Volume 31, Number 4

April 1992



-by DON OPPEWAL

Nominal Insights



I accepted, with a mixture of joy and trepidation, the Journal Association Board assignment to introduce this special issue. It consists of a recapitulation of the best of

over twenty years of my favorite continuing column. It began during my tenure as managing editor, in January 1970 to be specific, and with minor interruptions continues into 1992. Since the column will cease with this issue, now is a good time to look at its accomplishments.

My trepidation surfaced when I faced the task of choosing which of over seventy columns would be most meaningful today or most representative. Each one contributed something to the continuing cast of characters and their way of responding to the perennial problems of Christian schooling. The difficulty of choosing less than one in three for reprint was made easier by the board's assignment of two able persons. Vicki Kastein and Judy Otte, members of the board and experienced classroom teachers, also had strong enthusiasm for the column and informed opinions on which articles should be selected.

In the early years the Dutch connection was strongly evident. Since some of that is lost on a later generation, perhaps some explanation will be helpful. Readers should know that the pen name Zoeklicht not only sounds Dutch but in the Dutch has two meanings: one is related to searchlight and the other to the more elusive meaning of seeker after light. Together they capture well the intent of the column: to seek new light on old problems and to expose to light various issues. Faculty room dialogue, both formal and informal, is the means through which this intent is carried out over the years. While the Zoeklicht pseudonym has



persisted, some Dutch humor and plays on words in names of characters have been altered over the years, with only a minor loss in meaning, and surely a gain in reflecting the more pluralistic setting of Christian schools. A case in point is the name Den Denker. His name means "The Thinker," and first as history teacher and then as principal this character comes closest to the voice of the author(s). This Dutch allusion, and enrichment of meaning, was lost when Den Denker was killed in an auto accident, to then be replaced by Esther Carpenter, with her name suggesting the role of builder of faculty morale and unity. Only the linguistically curious would care to know that Sue Katje translates as catty or Jack Ezel as donkey. While many other names in the original cast of characters have bilingual meanings, the name of Bible teacher John Vroom is one that should not be missed. The allusion is to piety in both its positive and negative sense, with the negative sense of pious prattle being used most often as the foil for the wit and wisdom of both students and faculty.

Only one more reference to names will suffice to show how carefully names reinforced meaning and actions.

The name "Asylum" for the column itself has two meanings: a retreat from busyness in the classrooms but also a crazy house or place for lunacy. No careful reader would miss the pun intended and persistently reinforced.

Going beyond the literary features, one can note how persistently the columns have developed variations on the perennial issues that confront every classroom teacher. Issues like student discipline, the role of sports, faculty attitudes toward administration and school board, and faculty moonlighting and professionalism: all are treated with new twists each time, and with a mixture of humor and humanness that should bring a smile of recognition but also that embarrassed smile at the exposure of foibles among us all.

Read them then, either at one sitting, like a brief novel, or in bits and pieces, as your own school year. You will find, we believe, much more than an exercise in nostalgia; you will find in the episodes both a celebration and a critique of your own "Asylum." May this special issue be a continuing reminder of the gap between the noble aspirations of Christian educators expressed in our rhetoric and the reality of our actual practices.

A Beginning

t was comfortably warm and peaceful in the faculty room of Omni Christian High. The Stromberg wall clock indicated twelve o'clock, time for the teachers to start meandering in for their noon break. The aroma of freshly-percolated coffee added to the atmosphere of anticipation that pervaded the empty room.

Karl Den Meester, teacher of English and speech, and Ginny Traansma, music and home economics teacher, were the first to reach the "Asylum," as the Omni faculty were wont to call "their" room. They were followed immediately by Bob Den Denker, history teacher, and the Bible teacher, John Vroom. For a while the clinks of coffee cups and casual, cheerful remarks about the beautiful fall day filled the room. Most of the teachers were coming in now, each finding a spot to sit a while and banter before facing their afternoon classes. The first four had taken seats around the big mahogany table placed in the center of the room. Each contemplated his coffee cup during a momentary lull in the light-hearted conversation, while John carefully peeled the Saran Wrap off his tuna fish sandwich. The others had already eaten their lunch in the classrooms. Karl was the first to break the silence.

"How hard did you get hit by tuition this year, John?"

John took a large bite from his sandwich and tried to answer, but his mouth was too full. Ginny turned her eyes away; she silently wished again that she could have John in her home economics class, even if it would be for just one hour, to teach him something about table etiquette. "Such a nice guy otherwise," she sighed to herself.

Finally John was able to answer.

"Well, with two in high school and two in grade school, it's going to cost me about \$1500, and that's not even paying full cost. That's a big slice of bread, vou know it?" After a moment he added, while taking another, slightly smaller bite, "But you know man shall not live by bread alone. The Lord will provide, I always say."

"I suppose that means, though, that your wife will keep working at Penney's a couple of nights a week, doesn't it?" queried Bob, barely restraining an edge of cynicism.

"Yes, every little crumb helps, you know." He had finished the sandwich and began to reach in the bag for the cookies he called his dessert. He repeated, almost as if to himself, "Every little crumb helps." Then, facing the others again, he added, "And I guess I'll be driving that truck again too next summer. But it's worth it, isn't it?"

"Is it?" The challenge shot back from Den Denker and startled the other three momentarily.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked a bit uneasily. "You sound so serious."

> "Christian education is worth it, isn't it?"

"I am! Is it really worth, not just John's hard-earned \$1500, but all the other thousands that are dropped into this venture we call Christian education?"

"What are you getting at, Bob?" Karl asked the question quietly, though irritation was unmistakably present in his voice.

"I mean that I have serious doubts sometimes about the dividends, Karl."

"What's bothering you, Bob?" Ginny's voice was full of concern now.

"He doesn't believe in what he's doing," Karl scoffed.

Then he shouldn't be doing it," John said with finality as he stuffed his mouth with the last piece of homebaked coconut cookie.

After a slight pause, Bob replied softly, "Maybe you're right. But I'd like to believe in it, you know."

Karl cut in sharply and impatiently. "I'd like to know what you're really talking about. You say you have doubt about the dividends. What did you expect—perfect products after twelve years of imperfect education?"

"Okay, okay, Karl. Maybe I was looking more for a sympathetic ear than a logical debate."

"Well, all you're accomplishing is raising suspicions about your dedication as a Christian school teacher, not to mention your religious beliefs."

"Wait just a minute here! Can't you speak your mind around here without having somebody immediately jumping down your throat and accusing you of heresy? If that's the case, all we'll hear in this room for the rest of the year will be an endless series of bland remarks that disturb nobody's illusions and upset no one's prejudices. That'll be just dandy: everybody mouthing little nothings about little nothings."

The loud, scoffing voice belonged to Steve Vander Prikkel, the husky biology teacher and basketball coach, who had joined the group at the table and was now directing the attention of others also to the scene in the center.

It was Matt DeWit, science teacher, who had the reply. "I don't think there's any danger of that, Prikkel; we could always talk about your eating habits."

But Karl felt a need to justify himself. "Look, I opened my mouth because I get pretty ticked off at all these would-be reformers who so glibly spit out their meaningless generalizations about everything they see wrong with this world, from the Vietnam War to the prohibition of pot."

"Add Christian education to the list," reminded John.

The attention of nearly everyone in the room was now directed to the group around the table, and it was clearly Den Denker's turn to continue or conclude the tenor of the conversation he had unintentionally been responsible for starting. He decided to let the chips fall.

"Okay, people, I opened my big mouth and I asked for it. I'm sure I can't give you everything you expect, Karl, but I'll at least try. I said I get upset sometimes over this whole Christian education thing we're all part of. Now let me give you some examples. I get pretty upset when I often find it impossible to cut through the thick layers of stereotyped responses, conventional prejudices, and superficial, materialistic values of my junior and senior students. I get upset by the deadening mental passivity and docility of most of them, by minds that show the dangerous signs of prolonged indoctrination and isolation that can only result in intellectual stagnation. I get upset by the parental and community pressures to turn out a safe product that preferably doesn't think too much, questions less, and generally gives offense to nothing and no one in thought, word, or dress. I get upset by intimidated and autocratic administrators whose only criterion for decision-making is public relations. I get upset when I see a display of greater ingenuity in imposing prohibitions about skirt and hair length than in constructing a better educational program here at Omni Christian. I get upset when I see more effort and enthusiasm given to the promotion of football and basketball than to the structuring of appropriate courses for our 'rummies' who aren't collegebound. I get upset by the number of dull chapels we feel we must impose in the name of Christianity. I get upset when the bell interrupts me every time I get to the climax of a lecture." He added the last part with a wan smile as the school bell summoned students and teachers back to the classrooms.

Karl was the first to stand up; at the same time Peter Rip entered the room. Peter Rip, better known among the faculty as P.R., was the principal, and his entry at this time was usually calculated to reinforce the bell's warning. Sensing the tension in the room, he asked no one in particular, "Did I interrupt something?"

There was a sardonic edge in Karl's voice when he answered, "You just interrupted a one-man recital of hang-ups that makes the rest of us wonder why we haven't got them too." Turning to Den Denker, he added, "Maybe you should remember that a guy who speaks his positive convictions is worth a dozen of those who are always sounding off their doubts and suspicions."

To which John added, as he made his way to the door, "We must walk by faith, Bob, and not by sight."

'As long as you guys are quoting, how about throwing in that bit about the doubts of an honest man containing more moral truth than the profession of faith of people under an imposed voke." Jack Nieuwsma, the new math teacher, made the last contribution.

The room was beginning to empty. Steve turned to Bob who was still by the table and said seriously, "I think you've given us something to think and talk about for a while. At least I hope this isn't the end of the discussion.'

Ginny and Bob were the last to get up. Clutching Bob by his sleeve, Ginny said anxiously, "I don't agree with you, Bob, but I admire your honesty. And we must talk about it again."

Den Denker smiled at her warmly. On the way out he said, "I think we will. The year is not yet over."

Behind them, alone in the "Asylum" now, P.R. looked puzzled. "I wonder what that was all about," he muttered to himself.

> Originally published January 1970

"I get upset by the parental and community pressures to turn out a safe product that preferably doesn't think too much, questions less. and generally gives offense to nothing and no one. . . . "

Of Spirit and Truth

he sonorous rumble of the chapel organ in the gym at the end of the long hallway invaded the Asylum as John Vroom slipped into the almost deserted room. He carried a large bag in one hand and a half-eaten orangeglazed doughnut in the other. His glance about the room fell appreciatively on the covered pan of brownies someone had brought. His questioning look was answered by Ginny Traansma from her sunken position in the battered leather couch. "Prikkel's thirtieth," she explained cryptically, referring to the pan that Steve Vander Prikkel's wife, Stella, had provided in dubious honor of the coach's birthday. Ginny and John were on hall duty this week. The people on hall duty always got to skip chapel so they could get something to eat before the kids took their break. If you were going to skip chapel without a good excuse like hall duty, you stayed in your room or went to the boiler room. It lessened the chances of being challenged by P.R., or by the secretary, who was always on the lookout for any hint of laxness in faculty and student body life.

"Student chapel again this morning?" Ginny inquired of her companion.

"Yes," John mumbled through the remaining crumbs of his third doughnut. "Stan Sterk, you know—the student body president." The speaker in the ceiling was beginning to hum as Mrs. Snip diligently began her search for the buttons that would pipe this morning's chapel into every room in the school.

"Good speech?" Ginny asked.

"Oh, the usual kind of thing one gets from students. Very short, something about love and school loyalty." He was the faculty member in charge of chapel. He assumed the job by default. Nobody else really wanted it, and it seemed right that the Bible teacher should have the job. John always read through every speech to be given by a student. He still had painful memories of the day the sophomore class president used selected passages from Book of Mormon, the Koran, and Catcher in the Rye for his chapel speech.

The blare of Karl Den Meester's monotone leading the singing too close to the microphone precluded any further conversation. The two colleagues settled back with their snacks as Stanley began softly to make his appeal to his peers.

"Something has been bothering me and others for some time. I remember that the Bible says that he who would worship God must worship him in spirit and truth. That is my problem. And that's what I want to talk about this morning because it's your problem, too."

John's forehead had begun to wrinkle with thought. "Did I read that?" he mused. Stan continued.

"Three times a week we come to the gymnasium. We come to chapel, because this is a Christian school. And it's right and proper for Christians to worship. The honest truth is that most of us find it impossible to worship here."

John's lower jaw dropped involuntarily, then clenched tightly, his face drained, then livid.

"We're forced to sing hymns when most of us plainly don't especially want to sing.

"We're forced to listen to a speaker who didn't especially want to come and who didn't especially have something to say.

"But we're all coerced, and we find ourselves going through the accepted motions while our spirits slip into a kind of mindless passivity.

"We're bored and we can disguise it only by hypocrisy.

"We tune in to the good jokes, but turn off when the sermon starts.

"We resent playing church in school. We resent being preached at as if the minister had not done his job adequately on Sunday.

"We're seldom inspired, aroused, or challenged. We've heard it all before. Many of us have already become indifferent; a few of us revolt.

"We come to chapel because we must. But we no longer expect to worship here. Instead we nap when we can, or hold hands with our girl, or study the note cards for the next hour's test."

Vroom could sit no longer. As he strode toward the hall door, he glimpsed the darkened window on the door of P.R.'s office and reflected with grim pleasure that at least he would have until tomorrow when P.R. returned from his trip to the State Capitol to phrase some kind of account of how he could have let this happen. As he slammed the door and hurried to his room, Stanley's voice, stronger now after the tremulous beginning of this daring venture, was saying,

"These are terrible things to say, and I regret having to say them. I had another speech prepared, which I would rather have given. But I was bothered into saying *this* instead. Someone had to, because it is true.

"I've thought hard and long about solutions. They're not easily found. Many will not agree with my proposals. Maybe that is not so important. But I hope you'll listen at least so that we can intelligently talk together and explore other answers to this problem.

"First of all I propose that we abolish chapel as we now have it. I think we must, for the sake of our faith and our sincerity; for the sake of becoming more Christian with each

"We resent playing church in school."



'We're seldom inspired, aroused, or challenged. We've heard it all before." other and more genuine before our God. There's something false in the notion that fifteen minutes of chapel will give our godliness the necessary spiritual boost, or that our Christianity as students at Omni High will be promoted through a sermon and some songs.

"Some have suggested more student chapels. I don't think that's the answer either. Instead of a preacher or a teacher, we'll have a student up there nervously and desperately trying to communicate a message that often turns out to be a pale imitation of the adult examples we've been exposed to most of our lives.

"Voluntary chapel sounds attractive, especially if the format of chapel could become more meaningful, too. Yet I also reject that as a solution, for, at its best, it would still be mass worship, and, at its worst, it would split the students and polarize them as pious and indifferent according to whether or not they attended chapel.

"What we need is the freedom to worship God in spirit and in truth. Such worship can be public but also private. Maybe it's most meaningful when it's intimate, when it's private. On Sundays we have public worship. Perhaps in school we can stress the private more. I would like to see one room in this school building that is set aside as a chapel room. It would be a place for any individual to go to and be alone with God for a while; a place to read the Bible, a place for private prayer, a place to just sit and think or listen to religious music. Our spiritual needs are not all the same. They cannot always be expressed the same way. We need a place that can accommodate our individuality as Christians.

"We could still have special assemblies, of course. Occasionally there are speakers we would like to hear. There are choral groups, Christian folk singers, dramatic presentations, significant films—all of which could very well inspire, arouse, and challenge us. These I'm sure we would welcome, especially if we could have the opportunity to respond to them immediately after the presentation, either in the gymnasium or in the classrooms. So often we've felt frustrated because chapel was over the moment the organ started its postlude strains. It is so divorced from our classroom business.

"It's in the classroom especially that our life as Christians must come to fuller expression. Our devotions there must be made more meaningful. The link between subject matter and Christian faith must become discernable. Moral and spiritual values and concerns, implications of our commitment to Christ for our lives in the real world of the seventies—these must assume a larger place and be more seriously explored.

"In conclusion, let me urge again that we abolish chapel as we now have it. Not because we dislike the worship of God, but because we hold it so sacred. We wish to worship God better with our lives than we've been able to do here. We wish to grow as Christians and give expression to that growth. Chapel has not helped us to do this.

"I hope we can honestly face and explore these issues together: students with students, teachers with teachers, students with teachers. Maybe together we can find ways that will promote a more spiritual and truthful worship of God at Omni Christian High."

An unseen hand silenced the ceiling speaker as the doxology was dispassionately sung. The Asylum was startlingly silent. Ginny leaned on the battered arm of the sofa, apple cradled in her left hand, the brown wound in the red skin uppermost, her eyes shiny and large looking at the huddled figure of the man in the open boat hanging on the wall opposite-looking but not seeing. Sympathetic tears started as she thought of the courage Stan had shown, to say it the way he said it and to say it so well. But she thought too of the consequences of his courage and her neck stiffened in anticipation of the onslaught.

There would be P.R., when he got back from his trip, with that peculiar look in his eyes, which meant that he was trying to cope with the arguments that would flare from all sides, with special concern about what the parents or the board might say. There would be Klaas Oudman, heavy brogue accenting his indignation about students trying to tell their elders how to run things. Den Meester would have plenty to say, too. Probably about how impractical the whole idea was. There wasn't a vacant room, and if there were, it would just be used by students who wanted to skip out of study hall or by lovers who wanted a place to talk. And somebody would say something about chapel being a fellowship of believers, a quiet time with God to express the unity of the members of the school in their commitment to his service. And Vroom, if he ever recovered from the shock of being deceived, would be vocal in his denunciation of the continual cry of students for relevance and entertainment instead of the discipline of the traditional forms of worship. There would be all this and more, much more.

The door burst open as the faculty descended upon the steaming pot in the corner and the promise of tasteful titillation in the pan on the table.

Ginny sighed, struggled from the sofa, boomed the apple into the bottom of the empty waste can, and silently fought against the oncoming crowd into the hall to begin her duties.

Originally published January 1971



'We wish to worship God better with our lives than we've been able to do here."

of things and Failed

fitful breeze gutted the subtle perfumes of mid-May through half-opened windows into the still, stale faculty room. The fifth period bell had cleared the room of all occupants except one. He gazed listlessly through his record book of grades, pausing occasionally to sip the last tepid remains of tea from a stained mug. Through Bob Den Denker's mind flashed recurring images from the scene he had witnessed a few minutes ago at the door of the Asylum.

It was near the end of lunch hour. and the room had been crowded more than usual, perhaps because yesterday students and parents had been notified about probable or certain failure in each course. Emotions always ran high at such times, and the Asylum offered a welcome retreat. But there had come the inevitable knock on the door, followed by the usual indignant grumbles from those members of the staff who preferred to avoid as much contact with students outside the classroom as possible. Ginny had answered the knock and called for John Vroom.

Vroom rose reluctantly, shaking the crumbs from his lap upon the floor. His lack of rapport with students made him dread these confrontations. When he reached the door he faced Dick Zukken, one of his senior Reformed Doctrine students and an unhappy recipient of one of those "sure to fail the course" letters. "Ref Doc" was a required course, and failure meant the student couldn't graduate or participate in graduation exercises. Dick had been crushed by the news and had gone immediately to see Peter Rip, the principal. P.R. had lectured him on the virtues of hard work, just rewards, and inevitable consequences of "goofing off," and sent him to see his Nemesis—Vroom. Now he stood, face flushed, beefy body chafing and intense, first pleading with Vroom for another chance, then cajoling, finally yelling with tears of anger and anguish in his voice: "My folks have had a party planned for a month—all the relatives have been invited! And the new job I have waiting requires a high school diploma. I just can't lose all that!!"

Vroom had been adamant. "Dick, your work has not been up to the established standards; your attitude has not been serious enough: I have observed no real evidence of genuine interest in, nor of a godly attitude toward, Holy Scriptures. Remember, Dick, (raising the right index finger heavenward for emphasis) there is no reward without labor; and how vitally important in these evil times to know the Church's doctrinal positions so that you will not be blown about by every wind of doctrine. And become more diligent, Dick. If you can't be diligent about Ref Doc how can an employer expect you to be diligent at your work? Of course, you can redeem yourself, but only by repeating the course successfully."

The shouting and door slamming echoed in Den Denker's mind. The reverberations evoked images of other such scenes from the past. Always, the issue seemed to be a grade. He reflected upon his own discomfort during testing and grading periods: how emphasis on grades built more pressure than some could cope with; how often grades were used as coercive weapons by teachers; how often they failed to foster in students a love of learning or an excitement in friendships and produced alienation—mental, psychological, social, and even religious. He thought again of the despair and frustration in Dick's eyes as he stood in the door facing the implacable Vroom.

Bob grimaced as he finished the cold dregs in his mug. He rose to rinse the cup and paused at one of the open windows to sniff the fragrant breeze. His eye was drawn toward the daffodils and tulips blooming brightly across the street. Toddlers frolicked within the confines of fenced-in yards. He remembered his own neighborhood with its many children and thought back to a day not quite a year ago. He remembered the loud voices of three junior high girls taunting little Timmy VanDommen, the third grader from across the street. The girls were chasing Timmy home, calling him "dummy," "stupid," "idiot," proclaiming loudly to the neighborhood that Timmy was stupid because he had two "D's" on his report card. Timmy had stumbled tearfully up the back steps, then turned and faced his tormenters. and while trying to brush away his tears had raged: "You lie! You lie! You, you big liars!!" Then he had wheeled and burst into the house, slamming the door shut on his pursuers.

Den Denker turned sadly away from the window. How destructive to the individual's self-concept a gradeoriented education can be, he thought. Besides, didn't preoccupation with high grades tend to glorify mental acumen or performance as an index to the measure or worth of the person? And didn't that seriously slight the scriptural perspective of man as body, mind, and spirit, image-bearer of God, and infinite in worth?

As Bob sank again into his seat before his open record book, he thought of that student in the doorway and of two other students, two-no, three—years ago. The details began to lose their vagueness as Bob recalled them. Two senior honor students, classmates and intense competitors for top honors for six years. To be named valedictorian was the capstone of this

struggle. One student had edged out the other by one-tenth of a percentage point. The other student had collapsed under the strain and sunk into a severe depression, his goal of several years now out of his grasp. Bob shuddered as he recalled that now-vivid event. Grades had become a symbol of personal worth, a reflection of a success-at-all-costs-oriented culture, where success was conceived as measurable evidence of one's power to raise oneself above others.

Vroom had stressed diligence. But Bob wondered, for every failing grade handed out, didn't every Omni Christian teacher share in the guilt of that failure? Had they done all they could—in their course offerings and content, in teaching approaches, in student conferences? Or did every "F" reflect the failure of Omni Christian High, too?

The gurgling rattle of the almost empty coffee urn disrupted the stillness of the Asylum and Den Denker's reverie. In glancing up at the clock he noted with mild surprise that most of the period had passed, and he had failed to record grades from the tests he had given. He sighed with resignation, flipped shut his record book, placed his hands behind his head, gazed at the fluorescent fixture in the ceiling, and resumed his musings.

What options were there to the practice of club-grading, to this meretricious grade-oriented motivation? There was, of course, the pass/fail system; credit for a course would only be given if a student passed. If he failed he had to repeat the course until he could pass. But there were the standard objections: teachers who didn't want the "flunkies" to clutter up their classes for a second round; fears that without a grade incentive, kids might do only just enough to get by. Bob remembered Ginny's quick reply

to that one—something to the effect that there were already plenty of kids doing that, and furthermore, if the threat of grades were taken from teachers, perhaps some of them would have to work a little harder at finding other, more legitimate ways of getting kids interested in their courses.

After a quick glance assured him that Jenny Snip, the secretary, was busily typing and not likely to view his transgression, Bob eased his feet up into the chair across from him. He had often toyed with another alternative nothing really new-since it was still being used in some elementary schools. It would mean more work for teachers, but it seemed a worthwhile investment, namely, written personal reports about the development of the whole student: personal relationships, evidence of social and spiritual concerns, attitude toward the subject, toward issues, toward himself; sense of responsibility; apparent problems; level of creativity; intellectual and imaginative involvement; sense of confidence and independence; etc. Each teacher would record his impressions, or perhaps use a checklist.

The bell signaling the end of fifth period startled Bob from his reverie. As he slowly gathered his books and papers together, he grumbled half aloud to himself, "Yet, despite personal experiences and the findings of research that grades tend to have a negative effect on learning, we still hang on to them." He threw in the uncompleted record book and snapped shut his briefcase. "We cling to the myths of objectivity and efficiency, indifferent to the fact that it's possible to slap a grade on a person without really knowing, or caring about, that person—it almost boils down to moral irresponsibility!" Den Denker slammed the door behind him as he treaded to class.

Originally published March 1972

ral Den Meester walked into the Asylum clutching in one hand the five-pound Domino sugar bag in which he self-consciously carried his lunch and in the other the latest library copy of The Outlook. He paused to claim his coffee cup from the rack, a large, chipped Maxwell House mug, well-stained with much use and little washing, and sighed himself into a corner chair. As he mechanically munched his peanut butter sandwich, his colleagues filed in to begin the twenty-minute formality called lunch.

Ginny Traansma was late as usual. She often paused in the halls between her classroom and the Asylum to exchange pleasantries with students, even though it meant sacrificing precious minutes from an already too short lunch break. She mechanically sloshed some coffee into her cup and eased into the last empty chair, a gaudy yellow straight chair with a cracked seat, placed next to Karl and across the magazine rack from John Vroom. Vroom was eating his lunch with the usual gusto, oblivious to the fact that a fat dollop of mayonnaise had squeezed between bread and baloney and was now slowly spreading down his tie.

All around, the noon-hour debate was waged at full volume. It was the fourth day in a row on the same topic -that it was more ecologically sound to buy an artificial Christmas tree than a real one. Ginny, too, had hotly debated the issue, pleading on a platform of sentiment, romance, and tradition for a live tree; but today she seemed to take no interest in the discussion or even her lunch. The little brown sack remained tightly clutched in one hand as the other spasmodically opened and closed on a soggy, wrinkled Kleenex.

Karl looked up from The Outlook as Ginny blew her nose for the third time, soberly noting her teary eyes.

"What's happening, Gin?" Karl began. "P.R. turn down your request to offer a cooking class for boys again?"

Ginny looked tragically at Karl, grateful for the sympathetic tone of his voice. "Isn't it just so sad?" she whispered, leaning toward him. "It makes me feel just terrible—those poor kids, and their parents—oh, I wonder what the board will do?" The latter thought

Pregnancies, Principles, and **Policies**

stopped her long enough for Karl to respond.

"Ginny, what are you talking about?" Karl caught himself whispering in spite of himself, then reverted to his normal volume. "I mean, what's going on?"

'Oh, Karl, don't you know? I mean, haven't all your kids been talking about it all morning?" Ginny's voice too had lost its super-secret quality, but was still discreetly subdued. Responding to Karl's blank look, Ginny went on. "It's Mark VanDam and Pat Sweeney-you know-that nice senior couple always hanging around together in the halls and at basketball games. Well, the rumor around school this morning was that Pat's going to have a baby, so as soon as I had a chance I checked it out and it's true oh Karl—they're such nice kids and I feel so sorry for them."

Karl settled back from the edge of his chair as he listened, and his face hardened. "Sure-nice kids-but not nice enough. In fact, they're a couple of darn fools. I don't feel so sorry for them. They should've known that if you play with fire you're gonna get burned.'

By this time, other faculty members within earshot of this dialogue were beginning to tune in to what promised to be a more interesting discussion than Christmas trees. Others had heard the rumor and now turned to Karl and Ginny for consummation of their curiosity.

Sue Katje, in her inimitable sourpuss way, bluntly said, "Well, I think they should both be kicked out of school for good. After all, what kind of example is that to other kids?" she added rhetorically as she pulled her skirt down toward her shins.

"But, Sue," Ginny pleaded, "they're not bad kids. In fact, until this happened, they've both been model students—they get good grades, they're hard workers, they respect their teachers, they get along with other kids. It would be cruel to deprive them of the chance to graduate now that they're almost there. Besides, they'll need that high school diploma now more than ever."

"Baloney," snorted Vroom, raising his tie to his lips in a vain attempt to recover all of the mayonnaise that had leaked from his sandwich. "We're getting too soft on sin around here. You know that in the Bible women were put to death for sins of unchastity? And what do we do? We tell kids to let it all hang out, to dress and act any way they feel like. Why, just yesterday I saw a couple in a passionate embrace right in the hall. And you know what our softie principal said when I told him? 'Oh, John, it was probably just a friendly gesture.' Friendly gesture my nose! And this just shows where friendly gestures can lead." Having delivered himself, Vroom barely stifled a burp and settled back to his lunch.

"I agree," Sourpuss severely continued, "letting a pregnant girl stay in school is a bad example to set for other girls. It'll just put ideas into their heads, and pretty soon we'll have all kinds of bloated bellies floating around here."

"Well, that would help take care of the declining enrollment," interjected Lucy Bright somewhat crassly. She continued, her dark eyes intense. "What's the policy around here about couples who 'have to get married' as the expression goes?"

Karl replied, "We don't have very many such cases, fortunately; maybe, on an average, one every other year. In the past, the couple was immediately suspended, and then the board always ruled that the boy could return if he wanted, but the girl was not allowed to continue."

"But why expel the girl and not the boy?" Lucy's voice was incredulous.

"I'm not sure," mused Karl,"but I've never agreed with that part of the policy. After all, he's as guilty as she is, and the punishment ought to be the same."

"But it's not just a punishment. It's something the board felt it should do for the couple's own good," added Sue Katje.

"I'm sorry, but that sounds like pious hogwash to me," blurted Ginny. 'What possible good can it serve to ostracize the kids from the community of their friends and deny them the opportunity to finish their education?"

"But there are special schools for girls who get in trouble," objected Sue. The girl can always go to one of them to finish her education if she wants to."

Lucy Bright launched her speech with the fuel of moral indignation: "How can we even think of those alternatives! What, after all, does it mean to be a Christian school? What kind of a model are we to the world when we put a certain kind of sinner

out of sight and hopefully out of mind? Isn't it more Christian to draw them in out of love and compassion, to assure them that, in spite of their sin, we love them—just as Christ loves us in spite of our daily sins? I don't see how you can insist on the need for Christian education and then, when someone commits an obvious sin, suddenly let the secular school finish her education. I think that both Mark and Pat need Christian education and the love and support of this Christian community even more than before. I think they should be counseled to stay in school to finish their education if they wish.

> And I think the board should not only make clear its disapproval of the sin they've committed, but also its willingness to forgive that sin and a desire to be helpful and loving. That would be Christian and in the best interests of both the kids and the testimony of this school to the community."

> There was a complete and awestruck silence in the Asylum following this outburst from a rookie teacher. Lucy herself seemed embarrassed by her uncommon outburst and shuffled her papers to conceal her uneasiness. Abruptly the bell rang, the wheels of education at Omni Christian High School began to turn, and the faculty soberly filed into the hallways.



Originally published March 1974

Double or Nothing

ob Den Denker, history teacher at Omni Christian High, frowned, then thoughtfully folded his copy of the Christian Science Monitor, and walked over to the well-used urn to pour himself another cup of coffee.

He seated himself next to his student teacher, Avery Ellesley. "All set to take on the fifth hour class?"

Avery glanced up from his lesson plan and smiled at Bob, "I think so. I like those kids and I like the New Deal era, so I think we'll get along."

But something else was obviously preoccupying Bob's mind. He turned to Steve Vander Prikkel who was just digging an orange out of his brown

"Say, Steve, did I hear right that your wife is teaching full time again?"

Steve's stubby fingers began to peel his Sunkist as he answered expansively, "You bet, Bob. We've got old Stella back in the harness again. I've already got my eve on a new set of clubs for next spring. But first she's going to have to pay off that '72 Pinto we had to buy for her transportation. Oh well, it's a real good feeling getting those two checks every two weeks, let me tell you!"

John Vroom, Omni's Bible teacher and paragon of piety, if not of decorum, had been listening to Steve's account of his good fortunes while his fingers kept busy wiping the bottom of the Tupperware dish that had held a soggy wedge of banana cream pie. Now one finger disappeared into his mouth. He sucked it with a loud smack, then sternly addressed Steve.

"You are contributing to the breakdown of the home, and if the home breaks down, the church and the school and, yes, the whole nation will follow. Mark my words."

What Steve marked was another loud smack as finger number two was cleaned.

"Well, I tell you, John, I can't wait for my kids to grow up so my wife can start bringing in some shekels again, too," chimed in Bill Silver, the new teacher of business courses. "The way this inflation is going, you can hardly survive on one income anymore."

John Vroom finished licking his last finger and then pontificated, "We're doing it, and we believe it's right. We don't have boats or a second car or anything fancy, but the Lord provides. He always does if you are faithful to Him. 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct thy path.' Vroom stood up and almost stumbled over his briefcase as he went after another cup of coffee.

The teachers' lounge, otherwise known as Asylum, was coming alive. After another mundane sack lunch, this issue looked good enough to bite into.

Ginny Traansma, music and home ec teacher, watched Vroom tipping the urn to get one more cupful and said, "I know you're against wives working, John, but you don't really think that all wives do it only for the money, do you?"

School secretary Jennie Snip cut in with her usual sharp edge. "Do you think for one minute that this world, this school even, could survive one day without working women?"

"Well, John, I guess you asked for it," smiled Karl Den Meester, English and speech teacher. "I wonder about this though: is it right for wives to usurp scarce jobs when the family doesn't need the extra income and others who need the income go begging for jobs? What do you think, Bob? You started all this, you know."

But Steve was still nettled about John's remarks. Glaring at John, who was dipping his week-old oatmeal cookie in his half cup of coffee, he barked: "You give me all this pious poop about the woman's place being in the home. But you know, and know darn well, that your wife has worked part time for Penney's and that she quit because she prefers to be home. I wouldn't make my wife work either, if she didn't want to."

Bob Den Denker tried to redirect the course of the conversation. "You know," he began slowly, "I guess I did start this whole thing because I just got through reading an article about the sad state of the teacher market. And last night my nephew from Denver stopped by. He's one of thousands who want to be teaching, in his case because he likes kids and likes the challenge to influence them through Christian education. He's looked forward to it for six years, prepared for it through four years of college, but now there's no job for him. He's in love with a girl and would like to get married, but there's no job. He's disillusioned, to say the least. And I guess that started me thinking."

"That's what I mean," exclaimed John Vroom, casting a baleful look at Steve Vander Prikkel. "There's no jobs because too many women want to be moneymakers instead of homemakers." Smiling smugly about his own phrasemaking, John settled his plump physique a little deeper into his vinylcovered armchair.



"Well, I don't quite see it that way, John," Den Denker continued, "but I think the whole situation does raise an ethical problem for the Christian community. If there are, let's say, only ten available jobs, and there are thirty people who want those jobs, who should get priority consideration? Those with the most experience, those best known or with the most pull, or those who need the job most? I'm not so sure what the answer is, but it seems to me that somewhere along the line we ought to face up to the problem."

Bob turned to Mike Stewart, the chairman of the Omni school board, who frequently dropped in during the faculty lunch break. "Maybe it ought to start with the board, Mike, and the teacher selection committee.'

Lucy Bright, Omni's young, pert, and intense English teacher, had been listening with interest. Now she swept back her long, honey-blond hair and spoke up.

"Whoever is going to face up to the problem, if it is a problem, better remember a few things. Maybe there are a lot of wives teaching today who don't exactly *need* that second income. But maybe they have a need to fulfill that urge to serve as much as your nephew, Bob, or as much as their husbands. Maybe they need a sense of recognition and esteem and satisfaction that staying at home doesn't give them. Maybe they have a psychological need, or an intellectual need for stimulation. or who knows what. The answer just can't be to pick on the women and kick all married ones out of their jobs!"

Lucy's face flushed, and Bob hurried to smooth the ruffled feather. "I didn't mean to suggest, Lucy . . . "

"I'm not so sure about that!" Snip snapped. "When it comes to women, you men are all the same!"

"Right, we all love 'em or leave 'em," quipped Matt De Witt. But his laugh suddenly died; he remembered, a bit late, that Jennie Snip was a recent divorcee.

Karl Den Meester filled the awkward silence.

"Well, let's see what we have so far: There are a lot of young people, ready to start their career, but there are few open doors. And there are a lot of working wives who may or may not



need that second income. Bob thinks that poses an ethical problem, and maybe he's right. But who in the Christian community is going to resolve that problem? That's what I'd like to know."

Bob Den Denker re-lit his pipe as he reflected for a moment.

"I think the who is probably much easier than the how, Karl. In a Christian community all of us face a problem together. We should continually sensitize each other's conscience. And then we should help each other act on that conscience. For some of us who can afford to, that may mean an earlier retirement, let's say at age 62, if it means making room for a young person who qualifies and desperately needs a job. Or it may mean that if a wife has time and a need for service outside her home, she should conscientiously evaluate where time and talents are most needed. There's so much need, of course, for capable, dedicated volunteer service that the option, if there's no financial hardship, should at least have serious consideration."

Mike Stewart now entered the discussion.

"I'll confess that I've never considered the problem in just this light before, but I think you have a point, Bob, when you suggested that maybe the board should address itself to the problem, too. I've always pushed for hiring the most experienced people even though they cost us more money, but I'm beginning to see another aspect to this whole thing."

Den Denker turned to his student teacher. "Avery, this whole discussion maybe concerns you more than anybody here. How do you feel about it all?"

Avery grimaced a bit. "To be honest, I do sometimes resent the fact that so many families start picking up a double income just when they don't seem to need so much money anymore. Every time they get double, somebody else gets nothing. But," he shrugged, "I don't know; it's a complicated problem."

The one o'clock buzzer reverberated through Omni Christian High. Teachers began to get up to head for their classes.

Lucy turned to Mike Stewart as she stood up.

"Whatever you're going to do, I just hope it isn't going to turn out to be another form of discrimination against women."

"Don't bet your booties on it, honey!" was Snip's grim prophecy.

Many families start picking up a double income just when they don't seem to need so much money anymore.

> Originally published November 1976

Snip, Rip, and Smoke

t was 10:30 a.m. on a Monday morning. Chapel was just over. The teachers at Omni Christian High School crowded into the Asylum for a quick cup of coffee, that heady brown tonic that would enable them to educate the masses for the rest of the morning. John Vroom, fleshy Bible teacher, was chewing religiously on a vetbol, a kind of greasy, doughnut without the hole. washing down each half-chewed mouthful with gulps of coffee. From time to time he punctuated this ritual with a puff on a long Pall Mall cigarette, the tipped kind. There were grease spots on the bow tie that crowded his double chin. Karl Den Meester, teacher of English and speech, was flexing his biceps while running in place next to the coffee urn. He had already jogged five miles to school that morning, but now, before the intake of his daily yogurt, Karl felt the urge to recondition his muscle tone. Home ec teacher Ginny Traansma and English teacher Lucy Bright compared weekend notes while sipping tea on the green vinyl sofa at the far end of the faculty room. Coach Steve Vander Prikkel perused the sports pages of the morning Chronicle, while other teachers looked nervously through their lesson plans for the third hour classes. And then it happened.

The door opened suddenly and in stalked Jenny Snip, the school secretary, her right claw wrapped around the left arm of Egbert Rip (known affectionately around school as "Chip"), the oldest son of principal Peter Rip. Young Rip was obviously as frightened as Snip was angry; his eyes rolled fearfully around the room. Snip's left hand waved a package of cigarettes for all to see. "I caught one!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "He was smoking in the boys' room right during chapel. He had these in his pocket. Where is Dr. Rip?"

Bob Den Denker, history teacher, calmly removed his Dr. Grabow pipe from his lips to respond, "Well, Jenny, Dr. Rip, as you should know, is at his usual Monday morning volleyball game with the area principals and preachers. What seems to be the trouble here? And how, pray tell, did you find this young man in the boys' room?"

"Fanny Freswick came into the office and said that someone was smoking in the boys' john," said Jenny. "What else could I do? I went in there and caught him. Someone is going to have to exercise some responsibility around here."

Chip Rip took advantage of the occasion to release his arm from Snip's

bony fingers, but he saw no opportunity to escape with half the Omni faculty staring at him. He rocked nervously on the balls of his feet, his eyes directed to the floor.

"But Jenny," said Den Denker quietly, "aren't you overreacting a bit here? Do you think--?"

"Well, Bob," shrieked Jenny, "you know students may not smoke, and as far as I'm concerned, smoking is a dirty, filthy habit! I think you guys should be ashamed of yourselves, puffing away on your smelly pipes and things, polluting the air here in the faculty room for all the rest of us to breathe into our lungs, and setting an awful example for the young people you're supposed to be teaching. If you won't do anything about it, well, I will." She turned her pythoness gaze on poor Egbert. "Chip," she said in unyielding tones, "who else in this school has got cigarettes? You and I are going to check a few lockers. We'll have something to show your father when he comes back."

John Vroom was nervously trying to snuff his Pall Mall and furtively slip it into the nearby wastebasket. Den Denker had stopped puffing his Dr. Grabow, although the aroma of the Sir Walter Raleigh was heavy in the room. Karl Den Meester stopped his gymnastics to grin patronizingly at the little drama.

"She's right, you know," said Karl. "Smoking is not only a stench for sensitive nostrils; it's just plain bad. It hurts the people who smoke. It hurts the people who don't smoke. It costs a lot of money that could better be given to Kingdom causes. I just can't understand why anyone would want to smoke anyway. Did any of you ever see those pictures which compare the lungs of a smoker with a nonsmoker? That alone should. . . . "

Karl was interrupted by the preachy tones of John Vroom, who, confident that he had successfully hidden the incriminating evidence of his cigarette, offered, "Now, now, let's keep our perspective here. I think we need to remember the wisdom of moderation . . . all things in moderation. The Bible neither recommends nor forbids smoking, isn't that right? I see smoking as being in the category of the adiaphora; that is to say," and he

looked around to see whom he was impressing, "I see this as a matter of Christian liberty." He reached for another vetbol as he waited for response to his wisdom.

But there was none. Instead a glowering Jenny Snip turned on him and raged, "And shame on you, John Vroom! In your classroom you tell these kids that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, but when you're in here you fill that temple with filthy smoke and vetbollen." Turning to Bob Den Denker, she continued, "And you're not much better. You think you need a pipe to make people think you're a philosopher or something. Well, instead of all those philosophical airs, why don't you think a little more about the stink you raise around here!" Jenny wrinkled her face and thrust it at the astonished history teacher.

The Asylum had become tense, and it now became silent too, for into the room walked Dr. Peter Rip, the smiling principal of Omni Christian. He had thoroughly enjoyed his weekly Monday morning workout at volleyball, and he now looked forward to a pleasant morning of ordering janitorial supplies. But it was not to be. He was halfway to the coffee um when he sensed the tension in the room. looked around him, and saw his redfaced son trying to be invisible between Bob Den Denker and Jenny Snip. "Why, Eggie," said the startled administrator, "what, uh, what brings you here? Shouldn't you be going to third hour?"

Egbert didn't answer. Jenny Snip did. "Dr. Rip, just Friday I heard you say that the next time you caught a student breaking the no-smoking regulation around here, you'd make an example of him. Well, here's our Chip." And she pointed a shaking finger at Egbert Rip.

Glancing from his son to the school secretary, Peter Rip forced an awkward smile as he quickly sized up the situation. "Jenny," he said soothingly but nervously, "let's take this from the beginning. What happened?" And Jenny Snip told the whole story, while for the first time that anyone could remember, no one was smoking anything, not even a pipe, in the faculty room at coffee time.

When the story had been told,

Peter Rip cleared his throat a few times and said, "This is, to say the very least, a very difficult situation. Uh, we must do nothing hastily, of course. This is to say, Mrs. Snip, inasmuch as the boys' room is off-limits for a lady, we really can't say that the evidence is, uh, admissable in this case. But, on the other hand, Egbert here—well, uh, Egbert, you know how strongly I feel about smoking on these premises, and I—"

The father was interrupted by the son. "But Dad, they were your cigarettes. I took them off your desk in the study."

Peter Rip seized his son by the arm and escorted him rapidly out of the door, leaving an embarrassed but somewhat amused faculty behind them. John Vroom broke the silence.

"Well now," he said, "can you beat that?"

"Yes, I can," said Jenny Snip. "There you have a good example of what I was talking about. All of Rip's platitudes about smoking haven't influenced Chip at all. Chip has seen his father smoking. So he wanted to try it, too. And your students are seeing you people smoke. And that is good enough for them." Then she paused. "Maybe I did get too carried away. But I sure would have liked to find all those cigarettes in the kids' lockers. It's high time this place gets cleaned up around here and, I might add, aired out too." And Jenny Snip walked to the Asylum window and thrust it open to the cold January air.

Den Denker spoke up next. "Well, tell you what, Jenny, I'll promise not to smoke my pipe here at school—not even here in the faculty room. Fair enough?"

Jenny shrugged her shoulders as she walked to the door, but something of a smile tugged at the corners of her thin lips.

Den Denker looked at Vroom. "How about you, John?" But Vroom muttered something about being late for third hour, grabbed his Bible, and walked out the door.

> Originally published January 1978

Sour Grapes

ucy Bright, pert blond English teacher, burst into the Omni faculty room at exactly twelve o'clock, cheeks scarlet, eves moist and squinted, lips pressed tightly together. She strode right past the coffee um and flung herself onto the battered leather couch, where sat Bob Den Denker, who almost spilled his coffee. Matt DeWit, science teacher, saw Lucy's frenetic entrance and said, "Whatsa matter, Lucy, swallowed a sour grape?"

"Here's your sour grape," muttered Lucy, and she sailed a paperback novel across the room, where it landed, skidding across the carpet to a spot right in front of the astonished DeWit. The recently airborne book was John Steinbeck's controversial novel The Grapes of Wrath. DeWit grinned sheepishly and picked up the book. He sensed that all the coffee muggers in the faculty room were looking at him as he said quietly, "Have a bad class, Lucy? Didn't they read the book?"

"It's not the kids," said Lucy shrilly. "It's Peter Rip. Our fearless leader just told me that my students have to turn the book in tomorrow morning and that we can't teach this book at Omni anymore. He said that some parents have complained about that (here Lucy pointed at The Grapes of Wrath), about the bad language in it, and that the board had decided that the book has got to go. I didn't even know

about it! And I had planned a twoweek unit on that book."

Lucy got up from the couch, walked over to DeWit and grabbed the book from him, and stalked out of the faculty room, barely stifling a sob. Ginny Traansma got up to follow her, but Den Denker said, "Let her go, Ginny. Give her a chance to get hold of herself."

Ginny turned to the others, "I can't imagine Rip doing a thing like that . . . unless there's good reason, can you?"

DeWit said, "I could kick myself for that sour grapes crack. No, Ginny, I don't think Rip would ban a book arbitrarily, but he's afraid of the board. Or maybe I should say only that he's responsible to the board.'

Den Denker broke in, "But he's responsible to us, too. If Lucy is telling us the truth. Rip didn't even talk to Lucy about it. That's not right. That's not doing things in good order."

John Vroom, teacher of Bible, who had been steadily devouring his lunch since 11:45 a.m., officiously removed a toothpick from his mouth and waved it at the group as his signal for silence. "Well now, Bob," he said as though he were pronouncing a benediction, "let us not get carried away with secondary matters, as you are sometimes wont to do. Let's get right down to the nittygritty of this matter. The question is, it seems to me," and he rolled his eyes

toward the ceiling, as though he were reading a heaven-sent revelation, "the question is this: are there unseemly and perhaps irreverent words in, uh, what's that book again, Vines of Grapes? I for one," and here John rolled his eyes toward the ceiling again, "am much concerned about the loose vocabulary of young people these days. I sense a definite slippage on that point. And I give much of the blame to godless writers and movies."

"So, you haven't read the book either," responded Den Denker. "John, you really ought to read the book, and so should Peter Rip, and so should all of the board members. Then, at least, you can make a judgment based on what the book says.'

"Ya," said Vroom, shaking his head negatively, "that's what they all say, but I don't think we should read anything with dirty words in it. We should look on the good things, the pure things. There are enough of those things to look at. We don't need to poke around in the garbage, as it were.'

"Well," said Den Denker, "you have your students read Isaiah in your Bible class. Are all the words in that book good and pure?"

"That's different," answered Vroom. "That's the Bible."

Den Denker pressed his argument. "Could it be, John, that if Steinbeck failed to use the words which the Okies



"Some parents have complained about. . . the bad language in it, and the board decided that the book has got to go."

"We should look on the good things, the pure things. There are enough of those things to look at. We don't need to poke around in the garbage. . ."



really used, and if he failed to describe what the Okies really did, that he would be guilty of lying, of giving a false witness? Isn't there a commandment about that somewhere?"

Then Bill Silver, who had been patiently fingering his two-carat diamond ring during all this talk, offered his two cents' worth. "Now wait just a cotton-picken' minute, Bob. I'm no purist. You know that, having been on the golf links with me. But I have to draw the line on these dirty books. In the first place, both Rip and the school board have got to be mighty careful about rubbing the fur the wrong way out there in the constituency, you know. They've got to be sensitive to public relations. That's an economic fact of life you ivory-tower types sometimes forget. You want your paycheck to be a little fatter? Then use some common sense about the books you assign."

John Vroom nodded vigorously in support.

But Den Denker persisted. "Oh, baloney. Public relations makes cowards of us all. We don't need the kind of escapism that honors only books that hide the ugliness and sin in the world. We can read books more truthful than Grace Livingston Hill stuff."

Now Vroom shook vigorously in dissent. "No, Bob, no. What we need," and he aimed his toothpick at Den Denker, "is a more distinctive Christian education. Why, I'll bet they teach Sour Grapes, or whatever it is, right over there at Coolidge High." Vroom pointed in the direction of the local public high school. He continued to intone: "We must not be remiss in our duty. Remember what happened to Lot when he pitched his tent toward Sodom?"

"Good grief, John! Can't you stop talking nonsense? What does reading a good book under a Christian teacher's guidance have to do with pitching tents! What we're talking about is helping kids understand and care about the human experience of hope and despair, of human decency and depravity. How do you get close to such experiences without getting an earful, once in a while, of some pretty tough language and an eyeful of some pretty bad scenes. What you want us to do is plug our ears and put blinders on our eyes. But you call that Christian education?"

Steve Vander Prikkel now entered the fray. "You know what this whole business reminds me of, Bob? A few years ago, remember you were using Martin Luther King's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' in your classes? And it got yanked just like this book is now. We're the professional educators responsible for curriculum, and here we sit like a bunch of dummies when some irate parent imposes his prejudices on the whole program."

"You're right, Steve," responded Matt DeWit. "We need some pride in ourselves and some courage to stand up to our responsibilities. Why should Rip do all the talking for us? He's an administrator, not an educator. And why shouldn't we have a policy that outlines procedures for handling protests and make it stick, a policy that the board and"—Lucy Bright re-entered, followed by Principal Rip-"uh, well I think Carter is doing the best he can under the circumstances, don't you, Bob?"

Lucy, red-eyed but more composed, sat down again by Bob Den Denker while Rip, trying hard to smile expansively, addressed the group: "Well, what a lovely day it is out there today, isn't it?" He turned to leave again, but then, as if just remembering: "Oh, by the way, the board last night decided to cut back on the elective program for next semester, so, uh, that should make things, uh, a little less hectic for all of us here, right?"

> Originally published December 1979

"What you want us to do is plug our ears and put blinders on our eyes. But you call that Christian education?"

The Spirit Moves at Omni

hapel service ended, on that brisk Monday in March, with the singing of "Whosoever Will." The students of Omni Christian High School made their way to their lockers for their mid-morning potato chips, apples, or pastries. They were quieter than usual. Teachers went directly to the faculty room to fortify themselves with some coffee and indulge in some chat. They too were quieter than usual.

The last teacher to enter the Asylum was John Vroom, teacher of Bible and Reformed Doctrine, and, for today, chapel leader. He was still perspiring. He strode expansively to the large chrome coffee um, filled his cup with the savory brew, laced it with non-dairy creamer, and then selected a huge jelly doughnut from the box Ginny Traansma had brought as her treat. Vroom turned to face his colleagues, an angelic smile on his face. Around his neck he wore a beaded necklace from which hung a bottle-shaped pendant with the words, "Everything Goes Better with God." On his right lapel was a large lavender button with the inscription, "Let Go—Let God.

Ginny Traansma was the first to break the silence. "Well, uh, John, you, uh . . . that was some chapel talk."

"Thank you, Ginny," returned Vroom somewhat unctuously and, scanning the faces of his other colleagues, added, "I wonder what the rest of you are thinking."

"Yeah," said biology teacher Steve Vander Prikkel, somewhat anxiously, "you really told 'em, John."

"Steve," said Vroom in a low voice as he pointed his doughnut toward his colleague, "I was telling you, too.'

"Aw, c'mon, John. Get off it. What's got into you! We've never had an altar call in this school before. What's going on?" challenged Susan Katje, the librarian.

John Vroom chewed hard and swallowed some of his jelly doughnut prematurely, causing him to snort a few times, but he quickly recovered. He walked right up to the faculty Sourpuss, put his free hand on her shoulder and looked her full in the face. "Sue," he said, "I have a burden on my heart for you, and for every one in this room. and for every student in this school. I think Omni Christian is spiritually cold." Here Vroom waved his pudgy hand with the doughnut around the room, and added, "I personally think it's high time we set some spiritual priorities around here." He smiled paternally at Katje. "Sue, you asked me what got into me. The answer is simple—the Holy Spirit got into me. That's why I care for you, and I want you to know that. That's why I'm praying for you, and I want you to know that, too. We should do more praying in this school and in this room right here."



Vroom's voice had risen in intensity, but now Sue Katje pulled away, visibly embarrassed and irritated. She moved awkwardly toward the coffee um to refill a still-filled cup. It became silent again as John Vroom quietly and confidently looked at the other teachers, one hand stuffing the last of the doughnut down his throat. the other fingering his pendant.

Then Steve tried again. "But John. This isn't like you. You're always the conservative, the stick-in-the-mud, or something. You know, stressing doctrine and creeds and catechism and stuff. Now here you are all of a sudden trying to convert everybody, or something. What's happened anyway?"

"What's happened?" cried Vroom excitedly. "I'll tell you what's happened!" And he put his hand over his heart and looked Steve in the eye. "Saturday night Minnie and me went to hear Reverend Stone out there on River Road, and as he preached from Galatians and then gave an altar call, something happened to me. I tell you, I'll never be the same again, praise the Lord!"

There was more silence in the faculty room. Then Bob Den Denker, teacher of history, said gently to Vroom, "John, that's just fine. That's iust fine."

"Thanks, Bob," said Vroom, "but there's more I gotta say. See, I know now that I've been doing it all wrong in my classes. And I think you are, too. It's all head knowledge we're spreading, but what about the heart?"

And then the normally phlegmatic Bible teacher reached quickly for his briefcase, from which he removed his Bible and his textbook in Reformed Doctrine, and he held the Bible very low in his right hand and his Ref Doc

"We need to have a burden around here for the souls of our students. not just for their brains."

book high in his left. "I've held this doctrine up high and the Word too low," Vroom confessed huskily. And then very dramatically, his arms moving in see-saw fashion, he raised the Bible and lowered the doctrine book, saying as he did so, "But now I'm changing all that." He was perspiring again and wheezing a bit. "Maybe you don't understand, but I'm going to change my whole approach as a teacher here at this Christian school-and we should all do that. And I will help you do that. I say that we need to have a burden around here for the souls of our students, not just for their brains. Yes, their souls!" He paused to breathe, lick some jelly from his lower lip, and swallow some more coffee.

Dr. Peter Rip, who had been on the outward fringes of the crowd, now piped up supportively: "Ja, ja, John, you've got a point there. A definite point. I, uh, sorta like what you did in chapel this morning. Makes 'em think. That's always good for them. I'm sure a lotta parents are gonna like it too. If we did something like that a little more often, we could attract some of these people from other denominations to send their kids here, you know, like some of the kids from the River Road

"I'm gonna teach. . . from a Christian perspective, of course."

"That's just a cliché, and you know it."

Church. They think we're too cold, you know."

Lucy Bright leaned over to Bill Silver and whispered, "I'm not sure I like the new John better than the old, are you?"

The business ed teacher whispered back, "I dunno. But you know what? Maybe his head-heart ratio has changed, but it sure hasn't affected the role of his stomach. He's on his second jelly doughnut."

Now Matt DeWit, science teacher, entered the conversation. "John, I appreciate what you say and all that, but isn't this all kinda sudden, and even if what you say about spiritual deadness and so is true, is the classroom, the school, the best place for that kind of talk?"

"The classroom!" shouted an aroused Vroom. "The classroom? Anyplace is the best place. The Lord says we should all go into all the world! What are you waiting for?" And he quickly slurped the rest of his coffee.

Wait a minute, John," came the indignant voice of coach Ren Abbott. "Omni is a school, after all. It's not a tent meeting. It's not a church. 'Everything in its place' is what I always say. I'm gonna teach phys ed in my classes. That's what I was hired to do." He paused, and then added, "From a Christian perspective, of course."

"That's just a cliché, Ren, and you know it," retorted the Bible teacher. "And it rings as hollow as my empty coffee cup. You play basketball the same as Haley Public High. And that's okay, but you should also show concern about the eternal welfare of every one of our players." And then, in a burst of unaccustomed inspiration, John added, "For what does it profit a team if it should gain the state championship but lose its own soul?"

The bell rang, but the teachers did not move. Then Steve asked, "John, are you sure that everything you're saying is really Reformed? Are you sure that all this business is proper in our schools? Something like what you said in chapel could cause a ruckus, you know."

A suddenly startled principal pricked up his ears, blinked a few times, and said, "That's a good point too, Steve. By all means we must remember the constituents. Let's try to be, well, moderate, yes, moderate. That's good. You wouldn't start having testimonies and things like that, right in class, would you, John?"

But John Vroom had no chance to answer, for Bob Den Denker was leading him firmly off to class. As they made their way out, the teachers could hear Den Denker say, "John, you've given us all something to think about. I appreciate what you've said. I've an idea we'll all have to do some thinking about these things. But now you've got to teach about the sovereignty of God, and I've got to teach about the Inquisition."

The sound of a student whistling "Whosoever Will" was cut off as the door closed behind the two teachers.

> Originally published February 1982

Den Denker

ob Den Denker, teacher of history, sat alone at a table in the faculty room of Omni Christian High School. It was ten o'clock on a Friday morning. In front of him on the table was a stack of tests. one of which he was scrutinizing. Occasionally he groaned. He wrote a few marginal comments. Then a terminal comment. Then he put a grade on the paper. He reached for another paper, but instead of reading it, he seized the entire stack and threw it into his open briefcase on the floor beside him. He mumbled, "What's the use?" and like a man desperately seeking liquid relief for his misery, Den Denker strode purposefully to the coffee urn and drew a cup of strong, black coffee. He then turned to look out of the window which gazed southward over Omni's large parking lot. He saw a hundred gleaming cars, all of them brighter and newer than his own '69 Valiant. He went back to his chair. coffee cup forgotten in his hand, sat down, and looked off into space.

Lucy Bright entered the room, deposited a large pile of themes on the table next to the coffee urn, put a package of Cremora in a styrofoam cup, and filled the cup with coffee. She looked at Bob. "Whatsa matter, Bobby, a bit down in the mouth today?" Den Denker sighed audibly and walked back to the window, and with his back turned to Lucy, he asked, "You know how many boys in my senior government class own their own cars?"

"No. Why?"

"Lucy, do you know how many girls want to get married before they're even twenty-one?"

"Hey, what is this—a quiz?" came from Lucy.

Taking no notice, Den Denker persisted. "You know how many of my students study less than one hour a day?"

"Well, maybe you should step up the homework, Bobby boy," grinned Lucy.

Den Denker turned around then and faced her.

"Lucy, you listen to some of these. Then you'll know what's the matter." And Den Denker reached down into his brief case and pulled out the set of tests he had been grading.

government that says it is okay should

be killed." Den Denker added, "Mind

you, Lucy, I asked them to discuss!

These kids can't discuss—they can't

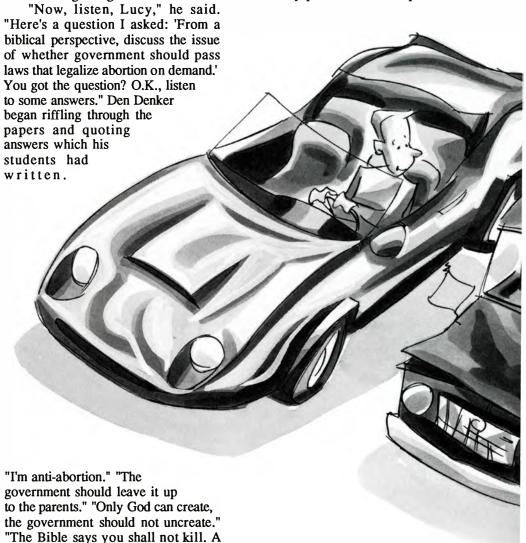
even think, they don't want to know

anything, they can't write." His voice

trailed off into despondency.

He looked at Lucy. "Am I getting too old to teach? Am I out of touch? Or is there really something wrong with these kids? I don't think I taught anybody anything." He stuffed the papers back into the briefcase and sat down.

Lucy pulled her chair up close to



in the Dumps

his and patted him playfully on the knee. "It's both," she said. "It's you and the kids." She smiled gently at him and continued. "You're an idealist, Bob; at least you have ideals. You have a vision of what Christian education ought to do to students-make them care and think and be curious about life, especially about the wrongs in life. That's what always makes you such a good teacher. But sometimes you get a

whole class of students who are puncture proof, or at least it seems that way, and then you fall into a funk.'

"Nah, it's more than that, Lucy," said Bob. "I'm tired. Maybe I've lost my effectiveness. Maybe I should paint

houses; at least they look good when you're finished. Maybe I shouldn't even try to teach anymore."

> "C'mon, Bob. Buck up. I've never seen you so down on yourself."

"No, I mean it, Lucy. I'm unhappy with the whole What business. earthly or heavenly good does it do to pull out the best that is in you day after day when all the kids live is some gut reactions, some popular slogans, and plenty of spending money for cars and

clothes?"

Lucy blinked a few times and patted him on the knee again. "I'll tell you what good it does. It is people like you,

Bob Den Denker, who keep me trying to pull the best out of myself, and out of my students, too. It's a teacher like you who makes one of my students, who is also one of your government students, say to me last Tuesday, 'I think I'd like to run for state senator someday.' When I asked why, she said, "Because Christians need to try to make a difference.' And I have a suspicion that she was repeating something she heard in somebody's class."

Den Denker smiled wanly. "That



really wasn't a very profound thought she was repeating—but it is a lot better than the stuff I read you from those tests." He stood up, put his hand very lightly on Lucy's shoulder and said, "Thanks, Lucy. You're one of the best, you know." He picked up his briefcase and started moving toward the door. Lucy called after him, "Bob, you need a break. Got any plans for tonight? Never mind those papers. Let them go for awhile."

With teasing in his voice, Den Denker responded, "Have something in mind?"

"Yes, as a matter of act, I am inviting you, Robert Den Denker, to my place for a 7:00 p.m. dinner, in return for which you may take me to a good movie of my choice later."

Bob bowed slightly in exaggerated courtesy. "It's a date, my dear. I'll see you at seven." He turned quickly and strode through the door into the noisy hallway. Lucy Bright walked over to the window and gazed thoughtfully at the hundred gleaming cars in the Omni parking lot.

> Originally published February 1983

The Chicano Connection

he shrill, accusing voice echoed through the halls of Omni Christian, "Why no Chicano poems and stories in your American lit classes? Lots of Anglo stuff. Nothing by Mexican Americans. Everything by Hawthorne and Faulkner. Nothing by Salazar or Gonzalez. Aren't they American, too? Isn't this supposed to be a course in American literature?"

The response from American literature teacher Ren Abbot was troubled, subdued, and halting. "But, uh, you see, Mrs. Morales, our anthology doesn't have any Chicano writers in it, and we-"

"But why doesn't it, Mr. Abbot? Why don't you buy another book, a better one? Fact is, I'll bet you can't even name one Chicano writer. That's the problem, isn't it? Go ahead. Name one. Just one. Right now. See? You can't." Her voice rose in a series of shrills as she pointed her wellmanicured finger at the frustrated English teacher.

By this time the morning coffee drinkers in the faculty room of Omni Christian had stopped all conversation in order to overhear the captivating dialogue in the hall. Even Bible teacher John Vroom had stopped smacking his lips on a glazed doughnut so as not to miss a word. When, a few minutes later, the embarrassed and crestfallen Abbot entered the faculty room to salvage what was left of his coffee break and his ego, he entered a very quiet room. He grinned sheepishly at his colleagues.

"Mama, mia," he said, "don't ever argue with a Chicano mama. We have two Chicano kids in the whole school, but their mama thinks we should study Chicano literature. Who in the dickens does she think she is?" Ren's hand was shaking as he filled his styrofoam cup.

Librarian Sue Katje responded. "I don't know, Ren, but don't you think Mrs. Morales has a good point? Her kids are the only Mexican kids in the school, and we sort of act as though Mexico doesn't exist."

"Well, Sue," Ginny Traansma put in, "how many books by Chicano writers do you have in our library?"

The librarian's face flushed, but she looked straight at Ginny. "If you want a particular kind of book in our library, you have to tell me. You can't expect me to read your minds, you know," she responded cattily.

John Vroom, who had renewed his assault on his glazed doughnut, now inserted a thoughtful remark. "Yes, I think that you in the English department and the library have a responsibility there to keep our shelves stocked with the literature of various cultures. We in the Bible department, thank goodness, don't have to worry about that." He paused and then added, "But all of us have some obligations along those lines. I, for example, have frequently reminded the hot lunch people that we should, in deference to the Morales, serve wet burritos, souvlaki, tacos—things like that. Helps them feel at home."

Ren Abbot, still smarting, came to his own defense. "We have more than we can adequately cover already in our American lit survey course, and we try to deal chiefly with the established and important American writers. Salazar and that other bird that she mentioned -who has ever heard of them? And besides, don't you think the Spanish

course should include some of those things?"

Now Lucy Bright Den Denker entered the discussion. "Ren, the writers that Mrs. Morales mentioned are Americans. They write in English. And besides, Rick has had only a few courses in Spanish himself, and he's teaching Spanish only because no one else will do it. We don't have a really prepared Spanish teacher. Nope, that won't work. If Omni is going to teach Chicano literature, you and Rick and I are all going to have to do it. Chicano lit is American lit.

Now Abbot re-entered the conversation. "I guess I have to admit that Mrs. Morales has got a point. Not only do we not teach any Chicano literature at Omni, but I, for one, don't read it either. But nobody in the English department at the college teaches it either. No one but Mrs. Morales seems to think that Salazar and Gonzalez and those hombres are important. I'll bet not one of you studied any Chicano literature when you were in college. And I guess I haven't studied any since then, either."

John Vroom raised a fat finger. "I read a story by Hemingway and there were bullfights in it and tortillas." Abbot ignored the Bible teacher. "There's just too much literature to teach. But maybe we ought to take Mrs. Morales' problem a bit more seriously than we have."

Principal Bob Den Denker, who had been listening very intently to all this talk, now entered the discussion. "I guess we should, Ren, but you're right about some of the problems. In the first place, the board has not stood behind our need to hire a really qualified, full-



time Spanish teacher. It's the old budget problem. In the second place, with only two Spanish-American kids in the whole school, there hasn't been much pressure for our English teachers to include some Chicano writers in their American lit courses. And I'm not even sure now that we should change the curriculum that way. At least the writers have to be good enough."

Vroom added another choice opinion. "I'm not sure we should even let those Mexican kids into our school. One of those Morales kids is named Jesu, and that's blasphemy. The Bible says there's only one name-"

A smile flickered across Den Denker's face as he interrupted. "One thing you could do, Ren, is to ask Mrs. Morales and her husband to discuss this matter further with the English teachers. They would be pleased to be consulted, and maybe you could get them to see some of the problems from your point of view. And, who knows? maybe the English Department would learn something from the whole business."

The bell signaling the beginning of the third hour rang. While the other teachers began to move to their classrooms, Ren Abbot lingered in the faculty room, determined to claim at least a few minutes of silence in order to recover from his ordeal.

> Originally published December 1985

t was a mismatch. Everyone had agreed on that at once. And they blamed Dr. Peter Rip for it; after all, it had been his idea to assign student teacher Nick Goldhoff to John Vroom. They understood, of course, how Rip's mind worked: he thought Vroom's staidness might moderate the irrepressible Nick a bit while, at the same time, Nick's creativity and charisma might perk up John's own teaching.

Wrong! Matt DeWit had wryly observed that Rip's judgment wasn't improving at Servant College; or was Rip trying to settle a score with his former obstreperous faculty member? In any case, Vroom suffered from a serious bout with unacknowledged inadequacy.

Even the glorious spring sun on this late April Thursday failed to raise Vroom out of the deep freeze of his affections for either Nick Goldhoff or his students. He opened the door of the Asylum, and, impervious to the presence and the chatter of colleagues, he headed straight for the faculty Coldspot, mechanically pulled out his brown bag, and fell heavily into his favorite vinyl arm chair.

Ginny Traansma was the first to notice that John hadn't moved in five minutes. His brown bag still resting, unopened, in his lap, John was staring into the horror of nothingness, trancelike, entering deeper into the darkness of his tormented soul. Before Ginny had a chance to retrieve John from whatever abyss he was edging closer to, the roar of a Yamaha 750 blowing in through an open window effectively accomplished her purpose. John Vroom jumped up like a Jack-inthe-Box, spilling his lunch bag on the floor, and rushed to the window as if to welcome the Judgment Day.

"Just as I thought!" he bellowed. "There goes that young whippersnapper again, and who's he enticing this time? Ah, you might have known it would be that Angela Hietbrook—she's been making goo-goo eyes at him from the first day he stepped in class."

Vroom, face flushed now, eyes blazing as he turned to his colleagues, stood ready to challenge all of the demons of envy and doubt that were threatening his self-image.

"Well, that does it!" Vroom spat out. "There's gotta be a limit, and this is it! There's no way that I in good have an example here of a flagrant defiance of the rules? No student leaves the school grounds during noon hour without permission, right? But here Nick Goldhoff is taking one of his students for a joy ride. Who gave permission, I'd like to know."

John Vroom asked the question rhetorically, but a voice answered quietly, "I did." Bob Den Denker had just entered the faculty room in the middle of the Bible teacher's tirade.

Vroom stared at his principal incredulously, the fire in his eyes retreating now. "You did? Why?"

"Why?" returned Den Denker as he made his way calmly toward the Asylum's Mr. Coffee. "Well," he

A Matter

conscience can allow that student teacher of mine to continue." John strode to the table as he continued, heedlessly almost stepping on his own lunch bag, which still lay neglected by his chair. "It's a matter of image, after all. We're teachers; we're a Christian school, for Pete's sake! And this Nick Goldhoff isn't playing his proper role. He's—he's—hanging around those students all the time. He even dresses like them. And that hot-rod motorcycle he wheels around—well, that's worse than the students! Is that how we're supposed to act around here?"

"Would you charge Nick as guilty of conduct unbecoming a teacher and a gentleman?" prodded Rick Cole, tongue-in-cheek.

"That's it, that's it exactly!" responded Vroom, leaning eagerly in Rick's direction. "Conduct unbecoming, yes, that's what I'll tell Peter Rip. I can't have that in my classroom; none of us should stand for that. And by the way," John intoned dramatically as he turned to his other colleagues, for another thought had just sparked in his rapidly overheating brain, "don't we chuckled, "I guess I felt like doing something like that myself today. But seriously, Angela had to pick up a prescription or something, and Nick had promised her a ride sometime; so I thought, why not? Why, is something wrong?"

Den Denker joined the group at the table with his mug of Brim and looked curiously at Vroom, who was retreating now to his own chair.

"Yeah," sputtered John, "I'd say there's something wrong when young male teachers cruise around in our community in broad daylight for pure pleasure with an eager beaver female student in tow. What are the parents supposed to think, huh? What kind of image are we projecting, anyway!"

Den Denker set his coffee mug down as he responded to his chagrined teacher. "Well, John, on the basis of what I've been hearing from parents, I'd

say that Nick Goldhoff's image ranks pretty high with them. In fact, some have been asking me about the possibility of giving him a position here next year."

Vroom looked stricken. The demons were regrouping and readvancing in full force. Still the Bible teacher fought back, wildly now.

"Have these parents ever seen this guy, huh? Barefoot in canvas shoes, loud T-shirts under a flimsy jacket, like a "Miami Vice" character? Or leather jacket and goggles like some Easy Rider of the sixties? Have they seen him in the classroom like I have, talking about all that so-called relevant stuff? Or are they just listening to the oohs and ahs of their kids who go wild over anything that's different and fun!"

A sneer of bitter derision contorted

students about sex and popular entertainment and invite them over to the house and have Minnie treat them to pizza and Cokes and be big buddies with them. Is that what we're here for?"

The defiance was still in his voice. but the fire was already receding in his eyes as John Vroom's demons advanced steadily.

Bill Silver licked the Pringle salt from his fingers, then turned to Vroom. "Let me tell you something, John. That Nick Goldhoff has been bothering me. too. First, because he's unconventional in style. You know what a stickler I am for proper dress around here. And more than once I've been tempted to tell him

bag on the floor but seeing only his own dwindling image of selfimportance.

"Nick's got something special," Bill resumed softly. "He's got a gift for teaching and relating to young people that I'll never have. But he's also got commitment. And I have no excuse for not demonstrating mine at least equal to his. All of us can at least be models of taking our work and our students and our faith as seriously as Nick does. Isn't that what the image of a good teacher is all about, after all?"

The question hovered heavily over Omni's faculty as the bell signaled the end of noon hour. One by one, the teachers began to gather their things in readiness for the next class. Finally, only John Vroom was left; his student teacher was teaching his next class.

Mechanically, Vroom reached for his briefcase, groped around a bit, and hauled out a student journal. The journal writing had been Nick Goldhoff's idea, of course, but John had reluctantly promised to read some of them. Now he forced his eyes to focus on Angela Hietbrook's April 15 entry:

I always thought Bible study and doctrine and all that stuff was a bore. But boy, was I wrong! I should tell Mr. Vroom soon that his subject is now my favorite. In fact, I think it's the most important subject in school. Goldhoff is helping me see (I guess he would say it's the Holy Spirit) how much the Bible has to say about everyday things that matter to us. For example, I'm just beginning to realize what it means to be created in the image of God . . .

John Vroom closed his eyes and began to pray the demons to their final defeat.

of Image

Vroom's face as he spat out those last words. A moment of painful silence followed. Then Bill Silver, munching on a handful of Pringles, entered the fray. "Isn't he doing a good job in the classroom, John? I got the impression from students that he was really doing a great job."

"Sure, he's doing a great job if you listen to the students! Because he's making himself popular! He's talking about things they want to hear about, he's taking guys on overnight hikes, he's taking students on rides and treating them to whatever. Well, is that what we're supposed to do? Is that the image you have of a teacher? Am I now supposed to enter some kind of popularity contest and talk with

to get with it. But somehow I couldn't do it. Why? Because I couldn't find a good reason why he should dress and act exactly like us old fogeys. He's Nick Goldhoff, not John Vroom or Bill Silver. No, hear me out a minute," as Vroom snorted his disdain. "There's a second reason he bugged me. You see, I've been observing him closely. I've been listening to what his students say about him. I've been watching the tremendous rapport he's obviously established with his classes. I've been noticing students taking their Bibles to his class and to study hall as they study for his class. I know several kids he's helped tremendously with their personal problems—and I'll tell you honestly, I've felt jealous and guilty."

It was very quiet in the Asylum now, as Bill paused momentarily. Vroom was hunched deep into his chair, his eyes on his untouched lunch

> Originally published April 1986

In the Image of God



"Tell me, how can I gather the pieces of that boy's shattered self-image and put them back in place?"

inny Traansma, who had been on lunch hour patrol, rushed into the Asylum, headed straight for the table, and dumped a pile of smeared and rumpled papers on top of it. Then she stood and faced her colleagues, eyes flaming, voice quivering, as she slowly said, "I just saw the image of God crushed out there, and I could weep that such a thing could happen in a Christian school!

There was a shocked silence at Ginny's outburst. Then Steve Vander Prikkel asked her gently as he helped her to a chair, "Why don't you tell us what happened, Gin." All looked at her expectantly; even John Vroom paused momentarily before chomping into his Ida Red.

Ginny struggled to control her emotions while fishing in her purse for a tissue. "Well," she started, "you all know Jim Klug, don't you?"

"You mean that pimple-faced, oddball femmie who's too smart for his own good?" queried Vroom, one cheek bulging with Ida.

"No," snapped Ginny, "I mean Jim Klug, a junior at Omni Christian High and one of the most gifted and brightest students made in the image of God we've been privileged to have here!"

"Yeah, I know who you mean," quickly soothed Lucy Bright Den Denker. "He's the shy fellow who usually walks around the halls and the ball field with a briefcase or an open book. He's in one of my classes, and I've never had better stuff from a student.'

"That's the one," responded Ginny, more calmly now. "Well, Jim walked out there on the field where a bunch of guys were tossing a football around when a couple of them decided to have fun with Jim. They grabbed his satchel from him and started playing catch with it while Jim frantically ran from one to the other trying to retrieve it. Well, of course it didn't take long for books and papers to start flying all over the place. When I came on the scene, Jim was almost hysterical, chasing after note sheets blowing everywhere. He's in my choir, and when he saw me coming he panicked. He just grabbed his satchel the guys had dropped by now and ran toward New Haven Avenue as fast as he could. I gathered what papers I could. But tell me, how can I gather the pieces of that boy's shattered self-image and put them back in place?"

John Vroom was not munching when he reached out, awkwardly put his hand on Ginny's, and mumbled, "Sorry, Gin, I was wrong."

"Did you tell Bob?" asked Lucy, indignation still smoldering in her voice and wanting her principalhusband to set things right again.

No one spoke for a moment until Steve Vander Prikkel cleared his throat and started.

"I've never told this story to anyone, but I think I'll tell it now. When I was in fifth grade, an older girl was in the seat right behind me. She'd had to repeat a grade more than once. Ann was not pretty to look at. She had a wide protruding forehead with bulging eyes on either side. She hardly had a nose, just nostrils in the center of her face. And she had a cleft palate, so it was really difficult to understand her when she talked, which she seldom did. There's a fancy medical name for the condition she had, and I understand that today doctors can do a lot to correct it, but at that time nothing was done, especially if you were poor. Anyway, maybe Ann shouldn't have been in a regular school, but I guess her parents wanted to treat her as normally as possible.

"Well, one day a bunch of third graders in this small Christian school thought it would be fun to pretend that Ann was an ugly witch, so they would walk around her in a circle and at a given signal look at her, scream, 'A witch! A witch!' and in mock horror run in all directions, all the while screaming, 'There's a witch! There's a witch!' They did this repeatedly till Ann, sobbing uncontrollably, finally dashed like a wild animal to one end of the playground and started to pound her offensive forehead against the iron fence post again and again, into a bloody blob."

Steve's voice broke as he struggled to retain control. Then in a whisper he added, "Ann was my sister."

After a long moment, Steve looked around at his silent, shocked colleagues, the pain and anger of his eyes mirrored in theirs. "Why," he groaned, "why should this happen in a Christian school? What are we here for? What are we doing?"

The questions hung in the air of the Asylum, like a cloud of judgement over a fallen world.

Then Steve added, all feeling gone now, "Ann never went to school again."

> Originally published October 1986

BLACK OR WHITE

lasses were over for the day and the week at Omni Christian. The late afternoon sun slanted through the west windows, which overlooked the parking lot and through which principal Bob Den Denker now watched the cars move slowly toward the Garden Street exit. The teacher-turned-administrator held a cup of coffee in one hand and a granola bar in the other. He glanced toward his friend and colleague Matt DeWit and mused, "You know, Matt, after hearing what happened to those kids at Community High last Saturday night, you wonder sometimes how all our kids survive the weekend. How do we get at that teenage drinking problem, anyway?"

"Well," responded the sciencemathematics teacher, "the problem is mostly with the parents, it seems to me. You know, there are a lot of people in our community who have moved into frequent social drinking. And let's face it, we've been doing it more among ourselves as a faculty too, which has become obvious at some of our parties. Things sure are changing, aren't they?"

"I know it," said Den Denker. "There's still a lot to that old saying 'monkey see, monkey do.' We'd better do some talking about that as a faculty and board soon, I think."

At that moment other teachers began entering the faculty room for the late afternoon cup. Ren Abbot, feisty

basketball coach of the Omni Eagles, joined Den Denker and DeWit. "No practice on Friday night?" asked the principal. "How do you expect to win a state championship that way?"

Abbot grinned and responded, "Friday night practices aren't too popular for some reason, Bob, but you can sure help me win a championship."

"How's that?" Den Denker responded.

"Easy enough," said the coach. "Help me get the board to be reasonable about athletic eligibility so that Larry Hughes can play ball for us this season. You do that, and I'll get you a championship."

"Is he that good?" asked DeWit, wiping his glasses with a handkerchief. "Seems to fit the stereotype, doesn't it—the only black kid in the whole school and he's a good athlete."

The coach warmed to the subject. "Good athlete? Why, this kid could be one of the three or four best players in the state! But we've got to give him a chance!" Abbot crushed the styrofoam cup in his hand, as if to emphasize the point.

"Well," said the science teacher, "he's a bright enough kid, I believe. But why in the world don't you persuade him to attend my class a little more often? He must've missed five or six classes since school began, and he hasn't turned in a single lab report."

Ren Abbot retorted, "You've gotta

remember that Larry works ten hours a week over at the Cycle Shop. His mom can't support that family alone, you know. We should be a little understanding about these people. Their background is quite different, you know."

"I know, I know," answered De Wit, "but athletes can attend classes just as well as anybody else. I hope you read the newspaper once in a while, Rabbit. Then you must know about that university down south where they fired the remedial English teacher some time ago because she insisted that the athletes be able to read. Do you remember? She sued 'em—the university, that is—and they've gotta pay her three million bucks and give her job back. And they had to apologize. How d'you like them apples?"

Bob Den Denker was smiling, first because he remembered that the coach had acquired his nickname as a college basketball player for his great jumping ability and continued to earn the rights to that name by munching carrot sticks and constantly shouting "Jump!" to his players during the games. But the principal also smiled as he noted that Matt was getting under Rabbit's skin.

Coach Abbot was steaming. "Listen here, Matt, you like sports as much as anybody. You come to the games and you like that free ticket, right? So what's your beef?"

Den Denker, still grinning,

"Seems to fit the stereotype, doesn't it the only black kid in the whole school and he's a good athlete."

"I say first things first, and no special treatment for anybody! And basketball isn't that important, anyway."

interjected, "I don't think we're going to fire any remedial English teacher here, Matt, though it does seem that too often sports becomes the tail that wags the dog. But I am surprised to hear about Larry. I thought he'd done okay. He was eligible for the team last year, wasn't he?"

"Right," snapped Abbot, "and that was the year his family was still together, and that was also the year he, as a freshman, led the conference in rebounds, was third in scoring, and really started to develop. Here's a firstrate athlete and a real nice kid with the best shooting eye in the conference, and this school is gonna make him sit out the season because he's a few stinkin' points below our academic standards that are higher than everybody else's." Rabbit's voice was shrill and bitter.

Now others had joined the group. Ginny Traansma chirped in, "Well, for what it's worth, I think Larry Hughes is a nice boy, and he's trying to help his mom make ends meet. I don't think the school should penalize him for that."

Jenny Snip, the school secretary, moved right in. "I say first things first, and no special treatment for anybody! And basketball isn't that important, anyway. My kids never played."

"Ah, but you're forgetting something," put in Bill Silver, the business education teacher. "If Larry is good in sports and can participate, he'll stay in

school. It may even be his only reason for being in school. If he stays in school, he'll get an education, we'll get his tuition, and Abbot will get his state championship. You see, you've got to be practical about this."

"Right!" reiterated the agitated coach. "And something else—I think people are picking on Larry because he's an athlete and because he's black. I bet there are some racist people on the board who wouldn't mind seeing this fine boy just go down the tubes."

"What does that mean?" snapped Snip. "Why don't you just get tough with that boy of yours and tell him to attend his classes, and write his papers and stuff?"

Matt DeWit took his glasses off again. "Now look, Rabbit, I'm not going to ask you to lower your basketball standards just to let Eddie Puntkopf play, even though I think playing on a team would be good for our prospective National Merit candidate. So how in the world do you figure you can ask me to give Larry special consideration in geometry or biology or any subject just so he can bounce a ball?"

"That's a good point," said Snip.

"It is not," said Ginny Traansma. "We have to keep Larry in school; we just have to. And if we have to let him play ball to do it, that's what we must do. He has to discover that he is a smart kid and that there's a good future

for him. He can go to college and make his mother and all of us proud."

"Another thing you've got to remember," put in Bill Silver, "is that a good team brings in money and prestige and loyalty. And even you have to agree, Matt, that all of us need things like that."

"You said it," agreed the irritated coach. "Everybody can feel so smug and righteous in an ivory tower, but don't forget that education owes a lot to sports. Besides, these same ivory tower whites owe a square deal to the blacks.'

Especially the good black athletes, right, Rabbit?" queried Matt. "Or are you a civil rights activist from way back and I never knew about it?"

The angry coach headed for the door. "I'm going to get out of here and try to forget that this whole stupid conversation ever took place." The door slammed behind him.

In the teachers' lounge, principal Den Denker deliberately packed his briefcase, paused momentarily, and said to no one in particular, "I think I'll go down to the gym for a while."

"Why?" asked Ginny who had hoped to catch a ride home with Bob.

On the way out, Den Denker stuffed his pipe in his coat pocket and replied, "Some of the boys are shooting baskets down there. I think I'll have a little talk with Larry."

> Originally published January 1987



rincipal Bob Den Denker watched the brown fluid flow from the urn into the ceramic coffee mug his wife Lucy had given him for his last birthday, his fortysecond. He was thinking about how his lines had fallen in pleasant places when he first took the job as a history teacher at Omni Christian High School, almost fresh out of college. And the last three years, now as the principal of the school, had given him satisfaction too, though, he reflected, it had not been without strain. This matter of athletics, of its almost inevitable encroachment on the academic schedule of the school, had been troubling. The students loved sports; the parents loved sports; the newspapers and the community loved sports; and Bob Den Denker loved sports, too. But he knew that sports at Omni, no less than in most schools, had become too important, that a school could raise funds for a new gymnasium or football field a lot easier than for a new library or more adequate faculty salaries.

As he raised the steaming mug to his lips, he reflected on what had been happening in large universities, where coaches had more power than presidents had and received larger salaries than history professors did, and where athletes had been given special academic and financial privileges. often in clear violation of the conference regulations, just to improve the chances for a championship. "So much for that character-building baloney," he thought. "It's become a business, and dishonest business at that."

"But now, what about here at Omni?" he mused. "Just last year we canceled classes so that the whole student body and faculty could go watch the basketball team lose the state championship. We wouldn't do that for any academic event. And we shorten classes to make room for pep rallies. We don't do that for a debate tournament or for a fine arts festival. People simply expect it for sports."

Bob Den Denker sighed. There should be a time for everything, he

A Time for Every-thing

believed. But the right ordering of priorities sometimes took more wisdom and courage than he could find within himself.

The coffee tasted good to Den Denker. He was glad that they had shifted from Maxwell House to Folger's. It seemed mellower to him. Lucy had always insisted that Folger's was the best.

And now there had been this business about basketball player Larry Hughes. Coach Abbot desperately had wanted him to be ruled eligible for the Eagles. Hughes was a good kid and a superb athlete. He was bright, too. The tests all showed that, and you could tell it from just talking with him. But he wasn't studying. He just didn't do the work. And he was the only black student at Omni Christian, a problem Bob thought even more serious than the eligibility issue: how was Omni going to become a multiracial school? But in the meantime there had been this eligibility question regarding Omni's lone black student. It would have been simple to lower the requirements to the level of the rest of the conference. Well, Den Denker had gone to the board with his recommendation; the board had listened, discussed, and voted. But that had been nearly two months ago.

Den Denker's reverie ended as the bell rang. Teachers began to flow into the faculty room for the morning break. Bob Den Denker stepped away from the urn to make room for the teacher. John Vroom went directly to the table where the Wednesday goodies had been arranged. "Brownies?" he snorted. "Didn't we have brownies last week? Ginny, I wish you would bring cream puffs next week. They give you quick energy, you know." He took two brownies, poured a heap of powdered

cream into his cup of coffee, and sat down on the vinyl sofa along the east wall, next to Ren Abbott, coach of the Omni Eagles.

"Well, Rabbit," he said through a mouthful of brownie, "how's that team gonna do this year; gonna make it to the finals again?"

The coach looked grim. "No, John, don't expect us to go to the finals this year. We might've, if Den Denker had talked the board into making the right decision about grade point for eligibility." He raised his voice: "By the way, Bob, I never did find out just exactly what happened at the board meeting that night. They flatly rejected your recommendation or what?'

The principal, who had been listening to librarian Sue Katje complain about how difficult it was to keep the noise level down in the "learning center," turned toward the coach. "Well, Ren, I guess I thought you knew. I recommended that there be no change."

The coach stared at Den Denker, then slowly got up from the sofa and walked toward the door. There was pain in the principal's eyes as he watched his teacher

The Bible teacher, John Vroom, had finally realized that something interesting had been going on. He stopped chewing long enough to ask, "Hey, Bob, what's happening? Ren seems upset; I think you have provoked him to wrath.'

Now Matt DeWit, the science teacher who had given the low grade that had made the promising athlete ineligible, sensed the tension and did his best to protect the harried administrator from further badgering. "John," he said, "are you going to hear Dr. Howard lecture on geology over at Servant College Monday night? If you are, I'd like to go with you. That should be very interesting. He certainly hasn't got much patience with the seven-day creation idea, has he?"

> It worked. Vroom's attention had been got. His mouth had been opened wide in anticipation of the last bite. but now he withdrew the brownie in order to reply. "That nincompoop liberal should never be allowed to speak in one of our colleges. Who is responsible for getting guys like Howard to speak, anyway? Somebody ought to do something!" He reinserted the morsel and chewed vigorously. Den Denker, fully appreciating DeWit's rescue, quietly made his way to the door. There he turned and faced his faculty.

> "Remember that we have a faculty meeting right after school. I'll be picking up a video tape this afternoon on 'The Issues in Contemporary Secondary Education.' After watching it we'll discuss its application to Omni for about twenty minutes and follow

up at our next meeting. I'll see you at 3:45."

Later, with classes over for the day, the teachers were relaxing with snacks and coffee while Steve Vander Prikkel was setting up the equipment for the video presentation. Den Denker had left at two o'clock to pick up the tape at St. Alfonso High, but he wasn't back yet.

DeWit glanced at the clock, noticed that it was getting on toward four, and got up to try his latest joke on the group. But before he had said a word, the door opened and a chalk-pale Jenny Snip took one step into the room. All eyes turned to Jenny. She took a deep breath and blurted, "Bob was in an accident. He is dead! He was driving on Garden. Somebody in a big car was speeding and hit him. They said he smelled like alcohol, the guy who hit him. Bob's dead!"



Originally published February 1987

The New Principal

o one was sure just how it happened. Steve Vander Prikkel had heard that some school board members didn't support retiring banker Louis Lulbaas for principal because they had once been turned down for a loan, while others didn't want Peter Rip back because he "projected the wrong image." Matt DeWit had heard that the board president was a long-time friend of the Timmermann family. Regardless, Esther Carpenter, who had her Timmermann name Anglicized when she started college, succeeded Bob Den Denker as the first female principal of the forty-year-old Omni Christian High School. There had been a lot of talk among Omni's constituency, ranging from theologizing about "women in authority" to psychologizing about "women under pressure." Some heads shook, some eyes rolled, some smiles of satisfaction flitted across faces, but—for the most part—parents, students, and faculty were content to watch the curtain roll up on Omni's new chapter in history.

Now it was noon hour, and John Vroom grumbled while puttering around by the faculty room sink. Under the new reign of Principal Carpenter, Jenny Snip would no longer be responsible for such non-secretarial jobs as making coffee, buying doughnuts, and cleaning up. Today it was Vroom's turn for KP duty. His neck muscles bulged under the unaccustomed strain of refilling the hot water pot. Some water splattered on his light-gray 100 percent polyester Penney's slacks, and he wondered with irritation whether the spots would dry before he faced his one o'clock class in Church Doctrine. Next time he'd wear one of Minnie's aprons, he thought, then wryly muttered to an amused Asylum crowd about the evils of women as pants-wearers while men slaved over women's work.

But the attention was suddenly



diverted from the indignant John Vroom as loud, angry voices exploded in the hallway just outside the door. There was a dull thud of a fist making contact, and then the scream of a girl. Quickly the faculty room emptied, and Omni teachers witnessed the new year's first love triangle conflict. Apparently fighting over Toots Middler for sole possession, Richy and Wally stood facing each other now like two psyched-up prize fighters, while their prize wept big tears on the sympathetic shoulders of several girlfriends.

Dr. Esther Carpenter, smartly dressed in an off-white pantsuit, was already on the scene. She took each combatant by an arm and ordered both to her office. Her voice was firm but not unfriendly, and because assistant

principal Bill Silver was absent with the flu, she asked Matt DeWit to accompany the small group.

Students slowly began to scatter while the faculty returned to their Asylum. All were full of curiosity about how the new principal was going to handle this one. "If I were the principal, I'd kick the rummies out," intoned John Vroom.

"Yeah, as your good book says," quipped Rick Cole, "vengeance is mine."

Vroom checked down the front of his slacks for the incriminating wet spots and chose to ignore Rick's dig. Ginny Traansma jested, "Just what I've always dreamed of—two handsome brutes fighting over me." Then she added wistfully, "I would've even



settled for one."

When Matt reentered a few minutes later, all eyes turned toward him. "Well, are they kicked out?" asked John Vroom.

Matt smiled at John. "No, they're back in the hall now; in fact, they'll be back in your class in just a few minutes, John.

John groaned; others asked what had happened. Matt eagerly obliged them with a first-witness account.

"Well, we all sat by the round table in Esther's office. I guess I was there as a witness, which is one of the new policies now. Esther just asked them if they knew there's to be no fighting around here. They didn't say anything at first—didn't even want to look at her. But Jenny Snip must've given her the names, because Esther then called each boy by name and repeated the question. I tell ya, she's cool, man, just as calm and in control as you please."

"So what did they say, then?" asked Vander Prikkel.

"They nodded. And then she said: 'Do you agree with the rule?' After a little while, they both said 'yes,' and then she told them that she's glad to hear that, because if they didn't, it would be very hard for them to keep the rule, in which case Omni might not be the right place for them."

"I like that," smiled Ginny approvingly.

"But what punishment did they get?" John pushed impatiently. "Or did she just practice this positive psychology bull on them and let them go?"

"Patience, my good man, I'm coming to it. She told them that since they had violated a school rule, they would have to be punished. So she said that she wanted three hours of their time, one hour after school for the next three days, to help her plan and set up a peer tutoring system at Omni."

"Whaaat?" gasped Ginny, but with pleasure in her voice.

"You've gotta be kiddin'," croaked John, the red color of incredulity and chagrin slowly creeping over his face.

"But then she gave them a little speech before she let them go. She said there was another rule this school tries to honor, namely the second great commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself. Then she asked each one if he agreed with that rule, too. By this time she had them looking at her, and they both said, without much hesitation, they did. Then she said, "I trust, then, that at the right moment you'll say you're sorry to each other and to God. You are free to go now."

It was quiet for a moment in the faculty room before Ginny Traansma said softly, "I think Bob would've liked that approach. I just hope the students aren't going to misunderstand it."

"Don't worry," responded DeWit, "there's steel in that lady, too. She'll put up with no nonsense, not from the kids and not from any of us." Then he added, a note of foreboding in his voice now, "We'll find out, maybe sooner than we think."

At that John Vroom grabbed for his briefcase, hoisted his hefty self out of the easy chair, and stomped to the door even before the bell signaled noon hour's end.

> Originally published October 1987



ucy was back. Bob Den Denker, her late husband, whose accidental death a year and a half ago had stunned the Omni Christian community, had always been a popular though provocative part of Asylum gatherings and deliberations. But now Lucy was back, after a two-year absence, eager to be teaching again, though her two small children allowed her only a part-time involvement for the time being.

She had just settled next to Ginny Traansma, ready to enjoy a last cup of coffee before the afternoon classes began, when Principal Carpenter entered the faculty lounge and gestured to Lucy: "Mrs. Den Denker, Marilyn Balk would like to see you a minute."

Lucy put her coffee on the table and proceeded to the door. Ginny watched her go and exclaimed when the door closed behind her, "Wow, she sure looks good again, doesn't she? She must've lost 50 pounds during the last six months. Wonder how she did it," Traansma added wistfully, suddenly very self-conscious of the extra ten pounds she bad been battling since her 45th birthday.

"Yeah," sighed Steve Vander Prikkel, "what a beautiful couple they were in more ways than one. But it's really good to have Lucy back, isn't it? I think the teaching will be very good for her.'

"I think you're right," responded Dr. Esther Carpenter while soaking a cinnamon orange-spice teabag in a cup of steaming hot water, "but it's also so good for our students, especially the girls who need some adult female support and friendship. This Marilyn Balk, for example. That girl has problems but has simply not been able to reach out to anyone for help. Now she's building a trust relationship with Lucy, and I think that's wonderful."

"I just hope Lucy has enough energy for all this and her two kids, too," Ginny added. "We have to protect her, I think, from burning herself out because she wants to give 100 percent all the time, you know."

Just then Lucy reentered, picked up her cup, and put it in the microwave for a quick warmup.

"How's Marilyn doing?" inquired Ginny.

"I bet if she'd lose 100 pounds, she'd feel a lot better," offered Matt DeWit.

"No, Matt," Lucy responded, "it doesn't work that way. If she felt a lot better on the inside, she'd probably lose that extra 100 pounds. But I think we're getting somewhere."

Before both sat down by the center table, Esther Carpenter put her arm around Lucy's shoulder and said, "I'm so glad you won her trust, Lucy; nobody has been able to do that before."

Lucy smiled gratefully at her late husband's successor. "Well, I pray that I can do something to help her. I just went through a compulsive eating streak myself, you know. I never thought I would. But I'd look at Scotty and Monica, and I'd think how they'd never enjoy that wonderful man who could've been such a great dad."

Lucy paused, struggling with the rising emotions. Carpenter reached out



"I'd like kids to know why problems can lead to self-abuse, the emotional factors, vou know. . . . And because I hear a lot of people say, 'It's my body— I can do with it whatever I want.' I think there should be a look at the spiritual implications of self-abuse, too."

softly from Ginny.

It seemed as if the old Lucy was back, Lucy whose brown eyes twinkled when she responded, "Through much prayer and fasting."

Chuckles from the Asylum crew broke the tension. Vroom began to unwrap his special treat.

"No, really," Lucy continued, "it took a lot of good counseling first, and I still need it. There's many a night when I feel that I don't want to see another day-without Bob." She paused, then added, "Maybe that's why I can empathize with Marilyn-because I've been there, where everything

seems absurd and meaningless. There's a lot of pain in her life we know little about. She needs counseling, and she needs our prayers."

The principal spoke for her staff when she said, "She certainly does. And we want you to know that our prayers also continue for you and your two children. I can't tell you how much we appreciate your sharing your struggle with us and what an inspiration you are to all of us."

John Vroom looked at the enticing treat in his hand again, but he had not yet put his mouth where his desire was.

"You know, I've got an idea," came from Steve Vander Prikkel. "I'm on the

Special Emphasis Week committee, and it just occurred to me that we've got a lot of students and a lot of people in our society who turn their problems into self-abuse—whether it's by overeating or starving themselves, or smoking or drinking or doing drugs, or ultimately suicide, of course. Wouldn't that be a good topic for our Emphasis Week this year?"

Vroom succumbed. His mouth greedily closed around one-third of the confection while his tongue eagerly sucked at the jelly.

"Yeah, I think that's right," agreed Matt, "provided you don't put kids on the defensive; you know, like putting them on the spot and pointing fingers at them?"

Vroom quickly put the doughnut down again.

"Oh, absolutely," Steve agreed. "I'd like kids to know why problems can lead to self-abuse, the emotional factors, you know. And then I'd like them to have a vivid inside look at just what happens when a body is overfed or underfed, or invaded by alcohol, nicotine, or cocaine—the physical and chemical consequences, you know. And because I hear a lot of people say, 'It's my body—I can do with it whatever I want,' I think there should be a look at the spiritual implications of self-abuse, too."

"Sounds as if you have the program practically planned already, Steve," reacted the principal, "and I think it's a very good idea too. It will require a good many community resources like doctors, psychologists, and pastors, and that's all for the good. What do you think, John?" Carpenter turned to Vroom as she stood up to rinse out her empty cup.

John Vroom ignored the question. But as his principal strode briskly to the door, he rewrapped the piece of collapsed jelly doughnut carefully, strained his bulky body as he reached for the lunch bag on the floor beside the chair, and muttered as he removed temptation, "I think I've lost my appetite."

and touched her arm briefly. Then Lucy resumed. "I'd go to the kitchen, and I would just grab something and start stuffing myself. And I wouldn't stop. I'd hate what happened to my life more with every bite I took. I did not know how to cope. So, I took it out on my body; and somehow, in some perverted way, that made me feel better temporarily."

John Vroom sat on the sidelines eating his lunch. He had saved his favorite jelly doughnut for last. Now he stared at it; he sensed with regret that somehow the timing for the first luscious bite wasn't quite right.

"And how did you lick it?" came

Originally published October 1988

fternoon shadows lengthened in the Omni Christian High School faculty room as Friday waned into weekend. A fresh batch of coffee gurgled in the shiny aluminum pot. On the north side of the spacious room, comfortably relaxing on the overstuffed sofa, sat Lucy Den Denker and Ginny Traansma. They chatted amiably about plans for spring vacation.

As they talked they kept their eyes on the little drama unfolding on the far side of the room. There Bill Silver, fourteen-year veteran teacher of business and bookkeeping, was seated on the hard dining room chair near the telephone with his long legs crossed and his now cold cup of coffee untouched on the small table beside him. In his right hand Bill held his solar cell calculator, and in his left was the phone. He was engaged in a lengthy and earnest conversation.

Meanwhile, Steve Vander Prikkel. biology teacher at Omni, hovered near the phone, glancing alternately at Bill Silver and the wall clock with occasional quick reference to his own watch. His impatience was both audible and visible. He paced and grimaced and finally interrupted his colleague: "Bill, do you suppose you could get off the phone for just a minute? I've got to call the arboretum by three o'clock if I

STOCKS, BONDS,

want to make a reservation for my field trip tomorrow." His irritation put an edge on his voice.

Bill Silver simply smiled at him and waved him off without even breaking the flow of his conversation. "Yes, Mrs. Wisniewski," he said smoothly and confidently, "I'd suggest you take fifty percent of your insurance money and invest it in our Multi-Fund Fixed Account. That would give you maximum safety of your principal and at the same time give you a guaranteed interest rate. Then with the other fifty percent I think we can be a little bolder in your situation. I have some good noload stock funds that have averaged a fifteen-point-six percent gain over the last two years."

Vander Prikkel paced faster, noting anxiously that the clock read 3:05 p.m.. and he thrust his watch in front of Silver's face and tapped it with his forefinger. But Silver simply nodded at him as though he sympathized with the situation but couldn't do much about it.

"I'd be happy to stop by next Tuesday," he said, "and I'll explain the options for you." He paused and added, "You know, Mrs. Wisniewski, I was so sorry to hear of your husband's passing. So unexpected. So unnecessary. So tragic. We must always be ready, huh? I'm really sorry, and I'll see you Tuesday afternoon at 3:30, as soon as I get out of school."

He bade his client goodbye, and without even looking up he began making some notes, saying pleasantly as he scribbled, "Phone's all yours, Steve, but make it brief, will you? I've a couple more calls to make." He was too late, however; the angry biology teacher had left the room.

Across the room Ginny leaned toward Lucy and said sotto voce, "Steve's steamed."

"I don't blame him," Lucy responded firmly. "That's been going on as long as I can remember. Bill monopolizes the faculty phone for his investment business, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. He's a pretty powerful guy around here, you know. Been here a long time. Got a lot of money."

"I know," said Ginny. "And the trouble is that half of the school board members buy investments from him. And so do lots of teachers. He's pretty good, I guess."

She sipped the fresh coffee and then looked up to see a newcomer in their space. Bill had finished his jotting and had sensed the clandestine comments.

"Did I hear my name taken in vain?" he smiled. "Could it be that I am somehow the subject of this conversation?" He looked from Ginny to Lucy and waited.

The embarrassed teachers glanced uncomfortably at each other; then Lucy



AND SCHOOL

looked up at the towering Silver. "You did, and it could," she said a bit sheepishly.

"Well then," he said, "may I know what complimentary things you were saving abut me?"

'You may," Lucy said archly." And I'm sorry that they weren't complimentary, but I think they were truthful. We were talking about you, how you sometimes sort of monopolize the faculty phone for what is often your private business, uh, not related to school. That's what we were talking about." As Lucy talked, colleagues who had entered the faculty room for the end-ofday libation, soon sensing the edge on the conversation, had sidled closer.

"Now listen, Lucy," said a slightly flushed Silver. "What I do in my spare time is my business, nobody else's. Don't you agree?" He forced a smile, just a small, thin one.

Now Ginny Traansma, sensing the need to support her ally, looked up at Silver and pointed her forefinger at him. "Maybe that's the trouble, Bill. What you talk about all the time on the phone is business, and it isn't really your spare time. You're on that phone before school, at noon, after school, and, what's worse, right during school hours. You were on it just now during sixth hour."

She stared at him over her shivering coffee cup and added, "I think that was wrong of you to use the phone for your private business when Steve needed it for school business." She snapped her head for a clincher.

"Well, if Steve feels that way, let him say something to me."

"No," said the steamed music teacher, "it's my gripe too, and so I'm saying something to you. And I'll bet I speak for a lot of others, too."

"Wow!" came from a nettled Silver. "When you gals get your dander up, you really do a job on a guy, don't you?" He glanced uneasily at the group of listeners.

"Men get their dander up, too,

Bill," joined Rick Cole. "And it's not just what you do when you tie up the phone like that for your business. It's partly what you don't do, if you know what I mean."

"I really don't know what you mean," shot back the aroused business teacher as he crumpled his disposable cup into a ball. "Why don't you tell me what you mean?" he challenged.

At this point Ren Abbott, football coach and physical education instructor, entered the conversation. "It's no secret what Rick means, Bill. I think a lot of us see it, and probably we should have brought it up long ago. Rick means that sometimes you get so involved in selling investments that you just don't do your fair share of the work here, like lunchroom duty. Last Tuesday you were supposed to be in there, and you weren't there—you were here, on that phone again. And you miss committee meetings and often don't do your share of committee work."

Lucy Den Denker rejoined the attack. "Just yesterday, Bill, you were bragging how you never grade any papers, how you give only tests that can be graded by students in class. You told us that, without blushing, right here in the room. I think we are talking about professionalism. We are supposed to be professional teachers. This is not just a job to squeeze between other jobs."

"Do I detect a note of jealousy in this room?" said Silver. "It's no secret that I have a good business, one which I've built up over the years, after a lot of hard work, and I'm proud of it. I help people. I help them when they're in trouble, like that woman I just talked to. Besides, my business experience helps me in my teaching, not to mention the fact that our salaries here at Omni aren't all that much, especially if we want to send our own kids to this high school."

"Ah, Bill," said Ren Abbott with a gentle smile and a wave of his hand, we all know about low salaries and high tuitions. I wish I had some money to invest with you. I hear that you're good at it. But has it ever occurred to you that when board members see how you live and how much time you have for moonlighting, they may conclude that we don't need better salaries?

"We have no right to compromise our teaching effectiveness by carrying on private businesses that take us away from our teaching. We need time to prepare, to grade papers, to read books, to talk with each other. We can't carry on private business right during school hours."

Lucy, now standing, looked directly at Bill Silver. She reached out and grasped him lightly on the biceps and said in softer tones, "Bill, you teased me yesterday because I spent a lot of time making new bulletin boards every month and finding things to make my room interesting and attractive. But don't you think that's part of our responsibility? It does take a lot of time to do what we have to do if we want to teach well. What have you got against that?" She smiled gently.

Bill Silver looked at Lucy and said simply, "I don't mind if you want to do all that. I was just teasing. But I don't go for that fancy stuff. I don't think it's necessary. I get my subject matter, which is business, into the minds of my students without any distractions, and I test them on it. I'm not an entertainer. I'm a teacher. When I began teaching fourteen years ago, we no-nonsense teachers had some respect."

As he spoke the phone rang. It was answered by Principal Esther Carpenter, who had just entered the faculty room to catch a ride with John Vroom. She listened to the caller and then said in a large voice, "Bill, it's for you. It's a Mrs. Wisniewski." As she waited for him, she looked puzzled and said, "Wisniewski? Do we have any Wisniewskis in this school?"

> Originally published February 1990

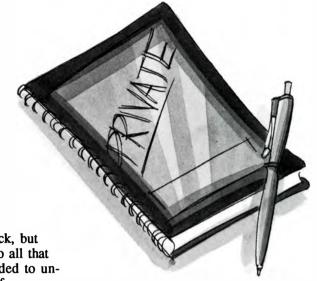
All Wet

ay is supposed to be the month of cleanly fresh, paleblue skies and wispy clouds. of fragrant scents from flowering tree and bush, of summertime promises for leisure and adventure that make those last weeks of school routines more bearable. May is supposed to be sunshine and sweetness.

But May was drizzly this year. Farmers grumbled, gardeners sighed, and students became ornery. Eventually the drizzle seeped inside the teachers too, and inside Omni's Asylum. It had drenched Rick Cole as he glumly looked at his colleagues and exclaimed, "This is the first time since I started teaching that I'm really wondering whether there's any reason for me to stay in it."

"What is this—something more than a mid-May crisis, Rick?" queried Matt as he took off his glasses to rub his eves.

'You really want to know?"



responded Rick, but it was clear to all that he really needed to unburden himself.

"Go ahead, give us an earful, Rick," said Steve Vander Prikkel. "Maybe I'll match you.'

"Well, I have students write in journals several times a week in English class, an idea I got from Lucy, by the way, and I've been happy with it. I mean, I can tell that it has improved their regular writing, and our discussions have been freer and better, too.

"But I don't read their journals, unless they want to share them with me. The journals are private; students can write anything they wish.

"Unfortunately, one of my students was careless. His journal was found and turned in to the office. Jenny looked in it long enough to decide that

Carpenter should see it, and...."

"What was I supposed to do, burn it instead?" snapped Jenny Snip, pursing her lips as if she'd been sucking vinegar.

Ignoring that, Rick continued, "Anyway, Carpenter read it and called in the student. Wanted to know details. And the student got terribly upset, of course."

"Details about what?" Reverend Broekhoest wanted to know.

"The what is none of our business; that's private," retorted Rick emphatically. "We're talking about an issue here!"

"Details about a drinking party," offered Snip, trying to gain the group's approval for self and judgment on Rick.

But now Rick reddened with anger as he faced the school secretary and raised



his voice: "You're completely unprofessional! Whatever access you have to student information is to be kept in strict confidence. And if you can't handle that, then you're in the wrong iob!"

At that outburst, drizzle was about to cover Jenny's face, too. She got up hastily and stormed back to the front office.

"Okay, Rick, I still don't know what all this is about, but it's obviously been painful. Why don't you tell us the whole thing," invited Lucy Den Denker gently.

Rick's hand shook as he took a swig from his Diet Coke. "You're right, Lucy, I'm upset. But this is what happened next. Carpenter called me in and wanted me to read what she had read. I told her I didn't want to read it—I had promised my students I wouldn't. She got angry and said that I was responsible for what I had my students write and had a duty to read what they wrote in and for my class. Then she called the parents in and let them read it, too. She told the parents that the school would have to discipline their son. Well, in the meantime my student had come to me. Carpenter had refused to return the journal to him, but he wanted me to know what he had written about, and of course he wanted advice."

"And what did you tell him?" Broekhoest wanted to know.

"That I stood by him," replied Rick with conviction. "I told him that his right to privacy had been violated, and I was grieved about that."

"It seems to me, Rick, that the secular humanist law of privacy is superseded by God's own law, which governs this school after all, and that is that we are all in subjection to God and responsible before him and each other for all our actions." Rev. Broekhoest clutched his empty coffee mug in both hands as he looked sternly at his younger colleague.

"Yes, Ralph," interjected Lucy, "but in journal writing we encourage students to write honestly about anything that's important to them, so that they learn to verbalize their own thoughts and feelings and develop as human beings and as writers. They need freedom to do that, without any fear of a grade or of censure."

But Ralph Broekhoest was not

persuaded. "I don't use a journal to teach them how to write. I teach them that their writing should exhibit God's principles of order and purity and truth. That, I think, is Christian education."

"And if that kind of Christian education can ride roughshod over agreements and privileged information and student privacy, then I'd say that unethical system is neither Christian nor educational, and I want none of it." Rick Cole got up, tossed his empty Coke can into the refund box, and headed out.

Matt DeWit shook his head. "I think Rick is right. If this kid, whoever he is—and I don't want to know, had sat in class and thought about whatever good or bad things he had done the

night before, that would be no different than writing about it in a private journal. So, are we going to start thought control now?"

Susan Katje, the librarian, stroked her pouffy hairdo as if it were a cat when she offered, "But we have rules, and Jenny told me that Alex Pils is on the baseball team, and that means he'll have to be kicked off if he went to a booze party."

The others stared in disbelief at another breach of confidence. Matt groaned, "I hope the kid gets himself a lawyer. He needs protection around here."

"We need a faculty meeting to talk about this," decided Lucy.

"We need a prayer meeting more," countered the reverend.

But then the door opened, and in lumbered a jolly John Vroom, a notebook clutched in his pudgy hands. A gleam of accomplishment shone

on his face as he explained: "This I confiscated from two girls I caught in Lucy's room. They were reading this and laughing hilariously, so I got suspicious and asked them to show me. When they refused, I got more suspicious and took it away from them. It's a journal they're writing for Lucy's class, and you ought to see some of the things they write about some of the people right here in this room."

Outside the drizzle had turned into a shower.

> Originally published April 1991

