, everywhere, I see his
his — even now I see it and oh, Lord, it is your face.

Mark Hiskes
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ROOM 219

Nancy Knol
Column Editor
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Heightening Our Senses

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

Recently a very good friend of mine was involved in a terrible car accident. As a result, her petite, athletic frame has been subjected to numerous pains and indignities and restrictions for several weeks now. One of the more intriguing results of the accident has to do with a temporary heightening of her senses. She was telling me about it just the other day. Suddenly even the smallest stimulants are almost more than she can bear.

Here are a few examples: She keeps her blinds closed and turns off all but the dimmest of lights in her home because her eyes cannot handle so much light; she even wears sunglasses when she briefly goes on-line to check her e-mail. When it rains, she can hear each raindrop individually on her roof, loudly and distinctly. When she empties her dishwasher, she puts a towel on the countertop so that the clink of the cups and plates is softened. On the positive side, all food tastes and smells like "Turkish Delight" — even oatmeal. And when a friend visited her recently and gently placed an arm around her and squeezed, she said it was so comforting that it felt like "an embrace from God himself." Amazing.

It got me to thinking about how deadened my own senses are, by contrast. Even though I sometimes marvel at beauty, for example, it generally has to be fairly spectacular and grand for me to notice. I can block out sound easily, which may be simply a line of self-defense for all teachers and parents. Common food is just sustenance. Perhaps only touch still has the greatest significance of all our senses, since it often seems to come, in its positive forms, as comfort, passion, celebration, or encouragement.

And pondering all this made me also wonder about Eden, where surely all senses were at a peak, and *all* was positive. So our dull or deadened senses are due in part to a fallen world and in part due to our own lack of awareness. Isn't that what the deadly sin of sloth really is?

Last week, in chapel, the senses of every person attending were as heightened as they can be this side of Eden. It was an alumni chapel, and at its conclusion we were blessed with the gift of words from an alumnus who died this past year from a rare form of cancer. He had graduated in 2001, and his high school sweetheart had made a video of him. He was driving his Jeep, his head bald, his eyes bright and intense, and he was talking to her — to us. He said that, at a recent chemotherapy appointment, the nurse had asked him if he had gotten to the "Why me?" stage yet. And his response was that he hoped he would never get there. God had a plan for him, and even though he didn't understand it, or why this was a part of it, he truly believed that he needed to hold to and trust that God's plans for him were good.

And then the video ended, and words from Revelation were put on the screen before us:

"He who has an ear, let him hear...This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus."

The silence was *deafening*. It was a holy moment because for once we all knew how important it was to be aware and alert. These moments cannot be manufactured, although certainly we all try. We must be in prayer constantly, as Paul says, that we will be open to opportunities that heighten our senses to all that God hopes we will see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Psalm 34:8 suggests that we "taste and see that the Lord is good." Let's begin a new school year with this prayer on our lips and in our hearts.

How Correct Should Our English Be?

Clarence Joldersma (cjolders@calvin.edu) professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the Dot Edu panel, "Is it important for students at Christian schools to use correct English? Is there such a thing as correct English or is that merely a hegemonic imposition of legalistic standards on a living, changing language? Is it better to have correct English or communicate clearly?

September 5, 2005

Johanna Campbell

Hi Clarence, Here's a poem on the English "laengwidzh" that should give us a good start. Multi-national personnel at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization headquarters near Paris found English to be an easy language ... until they tried to pronounce it. To help them discard an array of accents, the verses below were devised:

English is Tough Stuff

Dearest creature in creation,
Study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.
I will keep you Suzy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy.
Tear in eye, your dress will tear.
So shall I! Oh hear my prayer.

Just compare heart, beard and heard,
Dies and diet, lord and word,
Sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it's written.)
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words a plaque and ague.
But be careful how you speak:
Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;
Cloven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, show, poem and toe.

Hear me say, devoid of trickery,
Daughter, laughter, and Terpsichore,
Typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles,
Exiles, similes, and reviles;
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,
Solar, mica, war and far,
One, anemone, Balmoral,
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel;
Gertrude, German, wind and mind,
Scene, Melpomene, mankind.

Billet does not rhyme with ballet,
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,
Nor is mould like should and would....

This poem has thirteen stanzas; it finally advises the student of English to give up. It was written by G. Nolst Trenite in "Drop Your Foreign Accent" in *Engelse Uitspraak Oefeningen* and published by H.D. Tjeenk Willink en Zoon in 1929. Perhaps Dr. Trenite was a translator for NATO.

So should we impose upon our students and insist on correct English? Which version of English do we use? King James' English? Chaucer's English? Or do we go with the flow and use today's English which everyone understands. I think we should impose current standards and recognize that the language is living, changing and our current tool to communicate with one another. We don't have an "Academie Francaise" to keep our language pure. Yet we do need standards or we will have chaos. What does the Lord require of us in this regard?

Johanna


Clarence Joldersma

September 7, 2005


Tony Kamphuis

Johanna, I think the question you raise at the end does get us started in the right direction: the Lord requires of us to love our neighbors. That means we use standard English as a means to facilitate clear communication. Having each person speak and write whatever "...is right in their own eyes (and ears)..." sounds fine to a culture steeped in the belief that humans are autonomous and should be able to make up whatever "rules" they want, and discard others at will. But I'm going to be bold enough to claim that God and I don't think that's the right way to go. I'm not ready to appoint a body of the state to arbitrarily determine the placement of every jot and tittle (as the French have done), and sure language is organic and alive and can be fun, but as in music so with language, flexibility within parameters produces the most beauty, the clearest communication, the best understanding and the most opportunity to be loving and respectful towards others.

Tony

September 8, 2005


Lois Brink

Clarence, You wondered what has priority: correct English (or French) or clear communication? I wonder if the following question can also be asked: Is the purpose of language use expression or communication? If expression, who cares if it is not completely understood or meaningful or response evoking? But, then ... Babel. No standards of commonality or agreement in communication. Chaos. Much expression, but no communication.

If communication is the goal, then clarity is important. Correctness that comes from commonly agreed upon (standards of) use is respectful of the other person and leads to communication that is clear. This leads to understanding that is mutual.

Since communication involves so many layers (non-verbal signals, context, mental models or images, inferences, logical fallacies or illogical thought development, poetic devices and more), the use of commonly agreed upon meanings for vocabulary, patterns for grammar and other structures, (which according to Steven Pinker and others is an innate gift with which we humans have been endowed), and commonly used punctuation or other mechanical helps seems a small concession to give for a greater purpose.

Maybe the big issue is communication for what? Purpose, meaning, understanding, responsiveness, sharing, collaborating. Maybe this is why we need to expect some order to our language use.

Lois

September 12, 2005


Agnes Fisher

Clarence, "Correct English" does not speak to the truth about language, which is that it lives and grows and changes. However, there is a correctness for a particular time period which is the standard suggested by the English texts, manuals, dictionaries, lexicons etc. of that time period. Without uniformity, consistency of English usage both in writing and speaking, we would not be able to communicate with one another very efficiently, not even very truthfully (anyway, I wrote a piece on this for Bert before and don't really want to repeat myself).

Agnes

September 14, 2005


Pam Adams

Dear all, Of course, communication is important. If we are considerate of our readers we will take the time to write as clearly as we can. I fear in the age of email we too often send out a reply without rereading and editing. I know I have done this and have inadvertently sent out a message with a tone I did not intend. Leaving out a comma can make a big difference in the meaning of a sentence. If you want a humorous take on this topic read *Eat, Shoots, and Leaves*.

Pam

September 14, 2005

Hi all, Let me just add to what there is: I think using correct English is so important we cannot even think well without knowing the language well. Where that concept leads is too broad to go into here, but it does suggest that without knowing its own language well a society and the Church are both in deep trouble. Consider Helen Keller's behavior before she knew language, she was like a little wild animal (discipline was a part of the factor, of course). Note what she became when language and the proper use of it entered her experience.

Agnes

September 15, 2005

Agnes, I agree that the role of word choice and vocabulary is critical to communication. Using the word that exactly expresses your thoughts makes clear what you are communicating, that is, what you are describing, thinking, feeling or creating. ASCD recently published a summary of research and strategies for teaching vocabulary by Marzano and others in a book called *Building Background Knowledge* which is helpful for K-13 and really underscores the importance of correct communication through accurate word use. While teaching vocabulary has come into disrepute, pay attention to the new look at this old idea.

Lois

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) 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, Smithville, Ont.

Reader Response

Don't dismiss the importance of "wonder"

Dear Lois:

It has been a week, and I continue to shake my head at your entry in the April, 2005, issue of CEJ. I cringe at your quotation "And we do have to be efficient to be effective, right?" thereby making readers believe that dangling an artificial letter in front of students and then telling them this grade is really important is good motivation? All evaluation does here is cave into society's idea that to be successful we must get good grades, so we can get good jobs, so we can make lots of money. You may not have meant that but that is how it came across.

Secondly, you write, "I wonder if wonder is all its cracked up to be?" I feel sorry for people who do not maintain their sense of wonder as adults. One's wonder changes, but it becomes more informed, making the wonder more powerful and personal. It hurts me to think that we have teachers that think we need to move on from wonder. It is through wonder and excitement that true learning takes place, learning which will be remembered for a lifetime.

To bring Egan in with such brevity, even though the length of the column may necessitate that, does not seem relevant to me. Wonder breeds real learning and that learning can be through debate of an important issue, or through artistic expression or otherwise, but it is the "I wonder" feeling and desire that creates the authentic learning situation in the first place. We as teachers need to ask enough questions and facilitate enough discussion for each student to be able to find something in the content that we teach so that they can come to us and ask, "Mr. Spyksma, did you ever think about, wonder about, learn about...." This is one of the best ways to know that authentic learning is taking place rather than forced "learning," which in many classrooms becomes memorization of a teacher's knowledge.

It is the top down structure that forces the wonder and awe out of students already in the upper elementary and middle levels so that by the time students are in senior high they are just cogs in the wheel of the efficient education system. If they experience true learning when they get there, it is because an imaginative teacher shakes them out of their education-induced coma and hits them with life experience that shakes their view of learning and suddenly gives school more purpose than getting into university or getting money for university. The knowledge should come if students are part of a realistic learning education system.

Darren Spyksma
Centennial Christian School
Terrace, British Columbia

THE OLD PHONE

Source Unknown

When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember the polished, old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked to it.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she did not know. Information Please could supply anyone's number and the correct time.

My personal experience with the genie-in-a-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer, the pain was terrible, but there seemed no point in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy.

I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway. The telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. "Information, please" I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear: "Information."

"I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone, the tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

"Isn't your mother home?" came the question.

"Nobody's home but me," I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked.

"No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts."

"Can you open the icebox?" she asked.

I said I could.

"Then chip off a little bit of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice.

After that, I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography, and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me my pet chipmunk that I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, our pet canary, died. I called, "Information Please," and told her the sad story. She listened, and then said things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was not consoled. I asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?"

She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul always remember that there are other worlds to sing in."

Somehow I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone, "Information Please."

"Information," said in the now familiar voice. "How do I spell fix?" I asked.

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. When I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. "Information Please" belonged in that old wooden box back home and I somehow never thought of trying the shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall. As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me.

Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about a half-hour or so between planes. I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown

operator and said, "Information Please."

Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well.

"Information."

I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now."

I laughed, "So it's really you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time?"

I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your call meant to me. I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years, and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do", she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered,

"Information." I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?" she said.

"Yes, a very old friend," I answered.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute, did you say your name was Paul?"

"Yes." I answered.

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you." The note said, "Tell him there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant.

How Rhema Makes Its Music Program Noteworthy

by Gwyneth Zylstra

Gwyneth Zylstra teaches at Rhema Christian School in Peterborough, Ontario.

Anyone who spends even a few hours at Rhema Christian School will quickly realize that music is an exciting part of the curriculum of Rhema Christian School and the Peterborough community. Our Music program runs from JK through Grades 8. Our JK students enjoy singing and dancing their way through an introduction to the fundamentals of music — rhythm, beat, pitch, dynamics, melody, instrumentation, and musical form. As they move up through the grades, they revisit each of these elements many times, at increasing levels of complexity. In Grade 6, we ordinarily introduce our students to the recorder. And for many years we sponsored a vocal music program for our Grades 7 and 8. All teachers are involved in the teaching of music, and we still have our students participate in musicals. But four years ago, we took a different direction. We inaugurated the first instrumental music program at Rhema.

Flexibility in instruction

At Rhema we have had the privilege of having a Music Specialist on staff for 18 years. For most grade levels, she teaches one 30-45 minute music class a week and then prepares another, which is left for the classroom teacher to complete before her next music class. There are several advantages to this system. First of all, it keeps the hours for a music specialist position to a reasonable number. Not many schools are in a position to hire a full-time music specialist. Secondly, it allows the classroom teacher some flexibility in the weekly schedule. Offering music at 2:00 pm on Thursdays is not set in stone. We permit the classroom teacher to carve out a time that works best in terms of other curriculum expectations for the week.

For some classroom teachers the expectation that they teach even a small portion of the music curriculum is daunting. In these cases, there is always the opportunity to swap classrooms with another teacher who may have a once-a-week class that they would relish handing off (Problem Solving!) or a strength that they can bring that complements one of your weaknesses (Drama — beyond acting out the Bible lesson!). This has worked very well for us over the years.

Building skills

Introducting our instrumental music program has breathed new life into our recorder program has received new life. While playing the recorder, students learn how to read and follow notes on a staff, breathe from the diaphragm, tongue between notes, and control breath flow to create different dynamic levels and moods. This experience has built a tremendous foundation for the skills taught in the instrumental music class that follows. Also, for some students the recorder is the first "real" instrument they have had the opportunity to learn, and it opens doors to a set of yet undiscovered skills.

Our instrumental music program is not a band program. Originally, this was a choice dictated by staffing, financial constraints, and a desire to start somewhere and see where we end up. Now, however, we have made a conscious decision to maintain an instrumental music program, and not a band program. Our rationale for this decision lies in the purpose behind the class.

One of the purposes behind our instrumental music program is to introduce students to at least one, and, hopefully, two of the basic instruments from one of the brass or woodwind families, or both. Our program uses the trumpet, the clarinet, and the flute. The instrument choices are limited to these three. Students given the opportunity to learn the trumpet will have learned the embouchure and buzzing techniques required for most other brass instruments. The clarinet is similar in that it introduces students to the techniques required to play other reed instruments, such as the ever popular saxophone, or the bassoon and oboe. In the same way the flute is a precursor to the piccolo. On a very practical note, these instruments are also some of the smaller choices when compared with band instruments such as drums, trombones and tubas.

As a school we were motivated to create such a program because we were becoming increasingly aware that secondary schools were no longer admitting students without previous experience into junior band programs. Part of any elementary school's mandate is to equip students, so that they have as many options as possible upon graduation. With this in mind we initiated a program that would at least introduce our students to playing a musical instrument.

Rented instruments

At Rhema, we choose to rent the instruments from a local supplier and purchase a band method book for each student. The student does not pay a fee for the rental or the curriculum. He does, however, have the option of purchasing the instrument. Each student signs a contract indicating that should their instrument meet with disaster while under their care, they will be held accountable. The advantage to renting instruments over purchasing is that as long as the the establishment from which you chose to rent owns the instruments, it is in their best interest to maintain the instruments, and most minor

repairs are completed at no cost to the school.

And even as we push onward and upward to greater heights of musical achievement in the regular classroom, there always seems to be time to squeeze in a musical or two each year. These truly are among the highlights of the year for both supporters and students. Joining together as a community of students and teachers to rehearse together and perform together is a wonderful illustration of the truth in I Corinthians 12. "We are all members of one body."

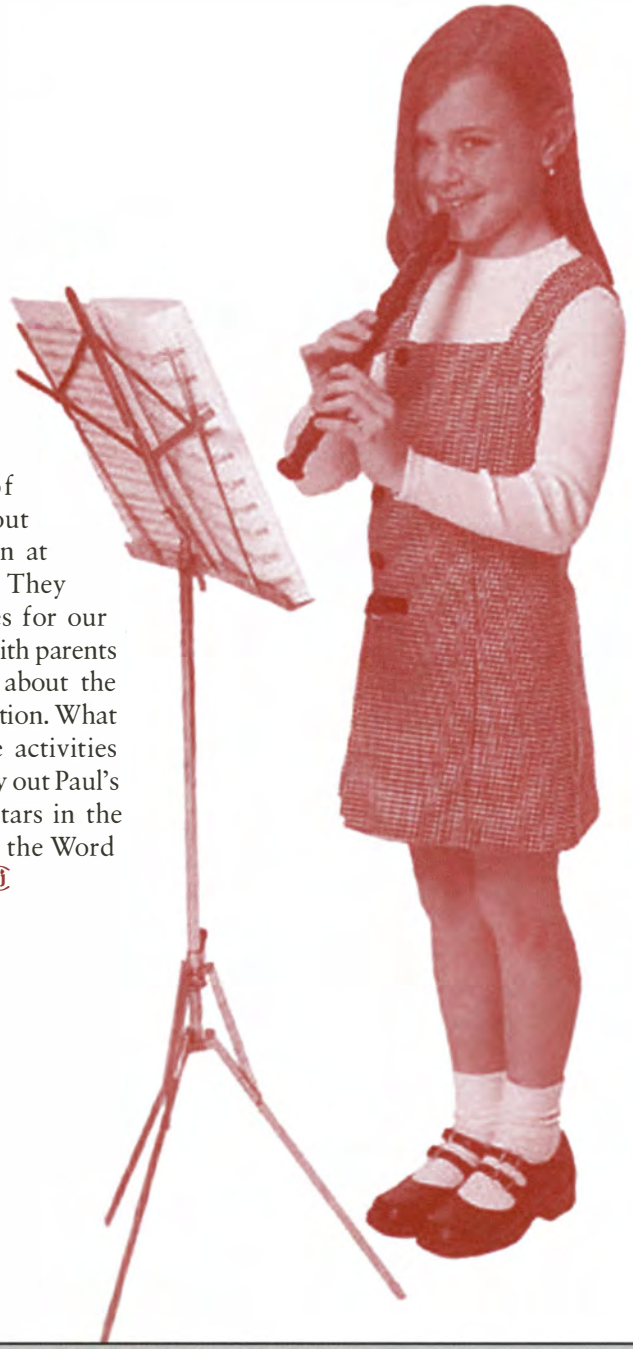
As our school has grown, we have attempted to limit the number of classes that perform together at any one venue, but somehow with the two or three quick songs from Kindergarten, the opening pieces by the recorder group, and three or four selections from the choir, we end up making space for us all. Our musicals speak so much about who we are as a school that it is difficult to put together a program that doesn't have room for everyone.

Communal outreach

Along the way are many other opportunities for our students to share their musical gifts with our school community and beyond, to the broader community of Peterborough. Perhaps one of the most exciting things about our music program is that we are involved in several annual events that take us outside our school and church communities. Each year we participate in the Festival of Trees, a popular fund-raising event for our local hospital that raises thousands of dollars. Many years our choirs also compete against those from other schools in the Kiwanis Festival.

Over the years we have sung in malls, caroled our way through the streets in the Santa Claus Parade, and even sung the national anthem at a Peterborough Petes hockey game at the Memorial Centre.

Events such as these are wonderful opportunities for the community of Peterborough to hear about the great things going on at Rhema Christian School. They create ideal opportunities for our parents to rub shoulders with parents who may not yet know about the benefits of Christian education. What is most important, these activities offer opportunities to carry out Paul's mandate "to shine like stars in the universe, as you hold out the Word of Life" (Philippians 2).



Christian Education: Does It Really Make a Difference? "We Do, God Helping Us."

by Rod Berg

Rod Berg (hmdcs@hmdcs.ca) is principal of the Holland Marsh District Christian School in Newmarket, Ontario.

Over the Christmas holidays I had the wonderful opportunity of witnessing my eight-week-old niece being baptized. Some denominations present newborns to God; others dedicate them. The denomination I have been raised in baptizes infants as a way of welcoming them into the family of God. Although I have witnessed many of these baptisms over the years, I listened a bit closer this time around. The minister actually asked my brother and sister-in-law, "Do you promise to do all in your power to instruct your child in the Christian faith?" I couldn't help wondering if Christian education would be part of that "to do all in your power" phrase.

Over the holidays I also had the chance to talk to an old friend who attended the same Christian elementary school that I did. The conversation followed the familiar pattern of family, career and children. When I asked which school his children went to, I was a bit surprised to find out they did not attend a Christian school. When I asked him why he would not consider the local Christian school, his response was that it did not make much of a difference for him.

Why do we send our children to a Christian school, and does doing that make a difference?

Responding in obedience

One of the best reasons for sending children to a Christian school has to do with parents responding in obedience. When my brother and sister-in-law responded to the question whether they would do everything in their power to instruct my niece in the Christian faith, they were promising to be obedient to God in this matter. I envision the picture of parents standing before God as he asks them if they will give their all to the Kingdom, if they will lead their children toward the cross, or if they will hold something back. True obedience means we respond with "No, Lord, we will not hold anything back."

A door for the Holy Spirit

Whenever we place our children in an environment that invites the Holy Spirit to work there, we are planting Kingdom seeds in them. As with the church, Sunday school, Bible studies, mission trips and praying with our children, Christian day school helps students connect Socializing, Science, Language Arts and discipline to God's world. Does it actually make a difference in their lives? When I am driving down a paved highway, I may not be able to feel if the contractor put the required 18 inches of gravel under the layer of pavement. However, over a few seasons of extreme cold and heat, time will tell if the pavement will buckle or not. Walking a life of faith is a long-term journey, and the various foundations laid may not be immediately evident. However, they do play a part in the big picture.

Sacrificing for the Kingdom

Blessings always follow sacrifice, whether it is a change in diet to improve lifestyle, a regular exercise program to increase the quality of life or a savings plan for retirement — natural blessings flow out of making sacrifices. Christian education works the same way. For some of our families the monthly payments are almost more than they can bear, while for others it is not that much of a challenge to have their children in a Christian school. Regardless of our financial picture, whenever we are required to give things up for the Kingdom, blessings follow.

A real difference?

My midlife crisis started about five years ago when I participated in the 10-kilometer Police Challenge Run in Abbotsford, BC. Taking up running seemed like a safe midlife crisis and was considerably less expensive than a white Mazda Miata or a little red Corvette, not to mention much more attainable.

I started running because I was up for a challenge, but I soon began reading about the many health advantages that come along with such an activity. Although the research states very clearly that a regular exercise program will significantly reduce the risk of a stroke, heart disease or diabetes, no *Running Room* or *Footlocker* store will give me a certificate guaranteeing a life free of health complications with a new pair of running shoes. If I were to ask for such a certificate I would be told there are too many other factors that come into play — family history and diet just to name a few.

Christian education is a lot like a regular exercise program. Although not the only factor in building a life in Christ, it certainly can be a significant part of the foundation needed to help our children to embrace a life of faith.

It certainly takes an entire village to lead a person into a relationship with our heavenly Father. It might take a family that introduces children to Jesus, a church that keeps the passion of our faith alive, and a Christian school that takes the phrase "This World Belongs to God" and implements it in all areas of life.

In a world that finds salvation in things, experiences and relationships, Christian education still holds up the signpost of God's kingdom that states, "The only true reality is a world connected to God."

Christian education … making a world of difference!

Fearful Bureaucrats Versus Common Sense

by Bert Witvoet

"I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves." (Ecclesiastes 10:7)

A year ago, I read in a newspaper I subscribe to that a Rochester, New York, teacher was suspended for washing a boy's mouth out with soap after he shouted an obscenity at a classmate. The teacher said she was stunned when a 10-year-old boy directed "a vile, very nasty sexual reference" at a third-grade girl. The boy had been sent home before because of unruly behavior. So rather than hand out another week-long suspension to this boy, the teacher decided to give him a symbolic lesson in proper speech.

She took the boy to the nurse's office, put a drop of liquid soap on his lower lip and washed it out immediately. She told him that she never wanted to hear filth like that coming out of his mouth again.

Apparently, the boy behaved well for the rest of the day. Nc did he complain to anyone about the little lesson. But his brothe apparently told district officials what had happened and the acted immediately to suspend the teacher indefinitely. More tha 40 relatives of children in the teacher's class asked for her to b reinstated.

It seems that among officials there is such a fear of what th public may deem to be inappropriate behavior on the part of teacher, that they lose sight of what's important and what is no (I'm guessing that it was considered an insult to the dignity of th boy to have an old-fashioned method, that in the past may hav been misused, applied as a form of discipline? Help me ou here.) Instead of worrying about the language used by childrei they focus on the innocent application of a drop of soap on a student's lower lip. Instead of empowering their employees and protecting them from frivolous complaints, they give in to the threat of a negative public image. In fact, the public is not at all concerned about this. The demand for the teacher's reinstatement on the part of parents and relatives indicates that there is still a lot of appreciation for old-fashioned standards among the common people.

I, for one, hope that our Christian schools will not stoop to sacrifice justice on the altar of public image. Sometimes we are so afraid of being sued that we will suspend a teacher of long-standing good service for one out-of-character slap because she lost her cool one day. Zero tolerance is not a Christian value.

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Query

Gender Differences and Obesity

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.

Gender-sensitive teaching

Question #1.

In his book *Why Gender Matters*, Dr. Leonard Sax argues that, because girls and boys learn very differently, they should not be taught in the same way or in the same classroom. Studies show that single-sex classrooms provide an environment which allows both sexes to excel: boys have the freedom to explore the arts without ridicule; girls can take on math and sciences without feeling intimidated. Schools that have tried same-sex classes are seeing positive results — academic as well as behavioral — and parents are lining up to enroll their children. What are your views on this?

Response:

All of our teaching in some way reflects our perception of the learner. As Christian teachers we say that students are created in the image of God and therefore given the ability to respond to God, the creation and others. We also believe that children are created with their own unique gifts and talents. Educators aim to honor the various ways in which children learn.

I believe classrooms can function as communities of learners respecting the various gifts of the learners. As a community we are called to learn from and with one another in order to build up the body of Christ. Children can be taught to respect and complement one another's ways of learning. As professionals we can learn from research and use learning strategies which more readily engage both girls and boys in their learning tasks.

New positron emission tomography and MRI technologies enable researchers to look inside the brains of boys and girls to find structural and functional differences that profoundly affect human learning. Research shows that there is a mismatch between our boys' and girls' learning brains and the institutions empowered to teach them (Gurian and Stevens, 2004, p. 22).

Research indicates that the larger area of connecting tissue between the brain hemispheres of girls enables more "cross talk" between the hemispheres. The prefrontal cortex of girls is generally more active than that of boys and develops at an earlier age, thus allowing girls to make fewer impulsive decisions than do boys. The increased serotonin in the bloodstream and brain of girls also makes girls less impulsive. Because girls generally use more of the cortical area of the brain for verbal and emotive functioning, sensual memory, sitting still, listening, tonality and mental cross talk, the complexities of reading and writing come easier. On the other hand, the female brain does not activate as many cortical areas as does the male brain for abstract and physical-spatial functions such as watching and manipulating objects that move through physical space and understanding the abstract mechanical concepts. For this reason more boys than girls engage in physics, industrial engineering and architecture.

Boys' brains generally use half the brain space that girls use for verbal-emotive functioning and a greater portion for spatial-mechanical functioning, making many boys more inclined to move objects such as balls, model airplanes and even arms and legs, through space. Having less of the chemicals serotonin and oxytocin than girls do makes them more likely to be impulsive and less able to combat the desire to move. With less blood flow to the brain and brain structures which compartmentalizes learning, boys are not as likely to multitask, pay attention or make quick transitions between lessons.

The male brain is set to recharge itself by entering a rest state. This is evident when boys drift off without completing assignments, stop taking notes, fall asleep during lectures or tap pencils or fidget in order to keep themselves awake. Girls can refocus this rest state without exhibiting the same kinds of behaviors. Thus, the more words the teacher uses, the more likely boys are to "zone out."

Teaching would be more effective for boys if use was made of symbols, abstractions, diagrams, pictures and objects moving through space. Boys' brains are more suited to learning higher math and physics which involve abstraction. That is also why more boys than girls are attracted to video games which involve physical movement and even destruction.

To accommodate these different ways of learning, teachers need to be aware of these differences and make allowances for them. Boys tend to need more physical space for learning and their learning materials appear less organized. Therefore, teachers should provide a variety of learning areas to accommodate this need when it comes desks, tables, area rug, easy chair and floor space. Teachers have to be open to more movement and noise for boys as well as a longer transitional time between lessons. For example, since physical movement promotes learning for boys, teachers should incorporate kinesthetic and large muscle movement into their lessons as language concepts are being taught. Animated literacy in the primary grades is beneficial. Providing

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a literacy rich environment helps young boys. They should be encouraged to verbalize their actions as they engage in physical activity (building blocks, beading, sand play) to build a rich verbal vocabulary. Keep verbal instructions to a minimum; no more than one minute for young boys. Elementary girls need opportunities to build, design and manipulate objects to prepare them for the spatial challenges of math and science courses. Puzzles, water and sand table as well as using manipulatives in math are helpful. Because gross motor skills are not as developed in girls, physical games need to be encouraged.

Group work at all grade levels will encourage discussion among learners and promote leadership and negotiation skills. Although many of the suggestions given pertain to younger children, discussions with fellow teachers and our students would provide insights as to how we could encourage the complementary respecting and honoring of the different ways boys and girls learn at levels beyond elementary.

Gurian, M. and Stevens, K. (2004). With Girls and Boys in Mind. *Educational Leadership*, November, pp. 21-26.

Body-sensitive teaching

Question #2:

We are expected to introduce thirty minutes of daily physical activity into our school program. We are told that the school must do this because of the increase of obesity in children. I understand that we must work with parents, but how can we do this without offending?

Response:

As Christian school staff we are partners with parents in educating children. Our task is to teach the children, work with parents and sometimes educate them as well. Studies as well as cursory observation of society in general reveals that obesity in children as well as in adults is on the increase. That may also be evident in your classroom. More poignant is the effect that obesity or being overweight has on a child's social-emotional development.

Establishing in your classroom the perspective that our bodies are a wonderful gift from God and that we have a responsibility to honor them is vitally important. "You are not your own, you are bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6: 19 - 20). Again, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14).

I believe one of the best tools we can use is accurate information. Having been a member of a weight loss group for many years, I have seen a lack of awareness of our body's nutritional requirements. People need to know more about the fat content of foods, the correlation between the body's intake (calories) and energy expended, portion size and the inadequate intake of water all contribute to weight gain. Facts regarding the increase of obesity tell a story. Statistics regarding the increase in heart disease, diabetes and strokes caused by excess weight are available. One of your avenues of educating parents is your school newsletter. As you begin this program you may also consider inviting a nutritionist to speak at a parents meeting. Creating activities for the students which involve parents' participation or feedback will also help educate parents.

Parents and students may have to be taught as to what is considered a snack. In some classrooms I have seen snacks that looked more like a lunch. National food guidelines give serving sizes and suggestions regarding vegetables, fruit and whole wheat crackers. As we teach children, we also teach parents. If we ask children, "What is considered a good snack?" we will at the same time be educating parents. With the help of parents you may want to introduce a snack program for the school. This involves having a group of parents prepare healthy snacks for the student body. A snack plan is prepared, groceries are purchased, snacks are prepared and distributed, and teaching focuses on the nutritional value of the snack.

Some parents are not aware of the amount of sugar and, therefore, empty calories contained in fruit drinks and pop. Water is an excellent substitute, since the benefits of water are numerous. Students should be encouraged to drink water, even while in class.

As adults we are also role models for children. If we teach children what constitutes a healthy lunch, and yet do not follow those guidelines, students will see the inconsistency. Our fast-paced society finds families more quickly opting for fast foods than preparing a nutritionally balanced meal. Students' comparison of the nutritional values of each may create needed awareness.

We live in a time when individuals, both parents and children, are more sedentary than previously. Today children watch television or play video games rather than play outdoors. A study revealed that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to become obese than are those who watch a little. Graphing the number of hours students watch television may create a greater awareness for both parents and children. Encourage children to engage in physical activities outside of school such as walking, hiking, biking and skating. Such programs can also be graphed.

As you and your students engage in more physical activity within

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Jellema's Double Vision

At one point in his encounter with God in the desert, Moses is told that if he inserts himself into a cleft in a rock, the Lord will reveal his glory — but barely. The Lord will not only shield himself with his hand, but will permit only a glimpse of his back. Something of this sense — that God is accessible, but only through crevices, flashes, and epiphanies rather than direct encounters, which would blind us as they would have blinded Moses — underlies this sprightly anthology of 67 poems by the poet, a well-known alumnus of Calvin College and professor emeritus of English at the University of Maryland.

This motif — the slender grace of the title — receives its most dramatic expression in the poem "Letter to Lewis Smedes about God's Presence." (13) Jellema knows with his head that "God's mercy is as wide as the ocean, as deep as the sea." But he confesses, as we all must, including mystics and poets, that in truth we experience God in "the slender incursions of splintered light,/ echoes, fragments, odd words and phrases/like flashes through darkened hallways....The thin and tenuous thread we hang by...." Such phrasing appears as well in "Bicycle Parts," in the phrase "narrow strings in sudden slants of light..."; in "Car Pool Radio," where he describes the "thin line of absence of static" (20); in the quotation from Plotinus, "If only we could see for a moment the holy light we pursue..." (87); in the poem "We Used to Grade God's Sunsets from the Lost Valley Beach." In the last, he urges us to affirm "how much promise there is/on a hurtling planet, swung from a thread/of light and saved by nothing but grace" (33); and in his delightful defense of the "dignity" of the green bean against a detractor, he talks about "the holy scent of turned earth/slendered into a bean...." (34).

Spiritual depth

Jellema provides a brief, helpful preface, where he explains how he has practiced the art of "the double vision." To begin with, he revels in this amazing, dazzling, surprise-filled world we have received as a legacy. Look where you wish — in the heavens, or the sea, during a snorkeling expedition, or a dryer full of clothes at a laundromat, tossing off colors like a kaleidoscope, or the six components of a bicycle (these poems will give you a new appreciation for this mode of transport), or the pineapple (we need to recover the art of preparing this fruit), or having us listen to blind Willie Johnson playing the blues, or describing the mind and art of Van Gogh, or living with the poor in Nicaragua, to whose deprivation we have, alas, contributed, or the contrast between a nun open to unusual phenomena in the skies during epiphany and the tired watchman who wishes only a cup of coffee and his shift replacement, "this world jumps," and this world matters.

Yes, this poet's eye is keen, and he filters his experiences with this world in the carefully nuanced prisms of the miracle of language — of words which need to be burnished as water burnishes stone ("Words Take Water's Way"). (3) The double vision comes into play as Jellema gives these images and experiences a second look. Surely the blessing God gave to his world when he pronounced it Good has much to do with its richness, its depth, its power to arouse, to suggest, a world in which metaphors can illuminate similarities in unlike objects or

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the class, think of the many ways you can turn the activity into a learning experience. Graph progress regularly, determine the number of muscles used, which muscles are used and the calories expended. Have students solve problems such as: How much physical activity (jumping jacks, walking, swimming) needs to be done to work off the two square inch (5 square cm) of chocolate cake eaten? Then decide on a more nutritional substitute for the equivalent number of calories. For example, "One cup of peanuts has a mind-boggling 720 calories and 63 grams of fat. If you swap your peanuts for two cups of pretzels just once a week, you'll save an astounding 20,280 calories and 3,120 grams of fat a year. That's worth 46 days worth of fat!" (Podleski, J. & G., 1999, p. 45).

In summary, I encourage you to work with the parents of your students as all of us together learn what it means to take care of our body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Provide current factual information. Celebrate new insights. Focus on the success you experience as a classroom and as a school community.

Blessings as you initiate learning activities toward a healthy life style for God's praise and glory.

Podleski, J. & G. (1999). *Crazy Plates.* Waterloo: Granet Publishing.

Rod Jellema, *A Slender Grace: Poems*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004. Pp. 116, including notes and acknowledgments.
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (professor emeritus of English at Calvin College)

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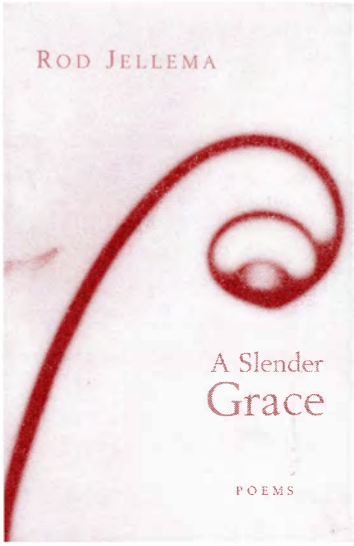
ideas, a world created with a divine profligacy, in which tears and joys, weddings and funerals, life and death all jostle each other in unending profusion.

Thus, Jellema permits his recollection of the ice delivery man to bring back a whole world of childhood — as did Proust when he tasted a piece of madeleine cake. But Jellema goes a step further as he reflects on "the spin of star-ice in space" as a foil to the warm tar of the street. In fact, he cannot help seeing double. In his "A Caribbean Cruise: A Letter" (80) he tries to live into the exuberant life available on this floating palace — the careful attention to one's every need, the pleasing amenities, the varied rhythms and sounds of the languages. But instead of attending the lively floor show, he will go to his room to do some reflection, holding this world of "the glitz of a lit-up ship" at arm's length.



He senses the irony in the disparity between the words on a 1930 plaque in Nicaragua affirming "the cordial relations" between that country and the United States, and the reality symbolized by the scarred cement and the broken-off pipe. The fountain yields no water, and children's names on crosses of wood speak of death by diarrhea. But he speaks to an even "deeper angrier fountain" than the children's names — exploitation by one nation over another, masked by ritualistic diplomatic language. Something of this "double vision" occurs as well in the poem "Take a Chance," (47) where, using three different situations, he celebrates the good that comes from choosing the road others neglect: what you would miss if you cancel the trip to Innesfree ("the quick red rage of a torn leaf before it gentles itself onto the quiet pool"); the student who chooses to pursue the subject in which he is weakest — mathematics; and what the child will never learn about light and darkness if you keep his night light burning. In his brief poem "Contact" (91) he praises what the Japanese might call "Wabi Sabi" — the case for imperfection, the need to be satisfied with less than a perfect amethyst or whatever, given the world we inhabit.

Christian antennae

What gives the poems this depth, this bifocal vision, is the poet's Christian sensibility. It serves as a spiritual compass, honing in on Biblical wisdom, sometimes directly, sometimes intuitively, but truly every time. Thus, his poem on Epiphany, "Letter to Lewis Smedes About God's Presence," the poem on grading God's sunsets, which concludes by reminding us that God gave us the palette, we are to do the painting, the poems of respect for Van Gogh, "A Prayer for Darkness in the Age of Glare," and the very fine "Frisian Psalms, 1930" — all these and others show their religious grounding more or less explicitly.

But this disposition also comes to expression frequently in especially two clusters of themes — the theme of home, and of improvisations on darkness and light. "All of life is but a wandering to find home" says a character in John Ford's play. Section IV of the anthology is, in fact, headed "Some Lost Place Called Home." His "Travel Advisory" (79) wishes to say that being a citizen of "that dim outlandish civitas dei" implies that we ought not to feel too satisfied anywhere — not in our travel destinations, and not in our very homes. "The Housekite" (5) suggests that the pilot of this contrivance should not entertain too lively a "spirity dream of home." He also borrows aptly from one of his favorite poets, Czeslaw Milosz, in a quotation which introduces the poem "Why I Never Take off my Watch at Night." (82) Says Milosz: "Tell me, as you would in the middle of the night/When we face only night, the ticking of a watch,/The whistle of an express train, tell me/Whether you really think this world is your home?" Similarly, a quotation by James Wright advises how one can find one's way home after a snorkeling expedition, "wherever home may be." And in that poem about snorkeling he pointedly contrasts the communities of creaturely homes in the coral reefs with human habitations: "...these are towns/we only dream, civitate, republics of mind/and heart, designed not to oppress and devour — ...cities that feed themselves to their tenants..." (85) Whimsical, perhaps, but a fresh thought nevertheless.

No abiding place

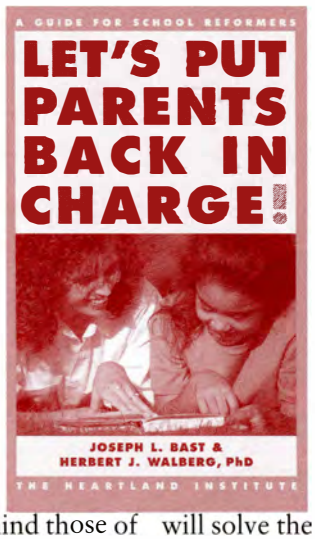
The poet has traveled far and wide, and is, as Tennyson puts it, a part of all he has met. But his poem on his summer home (95) is not one which would bring a rush of buyers. It is what it is, but no more than that. He has no illusions about this world offering a permanent abiding place. His poems on light and darkness also exhibit nuances arising from his double vision. Light, of course, is a condition of our lives. But we have not handled it well. Our world has too much glare (88), too much unfriendly illumination, with the threat of a nuclear blast a continuing threat. Thus, as the Psalmist says, we often derive wisdom and truth in the mystery

of darkness. The final poem says so as well, one of my favorites, where we learn that in the Fridsma's Frisian home the kerosene lamp did not get lit until the family had sung some psalms — in order that they could get to used to the dark and appreciate the light when it came.

Space permits only a few more observations. Jellema has a wide circle of acquaintances, and many of the poems are dedicated to such people. The reader gains added pleasure from learning about the relationships which gave rise to the poems. We get helpful explanations about settings and occasions of other poems. Moreover, all the poems are rooted in life, in experience, in astute observations and reflections. They do not represent the tortuous self-scrutiny of so much contemporary poetry. He suits the meters to the subject; one feels the beat, but it is not obtrusive. He is a master of free verse — free, but disciplined. He divides his poems into the following groups: Incarnality, Bifocal, Assignment Nicaragua, 1985, and "Some Lost Place Called Home." Reading these chastely chiseled compositions provides a pleasure of a high order — health to the mind and challenges to live reflectively. And thanks, Mr. Jellema, for calling off that poet's strike. We need you. We need you to teach us how to see, how to exercise stewardship over language, and how to see the truth of Milocz's observation that "One clear stanza can take more weight/Than a whole wagon of elaborate prose."

Joseph L. Bast and Herbert J. Walberg, *Let's Put Parents Back in Charge! A Guide for School Reformers*. Chicago: The Heartland Institute, 19 South La Salle Street, #903, Chicago, Illinois, 60603. 2003, 91 pages plus several pages of information about the School Choice Movement. (Abridged)
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (professor emeritus of English at Calvin College)

The title of this booklet (complete with exclamation mark) tips the reader off to the content and style of this passionate case for parental choice in schools, to be achieved through the voucher system. The authors remind us that the Supreme Court approved as constitutional the use of school vouchers to empower parents to have more say in the choice of schools. Part 1 sets forth the need for vouchers; Part 2 acknowledges that capitalistic principles are at work in the voucher system and provides a useful primer on free enterprise economics; Part 3 tells us how people committed to greater choice in the selection of schools can go about making it happen in their state.



The case for vouchers entails a harsh criticism of the existing school system. Reliable statistics seem to bear out the academic, social, and political failures of the current arrangement. Little progress has been made in eliminating drugs and alcohol from the classrooms, reading and math skills lag way behind those of many other countries, school boards lack the will and the ability to bring about the needed changes, and teacher unions are focussed on retaining their power. What is needed — so we learn in Part 2 — is the stimulus of competition, which employs the institutions of private property, markets, and the Rule of Law. The core of this section challenges seven myths about capitalism — misunderstandings, say the authors, about a free market economy — and makes the case for the compatibility of capitalism and education. Capitalism, they say, is not perfect, but government intervention seldom improves education. Schools will benefit from free market competition, based on freedom of choice. Parents are astute enough to make wise choices, private schools have enough classrooms to handle more students, and a safety net could be established to help the poor.

A system of free choice of schools should be introduced only gradually, and incrementally. Home Schooling is already a good program — though some guarantees would need to be exercised that the vouchers would be used properly. Several layers of new types of administrators will have to be introduced, as liaisons between parents, schools, and the government. Parents and others who are persuaded that nothing less than an overhaul of the present school system and a launching of school choice will solve the educational problems of our country should start by distributing this book widely. Discount rates for larger orders apply. Example: $35.00 will buy 25 books. Contributions to the cause are also welcome.

Readers should remember that the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship makes the same case in their publication *Society, State, and Schools: A Case for Structural and Confessional Pluralism*, published by Eerdmans, 1981.