bleak futures

Sometimes words from the car radio speaker seem to flash out of the ether to create a riveting neon sign in front of your eyes. Like these, for instance. Announcing the decision in the Kelly Flinn case, the newscaster said that “her future is not at all bleak, however, since several media contracts lie just ahead.” I saw the words “not at all bleak” for the next several miles, as if they had been etched on the windscreen. “Not at all bleak,” to describe the expected few months of celebrity. Dazed, one imagines the introductions: “And now, here she is, America’s favorite adultress, schemer and proven disobedient promise-breaker—Kelly [breathless pause] Flinn!!” Will she then bounce onto the stage, flashing the smile that made her so compelling on the recruiting video? Will she take up a position (God save the mark!) in the feminist movement, extolling women’s right to be men’s moral equal in sordid matters of infidelity and sleazy deal-making? A new poster girl for Homewreckers Anonymous?

What exercises us most about the case is not so much the matter of Ms. Flinn herself, or the ins and outs, rights or wrongs of her private life. Whatever she did and why she did it may fascinate the curious, but these are irrelevant compared to the fact that she broke her promise to us concerning her willingness to live by the military rules, and then expected not to be held accountable. Her future, so far as any parent or teacher can determine, looked bright and honorable; when it was lost, she bargained instead to be a celebrity rule-bender. And for this breach of good faith (at the very least) she is touted as a celebrity, in some quarters almost a hero. This is heartbreakingly bad news.

Parents and teachers work in an atmosphere determined by idealism and hope about the future. In one of the many things that sets us apart from other kinds of operations and management systems, neither parents nor teachers pay much attention to the fiscal year’s bottom line. We are less interested in what things look like in this month’s balance sheets, and more interested in a vision—a dream—of what might be the case in five or ten years. When parents delight in seeing the first grader’s papers come back with happy faces and gold stars, it is not that moment which gives them satisfaction, for the achievements of children, wondrous and astounding as they are, are not the goal. They are, rather, the promise of some future in which the child’s ability to play well with others, or master sequential thinking, or assemble puzzles into satisfying wholes will be a component in their being happy, successful, thriving adult persons. Likewise, we college teachers would be thought crazy if, when we saw our students striding across the stage at their commencement, we were fully satisfied that in this moment all our visions for them were completed and fulfilled. We are motivated every day, through many small annoyances and big disappointments, by the hope that the futures of the young people we care about will be good futures.

The Flinn case makes it clear—if it was not clear before—that the American public has no consensus about what a good future for our young people would look like. The wider world of American higher education has begun to notice this, and more and more conversations have begun to turn on the question, “What is this education for? What kind of future should our students desire?” But in the context of church-related higher education, this is an old conversation, a fundamental one, perhaps our most important one. The Lilly Fellowship Program in Humanities and the Arts, which for the fifth year has funded this special issue of The Cresset, allows the conversation to
be overheard by many who were not present at the fall conference, and readers who, in many
contexts, care about the futures for which we in education go to work every day. Two of these
essays come from speakers at last fall's conference, and they bear directly on the question: is there
a Christian worldview, and how—in the context of education—can it be made winsome and
compelling for the young people who need it so desperately? Richard Mouw and Jeanne Knoerle
give us clear guidelines in their eloquent contributions to the conversation. A third essay, by Jennifer
Thomas, adds an example of the kind of scholarship done by our Lilly Fellows here at VU, demon-
strating as it does a primary sensitivity to the religious implications of the problems that mark story
telling and story hearing between members of different races.

The fourth major essay may seem surprising; it is certainly disconcerting. Since a good deal of
what it reports comes from the world of public education, we may be tempted to think that its
account of students, their classroom behaviors and principles of evaluation, is irrelevant. But
Professor Trout has done a service for teachers of all sorts in his analysis of the frequently
embittered environment of college classrooms today. Though its language and content may trouble
"younger or more sensitive viewers" it reports some features of the education landscape that may
indeed loom on our horizons, if indeed we are not stumbling among them today. If Christian higher
education cannot make a difference in this context, it will not be providing what it claims to be able
to do. Beyond the vision of happy, successful, thriving persons which every educational institution
could claim that it hopes to produce, the Christian school's mission endeavors to help young people
find their role as people of God in a world God desires to love into wholeness.

And that claim, of course, reverberates in artist Robert Sirko's covers, commissioned for this
issue. Angelic messengers speak for the claims of our institutions, and in our hopeful moments we
can see ourselves in that limpid clarity, witnesses to truth and beauty, operating in the sunlight of
pure reason and true faith. Alternatively? the back cover image presents harder problems of inter-
pretation. What happens when our mission is compromised? Like the seven demons comfortably
ensconced in the house from which they had been cleansed, does 'bad' Christian higher education
offer distorted and demonic versions of the truth? Or does the world, with its principalities and
powers, dominate our feeble efforts to be effective arms for the churches?

What will our students conceive as good futures for themselves? Can we hope that terms like
honor, fidelity, piety, obedience, and wisdom will inspire their idea of success? In what ways will
the experience of college and the acquisition of knowledge contribute to such understandings?
When they stumble and do wrong, will they know that experience as a context for repentance
and forgiveness? or will they simply use it to escape responsibility and achieve celebrity? We will deny
them the strength they need if we cannot describe our versions of the Christian worldview
adequately for these times. If we cannot be clearly dedicated to this task, bleak futures look
inevitable. This issue of The Cresset seeks to help in the clear articulation of Christian worldview in
the context of higher education; if we are willing to be committed to this task, we can help to
provide the summits that are themselves, as poet Barbara Bazyn says, the vision.

Peace,

GME
Recently I re-read an account that Mark Noll published a few years ago in Christianity Today, of an interview that he had conducted with Jaroslav Pelikan. Before pursuing his distinguished scholarly career at the University of Chicago and Yale, Pelikan had taught at church-related schools, including Valparaiso University. Pelikan told Noll that in thinking back over his pilgrimage, he had come to the conclusion that his decision to work in a secular university context was the best service he could perform to the church. Christian institutions are too skittish about scholarship, he observed. They put too much pressure on their scholars to give the church what it wants rather than what it needs. When this is the case, Pelikan suggested, in order to serve the church well “you may have to leave its payroll.” Not that he likes having to say this kind of thing about churches. “But,” Pelikan challenged, “show me one where it is not true.”

I found this comment troubling when I first read it, and it bothers even more today. There is obviously much truth in what Pelikan says about the plight of the Christian scholar. Christian communities have not always treated their scholars kindly. But in spite of the element of accuracy in Pelikan’s comment, it is not fair as an overall assessment of the possibilities for Christian scholarship. There are many of us in Christian academic institutions who have been strongly supported in our scholarly efforts, even when we have explored topics and themes that have challenged some of the prevailing assumptions in our sponsoring constituencies.

Most troubling, however, is the fact that Pelikan’s remarks give the impression that things are quite healthy for scholars in secular institutions. In trying to think about why I am especially bothered now about what Pelikan said in his conversation with Noll, I realize how my own views about the role of Christian academic institutions have changed in a rather basic way during the past decade. At the outset of my academic career I saw the larger secular academy as an exciting and vital arena of important activity. I operated with a “catch-up” kind of motivation as a Christian scholar. To be sure, I saw secular teaching and scholarship as often guided by a distorted understanding of reality. This was why, in my view, it was so important for some Christian scholars to work in schools that were explicit about their faith commitments; we needed to engage in the kind of undistorted teaching and scholarship that would help Christian institutions become the kinds of exciting and vital arenas of important activity that we had experienced during our studies in the secular academy.

I now operate with a rather different view of who needs to do the catching up. My mood regarding the secular academy has become much more pessimistic and my attitude toward Christian institutions has become much more upbeat in recent years. This assessment of the state of higher education gives special poignancy to my topic here—the exploration of the connections in church-related institutions of higher of education between our teaching and scholarship and a Christian worldview.
no loom?

Speaking to a national gathering of seminarians in the Spring of 1985, Neil Postman quoted from a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. These lines were written much earlier in this century, but Postman considered them to set forth a prophecy that is being fulfilled in our time:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,  
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower  
Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill  
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom  
To weave it into fabric...  

Postman is well known for his thoughtful critique of our present-day "technopoly," so it is not surprising that he would apply these words of poetic prophecy to the high-tech information systems that have come to play such an important role in our lives. We are, he insists, "awash in information," but we have lost our grasp of the grand narratives—the looms of transcendent meaning—that can help us to weave our "meteoric shower" of disconnected pieces of information into a coherent account of how we might live together as flourishing human beings.

But Edna St. Vincent Millay's prophecy can also be applied to much of what characterizes higher education these days. Indeed, there are many of our contemporaries who celebrate the absence of any loom that can combine the fragments of our intellectual lives into a coherent whole. The rejection of the "tyranny of the meta-narrative" is for such folks one of the triumphs of postmodern existence.

Others agree that we do live in an age of cognitive fragmentation, but they consider this to be a tragic state of affairs. One obvious case in point for this kind of assessment can be seen in the pessimistic picture that Alasdair MacIntyre sketches in the concluding paragraph of his much discussed book After Virtue. We are living, says MacIntyre, in "the new dark ages." But this time around, he argues, "the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time." Our only hope is to engage in "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained." Thus we wait, he says, "for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."

I must confess that part of me is drawn these days to this kind of apocalyptic scenario. I am tempted by MacIntyre's "Benedictine" option: Since the rest of the academy has lost its moorings, I sometimes ask myself, why don't we withdraw into strong, faith-based academic communities where we sustain a different vision of the intellectual quest in our internal communal lives?

But I also have some misgivings about embracing this analysis in the stark form set out by MacIntyre. For one thing, this scenario fails to recognize the historic intent of the actual "Benedictine" option. The monastic tradition in Roman Catholicism was never seen simply as an abandonment of everything that existed beyond the boundaries of the abbey. Monastic communities existed to keep certain communally-based virtues alive in a manner that would strengthen the larger Church, and even the larger human community. The monasteries formed a subset of a broader system of "orders," all of which were seen as making a contribution to the overall scheme of things.

This is how I am inclined to view the role of present day religiously-based academic institutions. Indeed, this is in broad terms what I take Mark Schwehn to be calling for in his important study of the contemporary crisis in academic vocation. Academic communities of the past were undergirded by such "spiritual" virtues as humility, faith, self-denial and love. These qualities have been sustained in traditionally rooted academic settings by affections, liturgical practices, and symbol systems that are intimately intertwined with religious convictions; and, as Schwehn boldly states his case, "their continued vitality would seem to be in some jeopardy under wholly secular auspices." Indeed, Schwehn strongly suspects that "most of our present-day academies" are "living off a kind of borrowed fund of moral capital." But this does not lead Schwehn to advocate a thor-
oughgoing pattern of withdrawal on the part of religiously based academic communities. Maintaining separate institutions is only one of several strategies that we must attend to. But it is indeed a centrally important one.

Not that we should abandon secular institutions altogether; certainly Schwehn's analysis would not support such an approach. This is precisely the point where it is helpful to think of the formation of separate religious "orders" in the academy. Maintaining academic communities that are organized around a common set of beliefs and spiritual practices is one very important strategy. But it is also crucial to sustain networks of Christian scholars who work in other, more "secular," academic settings—especially when good patterns of communication and mutual edification are established with those scholars who are pursuing their vocations in distinctively religious institutions.

This notion of maintaining various "orders" of Christian scholarship is fairly close to George Marsden's in his *The Soul of the American University.* Near the end of his book, Marsden pleads that the scope of such celebrated themes as pluralism and academic freedom be broadened to create room in higher education for considering "substantive religious concerns." He hopes that typically secular faculties can be more welcoming to committed religious scholars. But Marsden also rightly questions whether the secular emphasis on pluralism can be consistently expanded—at least on any grand scale—to accommodate academic activity based on substantive religious convictions.

Christian scholars must work diligently, Marsden is convinced, to create contexts for pursuing a collective Christian scholarly enterprise in which Christian intellectuals operate with a clearly Christian understanding of reality. This means, he insists, "that religiously committed scholars who are already present at many universities will have to overcome their own longstanding inhibitions about relating faith to scholarship and establish academic credibility for expressed religious viewpoints." But it also means that we must strengthen the task of scholarship in explicitly Christian academic institutions.

The present situation calls, then, for strategies which aim at both the maintenance of healthy Christian academic institutions and the provision of support systems for Christians in secular institutions. Our strategic diversity will not be adequate in the present crisis, however, if we fail to work together to encourage genuinely Christian ways of thinking about teaching, learning and research. And central to this project—or so I will argue here—is the diligent exploration in church-related institutions of the ways in which a Christian worldview can give shape to our scholarship and teaching.

Obviously, there is a real danger here of coming up with a set of "packaged" answers that we impart to students in a formulaic manner. This is not the project I mean to encourage. I am not very interested in having Christian teachers simply "impart" a worldview to their students. Rather, what I have in mind is a complex process wherein both teachers and students are engaged in forming a Christian worldview, as they work together to explore the ways in which Christian answers to basic worldview questions can shed light on the complex and ongoing investigations that are the stuff of the scholarly enterprise.

Worldview formation, then, is a process. And it is more than a cognitive process; it also encompasses the ways in which we develop as beings who feel and do. This is regularly noted by Christian writers. Arthur Holmes observes that worldviews originate "at the prephilosophical level...with the beliefs and attitudes and values on which people act." And Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton argue that a person's "worldview is never merely a vision of life. It is always a vision for life as well;" our worldview also shapes "our valuing."

In pointing to the more-than-cognitive dimensions of worldviews, I do not mean to say that in higher education we can avoid thinking in the process of worldview formation. But neither can we ignore the larger process of what it means to develop and appropriate a Christian worldview. As I have served as a visiting lecturer on many college campuses over the past three decades, I have
conducted an informal survey of viewpoints about the transmission of Christian traditions. On a given campus I have often explicitly asked the question of key educators: What would you identify as the key areas or programs on this campus that are designed to pass on to your students what you see as the best of the Christian tradition? The answer I was most familiar with was the one regularly given on Calvinist campuses: we pass on the tradition primarily in the classroom. This perspective was set forth to me in a graphic manner by a high level administrator at Calvin College when I was being interviewed for a philosophy position there many years ago. The college emphasized the need for a Christian worldview to be set forth in every class, he told me. Christianity was as important in chemistry and philosophy courses as it was in chapel talks and Old Testament classes. This meant, he said, that the real business of Christian liberal arts education would not be radically changed on the campus even if the chapel building were to burn down on the same night that the entire theology faculty dropped dead.

A second answer that people have given to my question is that the tradition is passed on in the patterns of student life. On such a view, the content of the classroom does not matter as much as the larger “extra-curricular” programs of campus and off-campus activity: the quality of life in residence halls, “cohort” groups, cultural events, organized efforts to serve the disadvantaged, athletic activities, attitudes that are formed regarding courtship, friendship, vocation, possessions, and the like.

A third answer focuses specifically on the importance of worship in an academic community. This perspective often looms large where a commitment to worship has taken clear architectural shape. On one campus that I visited, I happened to pose my question to a theologian while we were standing in a very attractive worship center. He pointed to our surroundings and said with considerable passion: “This is what makes this campus Christian. If this building were not here there would be nothing Christian for the students to ‘get’ from us. This sacred space sanctifies everything else that we are doing on this campus.”

There was a point in my amateur sociologizing on this topic where I thought that these three answers pretty much exhausted the options. I was caught up short, though, when I asked my question on a Mennonite campus. I had given lectures at several Mennonite schools and had decided that the main emphasis in such settings was on the patterns of student life. The Mennonites had not seemed to give a lot of attention to a philosophically oriented worldview approach, nor did they seem very interested in sacred liturgical spaces. But they did have a strong emphasis on engaging students in programs of social service as an important supplement to the standard curricular offerings.

When I posed my question to a professor who had been hosting me, then, I fully expected a type-two answer. Instead he pointed to a very different emphasis: “How do we pass on our traditions? Oh, that’s an easy one. We insist that every student get serious exposure to Mennonite history. And not just in a detached way. We want them to know about the stories of people who have been faithful to the vision under difficult circumstances, so that when the time comes for them to make the basic choices, they will have models from the past as points of reference.” This perspective does indeed capture another emphasis: passing on the traditions through community narratives, the stories of saints and hero/heroines whose lives have embodied the virtues that are featured in a given tradition.

There could well be other distinct answers. Nor do I mean to imply that the ones I have briefly noted here are mutually exclusive. My guess is that most Christian colleges are working to promote some sort of combination of one or more of the strategies mentioned. Indeed, that is precisely what I want to encourage. No one of these answers is sufficient by itself to capture what a well-rounded program of Christian liberal arts education is all about.

But I want to make a more specific point here with reference to the worldview discussion: each of these strategies is an important aspect of worldview formation. There is an unfortunate tendency in those circles where explicit attention is given to worldview issues to construe the propagation of a worldview in almost exclusively cognitive terms. I speak from experience on this topic, since I have
been guilty of this tendency myself. There was a time when I viewed the efforts of people working in the areas of, for example, campus worship and student life as irrelevant—in some cases maybe even inimical—to what I was attempting to accomplish in the philosophy classroom. There were a number of factors that influenced me in this regard. For one thing, I was reacting against the very real presence of anti-intellectualism in the evangelicalism that nurtured me. In response to those Christians who strongly tended to underestimate the importance of liberal arts education, I tended to overdo my enthusiasm for the kinds of things that happen in college classrooms. But my views about such things were also formed in an educational environment where we gave little thought to larger questions about the overall formation of character in higher education, which meant that many of us dug into turf-defending postures without looking at the larger territory in which our tussles were occurring.

For these and other reasons, I operated for quite a while in my academic career with the deeply ingrained assumption that the process of transmitting a worldview was for all practical purposes a purely cognitive affair. I now see that this was a myopic way of viewing things. A more adequate view of the process is nicely illustrated in Daniel Shaw’s fascinating anthropological study of an initiation ceremony staged by the Samo people of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. In this elaborate celebration, called *kandila*, the Samo community dramatizes its military prowess by carrying out a series of mock raids. As Shaw demonstrates, however, these rites also exhibit “a complete array of cultural values upon which Samo relationships and ideology are based”—kinship patterns, gender roles, intertribal relations, the nature of supernatural powers, and so on. While these cultural values are displayed in this ceremony, though, they are not explicitly articulated. The Samo people do not possess, Shaw tells us, “a systematic ideology, neatly developed and organized” which they are capable of discussing. It is up to the analyst to “exegete” their cultural system, in order to explicate the “Samo worldview” by studying “the principles, values, fears, and glory [that] are enacted and affirmed” in this elaborate initiation ceremony. This is a compelling example of the way in which a worldview can be propagated and reinforced in ways that are less than fully cognitive—in this case through ritual enactment, symbolization and dramatized narrative. And it should be obvious that it has relevance for discussion of various transmission strategies on Christian college campuses. Worldviews are transmitted by means of extra-curricular campus activities, worship services, and programs of social outreach. When we give specifically cognitive attention to formulating worldview themes, we are explicating that which is already in an important sense present—as what Shaw refers to a “deep structure” and “worldview meaning”—in these other kinds of events and processes.

Having said all of that, I do want to emphasize the importance of cognitive articulation. The Samo people do indeed have a worldview without being able to talk about that worldview. The anthropologist’s task of analyzing the tribal worldview is an important service, especially under present conditions. As Shaw observes, the Samo people are experiencing increasing contact with other cultural systems. As they interact with persons possessing different worldviews, it is important for them to be more articulate about the meanings that guide their lives. It is also important for those with whom they come in contact to understand the Samo cultural system.

Parallel considerations can be brought to bear on the task of worldview explication in the Christian community. The apostolic writings contain a clear mandate on the subject: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). There can be no question that it is possible for Christians to possess a profound hope that is embedded in the deep structures of their lives without being able to provide a clear account of the content of that system of meanings. But the obligation to explicate becomes an urgent one when members of the community regularly interact with people possessing different worldviews. And in liberal arts education it has to happen. Exposure to different ways of viewing reality is essential to the process of higher learning. If there really are different worldviews, and if we regularly encounter that diversity, then worldview explication is of the utmost importance.
four questions

Thus far I have been tossing the term “worldview” around with some abandon. I must now assign it some content. In simple terms, a worldview is our understanding of our place in the larger scheme of things. People inevitably operate with some sort of worldview, even if they, like the Samo people, cannot give an explicit account of their sense of what reality is all about.

A good, and rather uncomplicated, formulation of some of the questions that are addressed by a worldview is laid out by Leslie Stevenson in his much reprinted philosophy textbook *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. Stevenson himself does not use the term “worldview”; instead, he describes how several distinct theories of human nature—Platonist, Christian, Freudian, Existentialist, and so on—each exhibits at least four components: each stipulates some characteristic that it associates with essential humanness; each presupposes a general conception of reality; each offers a diagnosis of what is presently wrong with human beings; and each provides a prescription for correcting these defects. Stevenson’s four components correspond exactly to the four questions that Walsh and Middleton insist must be answered by any worldview, except that they state the questions in an even simpler form: Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What is the remedy?

These are the questions that I have in mind when I insist on the importance of forming a Christian worldview in the context of Christian liberal arts education. Christian scholars must give explicit attention, I am convinced, to providing a Christian perspective on human nature, a Christian account of the larger reality in which human beings find themselves, a Christian understanding of what it is that presently plagues the human condition, and a clear sense of what the Christian message sets forth as the remedy for our most basic ills.

I am deliberately setting forth here a minimalist understanding of a Christian worldview—a kind of “mere Christianity” account. I do this out of strong conviction: in urging the people who teach and learn at Christian colleges to engage in worldview formation, I do not want to impose unreasonable philosophical and theological demands on them. My motivation here is in good part “pastoral.” There is a discernible tendency on Christian college faculties for philosophers and theologians to dominate the worldview agenda in a way that intimidates persons from other disciplines. This is unfortunate, and I want to dissociate myself from such an approach.

I must confess that it does make me a little nervous to downplay the role of professional philosophers and theologians in this project; I have, after all, spent most of my career emphasizing the importance of philosophy and theology. So I must quickly add that I do consider philosophers and theologians to be an important part of the conversation, although I think they will serve us all best by acknowledging the value of approaching the question of worldview formation in a less technical way.

I have been greatly helped in my own thinking about this subject by an important set of distinctions proposed by Arthur Holmes. Holmes distinguishes between “theologians’ theology” and “philosophers’ philosophy” on the one hand, and “world-viewish theology” and “world-viewish philosophy” on the other. The first set of terms points to the kinds of topics that professional theologians and philosophers talk about when they are addressing people within their own disciplines. The second set refers to the kinds of topics that are dealt with when scholars are wrestling with questions that are raised when we think about how a worldview applies to various topics: how a view of human nature speaks to theories in literary criticism or therapy, how we are to understand the fundamental issues concerning work and leisure, technology and the natural order, friendship and sexuality, education and politics.

Holmes does not mean to denigrate the more guild-oriented discussions in philosophy and theology. Such analyses, although difficult for the uninitiated to grasp, have an intrinsic value. But he does want to highlight the importance of a somewhat different kind of discussion, where intelligent folks grapple with basic philosophical and theological questions as they emerge for people immersed in variety of disciplines, vocations and life-situations. In such discussions, properly construed, all of the participants have an important kind of expertise to contribute.
mere Christian answers

I will not discuss in detail each of the four worldview questions listed above. But I do want to offer some brief elaborations on this set of questions. I take the appropriate “mere Christian” answers to these questions to be fairly straightforward. The biblical answer to the Where are we? question is set forth with elegant succinctness in Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” This proclamation in turn also points to the Bible’s understanding of who we are: each human being is a created being, fashioned after the image and likeness of God. But, of course, we have messed up that which God originally declared to be good. Therefore, the biblical answer to the What’s wrong? question is: we are sinners, alienated from God in a manner that also distorts our relationships with each other and with the non-human creation. And the remedy? Salvation that is made possible by the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ.

These are rather simple answers, but they do have an important bearing on our consideration of various theories and perspectives in liberal arts education. For example, that we understand reality as created by a holy God suggests a distinction between Creator and creation that rules out not only a thoroughgoing naturalism, but also the various animisms and spiritual monisms that have currency among many contemporary devotees of New Age thought and neo-paganism. Our understanding of human createdness and sinfulness stands in stark contrast to assumptions about human nature as set forth by, say, Freudians and Marxists. The biblical perspective on salvation and the afterlife differs significantly from conceptions of human flourishing that are taken for granted in various ethical and therapeutic schemes. And so on.

Worldview themes, then, need to be seen as foundational to the business of higher learning, and not as a mere pious gloss on a project that is capable of standing on its own. And Christians are not alone in thinking this way. In his commencement address last spring at Kenyon College, the Cambridge University literary critic George Steiner posed a poignant question to his hearers: “Can we have a liberal program in the humanities... that does not at least face the question of a theological foundation?” Steiner confessed that he is worried that “the teaching of the humanities without a metaphysical basis” will reinforce the “current mood of compromise and decline” in our “anything goes” culture. We ought to take courage from the fact that a non-Christian would use the language of theology to give such forceful expression to worldviewish concerns.

It would be wrong to give the impression, though, that being concerned about worldview issues is, as such, evidence of a healthy frame of mind. In our present cultural context, attention to worldviews is a thing to be celebrated. A legitimate paraphrase of George Steiner’s reference to our “anything goes” culture is that we live in a time when any worldview goes. The postmodernists’ story of how we got to this place intellectually is by now a familiar one. The Enlightenment project has failed. The notion that there is a neutral “universal reason” which can itself generate norms that are binding across cultures and nationalities has been discredited. We are now obligated to expose the ways in which the appeal to such “metanarratives” is a camouflage for what is in fact an exercise in hegemonic control, an imposition of “the tyranny of wholes.” The positive project that emerges out of this negative expose is the encouragement of co-existence among a variety of mutually incompatible worldviews. Some of these worldviews are associated with the different ways of “knowing” generated by our racial, ethnic and gender diversity. Others are embraced by a postmodern appropriation of premodern conceptions of reality, such as goddess religion, native American metaphysics, and Eastern mysticism.

The reality of this cultural condition was illustrated in practical terms for me recently in a conversation with the leader of a well-known evangelical ministry to university students. He described a whole new set of challenges in attempting to evangelize and disciple today’s students. It used to be that a student would make a clear choice between Christianity and a secularist perspective or a non-Christian religion, he said. But these days a student thinks nothing of participating in an evangelical Bible study group the night after attending a meeting of a New Age meditation group—and with no sense that there is anything inappropriate about moving back and forth between these two very different ways of viewing reality. Shortly after this conversation I experienced this
phenomenon in even more specific terms. I was paired with a liberal theologian on a radio talk show, and we discussed the resurrection of Christ. He insisted with some fervor that the Gospel accounts of the risen Christ had no basis in historical reality and I, of course, disagreed with equal fervor. One of our callers was Heather from Glendale. “I’m not what you would call, like, a Christian,” she reported. “Actually, right now I am sort of into—you know, witchcraft and stuff like that? But I agree with the guy from Fuller Seminary. I’m just shocked that someone would, like, say that Jesus wasn’t really raised from the dead!”

In contrast to this widespread pattern of somewhat indiscriminate borrowing in order to construct a worldview, Christian academic leaders need to bear witness to a very different way of being world-viewish. There is much that should be said about how we are to do this. I can only touch on what strike me as some important emphases in the remainder of my discussion here. Specifically, I want to emphasize three themes that seem to me important for the process of Christian worldview formation in our current climate: coherence, particularity, and depth.

control beliefs or worldview?

In the mid-1980s some of us from the Dutch Reformed tradition got together to talk about the relevance of worldview to scholarship in the social sciences. In those discussions Nicholas Wolterstorff expressed some misgivings about the feasibility of using the worldview notion to connect religious conviction and scholarly inquiry. We all possess a rather large set of beliefs, he observed. By what criteria do we choose, “from a person’s entire corpus of assent, those of his beliefs which constitute his worldview”? Better to work, Wolterstorff argued, with the idea of “control beliefs” as he had set it forth in his *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. In that fine little book, Wolterstorff had urged Christian scholars to look at the ways in which some of their beliefs, including beliefs that were uniquely associated with their Christian commitment, could guide them in the weighing of scholarly theories and claims. Such a view, Wolterstorff suggested, is also less likely to encourage us to think that Christian thinking on any given subject must on the whole be very different than non-Christian thinking on the subject.

I have some sympathy for the concerns Wolterstorff raises. I agree that much of our faith-and-learning activity, when properly conducted, will consist in thinking carefully about how this or that belief bears on an issue of scholarship, rather than in grand comparisons between macro-systems of thought. Furthermore, like him I am convinced that it is inappropriate for Christian scholars to take it for granted that we will consistently disagree with non-Christians on the issues that we face in the intellectual quest.

But I am not prepared to reject the worldview concept in favor of simply talking about a set of control beliefs. It seems important to me to emphasize the way in which our beliefs cohere, how they hang together. The above-mentioned tendency of people these days to operate with sets of inconsistent beliefs, happily assenting to a belief out of one system of thought on Wednesday evening and relying for guidance on a belief out of an incompatible system on Thursday morning—this widespread habit of mind today compels me to emphasize the coherent shape of a belief system. And this is helped along considerably, I suggest, by a worldview orientation.

exclusion as faithfulness

In his writings, Wolterstorff has helpfully insisted that it is better to talk about how we weigh theories in the light of our Christian beliefs, rather than stressing the need to devise theories as Christians. When we weigh a theory that is presented to us from a non-Christian source, we may discover that it is an adequate one for a Christian to adopt. To insist at the outset that we must devise theories is to give the misleading impression that we as Christians must inevitably walk a different theoretical path than our non-Christian colleagues.

All of this is important to say. But it is also necessary to be clear about the fact that the particularity of a Christian worldview can—and likely will, on occasion—lead us to reject theories and claims for uniquely Christian reasons. To make that point is not to contradict Wolterstorff: he is
careful to “insist that in the case of conflict between one’s Christian convictions, on the one hand, and something presented for one’s acceptance in the pursuit of science, on the other, often it is science that ought to give way.”

Certain theories and claims in the scholarly life will be excluded for us, then, because of our desire to be faithful to Christian understanding of reality. This is not an emphasis that sits easily in our relativist climate. We are conducting our teaching and scholarship in an environment in which it is deeply offensive to talk about how our convictions exclude other ways of thinking about life. I have been paying a lot of attention in my own writings in recent years to the need to incorporate both conviction and civility into our dealings with other people and groups in our pluralistic culture. My tendency, in talking to conservative Protestants, has been to emphasize the civility side of the equation. But convictedness is also important—indeed, in the final analysis it is far more important.

Problems of pedagogy loom large here. How do we transmit a Christian worldview to our students in a way that their worldviewishness is characterized by convicted civility? At a minimum, doing so requires that we ourselves model both civility and conviction. This means at least two things: we cannot hide the fact that our worldview does in fact exclude other ways of understanding reality; and we invite them to consider this worldview by immersing themselves in the life of a community in which this worldview takes on flesh. Wes Avram, of Bates College, put it nicely in a recent book review in Pro Ecclesia: Christian orthodoxy cannot simply be asserted. It must be recovered within communities of discourse shaped in the form of orthodox praxis. It must be explicated, explored, enhanced, and enticed away from self-congratulation toward self-emptying in loving action. That being the case, what is decisively at issue for Christianity today is little different from what has always been at stake. The postmodern voice of orthodoxy must be a voice that not only defends, asserts, and responds; . . . it must be a voice that invites and waits patiently, holding fast to a confident openness without losing itself among foreign discourses.

And, of course, we can rely on more than our own human efforts in this process. A few years ago one of my Fuller students told me about her dramatic conversion to the Christian faith. She had been raised in a secular environment, and after college joined a New Age cult. The group's guru taught that all major religious contained aspects of the one Truth. Each member was assigned a major religious teacher as an aid to meditation. She was assigned Jesus. As she studied the Gospel accounts, she became convinced that Jesus' claims about his own person and work conflicted with the teachings of the cult. When she talked to the guru about this, he encouraged her to follow the Truth wherever it was leading her. This young woman, now an ordained Presbyterian pastor, left the cult and pledged herself to the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ. An excluding message had broken through to her, even as she was practicing an inclusive worldview.

the depths of reality

I also think it is important to emphasize the way in which Christian worldview formation makes us sensitive to the depths of reality. Albert Borgmann, a Roman Catholic who teaches philosophy at the University of Montana, wrote an excellent book a few years ago in which he discusses the ways in which the postmodern consciousness often limits its attention to the surfaces of reality. He addresses this malady with a call to rediscover “the eloquence of things” in their particularity, to recognize “the things that command our respect and grace our life” to find “the depth of the world.” A similar call, issued explicitly to Christian scholars, was sounded a few years ago by the Lilly Endowment’s Craig Dykstra, in an address to the Indiana Academy of Religion. Dykstra encouraged an emphasis in Christian liberal arts education on the kind of “formation of character” that aims at shaping persons “who see deeply into the reality of things and who love that reality—over time and across circumstances.”

This emphasis on deep seeing and deep loving of reality in its complexity is, I am convinced, an important component of worldview formation today. In a review of a study of sexuality that she
once wrote for The New York Review of Books, Martha Nussbaum argued that the author’s approach to his topic was fundamentally misguided. Discussions of sexuality, she insisted, must be “more attentive to particular histories. . . . more humble before the mystery and complexity of living.” We need to learn from Plato, she suggested, how to combine explanatory clarity with a deep regard for particularity. Professor Nussbaum’s remarks have relevance to much more than the study of the erotic; her call, for example, for a sense of humility “before the mystery and complexity of living” applies to the process of worldview formation.

To be sure, one person’s intellectual humility can be another person’s intellectual despair. In their fascinating account of recent developments in cultural anthropology, George Marcus and Michael Fischer observe that most of their colleagues have abandoned any hope of getting a comprehensive understanding of human nature, and have instead slid “into atomistic nihilism where it becomes impossible to generalize from a single ethnographer’s experience.”

The process of Christian worldview formation requires something like ethnographic sensibilities, whereby we look into the complex depths of created reality without getting into what Marcus and Fischer describe as an obsessive “hunkering down on detail.” To use Craig Dykstra’s formulation again, we must look deeply into the world while at the same time loving a reality that stretches across time and diverse cultural contexts.

Martha Nussbaum cited Plato as an exemplar of what it is like to live humbly in the presence of particularity and complexity. Those of us who are involved in Christian worldview formation might well follow her suggestion by taking at least one of our cues from a passage that occurs about mid-point in Plato’s Meno. Socrates’ friends are discouraged at this stage in the discussion, because they have been looking for a unified definition of virtue—but instead, all they have come up with is a “swarm” of virtues. When they complain to Socrates, he tells them not to get discouraged by swarms. In spite of appearances to the contrary, “all nature is akin.” This means, he says, that there is nothing to hinder us, having tackled just one small assignment in the intellectual quest, from going on to find out about all of the rest, as long as we do “not weary in seeking” (Meno, 81A, my paraphrase).

Christian scholars can take heart from similar sentiments, expressed more boldly in the Scriptures. There too we learn a worldview in which all reality is akin. This means that Edna St. Vincent Millay’s prophecy, taken literally, is false: there does exist a loom to weave all facts into a single fabric. But we also learn from the Scriptures that there is Someone holding the loom, a teaching that has profound significance for liberal arts education: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”
I have titled this presentation, “The Love of Learning and the Desire for God,” which is the title of a classic work by the Benedictine scholar, Dom Jean Leclercq. His book takes up what he calls the “ancient theme of the opposition between knowledge and faith,” and focuses on the role of the monastery in shaping the conditions of that relationship during medieval times and beyond (Leclercq, 257). I have used that title because I want to ask two questions about the relationship between loving learning and desiring God in our time: Can one have a love of learning without a desire for God? And can one have a desire for God without a love of learning?

Now I think the answers to those two questions are manifestly clear and have become much clearer since the Enlightenment. Yes, one can have a love of learning without a desire for God. We see and have seen many scholars, with no belief in God, let alone a desire for God, who have spent their lives in research, in the development of new knowledge, in providing valuable information and insight into the workings of our universe, of our psyche, of our political system, etc. We have also seen many persons who have a desire for God and who do not have a love of learning. Each of us probably knows some very simple, good, pious persons whose love for God is something we wish we could imitate, but who seem totally uninterested in learning. Nonetheless, I would like to probe those answers, and perhaps enrich them somewhat, in the next few minutes.

We are all involved in religious higher education, I believe, because we are all Christians (or at least sympathetic with Christianity), we are all interested in the life of the mind, and we have a sense that these two vital aspects of our lives should interact with one another, and in fact, should inform one another. I suspect we believe we are most fully human when we are most fully in touch with each of these powerful forces—the force of knowledge which presents a rich panoply of facts, ideas and insights from which to choose, and the force of faith, which provides an energy to illuminate those choices and an end for which they are made.

Let’s look briefly at higher learning and especially at the constant theme which runs through its history of the tension between balancing our desire to know and our desire to grow in faith—of balancing the love of learning, with its constant stimulation of our mind, and the desire for God, with its desperate need for quiet in which to listen for His invitation. If we limit our focus to Christianity and return to its early beginnings, to the several centuries after the time in which Christ lived among His disciples, we can see the beginnings of that struggle illustrated very clearly in the place where Christianity was most intensely lived: in the monasteries of the time. The great monastic writings that have come to us—from Origen and Evagrius and Cassian and Benedict and Gregory and many others—clearly indicate that even the earliest Christians lived with that question—do I need knowledge in order to love God fully? Is knowledge a friend or foe of my faith?

On the other hand, I think the flip side of that question—do I need faith in order to acquire knowledge?—would have been considered irrelevant by the monks, and possibly a bit irreverent as
well. Of faith and knowledge, faith was the primary value in their lives of contemplation and desire for God, and knowledge was simply a necessary means to that goal.

However, it was a means which, if not watched over with care, could take control, could become bigger than the end, could, indeed become an end in itself. And so very early in the history of Christianity and higher learning in the West, the ancient fault lines appear and are repeated in every period since then, even to our own.

And yet there is never a time in early monastic history in which learning is not a primary focus for the monks. There is never a time when the intense focus on becoming men of prayer leads monastic leaders to dispense with learning as an absolute requirement for that. Those abbots (and abbesses, though alas we know so much less about them!) do not solve the problem of this relationship by removing the instruments of knowledge because of the possibility they may entangle the monks and nuns in temptation and sin or turn them away from their primary focus on prayer. No, they continue, and indeed increase the accessibility of knowledge to their subjects, as a way to feed their desire for and ability to love God. Clearly they believed that, under the best of circumstances, the love of learning increases their subjects' desire for God and they are willing to take the risks that it will be ill-used in order to reap the value it provides when it is well-used.

So I think we would have to say that the answer of the earliest Christian practitioners to the question—can you desire God without loving learning—is no, not if you intend to follow that desire to its fullest end. The earliest Christian virtuosi (a musical term that I just discovered has been borrowed by sociologists to describe those who more intensely than ordinary persons commit themselves to the practice of religion, like monks and nuns) clearly came down on the side of an inextricable link between learning and faith, especially the value of learning to faith, though also, less clearly enunciated but intrinsic, of the value of faith to learning, especially as a powerful motivating force for learning.

So what happened in the time between them and us? Has that link been permanently severed? Has it simply shifted in the relative values attributed to faith and learning? Or have we, in fact, distorted or suppressed any relationship? Let's take a quick look at the centuries that separate us from those earliest monks and the movements that have led us to where we are today. As I said, the early monasteries quickly learned that if their subjects were to desire and love God with the intensity required of them they needed to be educated, especially in those studies which made a person able to read and think and understand the Scriptures. Such a curriculum, which evolved over time into what we would call a liberal arts curriculum, focused on grammar as its fundamental building block. Grammar was considered absolutely necessary to reading and understanding literature, which was, of course, the gateway to all knowledge, since everything that did not deserve to pass into oblivion had, they believed, been entrusted to writing. And so the monasteries became places where monks were educated in grammar so that they could read the Holy Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and even classical literature, in order for their faith and desire for God to be enriched.

Because of this emphasis on learning, the monasteries became sites not only for prayer and contemplation (the religious work of the monastery) but for education. They became well-known as places which preserved and passed on the culture of the time, the meaning and value they found in their way of life. It was a rich culture because it possessed a twofold treasure: the Christian heritage, inseparably biblical and patristic, and the classical legacy.

And as a result of the increasing recognition of monasteries as places of education, and of monks as teachers and scholars, a new pressure was put upon the monastery—not only to educate those who would devote their lives within the monastery, but to reach out to local clerics and others who had need of an education but did not intend to become monks. Out of this a system of internal schools within the monastery and external schools outside the monastery began to emerge, both teaching the same liberal arts but in a very different environment and for very different ends.

As Dom Leclercq says, "In the schools [students] acquired a taste for intellectual pursuits, a certain aptitude for speculation... In the cloisters, they participated in an atmosphere where spiritual pre-occupations received greater attention, and culture, for its own sake, could develop..."
more freely.” (Leclercq, 310-11). As these separate loci for learning began to multiply, the ever present, indeed ancient, opposition between learning and faith began to widen.

Reflections on the value of learning were found frequently in the monastic literature of the time. St. Jerome says, “Holy simplicity is good, but holy knowledge is better.” And St. Bernard claims that the spouse of the Lord should not be a simpleton. Yet there was a great deal of wariness, not about acquiring knowledge, the content of which was almost the same in the monasteries as in the schools, but about the ends for which that knowledge was sought and about the potential impact of knowledge in leading one away from growing in a fuller faith. Again, Leclercq:

The scholastic lectio takes the question of the quaestio and the disputatio. The reader puts questions to the text and then questions himself on the subject matter. The monastic lectio is oriented toward the meditatio and the oratio. The objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation. In the monastery, the lectio divina, this activity which begins with grammar, terminates in...the desire for heaven (Leclercq, 89).

And, though Leclercq does not say it, he implies that in the schools, the scholastic lectio leads to a desire for knowledge for its own sake and ultimately, too often, to the inflation of the self.

I could give many illustrations about the worry and fear of allowing monks and nuns to be exposed to too much learning because of the negative impact of knowledge used in the wrong way. Nonetheless, medieval monasteries still continued to be places where both God and learning were loved. But as we move to and through the Enlightenment to modern times, we find an increasing fear of learning, wariness about knowledge, now no longer simply because too much learning can lead to pride or worldliness or over-stimulation which makes prayer difficult (that tension they had lived with relatively successfully for centuries). Now the problem has become substantively different, arising because the stability of classical culture, with its reverence for literature and grammar as the fundamental mode of knowing, has given way to the confusion of modern culture. Categories of knowledge have expanded, methods of learning have created distinct disciplines, some with very different modes of thought and exploration. And so not only knowledge, but the methods of acquiring knowledge, have become differentiated and compartmentalized. Science is now far more powerful than grammar. The empirical methods of scientific exploration have not only taken their place beside the liberal arts, they have, in fact, replaced them. As Bernard Lonergan says, “...modern science, precisely because it is methodically geared to knowledge of this world, cannot yield knowledge of God” (Lonergan, 95).

In the face of these dramatic cultural changes, we find the monasteries largely unable—or unwilling—to hold faith and learning in balance, for fear that knowledge acquired through scientific methodology, which “cannot yield knowledge of God,” will distort and weaken and eventually destroy the desire for God. Thus the rich history of encouraging monastics to love learning because it will help them love God, the history of living with the constant, creative and ancient tension between learning and faith, begins to be solved in some modern monasteries by simply relaxing the tension and choosing to stress the love of God over the love of learning.

I have recounted these bits of the story of the monastic ancestors of contemporary church-related colleges and universities because I think seeing the ancient theme of the love/fear relationship between faith and learning exemplified in their experience may help clarify for us why the issue has always been so painful and insoluble. The ambiguities, the in-built conflicts, the easy exaggerations and misinterpretations, the need for constant wariness about motivations that plague us today as we try to grasp the truly fundamental reasons for our being as faith-related institutions—all these have been very much present and unresolved from the times of the early Christians and the middle ages through the Renaissance, and remain still into our own time.

But perhaps the very realization that there has never been a time of stasis, of balance, of clarity about how learning and faith are best related should give us encouragement. Though we see around us many institutions, both of higher learning and of religion, that have apparently solved the tension in that relationship by choosing one over the other—denying the intrinsic connection between
them—the end result of doing that is ultimately unsatisfactory. Without the tension, the energy that the tension creates collapses, our gyroscopes are thrown out of kilter, we become queasy and unfocused. We find ourselves unconnected to the ends of knowledge and utterly confused about who God is and how to love Him. I think we see that happening all around us, in the disorientation many Christians and former Christians in our culture are experiencing, in the increasingly intense, (but often unfulfilled) search for meaning. In a world where faith’s relationship to knowledge has been severed, the result, for the Christian, is not unlike the severing of our spinal cord—we can live with a severed spinal cord, but our lives are severely truncated and our whole attention is absorbed with pain and survival rather than with fullness of movement and openness to experience.

It is our responsibility as persons of faith to work to heal the break between faith and learning. If we believe that without learning faith cannot come to its fullest expression, and that without faith learning too often becomes focused on self or knowledge loses its point and purpose, then we must seek diligently for some productive way to bring those two powerful forces back into relationship.

To do that, we need, I believe, to examine and explore the impact of a corrupted empiricism. Edward Farley, in *The Fragility of Knowledge*, describes what happens when empiricism, the powerful means to modern knowledge, becomes corrupted, when the meaning of knowledge is thinned out by the exclusion of mystery.

"The argument," he says,

...is not with empiricism itself. It is with a one-dimensional conception of scholarship and science. ...The systematic exclusion of imaginative, tradition-oriented, and praxis perspectives has helped produce a contemporary scholarship that is specialized to the point of triviality, preoccupied with technologies of method. ...Here we have the irony of disciplines that live in imitation of the hard sciences but that refuse to do what those sciences themselves insist on—that is, to assess the phenomena in their claims, their truth, their reality. ...In such a situation, knowledge, always fragile, is distorted (Farley, 14-16).

If knowledge has become distorted, as Farley claims, largely because we have excluded imagination and mystery and tradition from among the claims for its truth, then we must find ways to restore it to wholeness and to reconnect it to faith. It is only when our understanding of knowledge is whole and includes the contributions faith can make to it—and, I must also say, when our understanding of faith is pure and includes the contributions that knowledge can make to it—that we can benefit from the power of their intersection. If we as Christians who believe in the indispensable importance of learning to faith and of faith to learning do not move to bring them to their fullness and then reconnect them, who will?

And who might be our collaborators in this action? Strangely, I think our best collaborators may, in fact, be those who at one time we may have thought of as our strongest opponents: the scientists whose methodology at one time eliminated faith but who have now come to see their own disciplines in a new light and who have opened small, but unmistakable bridges to a world of faith, to a desire for God as a power without whom no explanations are possible.

I think we will not very easily let go of the corruption of overly simplistic empiricism, of the distortions that arise from having disconnected disciplines and fragmented fields of knowledge, and then excluded from them the powerful contributions of tradition and mystery. I believe we will continue to live with the present incomplete and unsatisfactory paradigm about the nature of knowledge for generations to come. But I believe that, if we as Christian educators simply accept that paradigm, when it, as Farley says, “wittingly or unwittingly violates the concreteness and complexity of things, or when it abandons the wisdom of the past,” if we do not continue at least in our own institutions to explore the complex nature of knowledge, including the knowledge of God as a powerful end and support to secular knowledge, we are then responsible for contributing to the anguish and pain of our time (Farley, 17). As a result, we will simply watch passively as more and more of our students and our colleagues suffer the debilitating effects of living in a culture which has severed its essential, life-giving spinal cord, its connection between faith and learning.

I have come in recent years more and more to understand and speak of the fundamental
Christian identity of a church-related college as a verb. The identity of an institution lies, not in what anyone says about it from time to time, but in what everyone does about it every day. Identity is not a static thing. Rather it is a dynamic action, a constant movement among the many persons who create an institution and who seek to influence its life. If in our daily creation of our institutions of higher education we do not hold them responsible for relating faith and knowledge, if we do not lead these colleges and universities to help students see that faith and knowledge indeed inform one another, we have misunderstood their mission. If we respond only to our obligations to teach as we have most likely been taught in graduate school, where too often the methodology “cannot yield knowledge of God,” we are creating not a church-related college, but simply a college. Possibly a very good college, but not a faith-related one. If we teach in a way that focuses primarily on developing the faith of our students and do not take responsibility for their knowledge and learning, we are creating a religious institution, perhaps a very good one, but not a college. If we do both of these things but in no relationship to one another, we are creating an institution with a schizophrenic mission. Each will be unrelated to the other, neither will inform the other. The result is not a church-related college.

As I think is clear by now, I believe quite strongly that, for those of us who are Christians, the love of learning and the desire for God are intimately related, and for those of us who are engaged in the enterprise of Christian higher education, they are inextricably related. We have an obligation to our students to talk about that relationship and to encourage them to explore it. That relationship has unfolded painfully through history; it is always in tension and in opposition, but only in modern times and in some cultures, especially ours, has it been—for all intents and purposes—severed. Our primary responsibility as Christian educators is to attempt to restore that life-giving connection in whatever way we can, so that the power of faith informed by knowledge and knowledge informed by faith come alive in a world that, perhaps blindly but nonetheless desperately, seeks it.

There is more and more evidence that contemporary Christian scholars are beginning to understand the fragile nature of contemporary knowledge, are beginning to explore ways to probe, and perhaps eventually even to heal, the fractures which have so decimated its relationship to faith in modern times. In a recent consultation about campus ministry at Union College, a conversation titled, “Out on a Limb: Thinking About Faith and Ministry in the College and University Setting,” several speakers pushed the epistemological envelope, seeking to heal some of the fractures among the disciplines and to include within knowledge a spiritual dimension which has been unfortunately lost to the contemporary world.

“There are very practical as well as theoretical ways,” said Douglas John Hall of McGill University, “in which a Christian community within the university today can become a forum for dialogue between the natural, social and spiritual sciences that are otherwise cut off from one another in their Babel language-worlds and their well-known fear of interdisciplinary discourse.”

At that same meeting, Douglas Sloan of Columbia Teachers’ College made a strong plea for the power of “living thinking” as a way to counteract the purely quantitative, mechanistic and sense-bound ways of knowing that are regnant today. “The quality of our world,” he says,

depends upon the quality of our thinking. If we are tied to a dead thinking capable of handling only the inanimate and the mechanistic, we will find ourselves living more and more in a dead and mechanistic world. . . . A transformation of our world must begin with the transformation of our dead thinking into a living thinking. . . . A living thinking will be a thinking in which the whole human being—thinking, feeling, willing and valuing—is involved in the work of knowing. . . . This transformation of our knowing by a living thinking would bridge the split between faith and knowledge, ethics and science, quality and quantity.

Similarly, in a recent review of the book, We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University by David Damrosch, James Turner of Notre Dame also describes the collapse of the traditional unified structure of knowledge, and the raising of what he calls “methodological walls [among the disciplines], scalable only by the well-trained.” But, he says,
Jeanne Knoerle is Program Director in the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment. Chancellor of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, she writes extensively on Christian higher education.

Christians and secular-minded academics share a single house of learning, and the task of rebuilding it offers opportunities for bridging the yawning gap that opened in the late nineteenth century between Christianity and the larger academic world. . . . Restoring coherence to knowledge is not a job whose outcome we can predict, nor one likely ever to yield a finished product; but it is one in which Christians should roll up their sleeves and labor side by side with non-Christians. Reconstructing a unitary discursive field, even though we can never expect it to be stable, matters greatly for general education and for the public culture all Americans share. It also matters in another way for Christians. A reunified knowledge could once again—in ways impossible now to conceive in particulars—allow Christian scholars to relate their research and teaching concretely and in specifics to the Creator. . . . God might return to the university from the exile into which disciplinary specialization sent him (Turner, 28).

I hope, and indeed I sincerely believe, that these scholars represent only the tip of the iceberg. They make a powerful and accurate assessment of where we are in higher education. And they also issue a hopeful challenge to all of us who believe that we do not simply inherit the identity of our Christian institutions, but that we actively, daily create their identity. If that identity is to include both the love of learning and the desire for God, it will only be because religious people, scholars who believe in religion, intellectuals who practice their faith—you and I—insist that those two ends are not only not contradictory, but are, indeed, mutually necessary if there is ever to be fullness of life. Our work is clearly cut out for us, and I hope to join you in that enterprise. 

works cited


"It was not a story to pass on"

tale and memory in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Jennifer Thomas

Discussing Toni Morrison within the context of music is not that far a reach, given both the blues tradition’s influence on African-American literature, and Morrison’s latest novel, entitled *Jazz*. I’m especially interested in the hush, both referred to—and exemplified—in the spiritual “Hush, Hush, Somebody’s Callin’ My Name.” As we hear the pause, silent and expectant, between the call and the singer’s response, I want to consider the role of such silences in the African-American literary tradition by examining the resonant silences in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*.

The terms of silence for literary art are different, though, from the rests and silences in music. We’re accustomed to silence when we close the book; The End, it’s over, no more to say. But *Beloved* ends by suggesting that it never should have started in the first place, that it spoke out of turn. We are confronted with those last two baffling pages: “It was not a story to pass on,” followed by a paragraph of oblique reference to the events of the novel and the community trying to forget them. Then, again: “It was not a story to pass on.” Another paragraph, then a crucial shift in pronoun referent and verb tense: “This is not a story to pass on.”

This ending has invited much conversation: any silence is filled quickest, I believe, by literary critics. Some rush to point out that the novel has indeed told this untellable, unspeakable story of slavery and its aftermath. Morrison, in other words, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t tell it; after all, she just has, and with Pulitzer-prize winning skill. According to this view, the ending serves to highlight the troubling nature of this particular story (and the other narratives that resemble it) and to sharpen the reader’s sense of the weight and risk of the pages in her hand.

A silence surrounding slavery is also embedded in the conclusion to this novel, and many other readers assess the ending in terms of the previously untold story of (especially) African women’s forced transport to and precarious foothold in 19th-century America. Morrison thus defies the code of silence by writing *Beloved*, and at the novel’s end, calls attention to her act of rebellion.

Both of these readings suggest a subtle contradiction, a tension between the statement and its real meaning. I’d like to entertain the possibility of reading these pages straight: What might happen if we finished this story with a moment of silence? What in this novel might be—necessarily, permanently, and perfectly—beyond words? With as keen an ear for silence as for the rhythm and texture of spoken and thought words, Morrison, in the ongoing effort to put life stories together, gives us plenty to do besides talk. We can read our way to Morrison through two other texts: a nineteenth-century account of the life of a slave woman named Louisa Picquet and another contemporary novel, *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams, published in 1987.

In this novel, Williams dramatizes the conflict of stories—told and untold—in the context of a nineteenth-century slave woman being interviewed by a white researcher. Dessa has led a successful slave rebellion, though she has subsequently been captured. Because she is pregnant, authorities will wait to hang her until she gives birth to the property she carries in her womb. While being held, she is interviewed by Adam Nehemiah, a white southerner who is particularly interested in her story of sedition and revolt. In the first section of the novel, we learn Dessa’s story through her interviews with Nehemiah, especially in terms of what she does not tell him. Dessa considers the effect of telling her story to him:
She cut her eyes at the white man. He was bent over the pad on his knee, his hand propelling the pen across its surface in intricate movements. What would this make him know about her, she wondered, about her life with Kaine [her husband]? (45)

Williams’ novel really rests on these questions: What can or will the slave woman say to make him (us?) know her? her life? In an interesting twist on the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, Dessa is not being interviewed by a white northerner. Ardent abolitionists like Lydia Maria Childs and John Garrison often framed (and authenticated) the accounts of escaped slaves and published their (very popular) narratives as part of their efforts to end slavery. Dessa Rose, however, darkens the context of the interview significantly, since Adam Nehemiah is working on a manual for slaveowners teaching them to handle rebellious slaves, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Populations and Some Means of Eradicating Them.*

Thus Williams substitutes the rebellion eradicator for the abolitionist. One possible explanation for the shift is that she is pointing out the peculiar relationship inherent in the very interview form itself. Whether the interviewer elicits the slave’s story for an abolitionist or slaveholding social program, the enslaved woman is unable to tell her story on her own terms. In the context of the interview with the white interlocutor, the narratives of slave women often display two distinct strategies: first, the woman might correct the terms and phrases the interviewer imposes on her story; and second, the interviewer might elide the woman’s account of her true experiences.

Both of these techniques run throughout Dessa’s story, as well as the account of Louisa Picquet, a woman born a slave in South Carolina, sold to masters in Georgia, Alabama, and New Orleans, who finally escaped to Cincinnati. In 1861, New York minister H. Mattison published a series of interviews with Louisa Picquet under the title of *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life, or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life.* This “tale” offers several striking examples of the corrective impulse I mentioned above, the strategy of interruption. As in many narratives of female slaves, Louisa’s story circles around the story of her mother, from whom she was separated at an early age and for whom she tirelessly seeks once she has gained freedom. Her account of the moment when she last saw her mother is one of the most moving in her story: “When I was going away I heard some one cryin[g], and prayin[g] the Lord to go with her only daughter, and protect me. I felt pretty bad then, but hadn’t no time, only to say good-bye.” Rev. Mattison asks, “It seems like a dream, don’t it?” And Louisa responds firmly:

> No; it seems fresh in my memory when I think of it no longer than yesterday. Mother was right on her knees, with her hands up, prayin[g] to the Lord for me. She didn’t care who saw her: the people all lookin[g] at her. I often thought her prayers followed me, for I never could forget her. Whenever I wanted any thing real bad after that, my mother was always sure to appear to me in a dream that night, and have plenty to give me always. (19)

The sharp reality of the pain of this experience for the daughter will never fade to a dream, and at the same time Louisa enforces this reality by describing her mother’s continued presence in her life, appearing in her dreams “with plenty to give [her], always.”

Similarly, Dessa Rose corrects (silently, but effectively for the reader) the defining language used by the white man. She wonders:

> why this white man would want to take her out under the tree and talk about Kaine, and behind her inquiring expression she resented his careless references. Wasn’t no darky to it, she would think indignantly. Kaine was the color of the cane syrup taffy they pulled and stretched to a glistening golden brown in winter. (58)

Filling in the picture of the man she loves and has lost to the slaveowner’s violence, Dessa contradicts the language of the whiteman (“darky”) and substitutes her own sensual, delicious association with Kaine’s name and self. It was not at all like a dream; he is not a darky. In these passages the slave woman speaks out against the terms of the story spelled out to her by the white audience.

Often, however, the tale or its teller refuses to speak at all. We’re moving here toward a sense of silence as a strategy. Often, the interviewer’s questions border on lewd curiosity. The white man does not hesitate to talk under the clothes of the woman he interviews, in a delicate dance of...
voyeurism and 19th-century morality. The interviewer asks a reticent Louisa a series of questions about the physical abuse she experienced. She was punished—as a fourteen year old girl—for refusing to go up to her master’s chamber for sex. She tells her questioner: “Then I came to the conclusion he could not do anything but whip me—he would not kill me for it; an[d] I made up my mind to take the whippin[g]. So I didn’t go that night.” She then briefly states “So he whip me.” Her questioner pursues the topic:

Q: Well, how did he whip you?
A: With the cowhide.
Q: Around your shoulders, or how?
A: That day he did.
Q: How were you dressed—with thin clothes, or how?
A: Oh, very thin; with low-neck[e]d dress. In the summertime we never wore but two pieces—only the under, and the blue homespun over. It is a striped cloth [changing the subject?] they make in Georgia just for the colored people.
Q: Did he whip you hard, so as to raise marks?
A: Oh yes. (12)

When Louisa recounts another encounter with this same master, the interviewer draws a veil over her story, interrupting with brackets to explain the omission:

“Then he came to me in the ironin[g]-room, downstairs, where I was, and whip me with the cowhide, naked, so I [ex]pect I’ll take some of the marks with me to the grave. One of them I know I will.” (Here Mrs. P declines explaining further how he whipped her, though she had told our hostess where this was written; but it is too horrible and indelicate to be read in a civilized country.) Mrs. P then proceeds, “He was very mad, and whipped me awfully. That was the worst whippin[g] I ever had.” (14-15)

This civilized country places strict limits on the nature of these revelations and makes some things unspeakable. In a thoughtful essay on the art of memoir in African-American literature, Toni Morrison speaks of the importance of this cultural context to the slave narrative’s form and meaning: “The milieu . . . dictated the purpose and the style.” Social purposes made vivid, graphic descriptions a necessary project in the goal of abolishing the institution that enabled it. At the same time, slave narratives couldn’t go too far in their brutal truth-telling lest they cause the white reader to put the book aside. Their readership was the wealthy white northern audience with the power to change the conditions to which the slave narratives refer, however obliquely. Morrison writes: “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things” (“Site” 110). Thus silence was strategic: it positioned readers for social action, armed with enough detail to convict but not enough to offend. However excessive the violence, it was carefully shaped and muted to fit these purposes. For the contemporary writer, the purpose has shifted:

For me—[writes Morrison] a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman—the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” (110)

A closely related commitment of Morrison’s is the role of the artist and art in the public world. She has given breathtaking speeches to Congressional subcommittees from the moment government cuts in arts funding began in the early eighties. She joins Oprah Winfrey for a dinner party with four guests who’ve won their places at the table by writing essays in response to Song of Solomon. She writes for and about the particularized world of African-American culture and invites the world to read, know, and believe it. She is a committed college teacher who makes regular critiques of the isolating tendencies of academe. In literature and literary criticism, she seeks and values a voice that is “not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very different kind of person but an implied ‘we’ in a narrator.” The writer is thus embedded in intellectual communities, but moreover, for Morrison, hooked into the world at large. In the same essay, she writes:
If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust . . . . The problem comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time (“Rootedness” 344-345).

Thus we return, with Morrison, to the ending of her novel about a woman’s experience in, through, and out of slavery. Along with ripping the veil concealing African-American experience, an important part of the work of contemporary African-American women writers involves silence, the freedom not to answer, not to tell, the story prompted by white American audiences. Morrison’s Sethe, and Williams’ Dessa Rose, who both resist talking about their slavery days, especially emphasize the brutal effects of slavery on their sexual and reproductive physical selves.

Even when Adam Nehemiah is not on the scene, Dessa does not want to tell her story. Surrounded by her fellow slaves, chained into a community on a coffle, Dessa wants silence:

Dessa knew herself to be enveloped in caring. The pain and tiredness of her body numbed her mind; she was content to leave it that way. Even when the others spoke around the campfire . . . about their trials under slavery, Dessa was silent. Their telling awoke no echoes in her mind. That part of the past lay sealed in the scars between her thighs (58).

Sethe, the heroine of Morrison’s *Beloved*, is also silent on some of these subjects, however much the novel might rip the veil to imagine and represent her interior life. A brief plot summary (which unravels the loops and layers you must read through to get this story): Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky where Sethe spends most of her youth and early womanhood, is owned and run by Mr. and Mrs. Garner, whose treatment of their slaves is uncharacteristically benign. Sethe, the only female slave on the plantation, works with Mrs. Garner in the kitchen, while the five male slaves (the Sweet Home men) work the fields and buildings. When Mr. Garner dies, his brother-in-law comes to run Sweet Home, and the world turns upside down (or rightside up). The brother-in-law, named only as “schoolteacher,” routinely whips and punishes the men, and along with his nephews, undertakes studies and experiments with all of the slaves. When Sethe overhears him discussing her animal and human characteristics, she decides to join the men’s plan to escape. Through a series of missed communications, all goes wrong. Though she gets her two boys and baby girl on board, she herself is bestially tortured by the schoolteacher’s nephews. She makes her escape, giving birth to another baby girl (Denver) on her way north, and finally makes it to Cincinnati where her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has been living since her son Halle (one of the Sweet Home men) bought her freedom. After a month of this bliss, Sethe spots the schoolteacher’s hat approaching from the road and grabs up her children as she dashes into a woodshed. In that darkened shed she tries to kill her children, so that they will not be taken back to slavery. She succeeds in murdering the “crawling already? baby girl” and is swinging the infant Denver toward a wall when a neighbor stops her. Later, out of jail, back at home, the baby’s ghost becomes active in the house, chasing off Sethe’s sons and making Denver shy and withdrawn. Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men, shows up and beats back the ghost, but as he does, a mysterious young woman named Beloved appears. She is twenty (the age the baby girl would have been had she lived), she has no marks on her hands or feet, a strange scar on her neck, and she knows about Sethe. Eventually, Sethe goes into a decline, for apologizing, making up, and explaining the past almost kills her.

So Sethe has had her own encounters with the sets of questions posed by the interviewer, and she even stops talking to her daughter, Denver, when she remembers them. Sethe begins telling Denver about schoolteacher:

he was a little man. Short. . . . Gentle in a lot of ways. You know, the kind who know Jesus by His first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face. . . . He liked the ink I made. It was her [Mrs. Garner’s] recipe but he preferred how I mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn’t know
that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions. He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said. I still think it was them questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for all time.”

She stopped.

Denver knew that her mother was through with it—for now anyway. The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame—signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go. (45-46)

Denver quickly recognizes the end of Sethe’s storytelling, and although the novel will fully examine and explore schoolteacher, his questions, and the ink she made for him, Sethe will not tell it, will not pass it on as a story. When Beloved appears in the flesh, she is hungry for stories, begging Denver and Sethe to tell her about their past:

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left. (72-73)

Just as the scars sealed up the past for Dessa, Sethe feels the bruise of the bit when she tries to say the unspeakable memories she carries. This problem of telling the story, of passing on the intricate and often cruel knots of the past, is the new vision Morrison offers here. The interior life of the woman who aches with the tale she stutters or circles around—these refer to other instances of telling her past—never surfaced in the nineteenth-century tradition of slave narratives.

Finally, some attention must be paid to the nonnarrative (silently speaking) forces that allow Sethe and Paul D to come to terms with their past and make a viable present. Even more powerful than told stories, Beloved holds up the efficacy of human touch, spiritual ecstatic expression, and song.

The mysterious power of the human touch, of care for the human body, emerges in many scenes throughout the novel. These moments of touch are primarily efforts at reassembling the body torn and slashed by slavery. No romance, but eloquent expression of the care for the wounds that the interviewer wanted to document. Amy Denver, the straggly white girl who finds Sethe on the bloody side of the Ohio and helps her give birth, also helps to revive Sethe’s lifeless, mutilated feet. Her “good hands” work their charm:

Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe’s feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears. “It’s gonna hurt, now,” said Amy. “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (43).

In another description of the saving touch:

Amy pressed her fingers into the soles of the slavewoman’s feet. . . “Hurt?”
“A touch.”
“Good for you. More it hurt more better it is. Can’t nothing heal without pain, you know”(97).

Most dramatically, Amy’s good “strong hands” bring Denver into the world. Morrison gives a silent, still description of this scene. The birth itself is plenty noisy and active, but Morrison pulls back to give us a quiet scene:

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by blue fern they did something together appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair—wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (104)
This wordless scene echoes with the sound of the river Sethe will soon cross and with the power that awaits her when she arrives at the house where her children are waiting, well-fed and loved by Baby Suggs, holy. Sethe’s mother-in-law carries her own loads of stories and unspoken burdens. By the time she made it to Cincinnati, Baby Suggs had “decided that, because slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue, she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once” (106). She allows no title to be attached to her ministry of the heart, except for the “caress” of “holy” which follows her name. Preachers, like paterollers, were often part of the problem for these believers, but powerful religious experience didn’t (doesn’t) require a degree in theology or a title of authority. Baby Suggs, holy, visits churches of all denominations, and holds gatherings outside them all. The scene in the Clearing merits quoting here:

Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods. . . .In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (107)

Sethe’s trouble—her murdered child, the baby’s venom—shuts down this powerful heart. When Baby Suggs realizes after all her years away from slavery that the white schoolteacher can just walk in her yard and undo her family, she goes to bed. Feeling that she has lied all her life about grace, dancing, laughing, and crying, she gives herself over to contemplating color. Finally, however, the women who gathered with her in the Clearing come back together. Thirty of the ones who danced, cried and laughed with Baby Suggs, holy come to rid Sethe and Denver of the ghost. As they approach the house, some kneel, some stand, all pray:

Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes . . . and then Ella hollered.

Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (318)

Clearly this is not silence, but it is also not a story or an answer to someone else’s question. Before the word, the prayer, comes the sound, the song of connection, protection, and love. Sethe opens the door:

[F]or Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (321)
Bigger and stronger than words—the sound “broke the back” of those piddling things—the music baptizes Sethe and rescues her. Once again, the language of grace, baptism, ministry find expression outside institutions that have alienated these believers. African-American religious experience, with its emphasis on participatory, communal worship is a relationship between the minister and the people. No oratory, and plenty of sound. Beloved disappears, and Sethe survives.

She is not whole, though. Paul D comes to her and performs a silent ritual of love and forgiveness and the generous gift of a self. She is haunted by the implications of her own act:

“I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.”
“What ink? Who?” (333)

Paul D is mystified but the reader isn’t. Sethe is remembering the schoolteacher’s incessant questions and records of what she and the other slaves say—along with lists of her human and animal characteristics, the notes he takes while his nephews take her breast milk—as she lies on what might be her deathbed. But Paul D won’t let her go; she needs care: “Let me heat up some water.” He stops. “Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?”

He wants to rub her feet. But Sethe resists the touch this time:

She is thinking: No. This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold? (334)

Paul D is the kind of man, says Morrison often, “who can walk in a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. Sethe cries, mourning the loss of Beloved, “She was my best thing.” Paul D, weary and grateful to this powerful woman, disagrees:

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?” (335)

This is a question, not an answer; not agreement, just disbelieving wonder.

When the narrative moves from Sethe’s soul-wrenching question to the call for silence, Morrison may be returning us to the epigraph of her novel, dedicated to the “Sixty Million and more” who died in and under the effects of slavery in America. Faced with this immeasurable number, the best thing we could do at this point might be to fall into the silence that only music is able to incorporate. Failing that, we can pause to remember, to rip the veil and imagine their imaginative lives and to allow a space for the unspoken, unspeakable truths that are beyond words. Morrison asserts that there are some truths that only our artists can tell, and with her among us we’re in good, strong hands.

Jennifer Thomas,
Lilly Fellow 1995-97,
delivered an earlier
version of this essay
as a talk to
the Christ College
(Honors)
Symposium in the
spring of 1997.
She has recently
accepted a position
at Newberry College
in Newberry,
North Carolina.

Conflict in the College Classroom

Paul Trout

But when I looked at Justin, all I saw was blankness. I must have looked at him for several seconds, searching for an expression, a smile, a sign, a movement of his eyebrows, something to indicate that, Yea, that’s good stuff and I’m glad this teacher turned me on to it. But I saw nothing. Justin’s eyes said, ‘You don’t amuse me with your brand of so-called good writing. There’s nothing you can do or say to impress me.’

Peter Sacks, Generation X Goes to College

If you press your ear to the ivy, you’ll hear professors murmuring about the strains of teaching today’s college students. Even at the best of times, of course, teaching is fraught with tension; professors, after all, have to test students, grade them, monitor them, correct them, and sometimes exhort, admonish, embarrass, challenge, and fail them. But professors are grumbling about more than the normal frustrations and anxieties of teaching. They are complaining about having to teach students who scorn academic culture itself.

Professors complain, for example, about students who openly read newspapers and bring trays of food to class and leave when the meal is finished; who hold conversations while the instructor is speaking and show their annoyance when asked to be quiet; who engage in petting sessions in the back rows; who simply get up and leave in the middle of the instructor’s remarks; who demand high grades for mediocre work; who expect special concessions when it suits them; who swear at and openly ridicule their instructors; who menace and challenge them, etc. As one experienced professor put it, “as compared with those of previous semesters this spring’s students [1993] are defective both in civility and rationality. In addition to the passive rudeness of absenteeism is a lack of concern for others shown in classroom misbehavior and even occasional active surliness” (Harlan Miller, 6).

Professional newsletters and websites are now flooded with troubling anecdotes about openly rude and confrontational students. Here a few Kodak moments from the classroom. When a professor asked students not to disturb the class, one of them said, “He’s just a stupid professor. He doesn’t know our names from Adam. Really!” (Bauer, 6). When another asked a student who was watching a tiny portable TV in class to turn it off, he said, “I’ve seen this show anyway” (Sacks, 16). Another student called an English professor “a bitch” in class. A student who was offered the chance to redo a bad paper called the instructor “a ‘dickhead’ and dropped the course” (Marc, 31). Another student who didn’t like his grade sent this anonymous note to the offending professor: “How can you justify giving 13 A’s in a class with over 200 people. You are just an old fucker. Burn in hell” (in Bauer, 8). When the instructor at an optional help session asked the class “Now, how would we do that?”, a student at the back yelled out, “Who gives a shit!” (Bauer 9). A professor at a college in the Rockies reported that one of her classes grew so unruly she had to leave the room (Chronicle [1995], A39).

It would appear, indeed, that giving the teacher a hard time has evolved into something of a sport, just as in high school. Students told Peter Sacks, author of Generation X Goes to College, that “many of their peers were contemptuous of their instructors, ridiculing them for the way they dressed or how they wore their hair.” The two students also observed that their peers “seemed to get special joy out of slamming their instructors, for rather spurious reasons” (Sacks, 64). A student at
Montana State University put it this way on a colleague’s evaluation form: “One reason you got so much shit all the time was the fact that it was fun to give it to you.” As one teacher said to me over the phone, “the kids are becoming bigger assholes and there’s more of them.” Not quite Mr. Holland’s Opus, is it?

The situation has gotten so tense that professors are urged by administrators to self-defensively institute classroom behavior guidelines and to list in the course description the acts they find rude and offensive (Chronicle [1995], A39). Here’s an example from Utah, one that also reveals the accumulated strain of dealing with callous and arrogant students:

This class is also too large for chit-chat, please do not. You are unaware of how far your voices carry in FAV 150 and how disturbing it is to your classmates to be forced to endure your idle chatter and giggling. The students who sit near you are not interested in your romantic lives, how out-of-touch you think your parents are, how stupid you think your teachers are, etc. . . . Mindless talking during class is immature, inconsiderate behavior.

The frustrations and moral dangers of teaching today’s students are exposed with ruthless honesty in Sacks’ Generation X Goes to College. When dealing with “childish, rude, or bored” students, Sacks acknowledges, it is tempting to just tell them to “go back to . . . whatever Neverneverland they’d come out of” (94). Day after day instructors have to “pinch” themselves or “walk out of the room” to keep from “blowing up.” But even when a class is going fairly well, Sacks points out, instructors are always conscious of their vulnerability, knowing that if they flub up or aren’t entertaining enough or otherwise cross students’ sensibilities, or show any weakness, students will smell blood and “like sharks devour you” (8). Confessing that his “cynical” attitude sounds “horrible,” Sacks explains that he earned it as a result of his “trial by fire” at the hands of impolite, presumptuous and arrogant students (8-9). No wonder the best attended session of the 1996 meeting of the Modern Language Association was “Professors on Prozac.”

Sure, there have always been undisciplined, ill-mannered, sullen, whining, surly, and uncivil students; what has changed is that now there is more of them and their displays of ill-temper are more frequent and egregious. How many more of them is anybody’s guess—who’s counting?—but there now seems enough to drive even seasoned educators to speak publicly about the problem and to warn that the mentoring relationship seems headed for disaster (Harlan Miller).

You don’t have to be a charter member of Mensa to figure out where this problem comes from. In the words of Daniel Wattenberg:

With the rise in two-earner couples, parental supervision of the next generation is declining. The void in parental authority is being filled by peer pressure and junk culture—violent video games and trash television, misogynistic rap, crypto-satanic heavy metal, and morosely self-absorbed alternative music—and the symbolic confluence of these insalubrious tributaries, MTV. Underexposed to adult authority and overexposed to peers and junk culture, children—especially boys, especially teenage boys—are apt to become lazy, stupid, coarse, authority-averse, thrill-seeking nihilists (32).

This passage may leave out other causes contributing to the conflicts in the classroom, but it properly points to the most important: poor parenting and a society, and popular culture, that is increasingly vicious, vulgar, and violent. No wonder American teenagers are beset by a bewildering array of pathologies. No metal detector can stop these pathological attitudes and behaviors from entering the classroom. Now that about sixty-three percent of high-school graduates go on to some form of post-secondary education, they are entering the college classroom as well, where professors now must wrestle, as high-school teachers have been doing for decades, with students who are undersocialized, coarse, and emotionally scarred.

But there is another reason, I think, for the rudeness and added tensions that now characterize college teaching. Of the sixty-something percent of students who take a stab at higher education, many are simply unfit for, and inhospitable to, the rhythms, requirements, and rigors traditionally
associated with college education. It is not just that they are academically underprepared—remedial courses and summer programs can remedy this problem. It is that they are temperamentally unable or unwilling to do what is necessary to succeed at college. Many, in fact, seem contemptuous of the nature and goals of higher education.

They are, after all, the products of a culture committed to entertaining them 24 hours a day, and of a high-school system committed to providing a “comfortable,” stress-free academic environment, one largely stripped of academic pressures and demands (little or no homework, no flunks) and marked by therapeutic praise and inflated grades. When these students run into professors with expectations and standards appropriate to training the nation’s future scientists, professionals, and social leaders, they are shocked and dismayed. Aggrieved at the demands imposed upon them by Authority Figures, students lobby in all kinds of ways to make college more like Highland High (where Beavis and Butt-head are so effectively tutored). Should they fail to do so, they are often outraged. I suspect that much of the rudeness faculty see are “gestures of resentment” provoked by requirements and standards that students regard as insulting, onerous, and unfair (Slavitt, 129).

Let me return to the issue of students who seem antipathetical to the nature and goals of higher education. For quite some time now, professors have been complaining about students who simply refuse to read the assigned works; who sit passively in class and don’t contribute to class discussions; who complain about course workloads and lobby for fewer assignments; who skip class when it suits them; who give low evaluations to instructors with high standards or tough requirements; who neglect to prepare for class and tests and do not even bother to do extra-credit work or take make-up exams; who do not consult material placed on reserve or pick up class handouts; who refuse to learn any more than is necessary to get a good grade; who boast about how little time is spent studying; who ridicule high achievers; who are impatient with deliberative analysis; who condemn intellectual endeavors as “boring”; who resent academic requirements as an intrusion on free time, etc.

Indeed, these behaviors and attitudes are now so rife on college campuses that they are squelching more motivated and engaged students. “Try bringing up a book you’ve read, or a great lecture you’ve just heard in class and other students will tell you, “keep it in class. My brain meter’s not running now”” (Willimon, 29). A sophomore at Duke University complains, “If you try to discuss something that happened in class, or something from your reading for class, they’ll ridicule you. People want to be able to turn off the academic switch the minute they get out of class” (Willimon 30). A student told me that she went to a counsellor to find out what was wrong with her because she liked her classes. The pressure is on to scorn all the grown-up garbage that makes up higher education (Sacks, 149).

Although no one can say for sure how many college students now feel this way, the number, at least at some schools and in some classes, seems to have reached a sort of critical mass. A philosophy professor at Virginia Polytechnic believes that “a majority of students are more or less disaffected and an alarming number (10 percent? 15 percent?) seem positively alienated.” “Unprecedented numbers [of students] rarely come to class,” “have not read the material and have scant interest in learning it. They will not ask questions, nor will they answer them.” “As I talked to other faculty members I was. . .disheartened to discover that the pattern was very common” (Miller, 3). A chemistry professor at Virginia Polytechnic estimates that only a “handful” of his freshmen chemistry students are interested in class, “no more than a few percent” (Bauer, 5). James Otteson, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, who has taught at Joliet Junior College and the College of St. Francis and the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), writes that “the majority” of his students are “generally uninterested in actual learning, [are] concerned to do the least amount of work possible, [think] themselves entitled to special attention, etc.” (in Bauer 13). An English professor who recently retired from an east-coast university said to me, “most students nowadays are reluctant to learn and to think and resent being awakened from their stupor. I shudder when I consider the future of this country” (Montclair State University).

What Sacks calls the “unarticulated, undeclared culture war” (75) between professors and
students is nothing less than a struggle over the expectations, requirements and standards appropriate for higher education. Growing numbers of students want them lower. The degree of pressure on faculty to dumb-down their courses to make them more “comfortable” became apparent to me a year ago last spring semester, when, as a member of my department’s annual-review committee, I read—and took notes on—all the narrative evaluation forms students submitted on my tenure-track colleagues. What these forms made all too clear is that many students demand a dumbed-down educational experience. If this sounds like student-bashing, listen to what students themselves said on these forms (assume sics throughout):

I feel that he, along with every other English teacher, feels that his class is the only one and gives too many books to read . . . . Let’s try to cut back shall we? / maybe not so many books / less reading of boring texts, the books put me to sleep / the reading load was intense it would be nice to have it trimmed & compacted a little / try to have less reading [per] day / may be fewer books or smaller books would be better / getting all of her assigned reading done is almost impossible / perhaps choose or focus on less reading material / the reading was too much. It is taught as a 400 level course, not a 200 / cutting down on # of reading assignments would have been helpful / the reading amount was a bit excessive / I felt the reading amount was too extensive / I think that the reading load was way too much / it is way too much work/reading for a 6 week class / it’s a pain to read so many books [6] in the summer / 4 books over 400 pages is a little to [much to] take in for 1 semester, etc.

Are eight books in a sixteen-week semester too many? Are six? Four? This depends, of course, on the length and difficulty of the books, on the amount of other work required, on the student’s course load, on the number of hours the student works outside of school, and on a host of other variables no professor can possibly know or factor in when designing a college course. And professors should not even try, because no matter what number of books they assign, many students will find the number burdensome and complain about it. What these comments reveal is that students—many of them English majors—find reading burdensome and do not like doing it. According to a recent poll, a majority of college students do not read anything outside of class. And even more have trouble finishing assigned books. I taught an upper-division class where only four students of 30 had read 1984, and another where only five students of 32 finished Madame Bovary, although both groups had two weeks to read the novels—including the week of Spring break.

In the following comments, students reveal just how testy they can become when asked to stand and deliver:

it is really hard to come to class when every day the material is being shoved down your throat / we were bombarded with information about authors that was boring with facts / less hand outs / could cover a little less information / she does seem to overload us with a lot of info. For a 200 level course it is very difficult / this class is exceptionally difficult, so maybe make it just a tad easier / I think he asks alot for a 123 class . . . . I think what he wants is a little advanced / tests & papers might be above level for some students / puzzles were not easy even though meant to be / 4 books and a 15 pg paper on a writing—a lot for a 200 level class / who gives a damn if we call it elegy or loss? Are these terms used elsewhere in lit? I’ve never heard of them! / she assumed too much prior knowledge of some details that were impossible for everyone to know / class content to difficult for a 200 level class. Quizzes & test were way to long for allotted time / he needs to realize the limits of his students and of a 200 level class / the course had a tremendous work load—two 6-8 pg. papers, a presentation, a midterm, final, and the 12-15 pg. research paper—whew [300-level course] / some of the material seemed to advanced / I felt it was too difficult for a 100 level course / its a lot of work for such a small reward / back off on harshness when grading reports too long / she grades way to hard!! / she seems to be a very strict grader . . . . It seems almost impossible to receive an ‘A’ on a paper / it seemed very hard to achieve an A / tests are quite difficult compared to subject matter / it is unfair to drop someones grade because he/she missed to many days / no mandatory attendance—at least not for grade reduction / attendance should not be mandatory and/or your grade should not depend upon attendance / allow us time to write an essay that can be allowed to be handed in with a wonderful grade / his expectation were a
little to high on writing / I found this class to be very difficult. I felt like I was drowning / I
don’t understand why we have to learn this subject matter to the extent that we do—even if we
teach in high school, we won’t go into this much detail, etc.

The message is clear: ‘Teach us less, require less.’ And this message reverberates throughout
higher education. Sacks quotes a student who complains, “Why are colleges trying to force this stuff
down our throats and trying to make us think when our minds and opinions are already formed?”
(Sacks, 79). A T-shirt sold at Duke University proudly announces “You can lead me to college, but
you can’t make me think” (in Bauer, 13). A student website offering term papers for sale is named
“school sucks.” Instructors have been complaining about such attitudes for about ten years now. Max
0. Hocutt remarked that “most students dislike courses in which you try to make them think or
require them to solve problems and resolve ambiguities, or force them to learn skills” (62). Reynolds
Price, a professor of English at Duke, worried about “the prevailing cloud of indifference, of
frequent hostility, to a thoughtful life” that he sees even at Duke University (Chronicle [1996], A33).
Kurt Wiesenfeld, a physicist at Georgia Tech, complained about college students who resented
having to work hard and who regarded a chance to learn as “less than worthless” (16). Michael Platt
was disheartened by students who “wear hats drawn over their faces” as if to say “I’m not really
here,” who “wear scowls, as if to say, ‘What are you going to ask me to do today that I don’t want
to’” (445).

Although professional educators should resent and resist student pressure to dumb down, the
sorry fact is that professors who do resist run into trouble. When an instructor assigned homework
in a course that many students regarded as “Mickey Mouse,” three students flew to the dean to
complain! (Bauer, 13). When Andrei Toom, an adjunct math instructor from Russia, explained to his
students something which was a little bit beyond the standard course, they asked suspiciously: ‘Will
this be on the test?’ When he said ‘no,’ the students refused to listen and showed that he was doing
something inappropriate” (Toom, 125). Asked by students why he gave math problems unlike those
in the textbook, Toom responded: “Because I want you to know elementary mathematics.”
Immediately an imposing train of students “stood up and tramped out” (127). When he did not give
out the requisite number of As and Bs (70 percent of the grades now at Montana State), students
complained and an administrator warned him to lighten up because “some students had sued univer-
sities for better grades, and won.” Here is what one student wrote to Toom’s superiors: “Please
inform Mr. Toom about the grading system and instruction methods of THIS country. . . Please
straighten this man out” (123). A colleague of Toom’s was also criticized for asking his students to
learn more than students in another section (127). Students viewed this not as better teaching but as
an iniquity. The only safe course, under these circumstances, is to fall short of the syllabus, “but
never go beyond” (124).

An adjunct instructor at Austin Community College filed a grievance when the administration
raised a student’s grade without his permission and reduced his course load because he refused to
lower his standards so more students could pass. Dale Gares, Associate vice-president for academic
affairs, said the administration felt that Manson’s expectations were too high (Campus Reports, 3).
At the University of Montana, an instructor of introductory chemistry was removed from the course
in the middle of the semester when 100 of the 200 students in the class signed a petition calling for
his immediate removal and accusing him of “inability to teach new information” and a “willful
academic demoralization of students.” Some contend that Rice is a tough teacher who became the
victim of students looking for an easy instructor to spoon-feed them the material. Many students in
the course, Rice’s defenders argued, were afraid that a low grade would have hurt their chances to
go on to professional or graduate programs. Rice, who had received good evaluations from students
in the past, said, “In my opinion, the real complaint is I am a demanding teacher. I ask them to go
beyond simply memorization and regurgitation of facts on exams” (Chronicle [May 1995], A25).

At Delta State University in Mississippi, Dr. Wayne Allen, professor of political science,
discovered that insisting on correct grammar, syntax and footnotes drew accusations of his “being
too demanding.” When three of Allen’s students complained about their mid-term grades to the department chair, a committee, which did not disagree with the grades Allen had assigned, terminated him (Campus, 2). Ralph Luker, an historian at Antioch, was denied tenure after students complained that he sometimes “terrorized” them. A junior who called Luker a “wonderful” professor, said that Luker “intimidates students unintentionally because he says things how they are, not how they should be in a politically correct kind of way” (USA Today, 4D).

Perhaps the most bitter struggles between faculty and students occur over grades. Norman Wessells, provost at the University of Oregon, says “The students are telling us, ‘I pay so much to go to school here—you can’t give me D’s and F’s!’” (Willimon, 22). A student imperiously wrote to his instructor, “If I don’t get a decent grade because of your critical attitude, I will be speaking to your superiors” (Sacks, 154). At Washington State University, a student in a history class actually challenged a professor to a fight over a grade. As these incidents suggest, instructors are become sanctioned scapegoats for indolent and disengaged students. “I have friends who expect to get good grades and they don’t study. They get mad at the teachers and blame them if they don’t” (Sacks, 169).

Not surprisingly, these relentless pressures to soften standards and lighten workloads are taking a toll on college instructors, especially the most conscientious ones. One experienced educator of twenty-eight years says that “never before have my classes been so unpleasant. Never before have frustration and resentment been so palpable on campus” (Miller, 3). A couple of years ago a calculus professor at Western Michigan University got in all kinds of trouble when he characterized the questions asked by a student as “stupid-assed.” Just last year an assistant professor of sociology at Doane College was forced to resign after he verbally abused six students and threatened another for misbehaving on a field trip. Henry Bauer, who has been examining the increasingly strained relationship between faculty and students and the reasons for it, remarks that “morale among teachers is low and getting lower” (3). One of his colleagues characterized campus morale as “abysmal.” Indeed, a study at the University of Michigan found that many faculty members were “embittered to a quite surprising degree,” racked by “disaffection, cynicism,” and “contempt for students” (Jensen).

This erosion of faculty morale, and the nation’s deepening concern about the dumbing down of higher education, are strong indications that the culture war over standards is being won by the students. This is because students have been given, by administrators, the most powerful weapon available to intimidate the faculty into accommodating student demands: instructor evaluations.

Few professors can afford to ignore what students say about them on evaluation forms—especially when these forms are factored into administrative decisions about hiring, retention, tenure, promotion, and merit-pay. Adjuncts and untenured faculty are especially vulnerable. As Andrei Toom puts it, “I could not afford to care about my students because I had to care about my safety from their complaint” (Toom, 127). So, some professors buy good ratings by giving their student “customers” what they want—easier courses and higher grades. W. H. McBroom, a sociologist at the University of Montana, found that when he reduced course requirements, students were more satisfied and rated the course and instructor more highly: “the less the rigor, the higher the student ratings.” One study found that at least one third of faculty respondents reported lowering their grading standards and course requirements to raise their scores on student evaluations (Haskell, 4). So professors who want to raise evaluation scores can do so quite easily by simply complying with student demands and dumbing down their courses. Students know the power they have. I overheard one of them telling her friends to take courses from adjuncts because they have to give out lots of A’s to get high evaluations so they can keep their jobs one more year.

Even tenured professors are vulnerable to the economic and psychological pressures of student evaluations. As Toom remarks, the criticism of academic bureaucrats can be easily ignored, but “censure of [the] market goes to the bones” (126, Note 4). How many times can even the most thick-skinned professor be denounced as an elitist swine before caving in to make students happier and to be better liked?
It seems implausible that instructional evaluation forms ever helped improve teaching if teaching is defined as improving student learning and skill performance: student academic performance has declined during the twenty-five or so years that these forms have been widely used. There is growing evidence, indeed, that these forms have contributed significantly to grade inflation and a dumbed-down curriculum. “When job security is put at risk, the free flow of high grades for everyone is hardly surprising” (Groff). J. E. Stone believes that using evaluation forms as a basis for administrative decisions on promotion, tenure, and merit pay “has been a major contributor to the academic decline and devaluation of the past twenty-five or so years” (Stone, 13).

These forms, because they are a source of pressure to dumb down, do more to dishearten and demoralize professors than any other aspect of professional life. Every time they must give these forms to students, professors must become unwillingly complicit in intensifying the very pressures they resent. And some, as they hand out these forms, must have to confront, at least momentarily, all the humiliating things they have done to jack up their scores, all the times they have compromised their ideals and standards, in order to buy student affection. The continued use of these forms, and the mounting pressures they convey to sacrifice educational ideals, has provoked so many faculty to finally speak out publicly about the dumbing down of higher education.

The essence of higher education is an instructor and a student meeting to discuss books and ideas. For this exchange to be pleasant and rewarding, both must like, respect, and want to listen to each. This contact between teacher and learner is the university’s heartbeat, and when it falters, education falters. The heartbeat is faltering now, and both students and professors have contributed to the problem, if not in equal degrees.

Too many students have become anti-intellectual grade-grubbers who are disengaged from, and often hostile to, the intellectual and academic ideals that college instructors have devoted their lifetime to defending and perpetuating. And certainly some professors have shoddily fulfilled their responsibilities as classroom teachers, recycling stale material with plodding predictability or self-defensively distancing themselves from students to avoid further disappointment and frustration from the hands of those who often revile the only gifts a scholar has to give. The situation threatens to poison a lot of ivy if something is not done soon.

If the mentoring relationship is to be repaired, professors, for obvious reasons, should take the lead. They cannot, of course, single-handedly improve popular culture or reform primary and secondary education, but they can and do cultivate their own gardens.

Instructors should *raise their expectations, grading standards and course requirements!* This sounds like bad advice, given that students want just the opposite and punish professors who don’t comply. But it is not. A recent survey found that half the students interviewed had lost respect for teachers because teachers were not challenging enough. Students want mentors to save them from their own worst instincts. The advice of the surveyors is, “Set tough standards—and then enforce them.” Many students are ready to respect instructors who “take them seriously enough to demand that they do their best.”

The narrative forms I’ve been quoting corroborate this. Yes, many students want dumbed-down courses and criticize professors for not supplying them, but other students want the exact opposite:

I enjoyed the challenge of his class / she is tough and makes you need to learn to save your ass! / he is a very tough instructor that actually makes his students work for their grade / put high expectations on us so that we were able to write and achieve alot more than a class with less of a work load / her teaching style is at first abrasive but I grew to love the class and actually really appreciated the rigorous expectations she had of us because we learned so much in a short semester / asked a lot from students & challenged us which was a nice change! / I’m glad I took it—very challenging / I actually liked the work load, though it was heavier than most of my English classes / I wanted to be challenged / try not to ‘spoon feed’ us. We should be capable of reading and interpreting literature / I think more assignments might be helpful / grading seemed to be a little lax. Its great to get an A, but if you think you deserve a C both before and after it is graded make the quizzes a little bit harder. . . Come to think of it, just make everything harder.
Good advice.

Second, instructors should practice “authoritative” teaching. I borrow a term used by Laurence Steinberg to describe a model of good parenting. Authoritative parents mold children into healthy adults through careful cultivation. These parents are caring but set limits, and are less concerned about the child’s happiness than about the child’s maturity. Students reared in this manner do best in school, as measured by their grades, attitude toward school work, and the time they invest in their studies (Steinberg, 117).

Similarly, authoritative instructors are more concerned with students’ long-term development than with students’ short-term desires or ‘happiness.’ Authoritative instructors do not coddle students, or release them from their obligations, or give them easy praise or undeserved high grades out of a misguided desire to raise self-esteem. Instead, authoritative instructors announce clear and high (but reasonable) expectations and standards and commit themselves to helping students achieve them. But they also hold students responsible when they do not. The authoritative instructor tries to engage students, but does not dumb down material so that everybody is having a good time. As one of my colleagues put it, a responsible educator is “a warm and fuzzy brick wall.”

Third, instructors should make sure that numerical teaching evaluation forms are not used in administrative decisions regarding retention, tenure, promotion and merit pay. This might be a tall order, given that such forms are used in over eighty percent of colleges and universities and enable administrators to make sure that standards are kept at a level that most students will find “comfortable,” but the effort should be made for the following reasons. As J. E. Stone puts it, relying on “student ratings of instruction as a measure of teaching quality encourages accommodation to students, not the exercise of independent judgment” (Stone, 23). Almost every professional educator I have ever talked to about this topic acknowledges that the specter of being evaluated by students, and having these evaluations factored into performance rankings, negatively affect his or her morale and pedagogic practice. “It is very hard to educate people you have reason to fear” (Platt, 452). Platt speculates that “the time is soon coming when groups of students will blackmail young teachers, threatening ruin on ‘evaluations,’ if they don’t get the grades they want or other things. Then teaching will be impossible . . . without self-deception” (452).

Given today’s anti-intellectual students and their constant demands for easier courses, lighter workloads and higher grades, the friction between students and responsible educators, as well as the dumbing down of higher education, will only get worse if these forms continue to affect faculty rewards. There are other, less pernicious ways to evaluate instruction for administrative purposes. Educators should heed the advice of experts and “eliminate the questionable practice of using the results of student rating for purposes of administrative assessment” (Erikson, 134).

And, finally, instructors should mentor a group of engaged students. Each instructor should create a group of students who have shown themselves to be responsible learners by reading the books on time, by picking up and examining handouts, by talking in class, by meeting with the instructor outside of class, by wanting to learn, by being hungry for new experiences, and by otherwise showing their readiness for real mentoring (as distinct from what passes as ‘advising’). These students need not be the brightest or most successful, just the most willing to learn.

I am now in the process of creating such a group. The students I mentor are encouraged to call or visit me to talk about ideas, books, movies, classes, and careers. I alert them about books, talks, classes, movies, events, and TV programs they might find intellectually stimulating, and they return the favor. A supportive, personal relationship with a professor could do much to liberate these students from the influence of anti-intellectual peers and help them overcome the demoralizing effects of having to sit in classrooms with disengaged slackers.

And it just might help some professors get off Prozac.
works cited

*Campus*, 4 (3), Spring 1993, 6.
---. 8 March 1996, A33.


*USA Today*, 17 June 1994, 4D.

DEEP GREEN CHASM

Ferns, moss and liverwort grow thick on the rocks—
All of them soaked, green, cold.
And there are ice-breath caves in the walls of the gorge,
And mossy fissures which exhale chilled air,
And falls that spray your path and drench your hair.

And you walk past the potholes on slippery wooden steps.
And see the leaves revolving in the stony basins—
In a world so fresh that woodferns spring from the flume-wall,
Lichen from pegmatite, spruce from a crack in the granite.

And you come up out of this chasm into another.
You stand in a valley with mountains in row after row.
Each row deeper in rain clouds, each more lost
In this cold, wet New Hampshire.

My friend from Nebraska complained of claustrophobia,
He missed the skies, the unpretentious plains,
Open and unassuming.
If you brag out there, they will cut you down to size.
But where there is no pretension the people perish.

So I won’t fear the chasm, no matter how deep, how fresh.
And I won’t resent the mountain when I can’t see past.
For the summits that block my view are themselves my vision.

Barbara Bazyn

Lawrence Cunningham of the University of Notre Dame and Keith Egan of St. Mary’s College first teamed up to teach a course on Christian Spirituality for graduate and upper-level undergraduate students from their respective colleges and then teamed up again to co-author this work as a result of reflection on their class. Where their class and a subsequent class on Thomas Merton and Saint John of the Cross had concentrated on spiritual classics, this work addresses themes that thread their way through many of the writers they had discussed. Either strategy would have had its strengths and its weaknesses as the authors are aware. First to the strengths of the book, which are considerable.

The subtitle of the book is a clue to more than its methodology. This work pays close attention to the tradition of Christian spirituality and sometimes in quite traditional ways. Most of the themes, which form chapter headings—“The Spiritual Journey,” “Prayer,” “Meditation and Contemplation,” “Asceticism,” “Solitude in Community,” “Friendship,” and “Eucharist,”—are traditional ones. Yet, the authors enter into dialogue with the tradition from a more contemporary standpoint. They have aimed the book at an audience interested in both historical context and reflection, and in general at a non-scholarly audience. With exercises for extending the reflections and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, the book is well aimed. The authors have eschewed engagement with some of the methodological issues arising among scholars in the field of study of spirituality today. Yet, there are depths and riches here from which any scholar of this subject could benefit.

Perhaps the most difficult task the authors must tackle is the attempt to define the much used and much misunderstood term, “spirituality.” This task they accomplish with seriousness and grace. The word “spirituality,” now an almost unavoidable part of the language of contemporary religion and culture, was only first used in the seventeenth century and with negative connotations. However, today, its connotations redeemed, it covers a multitude of phenomena from recovery groups to prayer groups and retreats. Derived from the Latin spiritus, the term has been defined by the editors of the series, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, as “that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions ‘the spirit.’ This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person experiences ultimate reality.” This choice of definition is a somewhat unfortunate one, in that its emphasis seems to be on the interior dimension of the individual alone. Far more communal, liturgical, and ecclesial understandings of the term have been developing in recent years. The efforts of Sandra Schneiders are particularly instructive in identifying the limits and scope of both spirituality and Christian spirituality. Recently, Michael Downey, in Understanding Christian Spirituality, has brought new terminological clarity to the subject and has outlined several methodologies and alternative approaches. By their own attention to broader aspects of the subject, Cunningham and Egan have implicitly corrected more confining definitions, finding contemporary Christian spirituality to be holistic, grounded in community, maintaining a balance between contemplation and action, between a sense of the transcendent and the immanent. The authors identify Christian spirituality with the “lived encounter with Jesus Christ in the Spirit” and specifically, with a way of life lived in discipleship of Jesus. Since, as others have said, there are no generic spiritualities, but only spiritualities rooted in the particularities of a religious tradition, the authors draw almost entirely on what they know best, the particularities of the Catholic tradition, while still attempting to see them as “catholic” in the universal sense.

Cunningham and Egan have used insights of the contemporary Christian spiritual quest not so much to critique the tradition as to lift up from it themes that are perennial. The emphasis on “themes” brings continuity and clarity to the whole tradition, but at the same time leaves itself open to the charge that the people and ideas treated transcend their historical and cultural milieus, being merely particular but transcultural instances of enduring truths.
The choice of universal themes does at times tend to leave historical context somewhat muted. However, I believe the authors have avoided an even more serious danger, that of reducing the mystery of God's relation to human beings to the quirks of history. Context is important, but not everything. To treat the transcendent and a way of life that brings inner freedom in a way that contextualizes them is to destroy both the mystery and the possibility of freedom. Cunningham and Egan's evident reverence for the spiritual traditions they select, their lack of a polemical tone in citing the work of scholars, and especially their own commitment to the life of the spirit and to the spiritual masters who have preceded them reveal a methodology of love toward their sources and toward the Source of the spiritual life.

Probably because this book is a collaborative effort, there are repetitions that might have been avoided. Guigo the Carthusian, for example, turns up in chapter after chapter along with his "ladder," The Ladder of Monks. Guigo's ladder proposed that lectio (sacred reading) should lead to meditatio (meditation), oratio (prayer), and finally contemplatio (contemplation). I am not sure that Guigo deserves this much attention, especially in the context of a contemporary spirituality which seeks to be grounded in this world and which questions ladders and ascents as leading out of this world, a point which the authors recognize. A far more troubling issue is the near absence of significant women, with the notable exception of St. Teresa of Avila. The authors do mention the names of some medieval women mystics and visionaries, but then "reluctantly" pass over them, thus relegating them to the same marginality they have suffered for centuries. Since so much has been done today to acknowledge these women's contributions to a "vernacular theology" (Bernard McGinn) and to look at their own stories and concerns (Caroline Walker Bynum), this omission is disappointing. I was unable to locate any reference to the great Hildegard of Bingen, for example. While no treatment can be exhaustive, one difficulty with the thematic approach is that it may become blinkered to the rich array of spiritual experiences in marginal groups such as the Beguines.

Although the overall rationale for the sequence of chapters is not entirely apparent, some chapters seem to work well where they are placed. The chapter on "Living in the Presence of God: The Way of the Mystics" forms an especially effective centerpiece to the book, coming as it does after a chapter on prayer and one on meditation and contemplation. In this chapter, Karl Rahner, whose influence can be felt throughout the book, is quoted as saying, "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all." This chapter leads into one on solitude in community, where solitude is understood as a paradoxical dimension of community. Friendship, the fruit of a solitude that is in and for community, almost necessarily follows. The final chapter, on "Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Christian Life," provides a fitting conclusion to the book as a whole since everything in Christian friendship, community, prayer, contemplation, and so much else, has its origin in the sacramental presence of Christ in the eucharist, the people of God, and in all creation. The authors end by calling for a more contemplative church, one able to seek the mystery of faith in an attitude of humble waiting and awe.

This is a book full of wisdom, a book that seeks not only to inform but to "form" in the best traditions of spiritual formation found among the desert fathers and mothers and in religious communities over the centuries. Yet, here the formation is clearly meant for the lay Christian, not for a religious and clerical elite, but for one whose way of discipleship leads into and through the world. It should be read by anyone willing to follow that path.

Maria Lichtmann


In theory, one could hardly imagine a more appetizing meal for those who are deeply committed to the institutions of Christian higher education than a book surveying the successes of such institutions and identifying various strategies for their success. Churchfolk, perhaps especially those from the South or the Midwest, might imagine a potluck, where each guest brings an item of her choice. If the guests and their contributions are ecumenical, a serving of Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist model institutions, all the better. And if we get a taste of several appetizers, soups, salads, entrees, and desserts then, at least in theory, our meal will be magnificent.

But in practice, as those who have catered such meals know all too well, it is difficult to achieve the desired result. What seemed such a fine idea in theory is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. So, the appetizers
are shrimp cocktail while one person brings a hot and sour soup, another brings a Morrocan carrot salad, and the entrees are lasagna, curry, "pigs in a blanket," and a cream of mushroom soup casserole with chicken and "tater-tots." No matter what the dessert, indigestion will follow what will have been a not very satisfying meal. Why? We will eat more than we can easily digest, hence the indigestion. Worse yet, I think, is that we will not enjoy a good meal because it is glaringly clear at potlucks that not all cooks are created equal and that not all dishes go well together.

So it is, finally, I think, with Richard Hughes and William Adrian's Models for Christian Higher Education. This is an ambitious and important undertaking, generously supported by the Lilly Endowment. The creative idea of Hughes and Adrian, both of Pepperdine University, was to identify a number of "success stories," institutions of Christian Higher Education with strong academic reputations who have tried to shape and reshape their mission in light of the faith commitment of their respective traditions. These success stories represent a diverse group of Christian faith traditions—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Mennonite, Evangelical/Interdenominational, Wesleyan/Holiness, and Baptist/Restorationist are the seven traditions identified. Individuals from each of these "traditions" would write a theological analysis of how that tradition thinks about higher education to accompany a set of two historical narratives of successful institutions. So, for example, Monika Hellwig mines the resources of the Roman Catholic tradition in an essay accompanying the narratives of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Collegeville, MN and the University of Portland and James Bratt writes of Reformed theology to accompany narratives of Calvin College and Whitworth College.

Two other facts about the structure of the book should be noted. The authors of the historical narratives of the book were asked not to write "puff" pieces about their schools, but to write an authentic narrative of their institutions, warts and all. A surprising number of these narratives do, in fact, meet these instructions, so large a number, in fact, that the presence of a couple of "puff" pieces will be especially unsettling to readers.

Secondly, the two West Coast editors determined that it would be especially illuminating in the case of each of the seven traditions to contrast a West Coast institution with an older, more established, more traditional institution from the Midwest or East. I don't think it a matter of mere regional prejudice to suggest that this commitment to West Coast representation is the greatest weakness of the collection. The editors are quite right to bring the reader's attention to the distinct set of challenges faced by younger institutions and institutions established in an impressively secular and independent section of the country. But that could have been accomplished in two or three, rather than seven essays.

One result of their forced regional comparison is that we have narratives of institutions that arecontestably successful academically as well as in terms of their identification with their faith tradition. Without naming names, let me say that this reader is dubious about how deeply committed to their tradition some of the selected universities are and about the academic achievements of some of the selected institutions. (It is an interesting question, of course, why we would expect a church committed to caring for the poor and the weak to have top-flight academic programs rather than merely first-rate remedial education programs). A second result of the editor's regional comparison is that readers are not exposed to the different character and challenges of institutions in other regions of the country. For example, there is but one institution from the South, Samford University, discussed in the collection. There is, however, a very interesting story to be told about the nature and history of church-related colleges in the South, particularly with respect to racial issues, the posture of church-related institutions in a heavily churched region, and the on-going unrest in the Southern Baptist convention. Likewise, there is but a single representative from the East, Messiah College, an excellent college but one whose character is, in every respect, more Midwestern than East Coast. In short, the editors were right to think that something interesting might be learned about institutions of church-related higher education by attending more self-consciously to geographic locale. But their insight is better than their execution; a better execution might have included an urban church-related college from the East and a Roman Catholic university from the Bible Belt.

Many readers of this collection will be puzzled by the title. We may presume that each of the institutions represented is a "model" of Christian Higher Education, but this is model, it seems to me, in a purely descriptive, historical, sense. The editors are reluctant to identify traits or practices at institutions which make them good models, institutions worthy of imitation in specific respects. Likewise with "Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First
Century.” This is, almost exclusively, a book written by historians writing historical narratives of their institutions. Of course historians, not infrequently without support, make claims about the future. But there is, still, precious little in the way of explicit discussion about the challenges the next century will bring for institutions of Christian Higher Education and some proved strategies for dealing with these challenges. For example, there is almost no discussion of the promise and perils of developing information technologies, something all institutions of higher education must quickly find their way around.

There is another way in which I think this book might have been a stronger, more interesting book. Despite their preference for the language of “institutions of Christian higher education,” these essays are the stories of institutions which are, as the authors and editors note, in some sense, “church-related.” Yet, although this is by no means atypical in such discussions, the voice of the church is nowhere to be heard. Wouldn’t it be interesting, wouldn’t it better help us think about our futures as institutions of Christian higher education to hear what church officials and clergy are saying about education and our missions as church-related educational institutions? For example, the current Presiding Bishop of my denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is a former president of a Lutheran college. Mightn’t it be interesting to hear from him what he thinks the role of such institutions is with respect to the mission of the church? Mightn’t it be interesting to hear from him why so few of the youth of the church are interested in church-related colleges and universities and whether the church regards that as a problem worth addressing? In other words, the work of institutions of Christian higher education is never merely academic work, however good that work may be. It is also, in some sense, church work. In many cases mere survival of some institutions as church-related is contingent upon a greater commitment of the church to educating her young people at church-related colleges and universities. Real progress in thinking through our missions and our vocations in the twenty-first century will require a conversation that includes voices other than those of academics alone. And if such conversation is not a high priority for the church, that in itself will tell us something interesting.

My comments up to this point may lead the reader to think that my view is that this is not a strong or important book. On the contrary, I think it an extremely valuable contribution to the conversation, especially if read in the right sort of way. When the book is good, it is very good. And when it is bad, it is not all that bad. My advice to readers would be to read it in bits and pieces, starts and stops. I especially recommend that readers start with the insightful introduction and conclusion by the editors. Following this, dip into the sections of the book which are of greatest interest. The strongest section of the book is that on the Reformed Tradition with a winsome essay on the tradition by James Bratt and an extremely rich essay on Calvin College by Bratt and Ronald Wells, followed by the insightful narrative of Whitworth College by Dale Soden and Arlin Migliazzo. Other especially good chapters include Monika Hellwig’s discussion of the Roman Catholic tradition, Bill Leonard’s assessment of the Baptist tradition, Theron Schlabach’s narrative of Goshen College, and Hamilton and Mathisen’s “Faith and Learning at Wheaton College.”

A satisfying potluck requires a great deal of courage and wisdom on the part of its organizers and prudence on the part of those who would feast. Readers who selectively will feast at the banquet table provided by Hughes and Adrian may not always get what they want, but will get more than enough to satisfy. Such readers will acknowledge their gratitude to the providers of the feast, Richard Hughes and William Adrian.

Notes on poets, reviewers

Barbara Bazyn writes in Chelsea, Iowa, and has published in The Critic, as well as in The Cresset.

Mike Chasar is a graduate student of creative writing at Miami University of Ohio. He has published in Southern Poetry Review, Nimrod and Hellas.

Maria Lichtmann was the Lilly Program Senior Fellow during the academic year 1996-97. This fall she will once again take up her position at Berea College, where she teaches philosophy.

Thomas D. Kennedy is Book Review Editor of The Cresset and chair of the Department of Philosophy at VU.
My father shoulders his body beneath the car.

I see his legs, bony and white, thin veins
mapping the sides of his knees,

hear him curse and watch him drag
the shallow pail to catch the old oil
he still insists on changing himself to save
the ten bucks Jiffy Lube will charge.

He shoulders back out across the rug,
remaining, for a moment, on his back,
staring up my body to my face. And because
I'm much too tall that way, standing
in front of his house, the siding he bought,
the shutters he paints every other year,
the bay window he built like a belly in front,

he makes a show
of jumping to his feet, agile and quick,
though I know he knows I see the quiver
in his knees, the pain on his face.
“Damn thing never works the way it should,”
staring bullets at the car now conquered
and empty, hood up like a baby bird begging
its mother for food. Wiping his hands

on a turpentine-soaked rag, he pulls from the grey
shelves a quart of Quaker State
and twists its lid, knowing I won’t forget
this morning’s talk and what the doctor
said, how every word rubbed like metal
on metal, knowing the green cap he twists
had better turn this time on the first try.

Mike Chasar
The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, established in 1991, addresses two critical problems faced by church-related institutions of higher learning in the United States. First, though many church-related colleges and universities are seeking to recover or refortify a sense of purpose and identity, there has been no sustained national conversation expressly designed to renew and deepen a sense of corporate vocation among these schools. Second, settings for the formation of younger scholars who wish to pursue their vocational commitments at church-related colleges and universities scarcely exist in the United States. In brief, the hegemony of the secular research university has gradually eroded both institutional and individual senses of Christian vocation, leaving many schools and many Christian scholars in need of renewed vision and mutual support.

The Lilly Fellows Program therefore consists of two distinct but integrated programmatic initiatives. First, it has established and will steadily expand a national network of church-related institutions of higher learning and sustain among them a discussion of Christian understandings of the nature of the academic vocation. The network represents a diversity of denominational traditions, institutional types, and geographical locations. Representatives from the network institutions meet annually for a national conference. Additionally, several workshops and mini-conferences are scheduled annually on the campuses of the network institutions. A biannual newsletter reports network activities, provides listings of young scholars interested in teaching at church-related institutions, and includes reports from conferences and workshops.

Recent developments include the formation of a National Network Board, consisting of nine Network representatives. Together with the Lilly Fellows Program staff, this Board has devised several new Network projects:

- A series of Summer Seminars for College Teachers designed for junior faculty from Network Schools;
- An annual Summer Institute for Fellowship Applicants and Advanced Graduate Students, each exploring a fundamental issue addressed by the Lilly Fellows Program;
- A series of Mentoring Programs on Network campuses intended to provide junior faculty members the opportunity to acculturate themselves into the ethos and traditions of a particular institution.

The Lilly Fellows Program is also in the process of gathering materials for three new publications: a bibliography of articles and books relevant to church-related higher education in America; a guidebook for mentoring; and a collection of essays and reviews related to Christian higher education.

Second, the Lilly Fellows Program offers young scholars in the humanities and the arts a chance to renew and deepen their sense of vocation, and to enrich their postdoctoral intellectual and spiritual life within a Christian community of learning. Each academic year Postdoctoral Fellows are appointed for two-year periods, selected from candidates interested in considering the relationship between Christianity and the academic vocation. The Fellows are prepared, through a variety of teaching experiences, through participation in a weekly colloquium, and through regular association with mentors, to seek permanent employment within church-related institutions of higher learning. A total of eighteen postdoctoral fellowships have been awarded to date as part of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts.

The Program also sponsors one Senior Fellow, selected from nominees from the network schools, to spend the year on the Valparaiso University campus, working closely with the Lilly Fellows Program. The Senior Fellow engages in research and writing, is a resource person for the Postdoctoral Fellows, participates in a year-long colloquium, and contributes to the annual conference the following fall. The first six Senior Fellows came from the following Network institutions: Calvin College, Goshen College, Saint Mary’s College, Boston College, Berea College, and Furman University.

These initiatives bring focus, clarity, and energy to a critical aspect of a much larger project: the imaginative reformulation and implementation of an agenda for church-related higher learning for the twenty-first century.

For more information about the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, contact:

Arlin G. Meyer, Program Director
Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana 46383

Telephone: (219) 464-5317/5770
Fax: (219) 464-5496