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This issue of The Cresset, with its focus on struggle, is dedicated to the memory of Constance Coiner (VU'70).
See page 30 for a review of her book, Better Red, and announcement concerning donations to a scholarship in her honor.
Handprints on the Wall

This Homecoming I ran into an alum who pretty immediately took me on about tenure. In his business, he said, you have to prove yourself every year, and every year you know just how you stand. If sales are up, you are doing fine. If not, you need to assess what you are doing wrong and make adjustments. “But you people,” he said, “if you teach a class badly, or miscalculate your objectives with a course, or fail to achieve your goals, you don’t have to pay for it all. You can just forget it. You’re not accountable, and that’s no way to run a business, even the business of education.”

The bottom line of his argument was that “nobody deserves a job forever.”

I had this Cresset—on struggle—on my mind. “True enough,” I said, “but what makes you think that there isn’t assessment in what we do? Every class, every semester, every student writes an anonymous assessment of what, in her mind, I have accomplished or not. And, after I have handed in grades, I go over these evaluations, as does my department chair. I have them in mind all the time as I plan the next class, and the chair has them in mind when he makes salary recommendations. Isn’t it enough that I struggle with another batch of these every half year?”

He hadn’t known about these evaluations, he said, but it still seemed to him unsatisfactory that I wouldn’t suffer quite enough from bad ones. It would just be up to me to self-correct, and that didn’t reflect the clear directives of a market-driven assessment. We finally agreed that the problem of finding an adequate mechanism for measuring what teachers achieve has yet to be derived.

That struggle occupies a great deal of attention in the academic world just now, and it isn’t getting easier. One reason for the difficulty is asking students to describe whether they received what they liked. And these answers, predictably, are all over the map. Here, for example, are selections from an evaluation over which I have suffered inordinately: “I have a few things to say to Eifrig. Go teach elementary where you can talk down to students, quit, or get an attitude adjustment. I have never experienced as poor a professor at VU as I have you. GROW UP! Oh, yeah, a little modesty never hurt anyone. This woman should not [underlined] be considered for promotion.”

And from the same class: “Eifrig proved to look at texts and themes of literature in an insightful and intelligent way that hasn’t been matched by many professors here at VU.” And, “I have learned an immense amount that I will carry with me in my life, not just in the classroom.” As those under twenty might say, “Go figure.”

Given this kind of difficulty, it is not surprising that the struggle over tenure, or post-tenure review, as it is called inside the academy, grinds along with the kind of laborious difficulty that marks many discussions among us. Granting the point that education should operate on the same premises as business—a point I do not think has ever been adequately demonstrated—the grounds for determining success in teaching are not those that will determine success in designing cars or selling airline tickets. The necessity to make distinctions that depend on judgment, not numbers, means that people will disagree over the weight or significance of each of the elements being considered. In the specifics of assessment in teaching and learning, for instance, which students, at which point in their careers as students, can make the most accurate evaluation of the teacher’s contribution to the learning process? And, raising the stakes, though not simplifying the issue, which peers can best assess one’s excellence as colleague? Should such an evaluation of one’s value to the institution be ordered
only by discipline? within or across colleges? if over time, what kind of time—two years, five years?

Reducing the problem to only one of its dimensions, I fear that this is yet another instance of a disinclination in our culture to rely on trust. And the rapid disappearance of trust, which makes a huge, nearly immeasurably difference in the quality of everyday life, plunges us ever more insistently in the struggle to find other means by which to organize our relations. Thus the struggle over post-tenure review is part of the same problem we refer to when we say, as the commonplace goes, “Why, we never used to lock our doors when we left the house.” Now we say to a teacher, “without an adequate means to punish you by affecting your livelihood, we do not trust you to be seeking earnestly to improve the level at which you communicate whatever it is that you teach to your students.” That accusation is certainly what I hear when an end to tenure is called for, and whether or not such an accusation is meant, the hearing of it may explain some of the defensive anger on the part of academics. Because a few have abused a system founded on trust, no one can be trusted. Only an optimist could believe that a system without trust will be an improvement on one that relies on it.

And what does this recognition have to do with those handprints on the wall? The image reproduced almost actual size on the front cover is a photograph of a wall in the Algerian quarter in Avignon. Even without knowing that, we can see the handprints as a kind of sign, it seems to me, of the ultimate necessity we feel, as human persons, to find and to mark a point beyond which we cannot we moved. However deep the nature of the struggle—to know what is right, to do what is required, to understand, to be committed to a purpose—at some point we place ourselves and say, “This is the place I must stand.” To engage in struggle means that we will somewhere, someplace, put our hand to the wall to say, “Here is the sign that I believe—that I must believe—this.” If this is a symbolic gesture, it is not without content. To put my hand to something brings my identity to bear, forces me to know where, in the given issue, my identity is at stake. It should surprise no one that teachers refuse to accept with equanimity the suggestion that they are untrustworthy in carrying out their responsibility as teachers. To open a discussion to try to define more clearly what those responsibilities ought to be—of course. To devise more insightful measurements of achievement—certainly. But to agree with the principle that only by coercion and external control will a teacher be a teacher? Never.

A year ago in these pages, Professor James Bachman’s Reformation homily reminded us that when Luther said, “Here I stand,” it is the ‘here’ we need to note. Luther grounds his moment of standing firm in the Word of God, not in the righteousness of his own identity and opinion. True enough. But in other of life’s struggles, we may indeed have to emphasize that other part of the sentence. When we have struggled to know or be what is right, then it may be that we need to show where we are. Circumstances may demand that we be counted on one side or the other, that we put our hand to the wall, even if the sign only shows where we were standing when we went down in defeat.

In this issue of The Cresset, writers consider some of those circumstances. Generational conflicts, gender wars, economic controversy, elections—even the struggle over what kind of Italian restaurant to run—become their subjects, for to be human is to be engaged in struggle, and to give accounts of these struggles is to participate in the human enterprise of making sense. Lutherans, with their propensity for making sense through the process of dialogue and argument, remember the Reformation by recalling that 95 arguable propositions posted on the church door at Wittenberg marked a step in the process of struggle which has always characterized the life of encounter with God. Indeed, the very expression ‘simul justus et peccator’ implies a struggle whose resolution rests beyond us now, caught as we are in our moment of time, our hands to the wall.

Peace,

GME
On W.W. II, Vietnam, and Turning 50

Peter Scholl

My fiftieth birthday last year coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and the twentieth anniversary of the end of the war we fought in Vietnam. Turning fifty makes you look over your shoulder to wonder if you have been moving ahead purposefully or just going in circles. Hundreds of thousands of Americans must have been born in 1945, and few of us can ever have been far from the forced awareness of how wars, major and minor, have punctuated our lives this past half-century.

We grew up playing war and we had real army helmet liners, canteens, ammunition belts from the army surplus store or from somebody’s closet. I remember sitting around in a backyard dugout watching the indicator, some kind of army surplus seismic detector to see if it picked up the tread of approaching enemy feet. Going home with little buddies in the 50s, I might be shown a ceremonial Japanese sword or a dagger with swastika worked into the ornamental hilt that a dad picked up in the service. We watched dozens of war movies and hours of W.W.II combat footage in patriotic series like “Crusade in the Pacific,” and “Navy Log.”

My Sunday school teacher was in the Battle of the Bulge. We asked him if he killed anyone, but he said he was too busy taking care of “old Brevard’s fanny” to notice. My Scoutmaster was a US Marine recruiting sergeant who had enlisted at 17 and had been wounded by a machine gun bullet in Korea. He addressed us in Marine-ese: “Police the deck, get that squared away.” We had several Scout overnights in barracks on a military base and on camping trips several of the men and boys carried guns, including a military .45 pistol. We earned marksmanship merit badges practicing in a Marine rifle range and we ran their obstacle course a few times.

Looking back it seems my brother and I and most of the guys we knew always expected to go off someday to our war.

The year I turned twenty, the Marines landed on the beaches near Da Nang, South Vietnam. I was in college, and I had been following the debates over our involvement in that conflict, and had already decided I did not believe in the “domino theory.” I read Senator Fulbright’s book, The Arrogance of Power, and I wrote some editorials in the college paper attacking the policy of armed intervention. A few years later as all manner of draft deferments were eliminated, I was sent an induction notice, and I decided to resist service in that war by whatever means necessary.

In the event, I didn’t have to go and didn’t even have to go to prison either. I was extremely lucky. But I can’t say I came though unscathed. I was not able to avoid coming to distrust, disrespect, and even hate those on the other side of the issue. Polarization is the word that characterized the debate and everyone is familiar with the “generation gap.” I wondered what my Sunday school teacher and my Scoutmaster thought of my refusal to follow the flag, but I never found out because I had moved far away and didn’t really expect to see all that many of the role models and public fixtures I had known as a boy.

Novelist Tim O’Brien is about my age, and his account of his decision to go to Vietnam instead of crossing into Canada in his 1991 novel The Things They Carried really rang true for me when I re-read it this spring. When he got his draft notice, he too had recently graduated from col-
college, where he had “taken a modest stand against the war,” writing the occasional editorial for the campus paper, campaigning for Gene McCarthy. But the hometown pressures were more intense for O’Brien than for me—I was not from a small town in the first place and was attending graduate school in Chicago at the time. O’Brien, on the other hand, was living in “a conservative little spot on the prairie,” a place where he felt he would always be remembered as a traitor if he refused to go: “The emotions went from outrage to terror to bewilderment to guilt to sorrow and then back again to outrage. I felt a sickness inside me.”

As the pressure built, he began to hold the coffee crowd at the Main Street cafe personally responsible for his predicament—for not learning enough about history, for “their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand.” But when the moment finally came to cross the border into Canada, he couldn’t do it: “I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to . . . I was a coward. I went to the war.”

I didn’t go to war—partly because unlike O’Brien, I didn’t come from a small town and didn’t think I would have to be constantly confronted by people I knew who would think me a traitor. But I remember hating the “pro-war” people—just as I imagine they hated us in the “antiwar” crowd.

I realized even way back then that almost every American around fifty years old (including everyone ten years on either side) had been deeply affected by their war, by World War II; that they were emotionally still close to the desperate fight against Germany and Japan that we truly could have lost. I knew almost everyone seemed to have been involved in the struggle. Sure, there was dissent, especially at the start. But “polarization” was never the best word to describe the state of the body politic over the issue of involvement in W.W.II after Pearl Harbor. In a recent issue of my alma mater’s alumni magazine dedicated to commemorating 1941-1945, a veteran writes: “Reflecting on the end of hostilities fifty years ago, I recall the war as a time of willing, even fervent, national commitment to our cause.” I knew even in 1965 that millions supported the war in Vietnam in large part not because they had studied the issues, but because they remained deeply committed to the idea of America they had formed during the other struggle that was ending just as I was being born.

I knew all this, but it didn’t calm me down. Let me tell you about an experience that did.

I teach at Luther College in Iowa and in the month before my fiftieth birthday, I attended a banquet for first-year students who had written the best research papers in Paideia, our required English and history course. The theme this year was “commemorating the final months of World War II, May - August, 1945.” The menu included Victory Garden Vegetables, Spam, and Serviceman’s Special Candy, “sturdy enough to send overseas.” Entertainment included a trio singing songs like “The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B,” and there were displays of letters and photos from the era on display. There were brief talks by five guests, three men and two women, four of whom were Luther graduates. As some of them told where they were on campus when it was announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, as they told of the general stir on campus and the haste to enlist, as one or two of them referred unconsciously to the “Japs”—it was obvious how vivid those fifty-plus year memories remained.

Our almost ethereal choral director told how he had not hesitated to sign up and soon found himself in the tank corps. Amazing to think of this gentle, soft-spoken man in General Patton’s armored division, racing to rescue soldiers who had been surrounded by the last German offensive in 1945. Weston told how they soon found themselves cut off and surrounded by German forces, and how they were offered communion in a French village church on the eve of what they feared might be their last day. As the wafer was presented, he saw on the minister’s hand a Luther College ring. I was seated with a woman who had worked in munitions factories during the war, and she told me how her husband had been in combat in Europe and of his close escapes. When she got up to speak, however, she told of another man to whom she had been engaged. He had been a fighter pilot, and they had written avidly, counting down the days as the war moved towards its con-
clusion, until he had only one mission left. He was shot down and killed on that last mission over France.

When I was twenty—and was making up my mind that Vietnam was more correctly seen as some sort of civil war and an ongoing struggle of national liberation much more than an instance of international Communist expansion—the speakers at our banquet were only twenty years distant from the end of the war that had caught them up and forever changed their world and lives. If I had been a student at Luther College in 1965, they would have been about fifty years old; they would have still been under the spell of World War II just as I was still under the spell of Vietnam in 1995. In 1965, I was utterly convinced that the lessons of World War II were irrelevant to the current situation. World War II was history, and the role of the USA in that war had little to do with its role in Vietnam. We were no longer necessarily the "good guys." The emotional, moral, and political reflexes appropriate to the forties were no longer appropriate to the sixties. That's what I would have been thinking had I gotten into a serious argument over Vietnam with a W.W. II veteran back then. Of course many people in the World War II generation did argue against fighting in Vietnam. But so many, it seemed, acted as though little had changed—it still seemed the best course to follow the President's lead and follow the flag, as if the same geopolitical considerations still applied. This was a major error, I thought in 1965. I still do today.

The difference is that now I have had the experience of turning fifty, and looking back on a war just twenty years past—and realizing in my guts how little difference the passage of twenty years seems to have made in my thoughts and feelings surrounding those days. In 1965, World War II was not over for those who lived through it, just as in 1995, Vietnam is not quite over for those of us who were so involved in the actual combat or in the divisive confrontations on the home front. I still get angry when I think of the waste, when I see Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, talking about how he didn't consciously lie to the American people about our reasons for fighting and our prospects for success, that he and his fellow decision makers were just "ignorant," just badly misinformed. I get angry thinking about people who supported Richard Nixon's Vietnam policy to the bitter end; I want to call up one of them who recently died, and ask him if he doesn't at last think that war was a terrible mistake—even McNamara says so now!

Near the end of The Things They Carried, O'Brien tells of a trip to Vietnam he took with his young daughter. He had carried along some of the personal effects of a buddy who had died in a paddy field, and he returns them to this site—a ritual gesture that seems intended to lay the ghosts of that war. On one of the many war commemorative shows on television, I recently watched Vietnam veterans who were making similar pilgrimages—nothing so new in this. But some of them were taking with them personal effects of former enemy soldiers with them, NVA helmets and identification cards, even snapshots of the dead taken by GIs as trophies and souvenirs. They no longer wanted to keep such things. They wanted to return these things so that they might possibly help Vietnamese survivors learn about what happened to their own missing in action. Some of the veterans supplied detailed maps, showing where they buried enemy troops more than twenty years before.

They are more than ready to "lay down their swords and shields down by the river side and study war no more." So am I. I feel I want to say I forgive those who believed in and supported the Vietnam war. But I know this is too patronizing and would seem hopelessly fatuous and self-righteous to many. I should say I just accept their actions and feel less urgency to judge or criticize them, even though I still cannot believe they acted in the right. I realize more fully that if I had been born into my father's generation, I probably would have supported the war, too. And that if I had come from a small town, I too may have swallowed my personal convictions and gone to war, worried about all those voices from Lake Wobegon saying, "Who does he think he is? He thinks because he went away to college he knows better than we do?"

There are signals out that President Clinton is ready to formally restore diplomatic relations with Vietnam. And if what I have been seeing and feeling is indicative of the nation's mood, I think we are ready. The time has come to lay it down, America. It really is all over now.
Where is the Church in the War on Women?  
Mary Todd

Perhaps you wouldn’t describe it as a war, but Mary Todd does.
Like other wars, this one has partisans, guerrillas, recruits and deserters, perhaps even collaborators.
Where should the church be when her sons and daughters are warring?

I always learn something from my students. I learn even more when they ask me questions I can’t answer, questions at once both fundamental and profound. Recently a young man waited around after a women’s studies lecture to say he wondered why, since women have now finally seriously challenged male dominance in the world, institutions continue to be so obviously male-dominated. His primary example of such an institution was the church, generic.

Why aren’t things changing, he wanted to know? Why indeed? That day’s lecture had focused on the influence of religious fundamentalisms on women’s lives globally in multiple religious traditions. The young man who lingered after class was not the only student to struggle with how to understand the phenomenon of fundamentalism and its seeming war on women at the same time that women in more developed nations appear to have made significant strides toward gender equity.

What? There’s a war on? Do women know this? Shouldn’t somebody tell them? Some women apparently do know and have told. A quick glance at the gender shelf at the local bookstore reveals a series of alarmist titles, from Marilyn French’s The War Against Women to Tanya Melich’s The Republican War Against Women, and including Susan Faludi’s widely read Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. Magazines and journals echo the theme. In 1994 U.S. News and World Report featured a series on the global war on women, while the cover of a recent issue of On the Issues read “Loving Babies, Hating Women.”

I have long thought that we do ourselves no favors by using the expression, the “opposite sex.” The potential to polarize is ingrained in dualism. As long as there are just the two of us—women and men—the one who is not me is always, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, the Other. And we never quite know what to do with that either/or difference. But women are asking: does difference require that we be at odds? fearful of each other? at war with each other? What’s going on here?

Part of the problem, as I see it, lies in the prevailing mentality of the twentieth century. Two world wars followed by a half-century long Cold War imposed an ideological us/them lens on every dimension of our thinking. A world divided into spheres of red and white, communist and anti-, shaped the way we approached every issue. All we knew was that the other was the enemy, of whom we were to be afraid. And we were.

In a post-Cold War world where we no longer see every sociopolitical development through that either/or lens, what remains to identify the enemy? Difference between individuals readily substitutes as an obvious site of otherness—race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender. So neighbors who had been fellow citizens of the same country now identify instead as Hutus or Tutsis or Serbs or Croats and determine that co-existence is no longer possible. Within those ethnic conflicts gender plays an important role as women are the means by which the purity of the tribe is either insured or polluted. And even in cultures where race and ethnicity do not so evidently set off a part of the population, gender itself has become the new world border.

Political scientist Zillah Eisenstein suggests that the hatreds multiplying across the globe at the end of this century are rooted in “a complex set of fears about difference and otherness” (21).
Acted out in genocide and ethnic cleansings, mass rapes and repressions, these hatreds serve as markers of a mentality that requires an Other in order to define its own identity.

Why are women the enemy? Because, this kind of thinking suggests, they are everywhere around us, in places where they never used to be, and in places where they would not be if things hadn’t started to change. The most visible social change in the past generation has been the entry of women into professions and an increasingly unstable marketplace that had been a virtual male domain. If only those women had stayed in their place in the first place and not crossed the gender border, such reasoning goes on, we would not have the disorder so rampant in society today.

**at the front**

The war against women is being waged on many fronts, the most contentious of which currently is welfare reform. There are also family fronts and workplace fronts, some of which have experienced a steady chipping away at affirmative action programs (which have been most beneficial to women since their enactment) and reproductive choice, a persistent refusal to acknowledge the extent to which domestic violence and sexual harassment permeate our society, and even the obsessive media attention devoted to the image of the president’s wife. Women find themselves damned if they do (have sex before marriage, have children without marriage, stay home with those children) and damned if they don’t (have a heterosexual relationship by a certain age, have children at all, stay home with those children). The condemnations vary with race and class, creating mixed messages that only add confusion to what feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye identifies as the “double bind” of oppression (2).

Why is this war so hard to see? Is it perhaps because the wounded are still walking among us, living down the street, sitting next to us in church, and we never see them as the victims they are? Even the refugees, those who disappear from our midst, are soon forgotten. The obvious answer to why the gender war is so hard to recognize is because we’re all involved in it on a daily basis, whether we know it or not.

You don’t believe there’s a war on? Read the backlash scenario in *The Futures of Women* or the more graphic dystopic vision described by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Or read the new literature of analysis by men who worry about the increase in various manifestations of male violence in the post-Vietnam generation (McBride, Gibson). Or listen to the voices of women.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of this war is that it’s fairly one-sided. Subject at times to relentless attacks on various fronts, women have struggled to survive in spite of it all. There are, of course, some guerrilla fighters, as evidenced by the vocal protests against the recent welfare reform (Abramovitz) and an even larger Resistance, but for the most part, women keep on keeping on in their homes and workplaces. And the war drags on around them.

The other singular feature of the war against women is the silence—we don’t want to admit it is going on. We acknowledge culture wars, and worry out loud about what will happen if “the other side” politically gains or retains control of whatever agency or legislature or office we care about. But we don’t talk about the gender war.

We don’t talk about it because we don’t know how to deal with the gender difference that is at its root. Not knowing how to deal with difference, we demonize it, declare it deviant, allow it to divide us. Yet, as theologian Paula Cooey notes, “While without difference there would assuredly be no conflict, without it there would be no possibility for relationship either. Without it there would be no possibility for covenant.” (43)

**where is the church?**

So what’s a church to do when its people are at war with each other? Traditionally, churches as good citizens have supported war efforts even as limited numbers of people of conscience have called for their halt. Why isn’t it the other way around, with the church calling for an end to war even if some of its members choose to take partisan sides?

The church (again, generic—sadly, there is no stellar exception) has been quick to condemn
racism, but what about sexism? Are the two not intricately part of a whole, an interlocking network of hierarchies? One would think these two systems of dominance would be readily seen in the same light, but that rarely is the case. Denominations have publicly both repudiated and repented of the racism of slavery, but has any church acknowledged its complicity in the subordination of women (other than those who still require or celebrate it)? How can the church repent of one -ism without confessing its sin of the other?

Women have always been the majority of the people in the pews and only recently have they been allowed to be anything other. But even churches which have accepted the inclusion of women in ministry opportunities previously denied them reluctantly admit to a pernicious systemic sexism that allows, for example, a congregation to declare it will not accept a call list with a woman’s name on it. It appears the church has its own gender borders that may not be crossed.

Viewing the problem through the tension of individual rights over against the community’s common good—whether that community is church, home or workplace—we find not compromise but a standoff. Only when we stop looking at each other as an Other individual in competition with us at every turn, but rather as another member of the same community to whom we are linked by the very nature of our humanity, will we near the horizon we hope for.

Women, by the way, do not wish to win this war. They only wish for it to end. Why don’t men? Women’s gain does not require men’s loss any more than a strong woman requires a weak man, but until we free ourselves from dichotomous thinking, this is where we end up, hopelessly at odds.

The war on women presents a grave challenge to the institutional church, but where do we find the church? Right out there fighting on its own front, locked in endless denominational battles over who may minister—women? homosexuals? celibates?—or who may gather at the altar or how the scripture is to be read.

Why is the primary focus of discussion in the church about homosexuals on whether they may be ordained? Why the emphasis on whether they may minister to us rather than on how we might minister to them? The only other arena in which sexual orientation is so highly debated as in the church is the military. And if we would only be honest, we’d have to admit that the church has been observing a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy far longer than the military has. Do we ask the sexual orientation of our doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers? Does that information or the lack of it determine their care or effort on our behalf? Why is it, then, that gender difference or sexual orientation matters so when considering the hand and heart that extends to us the means of grace?

As often happens, discussion around the church and what it should or should not be or do is carried on without conscious consultation with God about what God would have us be or do. Why ask when we so surely already know, say the absolutists. But wait. God created humans in God’s own image to be in relationship, and here we are, embattled and at odds instead. God knew we’d end up in this mess when we learned the difference between good and evil and told us so, but God does not desire that we live like this. Rather, we are told to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. And one thing more, we are to love our neighbor just the way we love ourselves.

is every struggle a gender struggle?

If war is being waged against women, then feminists have been clearly identified as the opposition leaders who need to be undone. Critics claim that feminists are angry; critics of women’s studies programs claim that our classes are either too therapeutic or too political, both accusations underlaid with a charge of intellectual nonviability. These critics are the propagandists of the war, quick to declare the fragmentation or weaknesses of the enemy. And they have been enormously successful. Why otherwise would the vast majority of American women support equal rights for women but only half of those same women accept the label feminist? Accusations that feminists hate men top the list of why women reject the label. But few feminists admit to hating men while misogyny, the hatred of women, has a history all its own (Smith).
A colleague, a respected feminist philosopher and theorist, turned to me in the midst of a
discussion at our annual retreat and asked about men, “Why do they hate us so?” Here was yet
another of those questions I couldn’t answer. I could only say to her that I wish I knew, as it would
at least make the struggle somewhat understandable.

I know that some readers who may have glanced at this article probably are not still read­ing, convinced early on that this was just one more feminist whine about gender rights. That in itself
is a big part of the problem being considered here. Like Emerson, who wrote that, “If I know your
sect I anticipate your argument,” we have become so polarized around the issue of gender that we
no longer listen to one another, but dismiss gender talk as strident and shrill and unworthy of our
time because we know what’s coming. So feminists, whether they call themselves that or not, and
their concerns are dismissed as other issues are declared more significant, and thus deserving of the
churches’ and politicians’ attention and time.

Another of my students—dare I call her a freshwoman?—in responding to a question as to
whether she called herself a feminist, said she didn’t consider herself a full-time feminist. My grad­
uate students found that a very funny response. But the younger woman was at least honest. How
many of us in this complex world can devote our entire beings to what we consider a vital cause?
More and more women are becoming aware that gender inequity is fundamentally embedded in
social institutions, including the church. Do we all have to become full-time feminists to draw atten­
tion to that truth?

The time has come to call a truce and sit down at the table for peace talk. This is a conver­
sation we desperately need to begin. It will take time and it will be painful. But over the past sever­
al years, the world has seen men who long declared themselves mortal enemies now shake hands
publicly. Not always sure of the process or outcome, these reluctant leaders nevertheless came
together to talk about peace at the urging of a nonpartisan mediator nation. Might the church play
this role in ending the gender war? Would that service not provide opportunity to really live the
gospel, to be faithful to the great commandment to love each other as we love ourselves? Could the
church do that? Only if it first calls a cease-fire on its own front and recognizes that battles over
authority and office are not skirmishes necessary for salvation. We have allowed ourselves to be
diverted from the mission for too long.

It is clear that something needs to be done, and, as Pakistan’s Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto
reminded the United Nations conference in Beijing last fall, quoting Dante: “The hottest place in
Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of moral crisis” (McCorduck and Ramsey
255). The war against women is a moral crisis with enormous potential for good or evil. It seems
we have come full circle from the garden where we were first faced with that same dilemma.

A male friend asked me once if every issue is a gender issue. Until this struggle is over, I
would have to answer, yes, I think so, as long as perspectives and thinking are based on models of
assumed dominance and privilege. But then, last night I had the strangest dream . . . .

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I watch the black ink-crosshatched slough patiently.

A thesaurus list of words hangs, snake-like,

from an unseen limb above the fen,

And I wander the edge,

gathering fuel for future use,

Waiting, as men and women watch the shore

for the tortoises to hatch,

Daring to think this hoped-for child will birth,

Believing it will develop legs and drag itself to shore,

Yet hoping, always, for wings instead so it can soar.

Elizabeth L. Hudgins
HONKY-TONK BLUES

Coyotes circled the blood, the fierce
black splatter in headlights.
Bobbing in highway traffic, they sniffed
the slick tire streaks, risking a bite,
nipping each other. Whatever crawled off
through darkness to dense mesquites lay
watching, licking itself in shock.
Red-eyed coyotes followed, whining a claim

in their throats they would tell the moon,
when it was over. Inside, that singer
called us with the same sad country tunes.
Rings bobbed and weaved on her fingers,
a fist she punched with the drum, tossing
blonde hair back from eyes that had seen
it all, her eyes squeezed tight, sobbing
heartbreak in song. She looked redeemed,

more faithful than someone’s cheating heart.
We forgot all dangers in the dark
when she jabbed that mike to her mouth.
Boys who rode bulls out of paddocks and fear,
we swayed with fiddles and drum, holding our
girlfriends close and choking back real tears.

Walter MacDonald
It was sometime in the summer between my third and fourth grade. My family still lived in central Iowa then, Marshalltown, before we moved to California. My parents had always kept a garden of considerable size. Coming out of the depression, through the war years, and into those years immediately after, it was more an economic necessity than a luxury or fancy. A lot of work went into that garden and into "putting up" (that was the phrase used)—"putting up" the beans and more beans and carrots and tomatoes and whatever else.

I'm sure I had participated in the gardening process before, at least to the extent of carting produce from the garden to the house in my little red wagon, but sometime there between my third and fourth grade I was considered old enough to participate more fully in the gardening process, specifically weeding. And, I was eager to do so, setting upon this task with great energy. Fortunately, my mother had accompanied me out to the garden. I had just made a good start into weeding my row when she rushed over to stop me.

I had given myself to the task with relish. There was not a weed in sight in the area I had worked. But, at the same time, I had uprooted as well a good portion of the tender young shoots which were the whole purpose of the garden. (Well, they all looked kind of the same to me at that stage of growth—green and somewhat weird looking.) I don't remember doing a lot of weeding after that. There must have been a family conference, and I got exempted from the task. The garden was just too important to put at risk.

All of that would probably have become one of those memories that get safely buried away in the unconscious, except that at least every three years it gets resurrected by the reading of this portion of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Jesus' parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. The story is quite straightforward. The owner of a field seeds it with wheat. When the shoots come up, the servants discover that someone has likewise sown weeds there as well. The weed in mind was probably the "bearded darnel," which looks like wheat in the growing stage but is indeed poisonous. Rabbis considered it a work of Satan, a corruption of wheat. It indeed was an evil thing, its roots intertwined with the wheat. The dilemma for the owner of the field was not that his servants would not be able to get rid of the weeds. The problem was that in doing so the wheat would get uprooted as well.

The parable does not necessarily have a happy ending.

As Jesus explains it later in Matthew's gospel—the owner is God, the weeds are those sown by the evil one—at the end of the age when the harvest comes the angels of God will gather the wheat together, separate and destroy the weeds, and the grain will shine like the sun. That is a happy ending.

Meanwhile, however, the servants were going to have to go through the entire season watching the weeds and wheat growing there together. They would be certain that they could tell which was which and certain that they could fix it up. But, they would not be allowed to do so. The garden was too important to put at risk.

The parable is not hard to understand, but we must find a place to stand as we hear it. This will not be onerous or difficult. Just hang in here with me for a bit. The gospel we call "Matthew's"
emerges around the year 80 AD. It is a time of great flux and multicultural movements in the Roman Empire, a time with which we can easily identify. The death and resurrection of Jesus had happened about 50 years before. The apostles for the most part had died, though perhaps one or two were still around. Saint Paul had come and gone, leaving a legacy of his writings circulating around some of the churches. Only one gospel was in existence, the one we call “Mark,” and probably some “Sayings of Jesus” were in circulation. The other gospels and the later writings of the New Testament had not emerged yet.

Some questions had been settled. One great question was whether the Jesus gospel should be preached to the Gentile world. The answer was “Yes,” and such preaching had become quite successful. There were still, however, a great many Jewish-Christian communities, perhaps more appropriately, Jesus-movement Jewish communities. And a catastrophe had befallen the Jewish world. In 70 AD the Romans had destroyed the city of Jerusalem as well as the temple. It is important to understand that this was as great a blow for the Jesus-movement Jewish communities as for any other Jewish communities. Their roots had been ripped out from under them.

The end of that second-temple era also left up for grabs what would be the definitive form of Judaism, post-temple. Jesus-movement Judaism was in the running. So were Pharisaic Judaism and various other Jewish sects. By 80 AD, however, it was becoming increasingly apparent that Pharisaic Judaism was winning the day and would become definitive. The Jesus-movement Jewish communities found themselves less and less influential within the rest of Judaism. And, when they looked the other direction, towards their ties with other Jesus-movements, they found them to be increasingly Gentile.

This is the dilemma of the community that gives us the Gospel According to St. Matthew. They are trying to hold together two things which were precious to them and which they felt were of God, their Jewish heritage and the gospel of Jesus, at a time when forces beyond them were pulling those elements off into separate paths. It was a painful time, an extremely difficult time. I’m certain there were voices in that community which spoke out and said, “We must drop our Jewishness and go with the Gentile Christians.” Or, “We must drop Jesus and return to our Jewish roots.” And I’m certain there was finger pointing: You’re too Jewish. You’re not Jewish enough. You’re too Jesus-y. You’re not Jesus-y enough. You’re too Gentile. And so forth. And in that pain and dissonance, I’m certain there were many who just wanted to find some solution to the problem that would get them off the hot seat and out of the pain of it all.

I’m inviting you into the situation of this Jewish-Christian, or Jesus-movement Jewish community because it is there that Matthew’s gospel emerges, and it is this community alone that remembers the parable of Jesus which we read today. That parable is found in no other gospel. Somehow, this community found that it spoke to them in their impossible situation of trying to hold together elements determined to go their separate ways. However, the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds did not solve their problem. It suggested instead that they would have to live with the dissonance and the pain of their situation. For them to attempt a fix would be to put at risk what God had sown.

I did not set out upon this Sunday’s preaching task having in mind to preach about Valparaiso University. Perhaps I should have from the outset, but I didn’t. It was only when I got to this point of working into the gospel for this day that I suddenly found myself thinking: “I know exactly how those folks felt; I’m at Valparaiso University!” Here for a long time we have been trying to hold together and embrace a broad expanse of Lutherans (at least). And, it has become increasingly a difficult task. What we are trying to embrace has become two currents which seem to be flowing apart at least for now. Sometimes it feels like we are the only ones still trying to hold it all together. It is a difficult and painful task and time.

What we are experiencing here at Valparaiso, however, is not unique to us. Church bodies and congregations are experiencing much of the same over differences in social issues or sexuality issues or differences regarding tradition and music and styles of worship. Or, individual congregations find themselves divided over specific, unique, local issues. It’s difficult and painful to try to hold things
Pastor Dave Kehret preached this sermon in the Chapel of the Resurrection on July 28, 1996. The text was Matthew 13:24-30.

together. Increasingly, there is an urge just to fix it somehow, in order just to get beyond the pain of it all.

The Jewish-Christian community that gave us the Gospel According to St. Matthew did not succeed in the task of holding things together. They did not fail immediately—there is evidence of a Jesus-movement Judaism into the second and third centuries. But, their effort would not prevail. One can only speculate how the past 2000 years, even in our own century, might have turned out differently had they succeeded. They didn’t. We are not the heirs of that movement. We are the heirs of Gentile Christianity.

Nevertheless, that community left behind the legacy of this gospel and the legacy of this teaching of Jesus for all those who might find themselves trying to hold things together and find it so difficult that finally they want nothing more than to fix things and be done with it. This teaching of Jesus, which they alone remembered and left for us, does not solve our problem. Instead it incites us, as it invited them, to endure the pain and bear the dissonance. Seeking a fix might well put at risk nothing less than the tender things God has planted.

O eternal Wisdom, whom we understand in part and in part do not understand,
O eternal Justice, whom we partly acknowledge and partly do not obey,
O eternal Love, whom we love a little and fear to love too much,
    Open our minds that we may understand;
    Work in our wills that we may obey;
    Kindle in our hearts that we may love you. Amen.

SAMSON

Now that his eyes are out
His ears become pearls that
Listen for the least sound:
His arms are strong like
A hundred trees and he stands
As if a dozen men lived
Inside his skin. Feeling
The sweetness and the itch
Of living for too long he
Takes the pillars between
His hands and his vengeance
Breaks the city into a
Crumbled flower of stone.

Marion Schoeberlein
As the annual Reformation festival nears, I am moved to reflect on how modest beginnings can result in changes that shake the foundations of whole structures and institutions. There are places, even in our times, where minuscule initiatives have the potential to effect great transformations. In Latin America, for example, several decades of grass-roots efforts, projects, and movements have the potential to coalesce into a whole that could bring about substantial institutional change. "Grass-roots" implies a generation of activity at the level of the marginalized, a "bottom-up" direction for communal efforts to address conditions of living that one expects to have been addressed by the state, but which through indifference, negligence, corruption or conscious decision, the state has bypassed.

The strong legacy of ancient communal life among the indigenous peoples throughout the region has supplied the foundation for many of the grass-roots movements. These peoples lived and held property in community, and their traditions have survived despite laws in favor of individual ownership, despite migrations of millions of rural poor to areas holding greater promise of survival, despite governmental and international efforts at development and modernization. The maintenance of communal tradition, however, has been for the most part a defensive, silent effort to withdraw into the safety of those ways which protected the ancient beliefs and practices. Communities simply submerged their customs, their common strengths, holding them supremely private from the wider culture. Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchu, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, devotes the first chapters of her autobiography to the intricate rituals and beliefs that bound her family to her community. But even there, in this public recounting of her background, she withholds her community's central secrets. "We Indians have always hidden our identity and kept our secrets to ourselves. That is why we are discriminated against... we must hide so much in order to preserve our Indian culture and prevent it being taken away from us"(20). Community among the indigenous people served as a private, silent, long-suffering defense against the demands of the range of authorities—religious, ethnic, and governmental—that saw the native peoples as an entity to be exploited, controlled, or denigrated.

Liberation theology has been a principal factor in transforming this cultural predilection for acting in community from its passive defensiveness to a force for bringing about change. The premise that God's kingdom does not exist only in the afterlife, and that the qualities of the kingdom of heaven—peace, justice, fairness, love, joy—should be a part of earthly existence finds expression in communal reading and reflection upon the Word of God as it applies to daily reality. People become the interpreters of that Word for their own situations, and are called to act upon this understanding.

The message that God loves each individual, that each person contains within the self God's own image, that God's son was marginalized and harassed by authorities, accused falsely, tortured and killed, but rose again, becomes a newly-powerful message. It confers dignity, strength, and confidence. It empowers the powerless, in a reborn sense of community, and an incentive to begin creating the kingdom of God on earth. Manlio Argueta's agonizing novel, One Day of Life, uses the voice of the peasant woman Lupe to describe the effects of these new readings: "We grew a little in stature, because when you bow your head you become smaller and if you raise your head high your spirit also rises" (32).
Grass-roots projects, however, meet with varying degrees of acceptance by local and even national governments; empowering the poor is not a neutral concept when the poor outnumber the middle and upper classes by millions upon millions. Minor projects that improve conditions but do not unbalance the status quo may be tolerated and even encouraged at times, but often any efforts that educate and advance the poor are viewed as a threat to be discouraged by varying levels of interference.

To witness and explore first hand these realities, two groups of Valparaiso University professors and staff, making use of our spring break these last two years, have travelled to Mexico City, where through the program designed by the Lutheran Center, we have learned about the struggles of the poor. Such face-to-face contact with Mexico’s resourceful poor has changed the lives of many from the groups who have made the pilgrimage from the north. We were brought into contact with a number of grass-roots projects, many clearly motivated by the faith of the participants, and sustained by their understanding and interpretation of the Word of God.

The women of a shanty-town community on the outskirts of Mexico City showed us how they turn scavenged waste paper into scratch paper for their children to use in school by a process of shredding, soaking, draining, pressing, and drying. Since the school does not provide paper, and since the mothers prize education so highly as a way to conquer poverty, they devoted many hours to provide at least this one essential. In a clinic, a group of self-taught women made homeopathic medicines and administered health care to their community, whose needs the government had ignored. Located in one woman’s home, the clinic provided medications almost at cost, and clients paid what they could. Another trip took us to a day-care center, built and staffed by women who, before the existence of the center, sometimes had had to leave their children home alone all day when they went to work. One woman told of leaving her toddler tied to the leg of the table in their one-room shack for fear he would wander off from their doorless dwelling while she was gone. The center allowed the women, many of whom were the sole support for their families, to work the necessary long hours without devastating worry about their children, now fed and taught pre-school skills at the center.

The most obvious characteristic of these projects—that so many were conducted by women—is doubly remarkable, given that they struggle against both cultural and economic barriers. Women here do not readily take initiative, but follow the dictates of the men of the household. Several women told us their husbands had strongly opposed a spouse’s participation in the projects, even forbidding them to leave home. Jealous of the new loyalty, shamed by the need for their spouse to search for ways to supplement the household income, and threatened by the confidence and empowerment that women develop by participation in such a program, men sometimes responded with resentment. To follow convictions in the face of these reactions represented the women’s powerful commitment.

A second trait of these projects was the overwhelming devotion to the group as a force for good in the community. They worked so that everyone could advance a little, not so that one could prosper. Work, income, knowledge, was shared for the good of all. Women from other communities who wanted to begin similar initiatives were welcomed, for the projects were collective efforts to achieve minimal changes in living conditions, permitting a greater chance for survival. The very nature of the projects revealed the devastating conditions to which they were accustomed, and also revealed the painstaking patience with which the participants worked to achieve the small improvements in their quality of life—very small additions to the kingdom of God on earth.

Most impressive of our visits, in terms of understanding the David-vs.-Goliath nature of the powerless combatting the powerful, was our visit to Tepoztlán, a town rich in indigenous tradition, barely an hour’s drive from Mexico City. Entering the town, we walked around the barricade of boulders and barbed wire erected to defend against a surprise incursion of government forces. Tepoztlán was involved in a campaign to fend off the plans of a powerful group of Mexican and US businessmen to build a grandiose golf course, spa, and high-tech business park on the fringes of the village. The
opposition stemmed chiefly from the fact that the town's water supply, already inadequate in the dry season, would be commandeered by the developers. Additionally, the development was to be built on communal lands which had ancient sacred significance for the community, whose roots went back to pre-conquest times. Elected officials who had given way to bribery and pressure attempted to sign away the communal lands in secret, but the townspeople, following legal procedure, elected new officials. The government of Mexico still refuses to recognize, however, the legitimacy of their choices. A number of the protesters have been imprisoned, and in an incident that occurred at a demonstration several weeks after our visit, one leader was shot and killed, and a number of other townspeople, including women and children, were beaten and jailed by regional police.

We thus witnessed the escalation of repression of the sort that has frequently led to larger and larger conflicts in Latin America. A grassroots movement becomes a threat to authority which cannot be allowed to succeed, however legitimate its cause, lest it set a pattern. The movement must be stopped, even if the means illegally violate the people's rights.

If the recent history of grass-roots projects that begin to coalesce into movements for change has been that they are co-opted, undermined, threatened, or destroyed, what cause might there be to think that they might yet have the power to change or modify the structures that maintain the status quo? At least two changes of late have given new power to the efforts at the level of marginalized.

First, technological innovations in communication have given a voice to the voiceless that they never had before. The situation at Tepoztlan is a case in point. Our Valpo group saw this protest as the local effort of a small community almost doomed to fail against the power of the state. Much to our amazement, within several weeks of our return to the U.S. we had seen an article on Tepoztlan in the Chicago Tribune, another in the Wall Street Journal, and a third in Latinamerica Press. National Public Radio broadcast an interview with the town officials—the very people we had met with. In addition, though the police and the governor had initially denied any violent attack, it has been documented by a videotape taken by one of the villagers. When this was seen, the governor had no choice but to recant, and to take action against the police. Violent repression, unrecognized simply because authorities deny it, and discredit the witnesses, is ceding to an era when the savvy poor have become adept at the craft of media exposure. Where phone and mail communication were controlled, e-mail has even subverted censorship. When the Zapatistas of southern Mexico manage to have their leaders photographed with movie stars who have come to espouse their cause, and when guerrilla groups post information on websites, governments can no longer assume that the voicelessness of the poor will assist their efforts at repression.

Secondly, many first world countries have begun to question whether their aid funds are best distributed through government means. The disappearance of funds through corruption, or the use of aid money and goods as bargaining chips to ensure reelection, have raised doubts. Some governments are clearly threatened by the empowerment of the poor, and thus a tendency has emerged to use international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) as the conduit through which aid might be passed. In bypassing government control of funds, grass-roots projects that rely on outside support achieve a greater degree of independence from government, and also forge a more direct international alliance with advocates who can lobby on their behalf and support their goals for bringing about change.

Thus, the message moves from community to community as groups share their successes with nearby villages, and both projects and confidence proliferate. As documentation of injustice helps to stem repression, informed individuals, organizations and churches join in the mission to change the systems that sentence millions to lives on the margins of survival. It is, perhaps, surprising to think of a message on the internet or a clandestine video as the equivalent of the posting of the ninety-five theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Yet in each instance, issues are brought to light, the public is called in to the debate, the voice of conscience seeks support, the arena widens, and the possibility of real reformation begins.
What is a political conservative to make of the near-certain election of Bill Clinton for another four years? Though this essay is being written before the election and will be read after it, I doubt if its gist will be overturned by a Dole victory. However, it is uncertain whether the Republicans will continue to hold both legislative branches. Their loss would be a real jolt for conservatives who are already resigned to the loss of the presidency. Indeed, even Dole seems resigned to defeat.

Conservatives can take some consolation in the fact Clinton has presided over more conservative legislation in his four years than Ronald Reagan ever did in his two terms. Clinton's main role seems to have been to take the edge off Republican proposals and claim them for his own. In so doing he has stolen the Republicans' fire and grabbed the mainstream of popular opinion. This has meant, however, something of a sell-out of traditional Democratic ideas. He has moved past the center and enacted center-right legislation. Democrats of a more liberal stripe are upset, but where are they to go? They would rather be in power with Clinton than out of power with more of their cherished notions intact.

Clinton has done in America what Tony Blair, the head of the British Labor party, would like to do in Britain if Labor wins the next election there. And Blair gets the same sort of criticism from his left that Clinton gets from his. But the British left, like the American, has nowhere to go. Both Clinton and Blair have "modernized" their parties, which in effect has meant moving toward a center that has moved dramatically right in recent decades.

Clinton has reflected this move to the right in American politics. One would have expected a Republican President to boast about these: balancing the budget; making the government smaller and more efficient; devolving many powers from the federal government to the states; enacting a welfare reform package that eliminates welfare as an entitlement; using the "bully pulpit" to support traditional family values; supporting a religious freedom act that restores the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment; revising affirmative action to diminish its more offensive dimensions; signing legislation to discourage the legalization of homosexual marriage; and even supporting charter schools as a means of enhancing educational choice.

The comparison to Reagan could be extended to foreign policy. The Clinton administration has resorted to the unilateral use of military power as much as did Reagan. Periodic military attacks on Iraq, the firefight in Somalia, the invasion and occupation of Haiti, and bombing campaigns in Bosnia are examples of the overt use of unilateral force. Add to them the war scare with North Korea, the Marines evacuating foreign nationals in Liberia and the belated intervention in Rwanda, and you have many instances of military American activism. It seems that most of these interventions aim at "sending a message." Indeed, as Bacevich and Kaplan have argued in The Weekly Standard (Sept. 30, 1996), American policy seems to have made force all but indistinguishable from diplomacy.

While this military activism disguises many deeper problems in the Clinton foreign policy, it nevertheless gives Dole few clear easy targets to attack. The deeper problems would be too complex for soundbite debate on television. Like his domestic policy, then, Clinton's foreign policy has skillfully outflanked the conservative critics.
who have themselves offered few policy alternatives since George Bush’s ephemeral New World Order.

Even more important than all this is the relative health of the economy. Steady growth with low inflation is a combination that alone nearly insures the election of an incumbent President. And, again, haven’t conservatives been for steady growth with low inflation? So the stage for a Clinton victory seems set. Against all this, the only card Dole has selected to play seems to be the tax cut.

Yet, for all the consolation afforded by Clinton’s move to the right in domestic and foreign policy, his presumed victory still bears bitter fruit for conservatives. One instance of bitter fruit is assuredly not what Dole has claimed. Dole has charged that underneath it all, Clinton remains a liberal who will move to the left quickly after his election. That is unlikely, especially if Congress continues to be held by Republicans. It is more likely that Clinton will go with the flow, and there is little evidence of the country turning toward the left. In fact, Clinton seems so eager to win that he will even risk great conflicts within the Democratic Party in his pursuit of continued power.

One of the most troublesome things for conservatives is that Clinton will have four more years in which he will continue to appoint judges who are both liberal and activist. Conservatives suspect that the judicial branch has increasingly supplanted the legislative as the preferred instrument of liberals’ agenda. Indeed, the courts have exhibited a tendency to overrule popular political initiatives by finding new constitutional rights to defend and extend. Such judicial incursions will be unchecked by legislative enactments except in very unusual circumstances. Liberals will have the courts to rely on when they can’t get their way legislatively.

Further, the one issue on which Clinton has stood utterly firm is abortion. He has not given an inch against very strong efforts to limit the practice of abortion on demand that has held sway in this country since 1973. Yet abortion is an issue about which Dole is almost tongue-tied.

But, above all the other bitter fruit, Clinton seems to increase the cynicism Americans have for our political life. His character seems as weak as his glibness is strong, his adherence to a serious set of principles in domestic and foreign policy seems tenuous at best and his vacuum-like desire for attention and praise seems inexhaustible. He reinforces the negative stereotypes Americans have of our politicians.

But such Clinton shortcomings cannot account for the miserable state of our political life. Dole himself is a presidential candidate seemingly because he stood in line the longest. He has great talent for and experience with legislative craftsmanship but little for presidential campaigning. The one thing that could provide a real alternative to Clinton—a principled vision of how we might grapple with the major problems facing us—seems beyond Dole’s capacity. Clinton signs Republican legislation and offers a lot of small ideas while Dole crafts the legislation and offers one big, unexciting one—a tax break.

Public television is currently presenting a major series on Teddy Roosevelt. Roosevelt, it seems, took on the big issues facing a burgeoning industrial nation. Faced with large corporations unchecked by the decentralized political agencies of the time, Teddy argued that we must enlarge the capacity of national democratic institutions to grapple with those corporations. While he lost the election of 1912 to a Woodrow Wilson who had no such strategy in mind, Roosevelt provided the ideas that were the true bridge to the twentieth century. We have such major challenges facing us: the crisis of cultural authority; the anxieties produced by the changing nature of work and the stagnant living standards of the middle class; the baffling growth of an underclass; the erosion of traditional communities; and the unrelenting competition fueled by the integration of the world economy. These are the issues that our political deliberation seems incapable of even addressing, let alone ameliorating.

Whether liberal or conservative, we will have to wait beyond the election of 1996 for a true bridge to the twenty-first century.
Popular Culture

a comix faith

James Combs

People use television for all sorts of purposes—
to kill time, to gain information, to satisfy some
emotional (and sometimes prurient) desire, to be
entertained, and so on. My own habit lately is
to decompress by watching the financial news
networks—CNN Financial News, Bloomberg Information Television, and most often, CNBC.
To me this world is both fascinating and unfathomable, its terms alien: “basis points”, “IPO,”
“small cap stocks,” “sector funds,” “dividend reinvestment,” “emerging markets,” “investment portfolios.” The economy is global, and
the idea of a “national economy” or an
“American corporation” seems to have been
erased from the rhetorical screen of financial
news, although still with some measure of political salience in the minds of Ross Perot and Pat
Buchanan. And with computerization and capi
tal mobility, the seemingly solid features of eco
nomic activity—concepts like money and
ownership and corporate identity—have evapo
rated. Trillions of dollars, pounds, rubles, deutschmarks, yen move around the world at
light speed; hostile takeovers and executive
purges are daily occurrences; and familiar cor
porate names disappear (U.S. Steel) or merge
(RJR Nabisco) or are owned by mysterious holding companies in the Cayman Islands. The econom
ist Joseph Schumpeter characterized capitalism as a process of “creative destruction,”
and a daily dose of financial news attests to the
dynamism of contemporary capitalist innova
tion.

As a residual social scientist, what I find most interesting about financial news is the talk, and
the assumptions that inform the talk. Since
marketwatchers live in a world of anxious uncer
tainty, there is much oracular predicting about
what will happen and what to do with money.
Financial advisers will differ as to whether we
should expect seven lean years or seven fat years,
but they all do so with an air of confidence gleaned from the auguries of economic data. It is
rare to hear a Cassandra: in the atmosphere of
the Dow reaching for 6000, billions of dollars
pouring into mutual funds each month, and cor
porate profits attaining records, it is hard for all
involved to avoid a giddy feeling of flying
towards the sun.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about finan
cial news is the extent of what we might call its
mythic consensus on capitalism. European
socialists like English Labour Party leader Tony
Blair refer to themselves as “market socialists.”
Stock markets operate in Peking and Moscow
and Hanoi (what American soldiers couldn’t do
after a decade of fighting in Vietnam American
businessmen did in a flash). “The world is a
business, Mr. Beale,” the nutty tycoon says in the
satirical movie Network, made in 1974; twen
ty years later, it would seem so.

Some of the more utopian apologists for contemporary capital
ism—George Gilder likely the most egregious—
see such a universalization of capitalist value as
the way to world peace and plenty. The com
mon bond of humankind will not be religion or
a world government nor even rock n’roll; rather
what will unite us is the common desire to coop
erate in making a buck. The business of the
world is business.

The rhetoric of financial news is undergirded
by a common faith held in the financial commu
nity, and certainly by the rich who benefit most
from the creation of wealth. It is rare on the
financial channels to hear a discouraging word.
Occasionally a Ralph Nader or Michael Moore
appears, and is tolerated like an eccentric rela
tive who must be humored for his weird views.
But mainly the financial talk is circumscribed by assumptions that are indeed a matter of faith. The euphoria of the financial world is sustained by the feeling that they are the bearers of a world religion. Economics has gone from the bleakness of the dismal science to the luminosity of a millenial belief. The Unseen Hand of the marketplace bestows divine grace on those who believe. The great shrines of capitalism—the Federal Reserve building, Wall Street and Lasalle Street, Fidelity Investments—are not merely places of exchange, they are also temples of worship. The faithful who make offerings—invest wisely—shall attain the grace of goods and the belief. The Unseen Hand of the market forces (the golden parachutes and “trophies”) and divine providence (the market forces). But, what of those many who toil to keep the great engine of capitalist power running? We refer here not so much to working-class folks, who have long had reason to feel left out of the church’s grace and bounty, but rather to those inside the system—the middle-class managerial and bureaucratic class, the people who in fact do the work of corporations—personnel, sales, logistics, records, accounting, public relations, and so on. Capitalism made the middle class, providing for social mobility, the bourgeoise lifestyle, the suburbs, the expansion of higher education, and modern Republicanism. But now this vast white-collar class are all reading Dilbert.

The illth of contemporary capitalism is not merely stagnant wages, or dead-end jobs, or diminished benefits. Rather it is the threat of the loss of livelihood as the middle class has known it for decades. I refer, of course, to new corporate practices—downsizing and outsourcing, using “temps” rather than permanent workers, firing older and more highly paid personnel for younger and cheaper ones, and so forth. The economic “contract” that was the ideal—the notion of a stable work career—may not have been universal, but now it seems to be in danger of disappearing. Millions of people now work in a state of anxious dread of sudden abandonment by their employer and, if dumped, don’t work (or work for less) in a state of bitterness and a sense of betrayal. (There has been a big increase in the last few years of sabotage in the workplace, for instance, disgruntled workers deliberately fouling computer programs with viruses.) Now suddenly the white collar work force is dispensable, and it is a measure of the effectiveness (and pay) of CEOs as to how ruthless they can be in jettisoning employees like so many used paper cups. We now speak of the zero-sum society, the winner-take-all ethic, in-your-face capitalism, corporate killers, the overclass, the workerless corporation. Whereas once we talked about dis-

Is there a snake in this capitalist Eden? Capitalism produces much wealth, but does it also produce much illth?

Like any large and widespread faith, the historical fate of capitalism will depend on how inclusive it is. It is one thing to justify the wretched state of the damned at the bottom of society, since according to doctrine, they are suffering for their economic sins. But what of those many who toil to keep the great engine of capitalist power running? We refer here not so much to working-class folks, who have long had reason to feel left out of the church’s grace and bounty, but rather more to those inside the system—the middle-class managerial and bureaucratic class, the people who in fact do the work of corporations—personnel, sales, logistics, records, accounting, public relations, and so on. Capitalism made the middle class, providing for social mobility, the bourgeoise lifestyle, the suburbs, the expansion of higher education, and modern Republicanism. But now this vast white-collar class are all reading Dilbert.

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tributive justice, now we are told to think in terms of accumulative justice: the schoolmen at the foundations work out the justificatory dialectics of wealth accumulating at the top. Futurist Jeremy Rifkin flatly says that the elimination of labor is the last great agenda of capitalism. This is an astounding development: it now seems a canon of faith among our corporate masters that society, and the workforce in particular, exist to serve the needs and whims of the accumulative economy, rather than the economy operating to serve our distributive needs—for personal livelihood, education for our children, affordable health care, and for what Veblen called “the instinct of workmanship,” pride in a job well done and a comfortable retirement. The church of capitalism is sorely testing the faith of its most loyal parishioners, and many of those driven from the church have accordingly lost their faith, not to mention hope and charity.

So how do people cope with the daily fear of sudden humiliation and even fall into Hell? The white-collar worker now lives in a kind of organizational purgatory, suffering daily torments and envisioning personal horrors, most of all working without any certainty of ascending to the heaven of job security and career fulfillment. It is no wonder, then, that if you wander the cubicles of virtually any organization of size (corporation, university, foundation, you name it), you will see taped up everywhere the comic strip Dilbert. Dilbert is all about work in the '90s, and resonates with those people who have to endure this latest organizational threat. Dilbert appears in 1,110 newspapers; The Dilbert Principle is at the moment the top seller among non-fiction; the Dilbert website gets 1.5 million hits every day. The author/drawer of Dilbert, Scott Adams, is a former cubicle himself (Pacific Bell) who knows the Catch-22 absurdities of organizational life. Indeed, the “Dilbert Principle”—that the most ineffective workers are moved to the place where they can do the least damage: management—is straight out of Joseph Heller, since obviously nowadays management does the most damage. The Boss in Dilbert presides over a kind of Kafkaesque comic hell from which there is no exit except being fired, and sports (by Adams’ admission) two pointed tufts of hair that resemble the devil’s horns. So contemporary employees intuitively understand Dilbert’s plight—the “densification” of cubicles to save space but which makes it impossible to work effectively; the sadistic glee with which bosses lop off loyal employees; the introduction of technology no one understands but which replaces people; idiotic management fads which involve endless meetings and conferences and homework designed to improve productivity, which take up so much time and energy no one can get the work done. One may be powerless to affect such demeaning and dreary practices, but at least you can share with fellow inmates the sources of worker discontent and get an ironic if bitter laugh out of life in organizational purgatory. A lot more people can identify with the hapless anti-hero Dilbert than with corporate killers, since their daily work experience and common anxiety is similar. The Bosses may take great pride (and compensation) for killing, but they should not expect those killed to like it.

If these practices keep expanding, I suspect that more and more people will “wise up” to the Dilbert Principle. Capitalism is the last great faith of the twentieth century, and the people who prosper the most from it seem determined to destroy popular support. A society consisting of an extremely wealthy but totally exploitative elite ruling over a declining middle class experiencing a revolution of falling expectations cannot endure. The many losers simply come to hate the few winners, and at the very least, exercise disbelief. An economic religion, no less than any true religion, requires popular belief in order to gain adherents and inspire effort. Those who have to work in an atmosphere of hopelessness exercise neither faith nor hope; those who do not share the bounty do not share the myth. And, perhaps, those shafted by The System come to realize its spiritual emptiness, the falseness of its creed. Schumpeter, who himself saw the seeds of self-destruction in capitalism, summed it up: “The stock exchange is a poor substitute for the Holy Grail.”
struggle and resistance

Maureen Jais-Mick

I first met Dewayne two years ago when he was in 3rd grade and I was his tutor. He lives in a rundown neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and attends public school. Dewayne couldn’t read. Words on a page were mysterious symbols. He could do arithmetic, so he kept trying to convince me to work exclusively on math, which I refused to do. Finally, after 30 minutes of struggle, he said, “Listen, I'll give you $25 if you'll do my homework.” Sometimes his struggle with words meant tantrums and tears.

I've learned a lot from Dewayne. One afternoon I was trying to explain the difference between measuring liquids (pints, gallons, etc.) and distances (inches, feet, etc.). He offered his own method of pouring liquid into a square pan and measuring it in inches. Using Dewayne’s system you only have to learn one set of measurements. Dewayne does school work the hard way. A report on Montana required use of an encyclopedia. Instead of preparing a report outline, as I recommended, he opened the volume to “Montana” and begin copying text verbatim. I pointed out that there were 10 pages of very small print and it might be impractical (as well as physically painful) to copy them all. Besides which, his teacher was liable to be suspicious about the presence of three- and four-syllable words. “She won't notice,” was his reply.

Struggle is Dewayne’s way of life. He’s comfortable with it and resists new systems—even if they'll mean less work. He expects to struggle, whereas I am always trying to make things easier for myself. Dewayne resists learning what he considers unnecessary. He’s satisfied if he guesses a right answer—it’s not important for him to know how he arrived at it. Before he could read, I once asked how he was planning to get through life—hold a job, buy a car, etc. His answer was simple—“My brother can read. He'll do it for me.” This led to a discussion of the likelihood of finding an employer who would let Dewayne’s brother hang around all day and whether his brother planned to spend the rest of his life looking out for Dewayne.

When discussing music in the contemporary church with colleagues, I’m sometimes reminded of Dewayne and how he resists learning things he doesn’t consider necessary. We resist new musical styles, new languages, new texts, and new instruments. We struggle against their presence in worship. “My Music Committee told me they’d like more contemporary music in worship and I refused to do it.” Curious, I request details—the committee’s definition of contemporary music, for what purpose, led by whom, when, at what cost, etc. Often the response is vague. “Well, we didn’t actually talk about it. I just told them I wouldn’t do it.” A very Dewayne response: “I don’t want to do it. I don’t have to understand it.”

Struggle and resistance are major images in religion, but they’re usually presented as grand battles of good vs. evil. I don’t see much evil, even here in Washington, D.C. I see stupid, wasteful, and ridiculous, but evil is beyond my experience. The struggle that intrudes into my daily life is the struggle of communication. What do people mean when they label worship bad, charismatic, high or low? How come repeating a praise chorus 14 times is bad, while repeating a Taize refrain 20 times is acceptable? When two co-workers are at odds but won’t talk face to face, why do they resist conflict resolution? Apparently, a lot of us are like Dewayne, struggling against unfamiliar ideas and ways of operating. We resist the unknown for fear of risking what we have, even if it is only part of...
what we could attain.

Two of the online lists to which I subscribe deal with contemporary Christian music (CCM). The subscribers don't use much traditional hymnody and are always seeking new ideas for worship. One day a list member reported an astonishing discovery—the hymnal of his own denomination (which his church doesn't use) contains musical settings for the entire psalter! He asked if anyone else on the list was familiar with this exciting and unique resource. I give him credit for bothering to look through a book that he considered unnecessary. I have many colleagues who wouldn't bother to browse a CCM music book. Perhaps chanting the psalms will be the next big trend in CCM.

Recently, I became accompanist for Coral Cantigas, a Latino chamber choir that specializes in the music of Spanish-speaking countries. I call it my weekly lesson in professional humility. It's embarrassing to sweat over music that choir members learn quickly by rote. Not to mention that my Spanish approximates Dewayne's third grade reading level. But I've met a whole new group of folks who share a love of music. I've listened to traditional artists performing on instruments I'd only seen in books. I'm traveling to Venezuela this month. My Spanish is improving and I've begun to feel the musical rhythms. The rewards are definitely worth the struggles.

Dewayne has learned to read, but new words and ideas don't excite him yet. He sees books as obstacles, not as adventures. He's too easily satisfied with his current level of skill. "I know how to read. Why do you keep making me do it?" Sometimes I tell him I do it to make him miserable. He seems more able to accept that explanation than the truth—that I want him to figure things out, to make informed choices, and to take responsibility for himself. "You'll thank me when you're in college," I say. "I'm not going to college. You can't make me," he says. Tough talk, but two years ago it was "You can't make me read." Dewayne rarely misses a tutoring session or a weekend field trip, and he transferred to a more demanding school this year. I fantasize that by the time he leaves us he'll be hooked on reading and "unnecessary" new ideas. Then we educated folk who refuse to learn new things, especially in our own fields of expertise, will really look foolish.

MEMORIES

The cozy cave

under the belly of the baby grand
invited us,

In those between times

when all was done
but the waiting for Dad for dinner.

Then the "Black Hawk Waltz"

would leap from Mother's hands,
enveloping our warm spot
with a god's rumbling voice,
carving space between time
with its dramatic three-four thunder.

Elizabeth L. Hudgins
In *Lone Star*, when Frances McDormond, in her jumpy cameo performance as the obsessive football fanatic, Bunny, rants about how the state of Texas football affects her psychological stability, among her talk of the tedious politics of the NFL draft and the particular talents of high-school players, she inserts “that O.J. thing.” The line, barely more than a clause muttered under Bunny’s breath and more than likely improvised by McDormand herself, has the feeling of one of those timely little throwaway phrases injected into screenplays to elicit laughs. (It is a bit like McDormand’s presence in the film itself. Her monologue should be a glimpse into the heart of a woman in pain during a meeting with her former husband, but the way the camera follows her around with rapt amazement, forgetting for a while the other half of that marriage, her scene begins to look like something thrown into the movie to capitalize on her recent fame as Marge in *Fargo*.) Nevertheless, in the reference to the Trial of the Century you begin to see why director John Sayles made the film in the first place: America, it seems, was overdue for stories about racism that have happy endings.

Don’t worry, I haven’t given away the ending. Instead, I have merely defined the movement of *Lone Star* as being toward healing rather than separation in a context of racial disharmony—and in that way it is a story with an ending exactly opposite to that of Nicole Brown, Ronald Goldman, and O.J. Simpson, for whether you believe in Simpson’s innocence or not, the chief result of that story was to expose, deepen, and perpetuate division among racial lines in our country.

What Sayles imagines in *Lone Star* is a community in search of new stories to tell about itself. Fictional Rio County, Texas, as its name suggests, is situated on the border between the United States and Mexico and is populated by a mix of Anglos, Latinos, African-Americans, and American Indians. It is also in the midst of a transition, nearly a half-century in the making, that promises to move the administration of the county out of hands of the last Anglo oligarchy and into the hands of a new Latino one, and close a military base that creates quite a bit of the county’s economic activity. In *Lone Star* parents gather at the local high school to argue with each other about the content of their children’s history classes, while behind them hangs a map of Texas looking like just any set piece until you realize that what they’re fighting for is simply that map—the representation of Texas to future generations.

But like the map of Texas, Rio County’s search for stories about itself is both the object of and the backdrop to the predominant action in the film—a trio of family histories each with roots in the Texas desert. When a forty year-old corpse, wearing only a Rio County Sheriff’s badge, is discovered on an abandoned rifle range, Rio County Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) uses the story of his father, Rio County’s legendary sheriff, Buddy Deeds, as the map to help him to navigate the murder investigation. The road down which Sam’s investigation leads brings us into contact with other fathers and sons attempting reconciliation with each other, a mother trying to forget her past, and her daughter who wants to discover it. It also leads Sam to rekindle the most beautiful of recent screen romances with Pilar (Elizabeth Pena), the high-school history teacher and his childhood sweetheart.

Though his father’s story provides Sam a key to the past, he is notably uncomfortable...
with the tension between “truth” and “fiction” that the idea of a “legend” inspires. Indeed, he is uncomfortable with the fact that his father is a legend at all. At the dedication of the new county courthouse christened in his father’s honor, Sam reminds those gathered that though Buddy Deeds was in public a sheriff, “at home he was also judge, jury, and executioner.” Sam’s discomfort with the stories of his father’s benevolent rule over Rio County and his memories of a troubled filial relationship with him lead Sam at every turn to want to tell people, in his words, “the truth.”

But as one character in Lone Star remarks, “people like stories better than truth,” and when the body in the desert turns out to be that of Buddy Deeds’ immediate predecessor, the despotic, cold-blooded Sheriff Charlie Wade, the space between fiction and truth threatens to narrow. The most famous story about Buddy Deeds, of course, is how his sense of justice and morality led him as a young deputy to refuse to do Wade’s dirty work and to run him out of the county, though no one knows exactly how. Legends, as a matter of course, are based on the fuzziest events in their subjects’ lives. They are whole narratives about people, events, and regions based on storytellers’ speculation and hint about unavailable information. And for Sam, the idea that his father might have killed a man in cold blood offers him the chance to validate his assumptions of his father’s “true” character.

Though Lone Star is not the first story to associate a search for one’s personal origins with a community or nation’s search for its own, it recognizes a danger in refusing to recognize them. When Pilar’s mother, Mercedes, herself an immigrant, and now an upstanding member of the Chamber of Commerce and the City Council, sits on her gorgeous veranda at night and sees a group of people running through her yard, she mutters “Wetbacks,” and promptly calls the border patrol from her cell phone. “You want to see Mexicans?” she asks her daughter at one point in the film. “Just look around!”

Mercedes’ actions and attitudes (she is, in an informal capacity, an English-only advocate) suggest the fragility of the myth of immigrants in America, at a time in our country’s history when we are preparing to again limit the ability of people from other countries to become citizens. Mercedes is on par with the Rio County bartender who confides to Sam his fears that Sam will be the last white sheriff, and barely conceals his fear of miscegenation. Their dilemma is America’s: who do we want to say we are, and what language are you going to say it in?

The search for origins is as old—literally—as Adam and Eve, and resurfaces again and again in American films with films as diverse as Citizen Kane and Star Wars, but in a way Lone Star takes the old origins mythologies and redevelops them. The end of Lone Star is entirely satisfying in late twentieth century America, but it would have scandalized the ancient Greeks. Had Sophocles directed Lone Star the Furies would have descended in the end to lay waste to Rio County. Indeed, the revelations in this film, though powerful, are of a different weave than the kind of revelations we find in, say, Oedipus Rex.

Lone Star is appropriately named, for Texas in the American collective imagination is nearly synonymous with the American West, the home of the stories that we as Americans tell about ourselves. In our history, the West has always been a place where different American cultures encountered each other and battled for land and supremacy. In our movies, the Western has given us a place to talk about our history, decide who we are and who we want to be, and from that make new stories about ourselves.

The American dream proves elusive and compromising in Big Night, Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott’s film about the Paradise, a restaurant owned and operated with excruciating love and care by Primo (Tony Shalhoub) and Secondo (Tucci), brothers from Bologna who came to America with the dual hope of somehow educating the populace and getting rich. The theory that people will return again and again to pay for excellent food works in theory, but while Primo labors in the kitchen over a fabulous dish of risotto, Secondo must deal with their few customers, one of whom points to the basil on her husband’s plate and says, “see, honey, yours comes with leaves.” She is the kind of customer that is, in Primo’s words, “a criminal,” and proves it by turning her nose up at that exquisite risotto and ordering a side of spaghetti and meatballs. Primo is much happier with cus-
tomers who understand his endeavors, like the artist he feeds nightly, and who pays him with his latest canvases. “What would I do with money?” Primo asks, in a verbal act of communion with his favorite. Secondo, on the other hand, understands that paintings by nobodies don’t pay the rent.

The alternative to the Paradise is down the street at Pascal’s Italian Grotto, a type of food hell where, Primo is sure, “the rape of cuisine” goes on every night. Indeed, it does present a marked contrast to the starched white, beautiful linens that adorn the tables of the Paradise. Filmed with little light illuminating the gigantic plates of spaghetti and meatballs that Pascal (Ian Holm) serves his raucous customers, entering Pascal’s Italian Grotto is a bit like entering Jabba the Hutt’s Palace: the visitor quickly develops the idea that this one layer of decadence is only the cleanest, most presentable layer, and that beneath it exists a labyrinth housing things unimaginably terrible. The visitor is assaulted with over-stimulation, startled with the noise and the smoke generated by the crowd to entertain it. In an atmosphere that deadens the senses, what does the food matter? It’s a good thing that Pascal runs his restaurant from an office rather than the kitchen, because too long a time spent in that place might reveal even more horrifying aspects of hell.

That the most important place in Pascal’s Italian Grotto is an office instead of a kitchen as warm, functional, and quiet as the one at Paradise is, of course, immediately telling. Pascal is a businessman whose motto is, “Bite your teeth into the arse of life!” and he has no time for artistic aspirations like Primo’s. When Secondo approaches him about a loan to keep the doors of Paradise open, Pascal refuses him, instead suggesting the “big night” of the title. A famous singer friend of Pascal’s will be invited to the Paradise for dinner, and the publicity that his visit generates will be a boon for the restaurant.

*Big Night* is a story of the fall, complete with a snake—Isabella Rossellini’s long, elegant, bracelet-twisting arm waving to Secondo from the window of a Cadillac. Rossellini’s character, Gabriella, is even less of a temptation for Secondo than the Cadillac itself. Pascal owns it, and Secondo even takes time before the party to visit a Cadillac salesman (Campbell Scott) and take a test-drive. It is the ultimate symbol of American prosperity (in *West Side Story* Bernardo wanted to go back to Puerto Rico in one) but also the fruit of selling-out, and in one shot it sits parked on the street in front of the Paradise as an American flag flies in the distance. It is Secondo’s optimal desire, his reason for being in America.

Inside the Paradise, however, Primo prepares a meal to rival all meals, not for the money he could make, but for the simple reason, he explains, that “to eat good food is to be close to God.” Other movies make the connection between food and spiritual life—*Babette’s Feast* springs immediately to mind—but Primo prepares a feast to welcome his and his brother’s savior, while Babette herself is the savior, making food for people whose stark religion keeps them in a type of spiritual hibernation. The guests at Primo and Secondo’s dinner have in the entertainment and spectacle of Pascal’s Italian Grotto much more to tempt them than Babette’s poor parishioners. In Paradise, Primo’s morality is simple: “People should come for the food.”

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Blacklisted for some thirty years, Meridel Le Sueur began in the early 1980s to attract a new readership of feminists and young students discovering her work in their American literature and women's studies classes. Some ten years before, a small, dedicated number of critics in the Midwest, including John Crawford, Fred Whitehead and others, reprinted her work and invited her to colloquia devoted to recovering the work of 1930s literary radicals. In 1982, Feminist Press published an omnibus volume entitled Ripening introducing Le Sueur to a broad readership. The "dark time" had finally been lifted—by careful scholarship and changing attitudes.

Marching with strikers, riding on Greyhound buses with itinerant workers, living among common folk, Le Sueur listened to people's stories, and from their oral accounts fashioned a literature of social concern, at once lyrical and direct. Uncompromising in intent, her writing substitutes passion and intuition for cold analysis; myth and allegory for rational "fact"; and polyphonic discourse (heteroglossia) for proletarian realism as it was promoted by New Masses editor Michael Gold during the early period of the Communist Party's cultural program. Le Sueur is both shy and formidable, a powerful voice of her generation, an inspiration to young people, and a model for young writers. Such a writer, such a person, deserves critics and interpreters equal to the task. Such a critic and interpreter has at long last appeared in the person of Constance Coiner.

Long before the word "feminist" became common coin, Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen, Coiner's other subject, wrote of women's growing consciousness—toward their status, political rights, and economic opportunity. The women's suffrage movement drew attention to women's collective experience; in literature it had found few echoes in mainstream or popular literature, apart from the occasional reformer like Helen Campbell, a late nineteenth-century novelist. Coiner's starting point in Better Red is the re-emergence of the cultural left in the 1920s which foregrounded the struggles of the oppressed worker and permitted women radicals like Le Sueur and Olsen discursive space to explore the oppression of their own sex.

Cоiner begins by reviewing contemporary Communist Party of America (CPUSA) debates on literature and culture, giving particular attention to Michael Gold's advocacy of "proletarian realism" which by no means presented a consistent, coherent body of theory. The CPUSA's relationship to women was not good, Coiner reminds us, but what the party offered women—equal rights, at least in theory—was a great deal more than what they had been used to. Coiner divides her study into two main sections, giving roughly equal space to Le Sueur's and Olsen's life and work, pointing to strengths and weaknesses. Antithesis, she finds, is a formal principle of Le Sueur's reportage, including her (by now) famous piece on the Minneapolis truckers' strike, "I Was Marching." Distinguishing Le Sueur's writing, and imparting it its special gendered character, is the heteroglossic quality of multi-voicedness, a concept borrowed from the Soviet post-formalist critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

The special strength of Coiner's study is first to ground her discussion in contemporary leftist cultural debates, then to indicate both Le Sueur's debt and departures from Party orthodoxy. In her short stories, Le Sueur's writing represents a departure from the "manly" proletarian realist style that Gold upheld (but seldom followed in his own writing!), employing classical, Christian, and Hebraic myths and symbolisms to elucidate female experience. Le Sueur for proletarian realism which by no means presented a consistent, coherent body of theory. The CPUSA's relationship to women was not good, Coiner reminds us, but what the party offered women—equal rights, at least in theory—was a great deal more than what they had been used to. Coiner divides her study into two main sections, giving roughly equal space to Le Sueur's and Olsen's life and work, pointing to strengths and weaknesses. Antithesis, she finds, is a formal principle of Le Sueur's reportage, including her (by now) famous piece on the Minneapolis truckers' strike, "I Was Marching." Distinguishing Le Sueur's writing, and imparting it its special gendered character, is the heteroglossic quality of multi-voicedness, a concept borrowed from the Soviet post-formalist critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

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spoke to women's concerns and problems using their own voices, exploring "feminine" style and forms unique to women's experience. She remained faithful to her radical convictions through the darkest period of the HUAC/McCarthy era, writing children's books when she could no longer find a publisher for her main work.

The groundwork for the recovery of Le Sueur's literary work was, in part, laid with the publication in 1974 of Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*. Midwesterner, like Meridel, Tillie Lerner Olsen was born in Nebraska, the daughter of immigrant parents, early in this century. She too had heard Debs speak, read the world's classics in the "Little Blue Book" pocket-sized editions, and joined the Communist Party, first as member of the Young Communists League. Her early short stories, including "The Iron Throat," won a great deal of attention when it appeared in *The Partisan Review* in 1934. When she appeared at the American Writers' Congress in 1935, wearing a YCL uniform she had made herself, Olsen's literary stock seemed promising. Her working-class credentials were impeccable; she worked in a canning factory, helped organize farm workers, observed the militant longshoremen in the violent San Francisco dock strike of 1934. In 1937, however, she abruptly abandoned her writing to devote herself to raising her children, preferring "rank and file existence" to an exclusively "literary life." For twenty years she put her writing aside. When, however, the anti-red delirium of the McCarthy era subsided, Olsen's writing appeared again, beginning with the collection, *Tell Me a Riddle* (1962), the title story winning an O. Henry Award for best short story in the previous year.

Leaving the Party in the 1950s, Olsen devoted herself to her writing, aided by a creative writing internship at Stanford, Ford Foundation fellowship, and residencies at the MacDowell Colony (Le Sueur steered clear of accepting grants: they were, she said, "droppings from the capitalist cow"). The proletarian realism of Olsen's 1930s writing yielded to depicting the situation of the writer, poor and a mother of four children in America, in *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Silences*. *Yonnondio*, reconstructed from the unpublished scraps of early drafts, bears heavy traces of the Party aesthetic in which she had apprenticed, yet reveals Olsen's sensitivity to modernist techniques. Olsen refused to separate personal and political in her writing, according to Coiner, joining with Le Sueur in the aim to develop modes of nonlinear discourse that were opposed to a "dominant, linear, reductive mode of discourse" (199).

*Better Red* places Constance Coiner alongside scholars like Charlotte Nekola, Paula Rabinowitz, Janet Zandy, Lillian Robinson, Barbara Foley and others, whose recent books on women's part in the cultural left are essential reading for specialist and non-specialist alike. It is a terrible loss to scholarship, and a personal tragedy for those who loved and admired her, that Coiner's brilliant and insightful voice was forever stilled when TWA Flight 800 went down off Long Island in July, 1996.

Douglas Wixson

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On poets—

Elizabeth Hudgins
teaches high school English, and lists her other identities as "iconographer and photographer." She lives in Fairfax, Virginia.

Walter McDonald
is Paul Whitfield Horn Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Texas Tech University.

Marion Schoeberlein

On book reviewers—

Douglas Wixson,
Emeritus Professor of Literature at University of Missouri, is the author of *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990*, published by University of Illinois Press in 1994 and reviewed in these pages in Pentecost (May) 1996.
At the party Bill told me about his visit with his father, now 80, and how his father cried when Bill left and Bill cried when he told me this because he knew it was because his father knew he had missed her and childhood, and I think Bill was crying because he thought he might be missing his own children's childhood too.