# FRIDAY BY FRIDAY

A Compendium of Friday Chapel Sermons
Given in Statson Chapel at Kalamazoo College

## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forward, Robert D. Dewey</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Mystery and Ministry of Symbols,&quot; W. Haydn Ambrose</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A Meditation on Agape,&quot; Robert D. Dewey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Pain and the New Being,&quot; John Pink</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Strength of Thinking,&quot; Franklin A. Freuler</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Another Idealistic Sermon,&quot; Claire Monpin</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Easy Rider,&quot; Robert G. Middleton</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;On Community,&quot; Kathleen Weinh</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Forgiveness as an Order of Existence,&quot; Waldemar Schneichel</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Passion,&quot; Mackenzie Scott</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Uniforms,&quot; John Spencer</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Objectivity and Commitment,&quot; Lester Start</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Unless One Is Born Anew,&quot; Mark Thompson</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A few years ago services of worship at Kalamazoo College were held intermittently, were poorly attended, and rarely offered authentic worship.

Determined to correct the situation, a small group of students and interested faculty members met in the spring quarter, 1978, and decided that a regular Friday Chapel service of worship would be held every Friday between 10:00 and 10:50 a.m., "come hell or high water." Together they committed themselves to providing both participation and leadership; decided that Friday Chapel should be, unapologetically, a service of worship; agreed that a simple liturgy, good music, and high quality sermons should characterize this important venture.

Since that spring, Friday Chapel has been a regular and increasingly important event on campus. Attendance, 25 or 30 at the beginning, has risen to well over 100 on the average and inches higher. A meeting of interested faculty and students is held at the end of each quarter to plan for the quarter ahead. Except for major college convocations, also held in the 10:00 - 10:50 hour on Fridays, and an occasional outside speaker, most sermons are by Kalamazoo College faculty, staff or students. Seminary interns have given important guidance to Friday Chapel. Student coordinators have planned and implemented the details of week to week services. Music has been available through the college organist, The College Singers, and several individual soloists and instrumentalists.

The following Friday Chapel sermons are representative of those heard regularly at Stetson since the rejuvenation of regular services of worship in 1971. They were gathered for publication because, together, they give voice to the vitality of the religious thinking resident in this church-related college and give expression to the concerns of individuals speaking within the community.

Addressed to a college "congregation" and frequently alluding to issues arising in the academic community, they have, nevertheless, a wider reference and much to say to anyone who, "passing by," will listen. Two are by college administrators, three are by professors in the religion department, one is by a student, one by a seminary intern, one by a visiting minister, and four are by professors in four other departments of the college. Yet all in their different ways are "affirmations of faith."

Worship, as Evelyn Underhill put it, "is the response of the creature to the creator." It is designed to provide a place of meeting between God and his people. Music, always an element in high worship, is offered to lift the spirit, to express the inexpressable, to provide a means of praise and petition. Sermons, homilies, "talks" are meant to edify.
Together, they mean to nurture the life and soul of the community, or, in a more striking phrase, to give spiritual sustenance to the people of God. Friday Chapel has made this continuous feeding, nurture, worship a reality for growing numbers of Kalamazoo College students and faculty.

Perhaps it is a sense of the richness of the experience of regular Friday Chapel which prompts this effort to share some of the edifying statements it offers with a wider group; a wish to extend the benefit to others. In these affirmations of faith, if you read them, I am certain you will find food for thought and faith.

Robert B. Dowey  
Dean of the Chapel  
Kalamazoo College
Two decades ago, when U.S. - Soviet relations were at the Cold War stage, a prominent Baptist minister stood on the ramp leading to an airplane at the Moscow airport. For several weeks he had been visiting and preaching in Russia. On the way to the airport, his host, a Russian Baptist pastor, had been expressing his appreciation for their personal friendship and their weeks of mutual service. But they might never see each other again.

Uppermost in their conversation was the fact that the vast majority of the people of their two nations wanted to be at peace. And yet, their governments seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. As they stood now on the ramp, there was nothing more to say. Their words could not change the conditions overnight. Suddenly the Russian pastor reached into his briefcase, pulled out a small golden chalice, handed it to the American and said, "Someday, in this cup, our people will be united. God bless you!" And he was gone!

A symbol! How significant it can be in such a situation of drama and intense emotion. A symbol representing that which is unseen, pointing beyond itself to reality. Participating in reality's power. Making understandable its meaning. Why are they so important in our every day religious experience?

Why do people put a cross, which is really no better than a gallows, in their lapels, around their necks, and on their churches? Why leave the Bible open all week in the sanctuary to collect dust? Why doesn't a church or a college put a building on its stationary or its bulletins, instead of a logo that has to be interpreted? Why does the pastor wear that ridiculous robe when he looks better in his sport coat?

Well, there are reasons of course. I want to suggest this morning that the reasons are wrapped up in the roles which symbols take. First, they assume a teaching role. A child may forget the church school lesson about the baptism of Jesus, but will remember the water, the christ, and the dove, which she sees in the stained glass window in the back of the church every Sunday. (By the way, this is why it is important to have the finest in church art, or none at all!)

And the symbols also assume an aesthetic role. That is why an arts festival, or a symphony concert, or a beautiful ballet - is in many ways - a religious event. The cross, the painting, the symphony, may be merely enjoyed.

But for most of us the symbols go beyond this to take on a sacramental role. They become outward signs of an inward experience. The dove reminds us not only that the Holy Spirit came to Jesus, but that the Spirit dwells in us. The wooden cross not only tells us that people have labored in love to create it, but that God so loved in love that He allowed His Son to be placed upon it.
A symbol can become an avenue or approach to reality. One can receive a completely new understanding of agape (love) by seeing an oxen yoke upon an altar. One of my most meaningful experiences came one morning in a college chapel as a student placed an unliced loaf of homemade bread on the communion table.

Perhaps the most significant role played by the Christian symbol is in its ability to allow us to express the inexpressible. Religion to be complete must contain its mystical element. A physical expression to one's lover can be a symbol of mutual love that cannot be put into words. A handshake at the scene of disaster may be more meaningful than many words of sympathy or even long prayers. Even so, the opening of a bible; bowing of one's head; gazing at an object of art; climbing a mountain - these may aid us to bring about what Martin Luther calls "the unification of the self with the all-self," or what St. Paul calls, "seeing reality whole and face to face" (1 Cor. 13).

We use symbols but God used them first! It is impossible for us to speak of God except in symbolic language and it is impossible for God to speak to us except in symbolic experience. "Symbol is the only way in which God can communicate with human," said Gustave Weigel. "In symbol we act out the divine design. In symbol the truth is done and the truth is proclaimed."

The patriarchs and prophets trying to explain experiences which only could be contained within allegory and myth; Jesus finding words were inadequate and having to resort to oriental hyperbole and parables, as in the shepherd story of St. John 10, read this morning; Beethoven being inspired to write music for whose expression no instruments were adequate - all these remind us of the necessity of understanding and using the symbolic in life as we yearn for the communion with the real toward which we all grope.

I raised some questions a few minutes ago. Let me suggest some answers. We do use a cross as a focal point in the church, because Christ has transformed it from a sign of capital punishment to a symbol of eternal life. We open the bible, not only on the lectern or the pulpit, where it is before the minister, but often at the center of the Chancel - where it is open to the whole congregation, or on a Narthex table - where it is noted by the passersby.

In the Christian tradition, it is not the priest or the minister or the pulpit that is central; but the Word, the Lord at His table, and on His cross. The Christ-event, seen symbolically so often in church bulletin covers and stationery, and even hinted at by the artist in the crossed lines on our college logo, witnesses to all who have eyes to see that this is the event of human history. Even a robe, on minister and priest and musician, is symbolic, attempting to obliterate the person's own peculiar garb, that he or she may speak or sing anonymously as the servant of God.

There are so many more. Bread and wine become in symbol the body and blood of our Lord. The table in recent years is pulled away from the wall, for it is an open table around which all Christ's followers may sit.
The candles are lighted, for the light from God which is omnipresent, is with us "in the midst."

There are some nasty symbols - these are the present ones. Not the ones that seem lovely because of age or acceptable because of mystery. These are the guilty ones, the haunting ones, the real symbols by which we show who we really are.

We are dedicated to excellence on the job or in the classroom - what do we symbolize when we cut corners? We are a caring community - what do we symbolize when we cut throats? We believe in equality - what do we symbolize by our tokenism in student admissions and faculty appointments? We are stewards of God's resources - what do we symbolize by our investments?

Each symbol can speak to our spiritual needs, if we use it right. Yet the religious symbol, the symbol which points to God, can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine toward which it points. And this can be true only if we are willing to be studious, open and disciplined. It can be true only if we are willing to carefully consider the symbol's relationship to the past and its relevance to the present. Then and only then, will the symbol on the canvas, on the table, in the symphony - become the messenger of the Word of God to our hearts.

Dr. W. Boydus Andrews  
Director of Church Relations  
May 5, 1976
A MEDITATION ON AGAPE

If one were to begin a Chapel talk by declaring that "love is the only thing," one might be accused of over-simplification. No welcome fate if one lives within the borders of academia.

Nevertheless, I declare it. "Love is the only thing."

I do not mean the boy-girl thing nor even the man-woman relationship though both find their appropriate place within agape. I mean, if I understand him correctly, what John Spencer calls "the miracle of goodness," that still surprising reality which emerges and re-emerges in a variety of forms in the midst of what otherwise seems to be an steadily our cacophonous and catastrophic flailing about, ours and everyone's.

I mean that mystery which haunts and humanizes us in the journey from birth to death. I mean the wonder of grace, beauty, truth and goodness which beggars explanation; which, though all things seem to be against them, are somehow there for us. I mean that "presence" of which Wordsworth speaks, that "drowned promise" to which Arthur Miller alludes, that reality which lies beyond knowledge and prophecy and faith and hope whose original and ultimate ground is God Himself and which now and again visits our fruitful lives with its compassion. Which now and then, when we are for whatever reason open to it or even closed to it, enters into our lives and therefore to all of life and flows through us to others redeeming the occasion and the times, and without which, as First Corinthians declares, there is nothing.

I mean that reality which, viewed from our human side, the poet Rilke calls "the difficult work of love," for which "no universal rule based on agreed principles can be discerned; those claims," Rilke suggests," which are laid upon our development and are more than life-sized; to which, as beginners, we are not equal, but which if we continue to hold out and take this love upon ourselves as burden and apprenticeship will, in due time, produce some small progress and some alleviation to those who come long after us." I mean not feelings of affection or disaffection but of what Rollo May means by "the will to love" - whether my will to love beyond feelings or God's will to love beyond my deserving.

I mean that reparious but disinterested love which is proclaimed in crucifixion and resurrection, is glimpsed in the Royal head of Christ, heard in the Beethoven 9th; that pursuit of our lost humanity which the Biblical record documents, which occurs and re-occurs in history, which is the soul of every worthwhile enterprise, including, among other things, the life and work of this particular college.

"Love is the only thing."
Which, of course, strictly speaking, it is not. I qualify immediately. One does not want his faculty and student colleagues nibbling and gnawing at his generalities too effortlessly. There are many things. There is a plethora of things, good and ill. Perhaps love is not even the only important thing. Justice, truth, beauty, knowledge..., the flight of a bird, the cry of a child, the sound of an anthem..., and yet, love may be the only ultimately important thing. It gathers the rest into itself; or, better, when justice is in fact justice or truth truth or beauty beauty, or knowledge converted into wisdom, they have been infiltrated by love. It defines our faith, it stimulates our hope, it gives such ultimate meaning as there is to life, to our lives, to all life.

But why this rhapsody at the end of an academic year which has been a bit trying for all of us, to say the least...why dump this load on Friday Chapel? And, why, with all the political confusion, economic decline, and energy problems we are burdened by, extol, of all things, love?

Perhaps to re-inigorate my own flagging spirit, to bear witness about what I most value to myself; maybe it is a missive to my children, whose lot does not seem to be especially simple as I look forward; or is it to try to say in another way and yet again what liberal education in a church-related college is about? Or do I seek a glimpse of sun in a lowering sky?

Perhaps all times are grim. Those times seem to be so. One searches for a way to shore up one’s hope that life, mine and yours, the life of this college, society and world are not vain, empty things; that we are not yet facing, for our grievous individual and collective neglect, greed, and indifference - our sin, if you will - the final examination. We seem so ill prepared for an objective reckoning, for judgment, for a final grade. Whether the uncertain future holds us toward one more mid-term quiz or a final test is beyond my poor ability to know. The tragedy in Chicago was for want of a bolt, so they say, or the loss of one, or something like that. I confess it makes one wonder how many nuts and bolts have jarred loose from the whole fabric of human existence. In any case, no varieties of adversity appear to lie ahead for all of us, whatever our race, creed or color. That may not be too bad for us - or it may be - it depends I suppose on how we respond to it. Whatever lies ahead, today I give you among all the plethora of things, what Carl Sandburg calls "the little white bird," the power of love, the resurrection, with its coloured hint that love is powerful and will triumph, eventually. Agape is still, for my money, the best bet around.

"Love is the only thing."

Actually, the reason for using this rather simplistic phrase is quite personal; it was spoken to me recently by a very complicated and profound close friend in a conversation which turned out to be our last.

We were in school together, theological seminary. I was not, at first blush, my type. New England born and bred, he was grim; his favor-
ite Biblical quotation was "everything should be done decently and in order." Shy, quiet, constrained, sometimes petulant and frequently moody, he was, nevertheless, (freshmen may still understand this) an upperclassman into whose company I was inadvertently thrust, whose guidance and wisdom I needed in a strange new territory, the theological world.

Small of stature, frail in physique, with a strangely sallow skin, timid and unassertive except in theological discussion, his natural reticence, his aloof and cool manner, his prim New England manners baffled and annoyed me. But his grasp of St. Augustine was remarkable; his knowledge of Luther and Calvin equally impressive; and his familiarity with the Bible was, to me, a neophyte, incredible and captivating. His own faith, biblically and theologically grounded, was, I began to see, the root of a life which, below the surface, was strong as a rock and, contrary to my first impression, very warm, human and vital.

I learned more about him as we became friends, that tenuous friendship which early days in a new school makes necessary. That he was a diabetic; that a daily injection of insulin self-administered was his link to life; that he had been cut off at age 16 from most of the heady experiences of adolescence and the social pleasures which I had so freely indulged; and, since this was the late 1940s, that he did not expect to live beyond age 40. All this opened up new worlds of reflection and understanding for me. I began to appreciate, as we grew to be close friends, the courage, deep understanding, authentic Christian faith, and rich pastoral gifts and devotion to ministry of my friend, Walter.

That relationship began thirty years ago this spring, just after I had graduated from Kalamazoo College and started graduate work at Yale. Since then, we have served with several others, a year of post war mission work abroad, I in England and Walter in Wales; we have traveled together — and once, in Paris, he went into insulin shock, in which he tended to withdraw, deny his obvious incapacity, textily argue with and resist the help he needed — I had, against his will, almost literally to drag him from one place to another to find the candy bar or ice cream his chemistry required; for three years we served with two other ministers in a group ministry in a suburban New York church — we called Walter our "small group" man — give him any group of any size and it would soon be small, but, oh!, when small, how great — we dubbed his groups "holy conversation," and I look back on them as the core community of that sprawling church. He became "Uncle Walter" to my children, bravely opened his bachelor Cape Cod parsonage to the six of us and weathered the stresses and strains of our domestic life, only occasionally protesting in his quiet way that the children’s voices seemed to be pitched very high and they ran about rather much. Through him, as through no formal course at school, I learned what ministry really is. He has always been a patient tutor to an unlikely student.

Though he lived past forty, he hesitated to marry because of his disease; he was not a "career minister" — when life is tenuous at best the notion of career, the typical ambition most of us entertain for ourselves, takes its relatively insignificant place — a born thinker and scholar, he toyed with the pursuit of a PhD, not as a credential in the marketplace but because it gave structure and discipline to his central scholarly interest, the ecclesiastical and theological roots and flowering
of early New England, a subject about which he knew almost everything —
one of his ministries was at West Barnstable on Cape Cod — a church dating
from 1717 — restored to its pristine beauty during his years there — don’t
miss it if you ever drive the Mid Cape Highway — the tower bell was founded
by Paul Revero — and the congregation was first gathered in 1616 by Barry
Jacob.

For the past 15 years we have seen each other only infrequently, but
kept in touch. When our group broke up in 1960, I went to Iowa, then India,
and came to Baltimore, Ralph White went to Hollywood, Avery Post became
president of the United Church of Christ. Walter moved to serve a small
church on Battle Hill in White Plains, New York, a church in a changing
neighborhood, on a sociological island left from the urban renewal projects
around it, "a dying church — served adequately by a dying nun," as he put
it, with a wry smile. In his years it has changed from 94 60/100 white to
60% black and 40% white, and my friend, who was never your social or civil
rights activist, has proved to be the pastor of the most genuinely inter-
racial church I know of in the nation, genuine because, if you were to stop
in there, you would observe as Pliny once did about the early Christians,
how Christians love one another. I can not really explain this. The last
thing my friend ever was was a "touchy-feely" param — his concern for that
substitute religion was absolute, as I remember him. And yet, in this
church, (and it is as natural as our remaining for the posthole in Friday
Chapel) embraces across age and color lines are part of the liturgy.

Perhaps it is because Walter went blind. First one eye went, then
after two years, the other eye; no difficult for a man who reads — to
watch this proud man send off for the large print first, and then the
records after his blindness, was a moving experience for me. No joked
that, if in fact his church is as truly and beautifully inter-racial as I
declare it to be, it is probably because he was blind; he couldn’t tell
the difference; all were human, all in need, as he was, giving and re-
cieving indiscriminately, and he couldn’t tell who was what color.

You can imagine my surprise when, after some long months of no com-
unication, he phoned me one evening and said, with no hint in his voice
of any special news, that he hoped I might be able to come to New York
next Saturday. Grateful to hear from him, knowing that only Hilda, a
close friend for years, was with him in those difficult years of blindness
added to diabetes — I said it would be difficult to come to New York and
what was the reason for such a trip..."Well," he said, "Hilda and I plan
to be married on Saturday..." as I began to weep and bellow (and felt
through the phone lines his disapproval for my unseasonal jubilation, he
added, "And, oh yes, I meant to tell you — I finished my PhD at NYU" — and
then, as I gasped at this achievement for a friend, and a blind one besides —
he added, "And I’ve had surgery and recovered my sight." I could not speak
then...into the silent phone I heard him say, "I thought you’d like to know."

Two years ago, with our wives, we vacationed for two weeks in Tortola,
the British Virgin Islands, and there I wrote from him the tales of that
recovery of sight...he loved to tell about his first Sunday after he could
see again. During his blindness lay people had read the Scripture lessons,
and had done the moving about in the parts of the weekly service of worship;
he had preached... and surely, adding to his already mature gifts as preacher and pastor, his blindness served to help weld that mixed community into a powerfully love-filled church... but on his first Sunday back, he read of course the story of the blind man whose sight had been restored to him by Jesus. People were moved, and, as he smilingly reported, went to their jobs the next day and told anyone handy, as if it were a miracle, that their minister had read the Bible to them in church on Sunday.

What flowed through my friend Walter, especially in the years of blindness and declining powers, to me and so many, though the world will never hear of him — was no more nor less than the incredible power of love, a certain grace, whose source and energy, he would have been the first to say, was not in himself.

Just a few weeks ago I visited Walter and Ildis in their small house on Battle Hill... I stayed three nights and days, working in New York on college business most of the day. Dinners were frequently interrupted — now by things mundane, an older church member calling about not having made a call on someone she had promised to make, and would, but only if Walter accompanied her... a black girl of 16, at the door, weeping, led to the living room to talk about the argument with her parents about a boy she was seeing, and later a trip to her home so that the pastor and family could talk it through... each dealt with in that quiet, pastoral way.

Each night, after pastoral and domestic chores were finished, we stayed up too late, until two or three, drinking Scotch, singing favorite hymns we have sung in places as different as Sterling Chapel, the bow of the SS Washington bound for England, a Welsh cottage, and the top of Mont Blanc... talking theology and life... about our own lives, the lives of others, the life of the society, the world. We reviewed the anxiety, agony, suffering, and hurt we had known in our ministries, in his church, in my college, and we spoke of the brutality, hatred, and fear which hovers over the world we inhabit with all our wayward peers, of the grim scene with which we are all of us familiar. Walter’s known it, my God he has known it, and I have, from the sounds of massive artillery assaults over the Ruhr River during my early 20s, to the calculated injustices to black people, the sheer greed of a materialistic society, to the pain and hurt and suffering of individuals alone, lost and frightened. But we also remembered the brooding, seeking, redeeming Christ hanging, always hanging on the edge of his lost people, and of the rich healing and redeeming grace we had experienced and whose power at work in the world we had witnessed. We leaped into silence, the many words of sin and grace hanging in the 3:00 a.m. cool half darkness of his living room, when Walter said very quietly, “love is the only thing,” and I knew he was right.

He meant the love of God made concrete and clear in Jesus Christ, “the word made flesh,” the only saving, holy, unfailing thing, incredibly resilient, infiltrating our lives and all of life.

He had known it. I have known it. Surely you have known it. On this final Friday I mention it at much length because I think it lies behind and has been present in the good some of you have known in your
years here, and because it is the value above other values which we who
remain must be open to serve in this place; and I also use my friend’s
simple phrase as a tribute to him since, two weeks after we sang our
hyms and talked of our world and the strange power of love to heal and
redeem, he died.

At his memorial service little items he had written for an occasi-
onal church newsletter were read... I close with one which he wrote
immediately following Easter Sunday...

"The sun is shining as I am writing and it is warm. I find myself
thinking about life. It’s the theme, the good news of Christ: full,
abundant life. For some reason — for which the Church is almost certainly
to blame — people think Christianity is about death. Isn’t that a sad and
ironic twist? Jesus talked about living life to the fullest. For some,
that means running and jumping and singing and shouting. For others, it
may have to mean moving more slowly and quietly than that. Jesus said:
Live. He said more than that. He said that to live fully is to love and
to care about other persons, and to show that love and care by what we do
and say. That’s what real life is. Easter Day has just passed. Easter
points to something else about life. It says that love is eternal, not
limited or ended by death, and that God is love. It means that full and
joyous life which is loving and caring does not end with death. Love
never ends. Therefore, live life."

Robert D. Dewey
Dean of the Chapel
June 1, 1970
PAIN AND THE NEW THING

Apology

For a long period in my life I sat regularly in the seat of the scornful. As I prepared this talk, I realized too late that I had pitched it towards unknown occupants of that well-worn pew -- a pew where I was surprised to see myself still sitting from time to time. I pray that those of you who have come here this morning with searching minds and open hearts will, by God's grace, find some meaning in my misdirected words.

Humility

We're fairly comfortable in the world of things, the world which enters us through our eyes, ears, and the other senses. We've grown so comfortable with our vision, for example, that it comes as a great shock to us when we find that our eyes respond to only 3/10,000 of the spectrum of electromagnetic waves called "light." We've grown so comfortable with our hearing that we feel left out when we find that most of the birdsongs we respond to are only the lower notes of a brilliant melody which soars far beyond the range of our ears. (On the other end of the scale, I learned recently that the fundamental seismic vibration of the Earth is 20 octaves below B0 -- this turns out to be about 3/10,000 of a cycle per second: about 66,000 times lower than the lowest pitch our ears respond to.)

Of course, there are good evolutionary reasons for our limited sensory response. Luckily we can ignore those aspects of the world which do not affect our biological survival. It is sometimes exciting to imagine how the world would look and sound to us if we didn't have such slit-like eyes, such rigid drums for ears: how the flower looks to a bee, how the whippoorwill sounds to another whippoorwill.

One of the functions of reason has been to extend the limits of our feeble senses. Scientific reasoning has enabled us to "see" the extremely long radio waves; it has enabled us to "hear" the heavy seismic groans of the Earth and the ecstatic upper reaches of the meadowlark's song. Mathematical reasoning has extended our senses beyond the present, and enabled us to see a narrow band of what probably was (we know where the sun was when we were born), and a narrow band of what probably will be (we know where the moon will be tomorrow). Through reasoning of this kind, we children of the Enlightenment have come to participate much more fully in the world which enters us through our senses, the "horizontal dimension of existence," as Paul Tillich calls it.

Let's take a look at how reasoning of this kind operates. Mathematical reasoning is essentially a means of building bridges from one proposition to another. We begin with one proposition, and, with a sequence of assertions, each one following from the preceding, we reach
another proposition. This sequence of assertions is called a proof. The handful of propositions with which we begin are called axioms. The propositions which we arrive at through proof are called theorems. The stuff of mathematical reasoning is propositions. Until the beginning of this century, it was almost universally assumed that every true proposition which could be formulated in terms of the axioms was a theorem. That is, if a proposition was true, it could be reached from the axioms by a finite proof -- a proof which might be extremely long and terribly complex, but nevertheless finite. In the 1930's, this assumption was blown apart by Kurt Gödel, who demonstrated that in any axiom system rich enough to include the counting numbers, there would always exist true propositions which were not theorems, true propositions for which there was no finite proof, however long. Mathematical truth necessarily extends beyond mathematical reasoning! Absolutely!

A similar discovery had been made a decade earlier in the realm of scientific reasoning. Another German, Werner Heisenberg, was trying to measure extremely small physical quantities. Now, of course, the measuring device participates in that which is measured. Because of this necessary participation he was able to demonstrate that there is a rigid tradeoff between accuracy and information. Physical truth necessarily extends beyond scientific reasoning! Absolutely!

It's not essential that you understand the details of these discoveries in order to understand their profound existential implications: Ultimate truth is necessarily beyond the grasp of finite reason. Absolutely! (It's somewhat paradoxical that we used finite reason itself to ascertain this awesome fact.) We are in this important sense cut off -- entranced -- from a larger reality to which we belong. The light of our finite reason, which has led us to such full participation in the horizontal plane of existence, illuminates only dimly that larger reality which surrounds us. These dim fragments are separated by what necessarily appears to us as a dark void. We might think of ourselves as permanent residents of a vast cave, with only candles to light our way; or we might think of ourselves as visually impaired, in a very real sense. (Light is one of the major vehicles by which the structures of external reality enter our lives.)

I am reminded of an article about a blind boy which appeared several years ago in the New York Times. He was talking about the most bottomless feeling which accompanied his fear of bumping into something when he had lost his sense of direction:

You never know whether you're going towards good things or towards trouble. Because you never know right off whether it is something you like and need and want or something that is just in the way.

That is why I would not kick it, or blame it, or shove it aside. I could not make up my mind ahead of time, because if I did, I could be so very wrong. I could destroy something that might be one of the most important and valuable aids to me. I would destroy it in ignorance, without giving either it or me a chance.
In moving through our own horizontal existence, daily lit by finite reason, we necessarily come up against unforeseen aspects of the larger reality. It is at these collision points that we experience some of our most profound pain.

This pain manifests itself in the despair of having failed at what we thought was necessary for a good life; it manifests itself in the disgust we bear towards ourselves as we contemplate our piteous efforts to succeed; pain is at the center of the anguish over the disappearance of what we had assumed to be a stable component of our lives — the loss of position and power, the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship with another, either through separation or death; pain accompanies the dread we feel whenever we stumble upon something which challenges our assumptions about the relationship we bear towards ourselves and the world around us, the dread we feel whenever something new and unnamed has entered our lives.

Hilke spoke of this aspect of pain in one of his letters to Franz Keppl:  

You have had many and great sadnesses, which passed. And you say that even this passing was hard for you and put you out of sorts. But, please, consider whether these great sadnesses have not rather gone right through the center of yourself? Whether much in you has not altered, whether you have not nowhere, at some point of your being, undergone a change while you were sad? Only those sadnesses are dangerous and bad which one carries about among people in order to drown them out; like sicknesses that are superficially and foolishly treated they simply withdraw and after a little pause break out again the more dreadfully; and accumulate within one, and are life — are cultivated, spurned, lost life, of which one may die.

Were it possible to see further than our knowledge reaches, and yet a little way beyond the outworks of our divining, perhaps we would endure our sadnesses with greater confidence than our joys. For they are moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in our perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent.

Pain, in its several manifestations, seems to be the first signal of an encounter with totally new aspects of the larger supporting reality: aspects which rise to vision from infinite darkness to infinite light, and catch us completely unprepared, at unknown levels of our being.

There are two ways to respond to this pain: we can deny it, or we can embrace it; we can close ourselves from it, or open ourselves to it. Most of us vacillate between these two responses; few of us can stand for more than an instant in the full light of the awesome newness which seeks entry into our lives.
In the despair of failure, we throw ourselves after other successes with redoubled vigor; in the panic of loneliness, we grab at other people for temporary companionship; filled with disgust at our pain, we lock ourselves into situations we can control; we become directors, presidents, movie-stars, professors; we indulge in outrageous excess, feeling that because of this pain we somehow deserve it. In all of this behavior, we seem to be looking to the old and the familiar to justify a self which is already dying. Our response to the new is to kick it, blame it, shove it aside... and so turn our backs on something that might be one of our most important and valuable sides. If pain signals the breaking in upon us of a new level of reality, then in closing ourselves to the pain, we prolong our estrangement from the reality behind the pain. Our lives remain flat, and the pain, like the symptoms of a superficially treated illness, may disappear for a time, only to break out again the more dreadfully. This way leads to death. I am reminded of the first stanza of a hymn by Isaac Watts, which Daniel Reed -- a contemporary of the composer of today's anthem -- set to the beautiful tune WINDHAM:

Broad is the road that leads to death, and thousands walk together there. But wisdom shows a narrow path, with here and there a traveler.

What about this narrow path? How do we ever accomplish the awesome task of opening ourselves to the pain, taking it within us, and moving beyond it? If pain signals the totally new, then past experience counts for little; if the new reality enters our being at depths unknown to us, then the compassionate presence of others is of small value. I don't mean to discount completely past experience, or loving companionship; both serve as important sources of reassurance -- necessary and secure touchstones as we struggle with this seemingly impossible burden. I only want to point out that at some point both must fail; otherwise the newness would neither enter us at unknown depths, nor would it be totally new!

The best any of us can ever do is to point the way, to give signs, through metaphor, of postures to adopt as we struggle with being present to ourselves.

In the Call to Worship, we heard the Psalmist liken us to doors, or gates, and exhort us to fling ourselves wide, that the King may come in: The author of Lamentations tells us:

It is good to wait in patience, and sigh for deliverance by the Lord. It is good, too, for a man to carry the yoke in his youth. Let him lay his face in the dust, and there may yet be hope. Let him turn his cheek to the smiter, and endure full measure of abuse.

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These words come up to us from the darkness, and support us like long fingers. But if it is the totally new which enters us at unknown depths, where do we find within ourselves the structures to handle it? I am afraid the answer is "Nowhere." Any answer within ourselves ignores either the newness or the depth of that which is seeking to enter us.

It is at this point that the words of Paul, in his letter to the Romans, have special significance:

... the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us; and God, who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's people in God's own way; and in everything, as we know, he cooperates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.⁵

It is finally by Grace that we are carried through the darkest moments of our despair, and brought into participation with the new being which has entered our lives.

But what started us towards these darkest moments? What gave us the timid courage to try on the pastures pointed to by the Psalmist and the author of Lamentations? What within us lay beneath the yearning which kept us oriented towards the source of our pain; what called us beyond the limits of past experience, beyond the arms of those closest to us? The answer which springs to mind is Faith. But Faith in what? Faith in ourselves? Faith in the world as we know it? Such an answer ignores the depth and the total newness of the reality breaking in upon us. It must have been Faith in the ultimate goodness of that reality, Faith in our ultimate belonging to that reality. The words of Paul several verses later point to this Faith:

Then what can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or hardship? Can persecution, hunger, nakedness, or the sword?

... I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths -- nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

This is the Faith which enables us to wait in patience and sigh, to lay our faces in the dust, to fling wide the gates, and open ourselves to the Grace which carries us through our pain to a more intimate participation with the reality for which we all are yearning.

Let us pray:

Prayer

O God, beyond language is Your word. Beyond sin is Your holiness.
Beyond fear is Your love. You are the breath that breathes us. You are the hand that holds us. You are the heart that loves us. Stay with us this day and all days, almighty and redeeming Lord.

Amen.

Dr. John Pink  
Assistant Professor of Mathematics  
August 13, 1976

NOTES

2. R. M. Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet.
3. Psalms 24:7
4. Lamentations 3:26-30
5. Romans 8:26-28
6. Romans 8:35, 38, 39
I want to talk this morning about three concepts—thinking, creativity and strength—and about their relationships. The reason I do so is the perception that, in a number of areas, we in academic institutions sometimes forget the ways in which these three concepts are, for us, closely intertwined. I would not go so far as to say that they are necessarily intertwined; we have before us too many instances in our own history where they are not.

To argue that thought is inherently strong and powerful flies in the face of the prevailing conviction today that thought, in and of itself, is weak and powerless. For thought to have consequences, we say, it must be set in motion, through association with the psychological and material instruments of power we associate with politics. Thought, we say, gathers dynamic strength when it is tied to desire, to willing, and to external material and social forces which alone are truly capable of shaping reality.

Similarly with the concepts of thought and creativity. Our language implies that there is a disjunction between them. We refer to the activity of reading books and going to class as "merely" academic, to be distinguished from acts of creative thinking and imagination. In the classroom, we say, we memorize, read, take tests and give back on exams what the lecturer has put in our minds.

In one sense, this view of thinking, this view that thinking is isolated from strength and creativity, is new and paradoxical. David Barclay pointed out to us several months ago, in a most persuasive speech at the Human Rights Conference, that we in America are heirs to the Enlightenment—that America is in a sense the only still alive fragment of the Enlightenment. And one of the features of the Enlightenment is precisely its optimistic faith in the potential of reason, when unfettered by dogma and dubious spirituality, to address creatively the crises of the age—to "solve" individual and social "problems", to eliminate social evils, and to establish a human society characterized by harmony, justice and human happiness. Although we can no longer share fully this Enlightenment faith in the potential of thought and thinking, it is nonetheless true that the social and human sciences remain heirs, explicitly or implicitly, to much of this heritage. How paradoxical it is, then, that in America today, and especially in educational institutions, this view of thinking as implicitly strong has been replaced by one which relegates thinking to the category of impotent intellectualizing, to "mere" theorizing, to an absence of "realism."

Perversely, it seems, we have lost faith in the efficacy of reason, in the strength of creative thinking. The view that reason is strong has been drowned out by the positivist, Machiavellian, and very modern view that strength derives ultimately only from physical coercion, or from its
substitutes, such as the weight of public opinion, material interests, the ballot box or controlling roles in hierarchical organizations. As a result, we have become preoccupied with political power. It is from there a short step to the view that human dignity and happiness result primarily from the possession of political and social power. These are the definitions of social reality and human dignity pushed primarily by the purveyors of mass communications, interest groups and, especially, politicians. In accepting these definitions, colleges and universities become simply extensions of and reflections of the society of which they are a part.

There are several biblical passages in which a quite different understanding of the role of thought and thinking is given. One of the most vivid and profound of these is the passage of Mary, the mother of Jesus who, faced with an inexplicable set of events and personal crises, is said to have become silent, and to have pondered—to have thought about—all that had happened and all that had happened to her. Another passage with a different view of thinking is the one read this morning, St. Paul's letter to the Romans, particularly three verses:

v. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

v. 17 Do not repay evil for evil, but repay good for good.

v. 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

As St. Paul appeals to us to "renovate our minds," he does so in a way which rejects any divorce between thought and strength. The distinction is a formal, rather than real, one. St. Paul argues that the good, the acceptable and the perfect can only be known by a "renewal of the mind." He recognizes that society will press on the individual what Vladimir Nabokov in last week's Index referred to as a set of paradigms, paradigms which seek to impose on us a particular view of the world, its divisions and its possibilities. All paradigms, and here we must include both paradigms which are orthodox and those which are heterodox, those which are of the establishment and those of the anti-establishment—all paradigms constitute and define reality in not ways; they provide us with a set of definitions and problems, and logically imply standard and predictable procedures to address those problems. In calling for a renewal of minds, St. Paul, rather like Socrates before him, rejects conformity to prevailing paradigms, and stresses that only through creative and imaginative thinking can we hope at once to perceive what is good, beautiful and true, and to have any hope of bringing the good, beautiful and true to reality. In fact, the last verse seems to imply what I regard as an uncharacteristic optimism on the part of St. Paul: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Good, he seems to say, can overcome evil; we need not be reduced to the attempt to overcome evil by adapting the instruments of evil—an attempt which is in my case self-contradictory and doomed to failure. The victory of evil is only inevitable when ignorance and dogma
are permitted to dictate to us the terms of the struggle and the terms on which human relations are to be conducted; when, as one commentator puts it, the "cloum of hatred drowns the consol of love." This view, by the way, is close to that of the Indian leader Gandhi, and let me say parenthetically that I never would have thought that Gandhi and Paul and Socrates had so much in common.

If thought is strength, wherefrom comes this strength? And what are the conditions for it? And what are its limitations, from a religious perspective?

The strength of thinking remains for me a mystery. And yet it might have a very simple answer. Dorothy Sayers, in her book The Mind of the Maker, argues that thought, like art, is a creative act, and that creativity—the ability to make something out of nothing, rather than simply rearranging what already is—is the act of man which bears the closest resemblance to divinity. The phrase, "God the Creator," the Maker, is more than just a metaphor: making, creating is itself a divinity-like activity. Creative thinking, then, is the mark of the divine in man. The mind of the human maker—the human artist and thinker—and the mind of the divine maker, are made "in the same pattern." Is it any wonder, then, she asks, that here we discover an extraordinary strength and power?

Hannah Arendt, also reflecting on the strength of thinking, and deeply influenced by the Socratic understanding of these things, suggests that the process of thought—what she calls thoughtfulness—is in fact the most powerful safeguard we have against individual and social evil. "Could it be," she asks, "that the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it?" What struck Professor Arendt about evil doing was its sheer thoughtlessness, that the evil-doer does not ordinarily have any great ideological convictions or evil motives or even great intelligence. Rather, evil, she came to believe, is associated preeminently with non-thought, with thoughtlessness. "Common goodness, by contrast, is associated not just with good motives—we all have those—but with the habit of thinking, and with its associated erot, the love of wisdom, beauty and justice.

And what of the conditions for thought? The relatively isolated, cloistered walls, behind which educators have ordinarily chosen to place themselves and their students, embody the insight, shared in most cultures from earliest times, that withdrawal is a necessary condition for all mental activities, that the thinking which moves creatively and independently of dogma, hysteria and prevailing paradigms is possible only when the mind has withdrawn from the immediacy of desire, from the present and the urgencies of everyday life. All thought, of course, arises out of experience, but experience has little or no meaning or coherence until it has been subjected to the operations of thinking and imagination. The isolation of the university and college, then, does not mean that there is a lack of connectedness between thinking and doing. The image of the ivory tower is inaccurate. Isolation, and withdrawal mean only that a
creative doing requires an initial detachment so that the thinking per-
son has a chance to make a break with existing patterns of doing. The
notion that the thinker is a vague, dreamy creature living in retreat
from the facts of life is a very false one.\footnote{1}

The consequences of failing to preserve this withdrawal are elo-
quently laid out in an essay by the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka.
Writing on the edge of the Nigerian civil war and the Biafran tragedy
in 1967, Soyinka decried the African intellectual’s failure to remain
independent of the dominant political and cultural persuasions of the
turbulent times immediately following independence. The African writer,
Soyinka writes, became the vehicle of ideas whose direction was set basi-
cally by politicians. In so doing, the African writer abandoned his
unique vocation and sensitibility, abandoned any possibility of settling
forth an historic vision. Rather, he became a "Romancer," an "intellec-
tual mythmaker." He took sides on one or the other side of the politi-
cal equation, because he felt that only by constituting himself into a
part of the (political) machinery, could he have any strength to shape
events. He became, in the end, a "very prop of state machinery."\footnote{5}
The contemporary view of thought as inherently impotent implies the
same danger for us here in universities in America.

All this is not to say that the thought has a limitless strength.
It is only to say that its strength is not as predictably weak as is
ordinarily assumed, and is greater than ordinarily believed. Educa-
tional institutions are based on the claim, and hope, that we will in-
creasingly rely on thinking as the primary shaping force in human rela-
tions, that individuals and societies will rely on what Sayers regards
as the uniquely divine aspect of the human species, rather than on phys-
ic force, violence, received opinion, and simplistic ideologies. Nor
is it to say that we can rely on human thinking with absolute confidence.
We can never forget that it is humans who are doing the thinking, and
that the human grasp on the true, good and beautiful is always fragile,
and subject to error. It may be, Sayers says, that the human condition
do not have any "solution," and that one of the dangers is precisely
in looking for one. In any case, we know how thinking persons can dis-
agree. Thus, for the religious person, as I understand it, the confi-
dence in human thinking is conditioned by the hope of divine blessing,
and this hope for divine blessing is that upon which all else is based.
Or, to paraphrase Simone Weil, a remarkable thinker and social activist,
"The movement towards the good is a movement through contradictions by
a thinking creature drawn upwards by the supernatural operation of grace."

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August 10, 1979
NOTES


3. Arendt.


"You shall not kill - " thus was it said to Israel of old; so is it said to Christians today. In the teaching of Jesus the commandment is radically interpreted. To kill is forbidden whether by the hand or by the thought of the heart, by deed or desire. Life is given by God and by God alone. What man dare to take that which the Lord has given? Even anger presumes too much. The angry word is a blow struck, a stab at the heart; it seeks to wound, to hurt and to destroy. Anger erects barriers. When I am angry with my brother I do not speak to him. In my heart I deny his existence: It is as if he were dead to me.

Jesus does not distinguish between righteous indignation and unjustifiable anger. Even when a Christian meets with injustice and oppression, he does not answer with anger and violence. When I am struck I turn the other cheek; when my coat is demanded, I give it willingly and offer also my cloak.

There is no action on earth so outrageous as to justify a different attitude. Even the man who is most committed to my destruction, my enemy, is not to be resisted - he is to be loved. The Christian does not merely endure evil, he actively enganges it with the love of Christ. If out of love for my brother, I would willingly sacrifice my possessions, even my life, I must be prepared to do the same for my enemy. My response to those who persecute me is to commend them to my God, not that they should cease their persecution, but that they should come to share in that which a Christian holds most valuable - the pearl without price - the love and fellowship of Christ.

The words of Jesus are unambiguous in their prohibition of violence, and yet history provides too many examples of Christians who were willing to take up arms, often in the very name of the Prince of Peace. It is as easy to reconcile light and darkness, as to reconcile the teachings of Jesus with the practices of war, for who can reconcile "love your enemies" with defoliate them, bomb them and pour them with napalm and bayonet, the modern equivalent of fire and sword? We call ourselves a nation under God, but is it the God of Christ or the God of war? The United States has gone to war five times in this century, and if we are not at war now, the threat of war is ever with us. Though we say we do not want war, our national prosperity feeds upon it. We are the major supplier of arms to more than eighty countries. The volume of arms sales is so great that if universal peace broke out on Tuesday, the stock market would crash on Wednesday. Through our arms sales we perpetuate the poverty and injustice which breed war. American guns sustain dictators and their cost denies food to the hungry. There are those among you this morning who condemn the investment policy of Kalamazoo College because it supports apartheid in South Africa. What say ye about the college's investments in the corporations which manufacture the weapons which enforce apartheid?
The call of Christ is clear; yet how is it that Christians everywhere have not risen and denounced with all the love and charity of our faith this insane addiction to the way of death? Indeed, how is it that Christians actively participate in the waging of war?

This inconsistency in belief and practice occurs because one cannot be a Christian, one can only become a Christian. We are not born Christian. At some point in our lives we hear the call of Christ and our attempt to respond begins the unfolding process of becoming Christian. But when Christ encounters us, he encounters us as heirs to a culture we cannot reject because it is a part of us. Christ challenges us to renounce the world, and then sends us back into this world. We are to live in the world, but not of the world - a difficult task. Throughout our lives we are subject to the pull of two authorities which do not agree. We cannot serve two masters; either we serve one at the expense of the other or both badly.

As Americans we are called to protect our nation in war, and because our freedoms, our homes, and our families are dear to us, we obey, even though Christ commands otherwise. Many would sincerely like to follow Christ, but before the present evil, they deem the call unrealistic. We have learned our history well. Look here and here, men were not vigilant and they were overcome. Or suppose men had not been willing to fight here or to die there? We are so convinced that past evils must repeat themselves that we cause their repetition. We dare not risk a new life in which past evils are forgotten; a new life means to imply new evils, and rather than trust in the purpose of God, we would rather face the familiar evils. Hence we cling to the evil that has already become ours, and renew it from day to day and year to year. Our tragedy is that we trust neither evil nor God; what we trust is evil.

I could end my sermon here, for this is where the nations of the world have chosen to end it. We have lived so long with the evil of violence that we have accepted it as the natural order of things. Change has become unthinkable. But this morning let us dare to think of change. Let us return to the words of Jesus and consider how we may obey them.

Let us explore the option of Christian pacifism. Notice that I do not speak merely of pacifism, but of Christian pacifism. Pacifism as an ethical or philosophical system begins with a generalized principle such as "war and violence are wasteful" or "to kill is morally wrong" and proceeds from that principle. For the Christian everything begins with God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment." It is only God who is to be loved with heart, soul, mind and strength, and the expression of this all-consuming love is an all-consuming obedience to the will of God. Bultmann has called this obedience "radical" and characterizes it thusly: "radical obedience is present only when a man inwardly affirms what is required of him...when the whole man is in what he does, when he is not doing something obediently, but is obedient in his being." God has commanded us to do no violence and that is sufficient justification. We express our obedience to his will not only by doing non-violently, but by becoming non-violent in our very being.
Pacifism begins with God in the first commandment. It is directed towards man in the second, for "the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Like a certain lawyer so long ago we might ask "who is my neighbor?" and so would again hear of the Good Samaritan. But rather than repeat that story, I would like to share with you the experiences of a man whose time more closely touches our own.

My great-grandfather was born in Germany. In 1908 he left for the United States to serve as pastor to a small Lutheran church in Cincinnati. His congregation was more German than American; though they lived here and were citizens, Germany was still the fatherland and the home of brothers and sisters, parents, and aunts and nephews. Thus when World War II erupted the community faced a difficult decision. They felt bound to serve their new country, but how could they take up arms against the Fatherland? Suppose their sons should face the sons of their brothers across a trench? They came to my grandfather for counsel. After reflecting and praying for many days, my grandfather realized that the war had become abhorrent to them because in the face of the enemy they had recognized the features of the beloved neighbor. Hence in witness of the enemy’s neighborliness, my great-grandfather advised them to refuse to serve. And then he said even more, for he was able to go beyond the enemy who was known to embrace the enemy who was unknown. We are all one in Christ. Who is my neighbor? All are my neighbor. Who then is my enemy? None, for I have no enemies. My grandfather extended them to renounce all wars against all enemies present and future. For these words he was arrested. In World War II he would again hear witnesses against war, only to be repudiated by his church and by his only son, who died fighting in the South Pacific.

Love of God and love of neighbor calls us to renounce violence and war, but in our very human doubt and impotence, love is not enough. Radical obedience is made humanly possible by radical trust. Radical trust in God is the conviction that he acts in and through history to fulfill his purpose — that even now he is at work, that there is structure and content in his will; and that what he requires of us, he will not only make known but he will also give us the strength to fulfill.

If you came this morning to hear another idealistic sermon by yet another starry-eyed student, you are about to be disappointed and should leave now. The Christian pacifist is no idealist naively claiming that if men would only lay down their guns then everything would be all right. God in his infinite holiness can turn the Jesus of the New Testament into a flower child who believed in the fundamental goodness of men, and sought by trusting to bring out what was good in them. He speaks of his people as those who stone the prophets and then erect monuments to their martyred bodies. He puts no trust in the institutions and traditions of his own society. He shows little confidence in his disciples. He knows that Judas will betray him, and even Peter will deny him. The Christian confronts evil in all its horrible strength and power.

Often I am asked what kind of response would I have made in World War II. The answer, easily given, is not so easily lived. I would have opposed it. I would have opposed it even if every man throughout the free world had opposed it and Hitler had conquered the world. My trust
Is it in God and with trust comes acceptance. If it be the will of God that America should cease to exist, then so be it. Read again the responsive reading. Israel has ceased to exist in both nation and religious community, but Azariah accepts even this as the judgement of God upon the sins of Israel. Both good and evil come from the Lord according to his purpose. A Christian pacifist must accept the consequences when he renounces violence and war.

Love and obedience, trust and acceptance — these qualities define the Christian pacifist. These four and one more — action. Christian pacifism is no more than the rejection of violence, no more than the passive endurance of evil. Christ calls us to renounce the world and then he sends us back into that very world that we may perform the good works which give glory to our Father in heaven. He sends us back to be the light of the world, that all men may come to know and believe on him. Christ takes hold of our lives and makes of them a witness to the love of our Father.

The Christian pacifist must forswear both the necessary war and the unnecessary war, both World War II and Vietnam. But beyond the renunciation of violence, he must strive to create peace, to make peace. The Christian goes into the world to prevent violence by working to eradicate the injustice and oppression which breed war. We must look deeply into our own lives and seek there the selfishness and indifference which create discord among men. I have a friend who no longer eats beef. Beef, he says, is the most inefficient source of protein. The production of beef consumes inordinate amounts of corn which might better be utilized to feed the starving. In ways large and small Christians bear witness.

So steadfast must be the Christian commitment to God in non-violence that even persecution and death must becountenanced. The three men in the Old Testament lesson go cheerfully to the furnace, whether God will save them or not. Iet there be nothing we are willing to die for; let there be nothing we would do violence for.

Even as I stand here I realize how unworthy I am to speak these words to you. They are brave words but I honestly do not know how much I can dissociate myself from the things of the world, nor how much persecution I can bear. To follow Christ, to heed the call, is not honest. Everything I will, nor is it a decision I make in the presence of various alternatives. Christ calls and I follow because he enables me to follow. To become a pacifist is a gift of God. If I am persecuted, God will sustain me; I will not sustain myself. Christ calls me in a manner and a time of his choosing: I can not set the hour nor decide the way. I can only wait and prepare through the small obediences of which I am capable, and through prayer, prayer for the grace to answer. Please join me in such a prayer now:

Father, in whose kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no power known but the power of love; strengthen us that we may fearlessly oppose evil and renounce violence.

24
In memory of your Son who forgave his enemies
while he was suffering shame and death,
if it be your will that we must suffer
for the wrongs we bear,
save us from bitterness and despair.

Pour out your Spirit upon us
that the barriers which divide us may crumble,
suspicion disappear, and hatred cease;
that we may recognize in every man, a brother;
and that we may all be gathered to you,
as the children of one Father;
to whom be dominion and glory, now and forever.

Amen.

Cladi Maupin, K '78
May 13, 1978
The two young men, one in a leather jacket and the other in a fringed buckskin jacket, parked their motorcycles. They made their way through what was a junkyard. After speaking briefly with a couple of men, they handed the men some money and received in exchange a small package. They then mounted their cycles and stopped at the end of an airport runway, where a headjet came screaming in. Soon a luxurious car—a Bentley or a Rolls Royce—drove up and a young man got out. He handed the two motorcyclists a considerable wad of money and was handed the package. He got in the car and opened the package and sampled the contents. It was cocaine and he then drove off.

The two cyclists, Wyatt and Billy, have made the sale which will underwrite their trip. The destination they have in mind is New Orleans at the time of Mardi Gras. They are in Los Angeles and are now ready for their easy ride. Since it is a very important point in the film, "Easy Rider," that everything in this world is a little crazy, jumbled, it is fitting that they reverse the usual odyssey and go from east to west instead of west to east.

Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, who shared in the writing and producing of the film as well as acting the two leading roles, are saying something in "Easy Rider" of tremendous importance. It is a film which is not pleasant to see; it is boring at times and pretentious at other moments. But it is a very significant film. It says something about the young vision of America and it says it with searing honesty. Raw and brutal, idealistic and tender, it finally takes hold of you and leaves a lasting impact. This may not be the final truth about America, but it is the way in which some see this land. We all need to ride along, both to see America through the eyes of these young men and, at the same time, to see them and assess their way of responding to the nightmare vision of America.

In artful fashion, "Easy Rider" contrasts the beauty of the American landscape with the corruption of the people. As they ride along, the camera captures the loveliness of the American countryside, ranging from the sparse beauty of the desert regions to the lush green of meadow and farm. We see the beauty of quiet streams and lofty trees, and are impressed with what a magnificent land this is. But this beauty is almost obliterated by the loneliness of people, the tragic corruption and fear that are wasting the promise of America. The film does not make explicit the cause of this. It seems that at times urbanism is the culprit and that when you are at a distance from the city, especially when you are in isolated and rural areas, there is a quality of caring and concern which have been lost in the cities and in the small towns.

They stop to fix a flat tire at a ranch. The hospitality of the rancher and his family is instantly offered, not only making available
a place to fix the flat tire but offering to share the family meal. It is perhaps of some significance that, when they sit down to eat, the rancher asks Billy to remove his hat and says grace. The other place where they are received with kindness is in a hippie community, where a group of weird young people have established a settlement in which they share. They, too, give Wyatt and Billy a cordial welcome. And here, too, there is an awareness of a dimension of existence not shared by the vicious people of the film. After the hippies have finished scowring some seed for what they hope will be next year's crop, they wait quietly in a circle and then a prayer is offered. Too much should not be made of this but nothing in the film is accidental. I simply raise it as a question: is it where there is genuine openness to God that there is real human kindness?

As their trip proceeds and they move deeper into the Bible belt country, the animosity of the people becomes stronger and stronger. Wyatt and Billy are different. Their hair is long. Their clothing is strange. They don't look like nice, clean, well-groomed, All-American young people, and so they begin to find hostility and resentment. They are arrested and thrown into jail in one town and find that their cell mate is a young lawyer sleeping off an alcoholic binge. He is a son of a leading citizen and he arranges to get them and himself out of jail and also to make sure that his father doesn't hear about his latest escapade. He simply slips some money to the local officer, that's all that is needed. He decides then that he will join in the trip to New Orleans.

The three of them, Wyatt, Billy, and George Hanson, stop in a small town at a café. They want something to eat, but no one will wait on them. In the booths around the edge of the room the locals, including the sheriff, entertain themselves with side comments. "You know it," one of them says, "I'll throw rocks at it, Sheriff." They look like refugees from a gorilla love-in," says another. The three leave without having been served.

That night, sleeping beyond the town limits, they chat around the fire. The young alcoholic lawyer expresses the view behind the film: "This was once a hell of a fine country." And then he gets at the fear: "Oh, they're not scared of you, they're scared of what you represent to them...random. It's real hard to be free when you're bought and sold on the marketplace. But don't ever tell anybody they ain't free, 'cause they gonna get real busy killin' and namin' to prove they are." And that night, as though to prove the accuracy of the prediction, a gang of local rednecks descend on the three and beat them as they lie in their sleeping bags. They beat to death the young lawyer.

Wyatt and Billy continue toward Hard Grass, but the mood changes. More and more cowboys figure in the background shots. The song which forms a kind of accompaniment to the roar of the cycle engines includes the line: "He is busy dying." And along with the note of loneliness and death, there is a note of judgment sounded. For instance, when they get to New Orleans and go to the expensive restaurant, the waiters are quick to serve the young lawyer. And as they are in the restaurant, the music is not the usual music heard
In such places but liturgical music of the church and specifically the kyrie eleison: "Lord, have mercy." And when they and the girls from the house of prostitution take their LSD trip, it is not without important symbolic meaning that the setting is a cemetery and that one hears often a girl reciting her catechism in the church nearby, saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord... he descended into hell..." And along with the Apostles Creed the Hail Mary imploring prayer "for us sinners now and in the hour of our death."

Finally, however, they go on their way. They stop and Billy says to Wyatt they have it made—plenty of money, they can do anything they want. And Wyatt quietly gives the verdict: "We blew it, we blew it." And then, as they ride along the southern road, a couple of guys in a pickup truck come along, make some comments, and then with a shotgun shot Billy, who is left bleeding by the roadside. And when Wyatt goes to head for help he, too, is shot; and the last scene of "Easy Rider" is the flaming explosion of his cycle in a lovely, lush green pasture, a brook flowing serenely through it.

That's "Easy Rider," and it is surely one of the most disturbing films I have seen in a long time. But it serves also to indicate not only what is wrong with America—our uptight fears, our hatred of dissent, our loathing of nonconformity—but also what is wrong with the responses made to the ills of America. If American society is as bad as Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper claim it is in "Easy Rider," then the responses portrayed in the film are tragically inadequate to grapple with the malady. It is here that the film throws an inescapable challenge in the face of all who make professions of Christian faith.

There are, I suggest, basically three approaches which can be taken to the evils of society. Two of them are depicted in the film. The third comes out of the imperatives of prophetic religion.

One response to society's corruption is to transcend it. This is the response of the hippie community in the film and of many other groups in our society. It is a response produced by a pervasive mood of discouragement and disenchantment. So much has been attempted, so little has been accomplished: the result is a renunciation of efforts at social reconstruction. The motto is "Away from it all" and it can mean a retreat to the concerns of the private sector.

It is not hard to understand this mood. Not only young people but many older ones as well feel this sense of hopelessness and futility. It is not accidental that Albert Camus should be one of the authors who speaks with real power to this battered generation. Nor is it accidental that he should have chosen as the myth which most clearly sums up our experience, the myth of Sisyphus. The tragic figure of Sisyphus, forever rolling that stone to the top of the hill and forever having it roll back down again, sums up our social experience as many see it. No victories, really—this is their verdict. And no more attempts, no more crusades, no more causes, no more gallant forays against any unyielding establishment. A private life without worrying about social issues is all they want and as much as they will attempt.
The trouble with this transcendence bit is that it is finally impossible. You may elect to take no part in society's struggles for justice, peace, or whatever; but you cannot elect not to share in the resultant failure of society. No man is an island, John Donne reminded us; and we cannot avoid participation in whatever befalls our society. We may try to transcend; but finally we will have to recognize that there is no hiding place, no being at ease in Zion, when Zion is a threatened world. We might as well face it: transcendence just won't work.

If we cannot transcend the corruption and the trouble of our society, and if we feel that the evils cannot be changed, we can do precisely what the two motorcyclists did in "Easy Rider"—we can transmit the corruption. This is what disturbs me about the film and the response of the two young men. I would not for a moment deny that our American society is a sick society and one, moreover, which is full of all manner of injustice and corruption. The evidence of this is all about us. Nor would I deny that we have made thus far very little real progress in our struggle against the evil. The trouble with Wyatt and Billy is that they feel just a bit too sorry for themselves. The world is, they invent, a corrupt world. One is tempted to respond: "What else is new?" The insight that the world is corrupt and that it is filled with lots of problems is not a new insight with this younger generation. If you read the prophets of the Old Testament with any care, you will discover that they said about the society of their day some pretty devastating things. It was unjust and violent and idolatrous, they said; and they went on to condemn it in an uncertain fashion. So this is not a fresh insight; it is, actually, a bit stale. To use it as an excuse for becoming transmitters of the corruption is a little ridiculous.

The fact is, however, that Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper have done this. They are living in a rotten society and they respond by saying that society what has been called the sincerest form of flattery: they imitate it. They use society's whitened corruption as a neat way of justifying their own wallowing in the corruption. If deep down you want to throw off all moral restraints, if you want to live as you please, how convenient it is to be able to do it in the name of honesty, sincerity, authenticity. Because all society is corrupt, you can throw off all concern with morality. You can justify immorality by giving it an honorable new title—The New Morality. It sometimes seems that if adult society did not conveniently exist, it would have to be invented to justify a moral holiday. There is hypocrisy in the young as well as in the old; it does not disappear because one is under thirty.

So one suspects that "Easy Rider" becomes what Julian Barr has called "a sleek excuse for a moral holiday." This is a day which calls for something more than those who transcend and those who transmit corruption of society. It calls, in a word, for those who will transform society's corruption.

Plainly, this call for those who will transform society's corruption, injustice and evil goes directly out of the soil of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. The Christian is never called to settle down in the midst of whatever is; he is always called to move according to his vision of a
better order of society. This vision, which we call the Kingdom of God, is always beyond our present attainments. No earthly arrangement of society can ever fully represent that Kingdom. Consequently, the Christian can never find a resting place among any of the arrangements of the social order. He is always the rebel, forever the monasticist, always moving, as Thoreau said, to a distant drummer.

This means that the Christian is always to be part of his society, for only by being part of it can he effectively labor to transform it. It means also, however, that he is always a bit out of it, for only by some angle of vision not given by the society itself can he look calmly at those places where it is failing. It goes without saying that this is no easy task. We have often failed, sometimes by separating ourselves in the name of a supposed purity or piety; and sometimes by becoming so much a part of what we now call the Establishment that we have no basis of independent judgment. No task is more pressing than that of developing a group of people, young and old, who are able to pull off this neat trick of involvement and detachment and thereby succeed in being among the transformers of the social order.

Implicit in what I am saying is a recognition that the Christian never arrives; he is always and forever on the journey, on pilgrimage. He has here no continuing city, he looks for the heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. He is no easy rider, for he recognizes that the road is rough and uphill most of the way. He is upheld by the realization that as he labors he is not required to be successful, but simply faithful. It is not my task to transform earth into the Kingdom of God; it is my calling to live in accord with as much of God's will as I can see and to leave with God the final determination of what is to be made of my efforts. There are some things which simply can't be changed, no matter what we do; there are other things which can be changed, given sufficient courage and effort. So the Christian finally prays, with Reinhold Niebuhr,

0 God, give us

Serenity to accept what cannot be changed,
Courage to change what should be changed,
And wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Rev. Robert G. Middleton
Minister, First Baptist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
March 11, 1971

30
The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what is Christianity, and indeed what is Christ, for us today? The time when men could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or simply given, is over, and so is the time of inwardsness and conscience, which is to say the time of religion as such. What we call Christianity has always been a pattern — perhaps a true pattern — of religion. But if one day it becomes apparent that this a priori ’precious’ simply does not exist, but was an historical and temporary form of human self-expression, what does that mean for Christianity? What is the significance of a church... in a religionless world? How do we speak of God without religion, i.e., without the temporally influenced presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardsness, and so on? How do we speak (but perhaps we are no longer capable of speaking of such things as we used to) in a secular fashion of God? In what way are we in a religionless and secular sense Christians, in what way are we the Eklesia "those who are called forth", not conceiving of ourselves religiously as specially favoured, but as wholly belonging to the world? Then Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, indeed and in truth the Lord of the world, Yet what does that signify?... Religious people speak of God when human perception is often just from lassitude) at an end, or human resources fail; it is really always the image ex machina they call to their aid, either for the so-called solving of intractable problems or as support in human failure — always, that is to say, helping out human weakness or on the borders of human existence. Of necessity, that can only go on until men can, by their own strength, push those borders a little further, so that God becomes superhuman as an image ex machina. I have come to be doubtful even about talking of ‘borders of human existence,’ is even death today, since men are scarcely afraid of it any more, and sin, which they scarcely understand any more, still a genuine borderline? It always seems to me that in talking this we are only seeking frantically to make room for God. I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life, but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man’s suffering and death but in his life and prosperity... Belief in the Resurrection is not the solution of the problem of death. The ‘beyond’ of God is not the beyond of our perceptive faculties. The transcendence of theory based on perception has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. God is in the ‘beyond’ in the midst of our life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison

Diversity and community: these are terms which we have heard quite often in the recent past and from almost every quarter of our campus. The words, however, are subject to a number of interpretations, not to widely shared. For some, diversity means greater efforts at the recruitment of minority students to Kalamazoo College; for these students presently on
campus, a greater range of geographical origin and social milieu among fellow students serves to offer the possibility of more varied intellectual, social, and political interests.

The word "community" bears an equal number of, ironically, diverse interpretations. Students seeking greater voice in tenure decisions asked to be counted as part of the decision-making community in the college's academic structure. Faculty working on budget proposals and personnel decisions have engaged the administrators on our campus in another kind of decision-producing community. All of us -- students, faculty, and administrators -- come together in chapel as a community of worship and a fellowship in our commitment to the quality of life for all of us. As one of my colleagues, John Fink, put it so well in his recent Faculty Forum article:

If we attend chapel, we are able to leave our books, our offices, our appointments, our classes, and our meetings behind. We are all invited to lay down the cloaks which distinguish us from our fellows, to put aside the tasks related to our roles of student, faculty, clerk, or janitor, and for that one hour to come together to reflect on the deeper meaning which those tasks hold for us.

Certainly, for that one hour a kind of "community" does exist on our campus. Nor do I think that the sense of fellowship that one takes away from the chapel hour is quickly or totally forgotten. But the kind of community, the absence of which may of us lament, cannot be created nor maintained by a single hour on Friday mornings, nor by the small segment of the total campus population that those of us here represent. Nor can we pretend that the roles which we have set aside for this hour are not real or important in the ways in which we define ourselves and each other.

In our reading this morning from First Corinthians we learned that our community depends for its proper functioning on the diversity of its members, on the unique role that each member can play in the total community effort. The basis then of true community is diversity; that is a truism that we can all share and toward which we may even want to bow our heads. And achieving the proper balance of these two elements, a diversity of function and a sense of community, is a goal toward which, hopefully, we are all striving. Yet, in striving, I believe that we are sometimes prone to overlook the true diversity that the present college community represents. Instead of casting our minds into an outer darkness, seeking some kind of light and guidance, perhaps we should turn inward, to the darkness and complexity of our selves, here and now, and salvage some of the light that we can, I believe, find within these walls and within the parameters of this campus.

All of which leads me back to the alternative title of these remarks: "I don't want to be a 'them.'" Two weeks ago, I was part of a group having a lunchtime meeting. As conversation proceeded in our group, others entered the room. Looking over the situation and the group, they decided to bring their trays into the room and have lunch. "After all," said one of
them, "we won't disturb them." The tone of the remark infuriated me: I didn't like being a "them." One of those people, the others: the profs; those administrators -- the students -- those women -- "we!" It seemed so unfair to be labeled without even a chance to defend myself. Yet this happens all the time; we are constantly putting labels on other people, reducing them to categories, putting them in pigeon-holes. Yet how often do we deny in this way the very diversity that we seek elsewhere? But which already exists in abundance in our own midst? By drawing the lines between "them" and "us", we continue to ignore the unique gifts that each of us possesses. For the sake of the smooth operation of "things" and our own peace of mind, we close our minds to new ways of feeling and different ways of understanding. And in the long run, we are all diminished by our blindness.

Such labeling of those who differ in some way as the "others" creates a false sense of superiority in the one who makes the judgment. Nor is the temptation to achieve such an easy sense of status and superiority easy to resist. In our society today, improvement is a word that we hear everywhere but whose meaning has, I think, been lost. We are the land of the bigger and better monomotrip, and the shinier and swifter car. Advancement, ambition, progress -- our most important product -- are values accepted by most of us and whose merit at one level is not to be denied. And yet, I wonder...the bigger and better monomotrip still trap the frail creature instead of finding a proper place for it to live, unharmed and free. And the shiny new sedan may have rear windows that don't open and other non-functional trappings that add a great deal to its style and its prestige, but do not improve on its ability to perform a useful service.

In our rush to betterment, then, do we really advance very far? Not being one to shrink from the notion of self-improvement, I do not question the validity of this process -- only the ways in which we define it. Can improvement, progress, growth, come from a system in which growth is prescribed, not by the self, but by the judgments of others? Criticisms properly given should be received and valued according to the dictates of an inner being, where success is measured in terms of individual autonomy and awareness of self. I may accept the statement that this is not a B-paper -- nor even a B+ sermon -- but that it is a B-paper or a C sermon is only meaningful to me as an evaluation of my accomplishment, here and now, for this occasion only. It should not mean that I somehow failed, but only that I have achieved this goal and not that one. Whether I want to continue to strive and thus reach that other goal is a decision that I alone can and should make.

The false sense of superiority that is induced by the ability to judge is like the sentiment of the Pharisee, who by saying, in effect, "Thank God I am not one of them," heeded the letter of the law, but ignored its very spirit. That spirit, incarnated in Christ, the bringer of the New Law, put as the heart of the new message the notion that labels and judgments say very little about the reality of another person -- and say, unfortunately, all too much about the narrowness and self-centered focus of the one who judges.

It is all too easy for us, I think, to be tripped up by the pitfalls of pigeonholing. Labels, after all, make it easier to find the right jar,
the right ingredient. And each of us, I suspect, has discovered a formula -- the right combination of ingredients -- which allows us to function day in and day out, undisturbed by new tastes, new demands, new realities. How much more convenient to freeze someone in time and space -- to say "that's a liberal, that's a conservative, that's an intellectual, that's a jock." Or, "that's a man for you!" -- or, "women, I'll never understand them." With each label, the other person is fitted into a neat category, thus permitting us to count on that person's being both easily accessible when we need a dash of intellectual or a woman's point of view, but also at arm's length when we do not want to face the complexity of our situation. In thus categorizing others, we leave ourselves free to change our views, to select new ingredients, to change the formula of our daily lives. After all, if everyone were growing and changing, if everyone were capable of selecting, choosing, evaluating, then we -- the judges -- would never know for sure where we were, nor who we were. We would have to take into account the freedom of others to be and to grow, and by so doing, we might have to bear the awesome burden of our own freedom.

Nostalgia is very popular these days: people are finding their roots, returning to past times, reliving both happy and sad memories. And I wonder why we turn so willingly to the past. In one sense, we escape from the problems and tensions of the present to return to the earlier, less complex days of our childhood, or the simpler life of an early, younger America. But are we just escaping present difficulties? Or, in the cease for days gone by, are we also giving ourselves the satisfaction of playing a role in a drama whose plot is already in place and where we know the lines by heart? In other words, I think that the return to the past offers us satisfaction less for its contents, but for its fixed and familiar quality. By reliving past times, we are relieved of the burden of choosing. The choices have indeed already been made: we know where we are now, and whom we have become.

Similarly, when we pigeonhole others, we make them clear, fixed, predictable beings: and we derive the satisfaction of not having to choose, not having to interpret the actions and words of those around us. We are the only characters in the play who can invent new lines; and we have the advantage, or so we think, of knowing exactly what everyone else will say or do. However, what seems here to be an incredible advantage is really a trap: in putting others into the pigeonholes, we end up being rather lonely, like the night-watchmen in a mosque, surrounded by statues, each with a face and a presence all too familiar, and yet each incapable of saying or being anything new.

Each of us has, I think, both an outer and an inner self: a self who strives in a world of others, with all the self-measurement that this implies -- and a self whose inner being depends on the special grace of being a unique individual. When the outer self takes over, then we lose the precious sense of our own humanness, our own frailties. To function then solely for the efficient operation of the common endeavor. By thus failing to take into account the complexity of an inner self, both our own and that of others, we forgo the real diversity of the human spirit for a false notion of community. "Community" cannot just mean:
getting along well together, not working well together. Nor can diver-

sity merely serve the purpose of providing variety in our lives. Rather,
community must derive from a recognition of differences, a recognition
of individuality, which then permits us to transcend those differences
when appropriate, to learn from them when necessary, and to recognize in
them the very motivation for seeking out one another.

Recently, one of my colleagues pointed out to me a phenomenon on our
campus that might be called the "fear of being positive." It's not "is"
or 'with it' to be enthusiastic about anything these days: about classes
or professors, about advising or committee-work. I am always surprised
when, in the course of academic advising with a student, the student an-
swers my question, "How's it going this term?" with the following: "I
don't know what's wrong, Dr. Retsh, but everything's fine. Honestly, I
really like my classes." As if the fact that things are going well and
the sense of genuine excitement about one's activities were not precious
commodities in anyone's life. Why do we have this "fear," then, of the
positive? Perhaps, we are superstitious: to venture a positive note is

to invite the heavy hand of Fate. Perhaps, but I doubt it. Or rather,
have we forgotten that striving for betterment -- of ourselves and our
living and working environments -- does not mean devaluing what already
is, nor the self that is striving. By saying that I can do more and
better, I do not mean that what I am doing is deficient or somehow shoddy.
Different from does not mean "less than," yet so many of the scales by
which we measure one another and ourselves are vertical: C is below A;
4.2 is below 5.1 on the scale of faculty evaluation. Such measures
are of course necessary and can be productive and valuable. However,
they only measure performance of a given set of tasks; they cannot mea-
sure the special grace of individuality. Unfortunately, we can and often
do measure such individuality, not by a set of objective criteria, but
by our own needs and fears, our own prejudices.

Equality in the marketplace -- equal wages for equal work -- has
been the first step in the campaign for human rights of minorities and
women in our country. Such action is only politically sensible. But
the meaning of the term "equality" can become distorted if we apply it
to our dealings with individuals. Indeed, there is no measure of equal-
ity among individuals; there can be, I think, only an appreciation for
diversity that leads to real community.

In this morning's opening reading, Bonhoeffer spoke of a new reli-
gion, in which God would no longer be at the periphery of our world,
sought only in times of distress and when no human explanation is ade-
quate to our circumstances. For Bonhoeffer, the God of a new religion
would be at the very center of our world, his domain would be the arena
of human affairs. And if there is a special grace of individuality that
characterizes humankind, and is the source of both our greatest pain and
our greatest joy, then the recognition of each other's uniqueness will
constitute the place of God's work in our world and will be the one
common bond among all of us. Such a "community" will be predicated, then,
not on common vision or common interests -- although there are delightful
when they occur -- but on the shared recognition of our selfhood, and of
the freedom that this diversity confers on all of us.

Dr. Kathleen Retsh
Assistant Professor of
Romance Languages and Literature
February 2, 1978
The kingdom of Heaven, therefore, should be thought of in this way: There was once a king who decided to settle accounts with the men who served him. At the outset there appeared before him a man whose debt ran into millions. Since he had no means of paying, his master ordered him to be sold to meet the debt, with his wife, his children, and everything he had. The man fell prostrate at his master's feet, "No patient with me," he said, "and I will pay it all"; and the master was so moved with pity that he let the man go and remitted the debt. But no sooner had the man gone out than he met a fellow-servant who owed him a few pence; and catching hold of him he gripped him by the throat and said "Pity me what you own." The man fell at his fellow-servant's feet, and hugged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you"; but he refused, and had him jailed until he should pay the debt. The other servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and told him the whole story. He accordingly sent for the man, "You sinned" he said to him; "I remitted the whole of your debt when you appealed to me; were you not bound to show your fellow-servant the same pity as I showed you?" And so angry was the master that he condemned the man to torture until he should pay the debt in full.

Matthew 18:23-34 (NEB)

By any standard of judgment the man in our story has to be regarded as one of history's greatest chumps. Consider: He was in debt into the millions of dollars. His wheeling and dealing had finally reached a dead end, and the inevitable accounting had arrived. His creditor, according to the "law of the land," ordered him and his family sold into slavery and his property liquidated.

Then our man did something he may never have done before. He fell on his knees and appealed for understanding and mercy. Inexplicably his plea was granted. Not only was he spared his cruel fate, which by itself would have been a miracle, his debt was cancelled, and he could walk into a new life unencumbered by the errors of the old.

As he passes out of his master's house in the afterglow of an incredible act of generosity, he happens upon a man who in turn owed him 100 denarii, a measly 20 bucks! And then the unbelievable happens! The man who just moments ago had his enormous sum cancelled insists on the repayment of $20! When this debtor implores him for patience, he shows no awareness of what he had just experienced and has his debtor arrested.

Of course, the expected happens, and this rascal ends in jail with the original obligation to repay all he owed. The cheering section is filled and noisy. For once a real m.n.b. gets what he deserves, and justice triumphs even over the great and influential.

What is this story all about? Not really about justice, nor about...
...its assertion among those who deal in the millions. It is about forgiveness, and forgiveness of a particular sort. It does not illustrate forgiveness as an occasional achievement of human magnanimity, as something you and I may demonstrate on a rare occasion of moral awareness. It is rather a story of forgiveness as a necessary component of human life at every level; forgiveness as a structural element that makes life possible.

For just imagine life without forgiveness; a life in which the phrase "I am sorry" would receive no "That's O.K."; a life in which "Excuse me, please," would have no right to expect a "Go ahead"; a life in which my statement "I apologize for the impression I may have created" would not be met by your response, "I fully understand"; a life in which pleading lips would say, "Please, forgive me, honey," and would confront a contemptuous expression.

This is life without the possibility of erasure; this is life written in ink when we only possess the power to write with a soft pencil; this is life without the chance for a bath, this is life with a cementized memory for all the faults we have, the mistakes we have made; the dumb things we have done — the insensitive omissions, our no finely tuned ability to act like that proverbial bull in the china shop. All of this is remembered and is carried on into our future. It is written in cement.

It is the bane of small communities in particular to be trapped by unfortunate moments of history in which the cow of Mr. Jones grazes in the garden of Mr. Smith, and the confrontation over this act creates bitterness and memory that is sustained for years, extends over the larger families and frequently determines what can be done and cannot be done in this community.

I remember a story about such a small town whose two leading families suffered under the unforgiving resolve of their patriarchs. Something had happened a long time ago, no one was quite sure what it was, but grandfather "A" and grandfather "B" marshaled their clans in haughty disdain of each other. On a particular holiday the whole village was gathered at the harbor to celebrate a seasonal festival. Only these two grandfathers chose to remain at home, but since it was a beautiful day, they decided to do the same thing without being aware of each other's plans. They took out their bicycles to go for a ride. And as grandfather "A" coasted down one side of the hill, grandfather "B" coasted down the other. The road made a turn at the bottom of the hill, and they both reached it at the same time. Their age and surprise conspired to have them run right smack into each other.

In a most undignified fashion they lay sprawled on the road. Pain required some expression of emotion; male dignity prevented tears, and they began to laugh at their unceremonious meeting; they laughed at the studied silence with which they had passed each other over so many years; they laughed at the insignificant occasion of their original disagreement; they laughed at their bent bicycles, their torn pants and scratched knees.
The empty village heard laughter out of two mouths that had not emitted any sound in concert for a long time. When the celebration at the harbor was over, the people returned to see two old men seated in the middle of the road surrounded by their wrecked bicycles in most animated conversation. Understanding the profundity of this meeting the people took these bicycles to the village square where they were raised and remained unrepaird for a long time.

The act of forgiving is first of all an act of giving in which you give me something no one else can give because I gave you something you did not want. I gave you that injury, compromised you in the eyes of others, handed you an insensitive criticism, addressed you with that harsh judgment. You have something from me which in my calmer moments I very much would like to have back. But, what I gave was so uniquely intended for you that it has become non-returnable. Now the balance between you and me is profoundly disturbed, unless you have the power to overcome my gift, unless you can forgive, i.e. give away something yourself. But this "something" needs to be greater than my gift, it needs to have the power to envelope my gift and render it powerless.

The act of forgiving is secondly a refusal to remember. We are familiar with the peculiar expression, "I will forgive, but I cannot forget." If this inability to forget is the mere recognition that I cannot erase the experiences from my mind, that scars will remain and are not malleable to my voluntary actions, then we cannot quarrel with this statement. But forgiveness requires that whatever I remember can no longer influence the way I relate to you; that I refuse the memory of what you may have done to remain a force in what I will do.

When I forgive, I disenfranchise the energy that your injury may have created in me and will not use it as a power, an energizer, for anything I will do.

The act of forgiving is thirdly an act of love. Why should you forgive me? Does not your refusal in the presence of my desire give you an advantage over me? Is not the imbalance tilted in your favor, and could you not exploit my guilt into a sense of obligation? But you forgive because you desire my health; you forgive because you have been in my place; because you have received forgiveness; because you have known the pain of unforgiveness.

But you also forgive for your own reasons. The master who has a slave keeps something of himself in bondage. The unforgiving life artifi-cially keeps a wound open. It may perpetually remind the one who in-jured but it will also perpetually hurt the injured one.

The act of forgiving is fourthly an act of freedom. When you forgive me, you set me free from my past. You permit me to erase from the story of my life a paragraph, a chapter, a few pages detailing an unpleasant, an ugly incident. Since you have forgiven it, i.e. decided that it will no longer function in your life, I am free to do the same. Only then can this incident genuinely become a past incident. It has
become impotent beyond its time. I am not impaired by its claim to burden my future. Just like a financial debt will require my present earnings and claim them for the past, so an unforgiven act will tap my present and future moral resources and make me less a person than I can be.

The forgiven life is unburdened from the checkered accumulation of the past. Let me quote George Bernard Shaw once again, "Only my tailor understands me correctly. Every time I see him, he measures me afresh." When we have forgiven each other, we meet each other as if it were the first time.

Now a necessary consideration. The act of forgiveness is more than a gentlemanly gesture to let by-gones be by-gones. It is more than an expression of civility, a form of goodwill based on my good upbringing and in my accommodating nature. The act of forgiveness is nothing less than an attempt to alter the past and to shape the future.

Something happens. I intervene in your life and leave with guilty hands. You watch me go with a bruised soul and clouded eyes. The flow of time claims this act for itself and makes it history. Somehow and often because of the intercession of a true friend the magnitude of my thoughtlessness, my careless ways, my rough edges, dawn upon me and envelopes me in sorrow and regret. Where you got the power, I do not know, but you reach into the past and change my ways with you and give me a new moment of history. This shapes our future, yours and mine. I have been freed from consequences that were determined by my thoughtless act. I enter my future minimally mortgaged to my past.

The ancient Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1792-1750 B.C.) which certainly had a shaping influence on the legal provisions of the Old Testament has for an interesting mechanism to effect forgiveness. If a woman had been found guilty of infidelity, she and the involved male are separately bound and thrown in the river. If the husband chooses to retrieve his wife before she drowns, the king will retrieve the other man, and both will no longer be guilty.

There he stands, deeply injured and betrayed. Her hands and legs are tied. She is led to the edge of the river and pushed. The waves close over her helpless body. A short distance from her, her illicit partner reaches for the door of death. Is it mere pity, is it a noble spirit, is it a claim to moral heroism that makes the husband dive and save the disloyal partner? To be able to do that, he reached deep into his soul, beyond the point where injury and pride are effective arguments, and touched a power not of his own making, the power of God's grace. Here he knew himself to be touched by the giver of all of life and knew his own life to be a gift. Is it not arrogance of the highest order for someone who has been given not to be a giver in return? Is it not arrogance for someone who has been given in the millions to be a stickler about a measly twenty bucks? Is it indeed not an anomaly not to forgive when one has just stepped out of the king's presence, showered with generosity?

My act of forgiveness is therefore a recognition of the true char-
actor of my life: I have always been given more than I myself can ever
give! I upset the order of things if I refuse to do so! By refusing
to forgive, I close a door God has to the world and I make the world
a poorer place because God cannot give through me.

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April 13, 1978
PASSION

St. Paul, in that seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, tries to explain the proper motives for the Christian life. He talks about law and about grace. Paul wants to say that the law is good and it has its usefulness for Jewish Christians, like himself; but Paul emphasizes that the Christian life is not to be determined by law.

Most of us are probably happy to hear that we don't have to live by a particular law - we don't like to feel constrained by a law, especially when we don't see the point in it.

Grace is a much tougher concept - perhaps we're all content to let God save us through grace - but if law seems to over-interfere with our daily lives, grace seems susceptible of under-interfering with us. Grace, defined entirely as a gift of God, might seem to be a sort of fatalism. Certainly Paul doesn't want his readers to understand grace as fatalism - God's free gift is not unrelated to the way we may appropriate it - and the way we are to be free is to be, in Paul's words "Free in Christ." It is not a freedom from responsibility.

And yet, if we must respond to God's grace by being in Christ, how is that different from a new law? What's to prevent us from being Pharisees who not only scruple over the words of Moses, but also over the words of Jesus? This is a real problem.

Paul has the special problem of trying to tell people how to live under grace when living under grace is not something they can will to do. If they could decide for themselves that they would lead the proper Christian life, then all that Paul would have to do is to list them all the rules. All they would have to do is to do it. But then they would be living under law.

Living under law is a decision we can make - we merely decide that our lives will be led by our will, that we will determine ourselves by adherence to some rules or rules. Living under grace is different - we have to decide to abandon living on our individual will and be willing to let our lives be led by the love of God.

"Living by the love of God" - How do you do that? That's such a tough idea that it makes it seem worthwhile to ask, "what's the matter with living under the law?"

Isn't it enough to decide to observe certain customs, to read certain books, to say certain prayers or to refrain from certain actions? You know, this isn't narrowly a 'religious thing' - there are legalists of all kinds. People have all sorts of codes, you know, like some variation of the golden rule, or some sort of values based on a philosophical system of ethics, or on a psychological model of human nature.

41
To live by a constant act of will, patterned on some idea, is to
admit that God does not provide. To live that way says that God
does not provide. To live by law Is to deny the life of the Spirit, to
trust yourself rather than God.

I mean, it's not all bad - take the man who thinks it's his duty
to support Little League. So he gives them some money, and that
makes him happy because he feels like he's done what he should, and it
makes him happy because they can use the money. On the other hand, big deal -
Virtue is its own reward, and it is something -- but it is nothing great
and it is vain.

On the other hand, it is not enough to renounce the law or to ignore
the conscience. We are not to 'see through' our guilt or our virtue, to
relativize our values according to our whim - I knew a girl in school who
literally did what she felt like - she'd wander down a highway for hours,
or climb out on a window ledge, or bring you some flowers - all for no
particular reason. She was unpredictable and was an unpredictable to her­
self as she was to everyone else. You can't really live that way.

Nor can we escape living legalistically by defying the rules. Those
artists come to mind who create new art by deliberately changing the rules.
What does that mean they are free from the rules? No - if it weren't for the
rules what they did would have no meaning. A novel, for example, which
is composed by random cutting and pasting is only interesting because it
deffes the way a novel is customarily created. Often the people who most
want to flaunt convention become nothing more than an exception that proves
the rule - more eccentric than their more run-of-the-mill counterparts but
not more free.

St. Paul has a problem with legalists, who want to make Christianity
a life of prescribed rituals, and St. Paul has a problem with people who
feel that their new freedom in Christ Is best advertised by a defiance of
accepted customs. No one seems to get St. Paul's point, and he has a
hard time explaining to them how their lives are to be changed by their
faith in the Lord.

People whom we consider 'religious persons' always convey the truths
of their faith in two ways: one is the ideas they have, concepts, 'the­
ology' - and these ideas are more-or-less convincing on their own merit.
The second way a person teaches us about God is by their own personal
encounter with God, their own meal, their own passion. The reading from
Jeremiah shows that passion - a longing - was what was central to Jerem­
iah's life of faith. I believe the same thing is true of St. Paul. St.
Paul is full of passion. From time to time in his writings the man raves.
The passage we read this morning is a little unhinged. Part of this
happens is due to his frustration: he preaches, he teaches, he delivers
the Word of God and yet he lacks final control over God's grace - he
cannot give his personal passion and his intimacy with God to his con­
gregations.
I think a lot of what Paul writes makes very little sense until you begin to take his most convoluted arguments and his most painful entreaties as evidence of the great passion he felt in his religious life. If you believe that Paul wrote passionately, and you've ever been passionately involved in anything, or in anyone, you can empathize with Paul in his less logical moments, and you can appreciate the poetry, the pain, the cross-crossing arguments in Paul's letters.

But what do I mean by passion? Is passion something we create in ourselves, some form of self-delusion? Are we entirely responsible for the fact that we feel drawn to someone or to something? I don't think so. But if we are not the source of our passion, is passion something "out there," some invisible force that invades our lives and overpowers us, despite ourselves? That is obviously not so, because we have all controlled our passions.

Passion, I believe, neither resides entirely within us, nor is it entirely in the objects of our passion, but always in both. Passion is a relationship, a relationship between a soul — say, for instance, yourself — and some object. You experience your passion as your urge to give yourself for that object, you feel passion as a compulsion to spend yourself for that object.

The object of passion can be almost anything, but we are more prey to a passion in which we are promised power or beauty or love. Passion depends on our cooperation — unless we give ourselves to the passion, the object of passion remains an idea. And unless our potential for passion finds an object, it remains an emptiness, a longing and a loneliness at our very center. Passion is something in which we involve ourselves.

This may be hard for us to swallow in an age which tends to believe nothing exists outside of the individual self. But passion does have both a subjective and an objective part, and the bigger part of a passion is the part which seems to overpower us — the bigger part of a passion is the object. Love, honor, justice — all those "words" which are so rarified when they are written out in propositions or treatises, or political platforms — and which seem so abstract when they are being proved or disproved or approved — all those abstract "high hopes" of the human heart are the very things which rob concrete and particular people like us of our sleep and give us stomachaches and give us chills up our spine. And when God is no longer a proposition but a passion, the problem with legalism and with grace is no longer a problem. God's grace is that you have a passion for God, that God, as the object of your passion, conquers your will and you give yourself to God. In Paul's language that takes the form of being a 'slave' to Christ, to being a 'new creation,' and Paul can say such things as, "not I, but Christ in me."

We have times in our lives when we are so involved in what we are doing that it takes us over — times when we lose ourselves in something. Music can be like that — when you want to be a musician, you work on your technique to free you from having technique get in the way of the music. When you play well, you play as part of the music you are making —
it's not a matter of fingers and notes on a page and a conscientiousness about meter, but it's a question of feeling. Sometimes, even if you're only listening, you can hear the distinction between music that is merely correct from a technical point of view and music which contains part of the soul of the musician.

Having said all that, I see at the usual impasse. I cannot give you a passion for God. Whether a passion for God develops in your life is between you and God, but I will commend passion to you, and urge you to explore the possibilities which lie in passion. Passion is spiritual. Not all passions are passions for God, but the power of a passion is a power over the human spirit. In order to understand what it means to be religious, in order to answer the question of - what is the proper motive for the Christian life - we must understand that the proper motive is a passion. Passion is a motive which is impossible to argue into another person but a motive which is possible for each individual to live.

Our age shares none of its problem with passion with past ages - people will still throw themselves into strange cults, suicidal causes, and antisocial organizations. However, I don't believe that these sorts of impassioned movements are our problem. Our problem is not too much passion, but too little. We see through things, we know the whole story before we even get involved. We treat life as analysts, and critics, and as outsiders - and we wonder why it is hard for us to really feel a part of our world. We kind of wander around, flirting with art, flirting with girls or with guys, flirting with God, never daring to leave behind us the role of coquette and become responsible to art, or to someone, or to God. We sense that we might lose ourselves if we were to do that. We know the enormity of the decision to live for something, to put ourselves at the service of something, or someone, to expend ourselves...

A friend of mine at home is studying to be a concert pianist, and he and I have spoken often about his problem. He tells me, "I practice six hours a day, sometimes eight. I have no social life - my family and I get on each other's nerves. Do I want to do this for five or ten or twenty more years?" He goes on to tell me that he sometimes gets depressed and loses sleep, and resorts to running late at night to calm his nerves.

Yet he doesn't stop. He's done this now, seriously, for several years, and he can't stop. Sometimes he plays long hours and everything goes right and it is terrific and his passion for the piano pays off. Maybe that's why he plays, but he desires it and he believes in it. He plays because he believes he must. It is a given of his experience, he is hooked - pain and frustration and self-denial and pleasure and rhapsody - all are part of the fact that he is in love with the art to which he has dedicated himself.

Some people are horrified at the sacrifice, and some people think it's unhealthy. A person must change their habits, rearrange their hours, and allow themselves to be driven. It is a way of having demons, a perpetual force pulling on you, demanding your energy. It does not make for
the balanced life, for moderation in all things, for 'getting yourself together' — because the self's own health, and the self's own wholeness apart from the object of passion become an impossibility. Passion proclaims the insignificance of the individual self on its own.

Passion demands that you surrender. Passion imposes on you, it makes you crazy. Passion is not a way we live deliberately, passion is something to which we deliberately give ourselves. Then we can live in passion, and not in deliberation.

Falling in love is a passionate thing. Loving need not always be passionate, but falling in love certainly is. "Falling in love" — the very way we say it sounds like "falling in a well" — love is there as some murky pool of possibilities. The passion, you see, is not for a person, because we can never 'have' another person, the passion is for a relationship with another person.

Let's face it — when you are falling in love with someone, it is not really his or her goodheartedness, nor his or her friendliness, nor is it the way he or she is constructed from the back of an ankle to the nape of the neck that drives you crazy. Those things are part of it, but the promise which that person holds for passion is not a promise he or she is making — and in fact that someone may never come close to cooperating.

The passion you experience for her or for him is not as simple as it would be if it were a matter of your need for companionship, your need for approval, your need for sex. Some people try to make it that simple but it is not. Passion makes the person to whom you're attracted worth your while — which is to say, worth you — this person gives your life worth, and is someone on whom you can spend yourself and feel justified in doing so. Passion promises us life by the annihilation of ourselves in an ultimate relationship.

This doesn't always turn out well — and the traditional fear of passion on the part of churches and parents and politicians is that sometimes a passion will cheat the person it enslaves.

A friend of mine in high school we called the Z — as in Zebra — fell in love during our last year of school. He fell heavily — he didn't play basketball with the guys anymore, and his friends were all amazed at the time and energy he spent on his romance. There was talk of their getting married.

It fell apart on him over the summer and I heard he was taking it pretty hard. At Christmas another friend and I were out delivering Christmas stuff to friends and we stopped by at Z's house. He was living in the basement of his family's home. He wasn't going to go to school, he didn't have a job, and he never went outside. He talked with us a bit strangely and we left. It took him a couple of years to snap out of it.

The Z had given in to his passion for love, and mutual service,
and security and sexual fulfillment and he had subjugated himself, happily, to the relationship he wanted. And when the relationship was over all his impulses to care, and kiss, and caress, and to be the person concerned in the thing - all that was missing. He had lost himself, willingly, in something which then proceeded to leave him - and he lived out a kind of death in his parents' basement for a year or so, either because something in him had died or because his passion for the romance changed into a style of life in which he tried to lose himself without having anything to which to give himself. My friend the X didn't really want to die, but he didn't really want to live, either. Passion did that to him.

Passion is risky. Passion is something we rightly regard with suspicion and giving yourself to a passion is a big decision. I think it is a good idea to "look before you leap." But I think it is important, if things look okay, to go ahead and leap. Passion is real, its power and its promise are proportionate to the object which attracts you, but passion is OK. Passion is necessary - it provides the pull and the drive to keep you involved in your own life. Passion frees you from aimlessness, from judging yourself by arbitrary standards, and passion frees you from having to will every act, and every move - from just pushing yourself all the time toward some goal which you barely feel the need to reach. Passion uses your feelings and directs them, and passion reveals truths to you which defy explanation. You become at once greater than you are, and less.

You can miss a lot of living in this world if you insist on obeying only your private voices. You can over-rationalize things. You can be too careful. You can live successfully at this school and in our culture if you merely obey the rules, and you will get something for that. You cannot live very well if you ignore the rules. But life is not simply a matter of obeying or disobeying rules. Life is also love, and art, and high hopes. Life is recklessness and euphoria and despair. It is a matter of responding to the various calls to passion and passionate commitment around us. Life is living for something, and for others.

Well, what's my point? Should you go ahead and fall for so-and-so, or should you dare to commit yourself to your artistic impulses? I don't know - it's worth thinking about.

But whether you consider yourself a religious person or a person who is not religious, it is worth considering whether your values, your beliefs and your habits are founded on something deeper than assent to philosophical argument or to historical probabilities.

Our faith is that God is historical, and we do a lot of philosophizing about God - we believe that God is reasonable - but what makes God important to us personally is our faith that God is personal. We know a God for whom it is possible to feel passion, because our God is passionate. This God, whom we sometimes characterize as the God of love, the God who is Spirit and Truth - this God is sufficient for our longing. The passion for God which we can have and in which we can be had by God is not something we need to fear.
If we are reluctant, let us make sure that our lack of conviction, our reservations don't come from cynicism. Let's not let ourselves accept or reject God based on what we hear about God from somebody else, or because being religious seems like a good idea or a foolish idea - but let us realize that our response to God must be a personal response, that our relationship to God will take the form of a passionate response to the God whom we come to know and for the love of whom we dare to give up a little of our distance and the pose that we know all we need to know.

May the loves we have had and will have in this world, the ups and downs of our heart teach us the value as well as the price of passion and prepare us to "love God with all our heart, our soul and our mind," in the words of the Gospel. And to that end may God grant all of us to experience the love of God: the peace that passes understanding, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, this day and always. Amen.

Mackenzie Scott
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November 9, 1979
In the Book of Proverbs we find that the wise person will watch carefully how he behaves at the table of a ruler; he will not talk to fools; he will not hang around winos and glutons; and he will have nothing to do with prostitutes. In fact, the Book is full of much good advice, pointing out the wise way of dealing with all kinds of people and situations.

In the passage which just precedes our text, Luke reports Jesus' own awareness of what people are saying of him: "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" Then Luke describes Jesus' encounter with one of these sinners.

He had attracted attention with his healings and his fresh and challenging version of the Jewish faith. The Pharisees were the middle-class, responsible persons in that society, comparable to the families from which most of our students come, and to which all of our faculty belong. They were deeply concerned with right living and the good society, which meant they were concerned with God's will and how to live it. They have received a bad press, largely because we modern Christian Pharisees do not recognize ourselves in them, but, rather incongruously, insist upon forcing ourselves into the role of disciples when we meditate upon these events. So it does not occur to us that what we need for understanding the truth about ourselves and our ways is to be found in what emerges in Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees--good guys like ourselves.

At any rate, Simon was a Pharisee who invited this strange man to dinner -- this man who was reminding everybody of a prophet in the immediacy and bluntness of his speech on behalf of God's relation to them. To the dismay and embarrassment of Simon, one of the sinners followed Jesus right into Simon's own house, putting on a wild display of affection right in front of his dinner party. She cried and carried on, using her hair to wipe the tears from his feet, then putting perfume on them. Clearly, no prophet would have put up with this. He would have known what sort of woman she was and promptly sent her away out of his sight, refusing to be so much as touched by such a woman.

Simon was, of course, right. As Proverbs points out: "A harlot is a deep pit; an adventuress is a narrow well. She lies in wait like a robber and increases the faithless among men." That is, a prostitute is a destructive, disintegrative force weakening society by tempting husbands and fathers to neglect their responsibilities within their families. On a broader scale we can see that both the Book of Proverbs and the Pharisees of all ages are rightly committed to the good society and to effective involvement in creating and maintaining the civilized modes of living upon the basis of which all of the richest forms of human
existence must depend. The emergence of cultural and moral enrichment of human living depends upon man's developing agreed-upon ways of classifying objects and events and then being consistent in treating the many instances of the same sort of thing or event in the same way. We might say that the Simon recognized the "uniform" of the prostitute. He did not confuse himself by considering what her name was, how she came to be in the situation she was obviously in, what extenuating circumstances there might be, whether she might have changed just now, etc. It was better not to weaken his determination to resist her evil influence in his community by entertaining reflections which might confuse his clear feelings about what God and goodness called for in this situation.

By learning how to generalize humanity has evolved: knowledge, cultures, art, religion, government, laws, science, civilization, have become possible. Our creative capacity is to concentrate upon the uniform and ignore the many concretions, to discern likenesses and ignore trivial details— which distinguish individual objects and events in unimportant ways. This then enables us to develop complex and relatively reliable routines and various patterns of enduring relationships presupposed by every kind of valued human opportunity or action. Such classification, or consistent attention to "the uniforms," is the basis of all justice and fairness, of all standards, of all wide effective-ness of any kind, of all comparisons, of all such regulations as protect and encourage the family or even personal freedoms.

Several years ago we provided housing for some South American doctors who were studying medicine and dentistry in this country on a kind of sabbatical program. In an effort to make conversation with one of them while driving to Chicago I asked him what he thought about the roads and traffic in this country. His surprising answer was that he admired particularly how everybody stopped for the stop lights. It seemed that often an important factor in deciding who was to go first through an intersection in his society was the relative social status of the persons in the respective cars. He agreed that it was a greater freedom for all to ignore the persons in such a situation, and to concentrate solely upon the absolutely simple category of taking turns regulated by the impartial rhythm of red and green lights, each person simply being a number one.

On the college campus we are engaged almost exclusively in the relating of ourselves to various kinds of uniforms. The knowledge which is our prime reason for being here is made up of classes of objects and events and the rules which specify the regularities which obtain between these classes of things. Now each object or thing is also a member of an indefinite number of other classes, and subject to an indefinite number of other rules, but we choose to concentrate on a definite class of classes for each class and deliberately ignore the others. And we invent unique names, literal uniforms, signs and symbols to make this important process more effective.

In the teaching of religion, confession of the personal or living faith of each student and of the teacher does not contribute to the clarification of meanings; it confuses them. The question of John
Spencer’s religion stylizes the purpose of the course. But John Spencer’s personal preference or actual faith could be included as a typical instance of one of the options being examined and studied in the course. It is absolutely necessary, however, that it have identical status with all of the other options or possible faiths considered. In this way the student is equipped with added powers to understand and use for various purposes (among which is the deepening of his own personal faith) the insights provided by the great alternative kinds of statements of religious belief.

Our very powers of improving human relations, making effective our caring for and loving of others, our improving of the actual conditions for ourselves and others, presupposes our being able to classify actions and create rules which acknowledge these kinds of action and specify appropriate behavior in respect to them. And this is just what Simon was doing. One might have a somewhat different feeling about what to do about prostitution than he did, but he was clearly right in relating to her in terms of her kind of behavior and its consequences in the society.

But, it always gives me pause when I find that Jesus and I are clearly at odds. And here, my commendable identification with my fellow Pharisee, Simon, gets a shock, for Jesus transcends the rules and condemns the prostitute. This does not mean, necessarily, that he is condemning Simon, although he comes close to this. He does not actually say that he approves of her uniform in the face of Simon’s disapproval. Jesus does say to another such person, “Go and sin no more.” And here in our present parable, he clearly implies the same thing when he tells her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But he does something perhaps even more aggravating to Simon. He claims that this prostitute loves God even more than does Simon, the champion of God’s will. And “her great love is proof that her sins have already been forgiven by God.”

There is something very messy about love. Its very character is to accept the full concrete reality of the other person. It finds in the other an intrinsic value — value for its own sake. It is the very reason for the importance of rules, the creation of order, the establishing of the richer conditions providing richer content in life and new freedoms for its expression. It is the very nature of love to express itself in such service of persons. And yet it does not itself always obey the rules of generalizations which it creates, and from which it benefits. In fact, it often finds itself chafing at the restrictions imposed by treating others solely in terms of their uniforms. We have seen that Whitehead holds that “love is a little oblivious to sorrows.”

Robertson of Brighton complaining, in a letter written at night after a long day of pastoral visitsation: “A long, stupid visit is just over. I do believe that there ought to be more interest in humanity and more power of throwing one’s self into the mind of every one, so that no visit should appear dull. An infinite being comes before us with a whole eternity wrapped up in his mind and soul, and we proceed to classify him, put a label upon him, as we should upon a jar, saying ‘This is rice, that is jelly, and this pomatum’, and then we think we have saved ourselves
the necessity of taking off the cover; whereas, in truth, the Tory, Radi­
cal, Evangelical, gossip, flirt, or feather-brain are all new beings in
the world; each one never having existed before, each having a soul
as distinct in its peculiarities from all other souls as his or her face
is from all other faces. This seems to have been one great feature in
the way in which our Lord treated the people who came in contact with
Him; He brought out the peculiarities of each, treated each one as a
living person, and not as a specimen of a labelled class, like the stuffed
giraffes, camels, humming-birds, and alligators you see in museums.
Consequently, at his touch each one gave out his peculiar spark of light,
and each one of the characters we have in the Gospels is distinctly him­
self, and no other...What deep interest there would be in the most com-
monplace society, if we could associate with human beings in this wondering,
inspiring way."

You will notice that Robertson is overlooking the impor-


necessity of uniforms, as we have just outlined it. But he is ex-
pressing the particular frustration and dehumanization which seems inevi-
itably to accompany it as one of its inevitable by-products. And our
story from Luke makes clear the same point. Simon is right in an impor-
tant way. Nevertheless, he has thereby lost the power of recognizing the
reality which gives importance to his classifications — for the sake of
which he classifies. The uniform tells his certain important things but
it hides other important, more important, things. Seeing her as a signif-
ificant problem for society and for individual obedience to the will of God
blinds him with respect to seeing what is also true — and the more impor-
tant truth, even though it makes everything messy — that she has repented
and been forgiven by God. Jesus does not repudiate classifications (he
uses them too) but he remains open to the spiritual matters which are not
touched by moral criteria. He recognized her unbounded love as the expres-
sion of her new relationship with God.

There obviously are consequences for Jesus, too. His very ability
to transcend the truisms and moral categories which were the public reality
here got him in trouble. This is not to condemn the Jews of the time and
their commitment to God and His will, to the people of God and their good-
ness, individually and collectively. Our attitude, if it is honest, not
hypocritical, is to see ourselves — at our best — sharing this concern.
The appellation, "pious," should be dropped from our vocabulary. What
is being uncovered in this and other stories and parables is not the veil
of morality, nor the identification of morality, goodness, with religion.
It is the limiting of morality to its proper and necessary function, the
providing of the optimum conditions for the effectiveness of spirit. The
life of spirit presupposes the effectiveness of morality, but it is not it-
self a general condition — it is life! A. D. Lindsey, the English his-
torian and philosopher has put the point with admirable concision: "The
difference between ordinary people and saints is not that saints fulfill
the plain duties which ordinary men neglect; the things saints do have
not usually occurred to ordinary people at all."

Where does this leave us then? We have seen that generalizations,
uniforms, are necessary and good for the human life. To some extent
we all do, to sacrifice for them and for their maintenance and defense
as we all do, is good so far as it goes. But it does not suffice. To

51
be obedient is not to live, though obedience to the order insofar as it
serves life and God is good. But to live finally refers not to the con-
ditions for life but to the quality of participation in the Spirit.

There is not time now to go into what we might mean by Spirit.
Christians meet Spirit most compellingly and recognizably in their con-
templation of Jesus as the Christ. But let me suggest what this might
mean, using the words of Paul Tillich: "The Spirit can reveal to you
that you have hurt somebody deeply, but it can also give you the right
word that reunites him with you. The Spirit can make you love, with
the divine love, someone you profoundly dislike or in whom you have no
interest. The Spirit can conquer your loathing towards what you know is
the aim of your life, and it can transform your moods of aggression and
depression into stability and serenity.

The Spirit can liberate you from hidden enmity against those when
you love and from open vengefulness against those by whom you feel vi-
lated. The Spirit can give you the strength to throw off false anxieties
and to take upon yourself the anxiety which belongs to life itself. The
Spirit can awaken you to sudden insight into the way you must take your
world, and it can give you joy in the midst of ordinary routine as well
as in the depth of sorrow."

Life is most fully itself as life in God. It is an end in itself
and not to be produced or explained in terms of other things, but it
can be served by all sorts of conditions. But it can be traded for an
ultimate concern for these conditions. The devil is a fallen angel, but
nevertheless an angel.

Let us pray:

O Thou who art the Source of all order, the giver of all good and
perfect gifts, who dost surround our days with the sustaining and re-
warding faithfulness of unchangeable goodness and righteousness; whose
stars in their appointed courses sing the ineffable joy of participating
in that great symphony of creation; whose creatures find providential
patience in all things for their own ways of being themselves; give us
the will to recognize our utter dependence upon thee and the painful
despising of the repeated forms that sing together and sustain us. We
are restless and anxious, and foolishly strive to replace thy rich order
with a more vivid but shallow environment of our own making. We deserve
to be abandoned to the consequences of our own iniquitous impositions.
But, in our saner moments, the clouds of fantasy clear somewhat and we
appropriately have our doubts about taking our destinies into our own
hands, partly from the observation that there is such bloody competition
between our various visions of the emancipated life.

But deliver us, we pray, from the foolish relationships to other
persons which hide and suppresses the uncertainties of the spirit under
the familiarities of our general categories. We prefer, usually, to see
no farther than the uniforms that our brothers wear. We are afraid to
embark upon the adventure of love, and without love there can be no strength
for forgiveness. Yet each of us starves in his heart for lack of what we
could give one another if we could ourselves be set free.
There was one we have heard, who did just this in the lives of the people of a faraway place in a long-ago time. The world has never been the same since. When we hear this story of this foolish man who respected the uniforms, but was ready to accept and meet the spirit within them, our hearts tremble with hope. If only it were really true, and we could be set free in this way ourselves. Perhaps we could even risk our own spirits in the hands of others to whom we turn. O God, make it true for us as well; and we will forgive as Thou hast forgiven us. May we, and all men, come alive in this Jesus Christ whom we fear and love at the same time.

Please try to understand that we are so hard on one another because we fear the spirit so much. A man who lives beyond his uniforms in the freedom of the spirit frightens us. How can we ever hope to make a church or a family or a community or a nation or world if people do not behave themselves? And so our prayer for this love must be made in Jesus.

Amen.

Dr. John Spencer
Religious Department
October 1, 1976
OBJECTIVITY AND COMMITMENT

Confucius said, "The superior man understands righteousness; the inferior man understands profit."

A man of humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others; and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent.

Fan Ch'ih asked about humanity. Confucius said, "It is to love men." He asked about knowledge. Confucius said, "It is to know men."

Confucius said, "There is one thread that runs through my doctrines." Tseng Tzu said, "Yes." After Confucius had left, the disciples asked him, "What did he mean?" Tseng Tzu replied, "The Way of the Master is none other than conscientiousness and altruism. Conscientiousness and altruism are not far from the Way. What you do not wish others to do to you, do not do to them. What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not show it in dealing with his inferiors. This is the principle of the measuring square.

Yen-ju said, "The ruler of Wei is waiting for you to serve in his administration. What will be your first measure?" Confucius said, "It will certainly be the rectification of names. Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister be a minister, the father be a father, and the son be a son."

Yen-kung asked about government. Confucius said, "Sufficient food, sufficient armament, and sufficient confidence of the people." Tzu-kung said, "Forced to give up one of these, which would you abandon first?" Confucius said, "I would abandon the armament." Tzu-kung said, "Forced to give up one of the remaining two, which would you abandon first?" Confucius said, "I would abandon food. There have been deaths from time immemorial, but no state can exist without the confidence of the people."

The Address

Tertullian once asked, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" He was calling attention to the problem of reconciling religious commitment with Greek philosophical objectivity, and by his question he implied they were distinct. It is an interesting question (and, incidentally it appeared on the final in Ancient Philosophy last quarter). The content of liberal education hinges upon it: whether one can combine intellectual objectivity with value commitments. I think that one can, and this would make an interesting discussion, one I had planned to make. But my choice of readings from the Bible and from the Confucian classics suggests another question, one I do propose to discuss: What has Confucius to do with Christ? I would suggest that Confucius may shed some light on the
Confucius lived in the sixth century B.C. at a time in ancient China when the old Chou dynasty was in a state of collapse, leading to what was called the Warring States period. The dreams of Confucius was to reorganize society through education so that it would be founded on mutual commitment to moral principles. Righteousness, not profit, should be the pattern, and moral example should be the motivating force. When he said that the starting point should be the rectification of names, he was saying that social and political confusion and conflict result from moral confusion, and that there must be a correspondence between actual performance in life and ideal principles. Let the ruler be a ruler, means that the ruler should emulate the ideal model of a ruler. He was really saying what Socrates and Plato were to say later in Greece: there is an ideal pattern or form for the good, for justice, the right, which men should follow. And it is the task of education to clarify these ideals and to inspire men to follow them, in a common commitment to the moral ideal of humanity, human-heartedness, which means to love men. Moral principle, moral example must be the guide of government.

But there was another style of government advocated at the time as a solution for the troubled times. It came to be known as the Legalist School. Its members were called "men of methods." They were self-professed experts in administering, and claimed to have ruling down to a science, a kind of know-how skill. For them rectification of names meant making the actualities fit the names in a different sense. Rectification of names meant making specific laws, specific procedures, specific job descriptions very clear, and then holding people strictly accountable to them. It was the original managerial style making use of strict accountability methods. They distrusted vague moral ideals; it was better to spell out the details. They rejected the principle of rule by moral example and found moral commitment irrelevant. They were objective, realistic. Like the Sophists Socrates opposed, Legalists tended to define justice as the interest of the stronger, and advocated the two handles of government, reward and punishment. They believed in behavior modification techniques. Morality is not adequate for government; rewards and punishments work to manipulate men. Power, law, and statecraft are the tools of government, not moral principle. Said Hsu Pei Tse, a leading Legalist, "The severe household has no fersile slaves, but it is the affectionate mother who has spoiled sons." Nixon was speaking as a Legalist when he explained Watergate by saying, "I lost my political power base." The American people exhibited a Confucian Intuition when they saw that he had lost his moral credibility. Confucius would say he had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

It was the Legalist School that first united China after the Warring States period, and of all the schools in ancient China this is the one most admired by contemporary China. And to be fair, it was not all bad. It was efficient; it saw that solutions from the past were not adequate for the problems of the present; it was forward-looking. But it had no use for the sentiments of morality.
It does not take much insight to see that legitimist principles are what are dominant in today's culture,- in international politics, in government bureaucracy, in industry, economic affairs, in accountability evaluations in the public schools and everywhere else, it seems. Whatever the reasons, - the growth of behavioristic manipulative techniques, the decline of religion, the loss of respect for the person as a person, - legitimist ideas seem to be in the ascendancy in our culture.

Confucius would teach by moral example. He was the scholar-gentleman who inspired his students to follow his ways by appealing to a mutual commitment to principle, the principle of moral excellence.

This is the ideal motivation. And when we think back on the teachers we have known, it is those who inspired by example that we remember best. And the example of a great teacher like Socrates is immortal.

How different the real situation seems today. To begin with, students with their desperate concerns for grades, the practical goal, - and whether they must do to get an "A." And how easy it is for us to slip into manipulative techniques by using grades as rewards and punishments, forgetting the human interaction between teacher and student, forgetting the vision of knowledge as the goal, substituting the grade instead. We can stand in judgment over the student, grade him, reject and fail him, and then we can show him how according to the objectives and procedures and rules of the course which were strictly being followed we have no alternative. We can even package our education into units, set the students loose, periodically holding them accountable with the aid of assistants or computer exams, and reward or punish them without even knowing who they are. This is to trivialize teaching and to dehumanize education, but it is a growing pattern. As the man of methods taught long ago in ancient China, once the system is set up, it works by itself: you do nothing, but there is nothing that isn't done.

But surely, one might protest; one needs organization and administrative techniques. And indeed, we have the tools government, too, but they should be instruments of the larger commitment to excellence, not a manipulative objective technique in itself.

I was reading recently an account in the alumni magazine of my old college in which the writer recalled getting back his first theme in Freshman English, and finding at the end of it this cryptic note: well written; shows promise--F. You see, he got run against a legitimist rule of Freshman English; if two or more words were spelled wrong, the theme was an F, automatically. This, of course, was negative reinforcement of the severest behavioristic kind, and it inspired a careful consultation with the dictionary in the future. But at the same time it was carefully pointed out that this severe rule was a measure of their concern for precision in writing, a reverence for language, a commitment to excellence. And in the tutoring sessions which were a part of the class the effort was made to elicit a similar commitment.
The difference lies in how the technique is intended, and how it is perceived. We might say of one of our devices, "The exam was fair; it was not intended to be unduly hard," but the real issue is, "Was it perceived as fair? Was it perceived as just?" This is what matters. And I really think that in the classroom and everywhere else as well, moral example as in Confucius is the only way to develop confidence and trust. So when hard decisions have to be made, and they do, -- it is not like the famous camel race in Alice in Wonderland where "everyone has won the race and everyone must have a prize" -- when hard decisions are made, then may they be perceived to be just. The student, we hope, might then reflect (as a famous Englishman once said of his father): "He was a beast; but he was a just beast." But one can say this on the basis of principle, not procedures.

Perhaps this ideal was simpler to achieve in simpler times. Perhaps smaller institutions made for a stronger sense of community and commitment to the ideals of liberal education. I recall, for example, when I was a student at Hamilton College, the faculty numbered about forty including the President, the Dean who was also a Professor of English, and the Librarian. The bursar, superintendent of buildings and grounds, the manager of Commons, the President's secretary, three stenographers, and Wally Johnson, who was general factotum and ran the low-key recruiting system completed the modest bureaucracy. The small student body of four hundred felt a keen sense of community and commitment. Over the decades the student body has roughly tripled, the faculty more than doubled, but the administrative hierarchy has more than quadrupled, and I understand it is harder now to achieve a sense of community. Wally Johnson made a difference. They say that when he retired it took eight to ten people to do the jobs he did. He was into everything on the campus. But it was not the work so much, though it was impressive; it was his dedication, his commitment to the meaning and ideals of liberal college that made him so valuable to the college, that made him an institution. There are Wally Johnsons on all fortunate campuses. We know who they are. Students know them. They are supportive of everything; their commitment is total and totally apparent. We are saddened when they must go, by death or other ways. The spirit of the community is thereby sadly diminished.

But what has Confucius to do with Jesus? What has the sage of China to do with the Teacher of ancient Palestine? Their similar forms of the Golden Rule suggest a common commitment to the ideal of brotherly love. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," says Jesus. Confucius said, "A man of humaneness wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others." They both are moral teachers; they both were convinced that morality is the ultimate authority, whatever the powers that be might be. There is a Way to go, a Law from above, the Will of the Father, which demands obedience. Confucius idealizes the family as the model for the human community. Jesus teaches the Fatherhood of God as the basis of a wider community rooted in a mystical identification with His spirit. We are called to become not servants, mere instruments to be manipulated by God, but children of God sharing in His free spirit of creative power.

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," says Jesus. This is freedom from bondage to sin and to fear and free-
dom for creative activity and fellow service. This has been, of course, the favorite text for the church-related liberal arts educational institution. No matter how tempestuous the roost may now be, no matter how secular and cynical our culture, we know we must still be guided by principle, moral principle, in our educational process. We must be guided by intellectual honesty, by integrity, by fairness. These are the very basis of the knowledge we prize lies in those values. Skepticism and cynicism are not virtues. Skepticism as a way of life is a cop-out; it allows one to give up the search for answers by convincing oneself there are none to be found. The scientific skepticism we prize is based on the innocent faith in the rational order of the universe, that there are answers to be found. And we need the method of faith of religion to triumph over the awful ontological doubt that there may ultimately be no meaning at all.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." This is the truth that as sons and daughters of God we are called upon to be sharers of His creative power. We are indeed all one body in service to one another under the moral ideal of the love of God.

(A historical note: do you know that when the K plan was first discussed, many of us thought that there should be two off-quarters—one devoted to career experience, the other to some kind of service? The two quarters were put into one, called "Career-Service"; now it is called "Career Development." If we have dropped the term, service, we do not mean to suggest that our educational principle is self-serving, or self-service.)

What I have been saying about moral principle may sound too idealistic, unrealistic; too committed, unobjective. But let us be honest and open that refusal to follow the moral ideal, that being objective and realistic, may be a cloak for self-interest. Objectivity in values may not be the disinterested attitude, but can become the self-interested attitude, just as neutrality with respect to moral issues reflects a reluctance to do anything that might threaten our interests.

We in this college inherit a proud tradition, commitment to training in excellence for higher service. We are, I think, united in this moral ideal. But the managerial model of operation does not well represent this moral ideal, either in the classroom or the college at large. Only commitment to a common principle can bring the sense of confidence that expresses community. But remember: do not judge. As Paul said, "We have all sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God."

Let us pray:

Our Father, as we work together toward a common ideal, unite us as a fellowship in learning. Give us good sense, a good spirit, and above all the good will that will unite us as a community.

Dr. Lester Start
Professor of Philosophy
October 1, 1972
UNUSUAL

Have you been born again?

This is, for me, a strange and intriguing question. It is strange for at least two reasons: In the first place, my own religious background, while Christian I think, was liberal, rationalistic and cool. And I have found myself, also, allergic to the varieties of Christian tradition that talk so much about the born-again experience. President Carter notwithstanding, they make me itch. In the second place, like Nicodemus I am probably stirred in the depths of my unconscious memory by terrifying recollections of my own literal arrival on this earth which, as I am told, was by means of a breech delivery: a miserable and inauspicious beginning if ever there was one. There is, I imagine, within me, a wee, literal-minded Nicodemus who cries out, "O no, Lord! Not again!" I was, they tell me, lucky to have survived (I wonder about that, too, sometimes, but that's beside the point).

But the question still intrigues me. Getting born again, despite my personal idiosyncrasies, does have its appeal: starting afresh, wiping out my sorry past, maybe becoming another Gandhi or Schuyler or even a new messiah. And so I want to explore for a few minutes this conversation we heard this morning between Jesus and Nicodemus.

In our story we have a situation not unusual in the Gospel of John: a dialogue in which a questioner misunderstands Jesus’ words, only to give him the opportunity to expand the deeper meaning of his teaching. Here Jesus says, according to our translation, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." How an alternate translation of the passive of the Greek word gennain can be "to be begotten" rather than simply "to be born," implying a somewhat wider meaning with more of the sense of be created. Also, the Greek word another born translated "again" can also mean "from above." And so from the Greek we can see how the scene of the misunderstanding is set up. Jesus says, according to one reading, "Unless one is begotten from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And then Nicodemus misunderstands by taking the other meaning of the Greek: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Then Jesus goes on: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

What I now want to suggest is that the double meaning here is probably intended by John, and that the narrative serves to make this clear. For the symbolism is exceedingly rich, and our writer, knowing (as we do) that symbols are powerful by virtue of their extended meanings, uses the dialogue to deepen our understanding. The passage says, then, in its compact and suggestive way, that one cannot enter the kingdom of God unless he is born anew and begotten from above.

Jesus’ use of the words "water" and "Spirit" tell us this. To speak of being born or created out of water is to speak of death and rebirth.
It is also to speak of being begotten "from above," from beyond oneself. We know from innumerable cultural and religious traditions that water symbolizes both that which destroys and that which creates. Flood stories everywhere tell of the destruction of the World by water and of its re-creation as land emerges out of the receding sea. One need only recall the Babylonian Flood Story or the story of Noah and his Ark. Or, on a personal level, we know of countless rites in which a person, by being submerged in water, symbolically dies, and then, in coming up out of the water, in symbolically re-created. We or she becomes a new person. In the act of immersion, then, one ritually re-enacts his or her birth, coming as one does from the sustaining waters of the womb. And one also re-enacts the creation of the world, for creation myths almost always tell of the earth's emergence from water.

Modern depth psychology has made this symbolism even richer by understanding water as symbolic of the human unconscious, from which come, whether we will them or not, forces which permanently change us and which have been traditionally experienced as coming "from above."

Jesus further makes the point by using the symbol of the Spirit: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." The Greek word for spirit here, pneuma, is the same word that is also used for wind which comes and goes, moving beyond our control, as though "from above." And just as water is associated with cosmic creation, so is Spirit, at least in our Genesis story. Recall the words we heard this morning: "The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." The Hebrew word for Spirit here is ruach, carrying a similar double meaning as the Greek pneuma. Our personal re-creation, then, is in some sense a recapitulation of the creation of the world, as it is conceived of in Genesis, a creation "of water and the spirit."

And so Jesus' words would seem to have significance for beyond their particular application to Christian faith and practice. And indeed, if they are Jesus' own words, they necessarily must pre-date any specifically Christian application. They state in bold terms that unless we are born again we cannot be delivered into God's future. Or, to state it in another way, unless we are created from above and beyond ourselves, we can have no place in the future.

The words are not prescriptive, but descriptive. They don't tell us to go out and get reborn. They tell us that our future simply depends upon our rebirth. And they tell us that our rebirth also involves a kind of death. As water is symbolically both deadly and fecund, and since we are to be born of water, we must die. If we would find our life, we must lose it. But as the Spirit symbolizes clear (The Spirit blows where it will, no matter what we do), our rebirth is not in our control.

Isn't that the truth?

The child is dead. My mother may not always believe that (mothers rarely do entirely), but I know it. I have, for good or ill, been reborn, reshaped into a different person with different goals, different feelings, a quite different way of being in the world. And I had nothing to do with it. My death and rebirth were from above, or beyond,
beyond my control. Otherwise I might have lingered somewhere along the way: at ten, for example, I can well remember my son saying, when he was that age, "I'd like to be ten for the rest of my life." My daughter is ten right now, and already I'm grieving that the spontaneous, delightfully uninhibited person she is will soon be gone forever. And as that child dies, another will be born to take her place. I have no idea what she will be like; I hope I'll love her as I loved the child she was. But unless she's born from above she has no future. For death and rebirth constitute the Grand Metaphor of our lives.

Grand Metaphor and great problem, else Jesus' words would be simply trite. That is, as inevitable as our deaths and rebirths are, they can be extremely difficult. The outrageously long process of dying and being reborn that we call adolescence, for example, is not usually easy. The squeeze is on, and the process painfully belaborled. But we do get through it. Our parents may not want our rebirth (They may not have wanted our first birth.), but if we are to have a future, there isn't a thing they or we can do about it. We must yield before a mysterious power -- Spirit is the biblical term -- and wait to see what we shall become. And as we become the persons we are to be, all our grieving over our lost childhood, and all the remarks by our parents about how sweet we used to be, will avail nothing.

We may well wish that for this particular stage in our lives we could get it all over with quickly and dramatically as people seem to do in archaic societies. If you're a twelve-year old boy, and all the men of the village pounce on you, drag you off into the bushes, circumcise you or slit your penis from one end to the other or knock out a few teeth and scare you out of your wits with all manner of frightening sights and sounds, you know it's been a day to remember. But from then on, if you survive, you're an adult.

From embryo to infant, from ten to eleven, from child to adult, from single to married, from pre-mid-life to post-mid-life, to old age, to physical death, we never escape. In India and many Eastern countries, of course, the metaphor is extended backwards and forwards to encompass thousands of previous lives and thousands of future lives. And maybe that's the way it is.

In the face of the pain and suffering often caused by these traumas of change, the religions of humankind all have as one of their primary functions the dramatic enactment of the death/rebirth scenario. They perform a function of spiritual midwifery and furnish more than enough material for a systematic obstetrical theology. They cannot, of course, appreciably hasten or retard the process (The Spirit has its own timetable.), but they can use rituals and mythicize and symbolize the death/rebirth process that their devotees may make the transitions with some ease and grace.

In archaic societies the symbolism can be quite blatant: confinement in a hut symbolizing the womb, being symbolically devoured by an animal before being reborn, being smeared with white chalk or ashes to resemble a corpse before assuming a new status, and then perhaps being
fed as though one were a little child. In an ethnographic film I once saw, a man and his wife were being adopted out of one tribe and into another. They were obliged to dramatize the change by crawling between the legs of the members of their new tribe, while those granted as though they were giving birth. The birth having been accomplished, the two were then fed and cared for by their new family as though they were babies. They were dead to their old tribe, and alive to their new.

The so-called "high religions" also perform the same function. Upper casta Hindu boys become dujas (Sanskrit for "twice-born") as they enter the first stage of manhood, undergoing a rite that employs much death/rebirth symbolism as a ritual shaving of the head and a ritual bath. Much later in life they may undergo a ritual death, and then spend their last days in prayer and meditation, preparing for a birth into a new life. And we, too, have our rites of passage: baptisms, confirmations, bar-mitzvahs, bat-mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, the death/rebirth symbolize often being dramatically clear. In my own tradition we are baptized by immersion, buried in water, dying to our old life and raised up out of the water to new life. And we also, as do many of you, regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper, sharing ritually in the drama of Christ's death and resurrection, and expressing the fact that our deaths and rebirths are not confined to the major life-crisis.

But religions are not the only agencies practicing such spiritual midwifery. The psychiatrist John Perry treats schizophrenia as a process of death and rebirth (and not, incidentally, as an illness). At his center no drugs or shock therapy are used, but patients, left to their own devices, respond to the promptings of the Spirit. One man sat for a number of days in a bathtub full of water, and then re-activated in himself the stages of the creation of the world. Other patients characteristically build little wombs out of furniture in which they will stay until their time of rebirth comes. Or sometimes they crawl into a fireplace, a womb complete with birth canal.

Stanislav Grof, who has been doing LSD therapy for over thirty years, writes that his clients normally re-experience the birth process, often reflecting upon it by using the death/rebirth symbols long employed by the world's religions. In fact he may well give us a clue here to the genesis of much religious belief and practice.

Other modern researchers attempt to attend their clients' rebirth by submerging them in tubs of water kept at body temperature, in total silence and darkness. You can't get much wombier than that.

Further evidence of the power of this Great Metaphor may be reflected in the much-heralded experiences of those who have seemingly died and recovered. Last summer, late on a very hot night, I found myself celebrating into the wee, wee hours at an outdoor wedding reception. At one point more improbable than either of the bride lurched into my presence and began to disclose some rather astounding facts about himself. He told me, among other things, that a few years earlier he had been in an automobile accident, had experienced his death, and had met his deceased father. Having heard Kuhler-Hoss and read Moody, dealing with such experiences, I asked him if he now had any fear of death. No, he
said; he hadn't, echoing the unanimous verdict of those reported on in the near-death literature. (It's also interesting, I think, that so many of those people report moving through a dark tunnel into the light.) One wonders whether the ritual death of the aged Hindu believer might be accomplishing the same spiritual function as those unexplored experiences.

One might now ask, especially if he or she isn't into religion or artificial wombs or LSD, "Of what value is this metaphor to me?" It may be of great value. It helps me to know that as my old life falls a new life is coming into being. There may be some adventure in that. It helps me to know that as my two-year-old disappears before my very eyes, a new person is forming, with new possibilities for growth and love and creativity. It helps to know that when a personal relationship disintegrates, that out of its pieces a new relationship, with a more compatible configuration, may emerge. And finally, it may help me to trust this powerful rhythm of life so that even my final death will hold no fears.

For what Jesus tells us, I believe, is that we need not fear or falter as the Spirit bears us forth. For there is a sense, I think, in which we can multiply suffering and confusion by fearfully trying to cling to a certain experience of life. Parents try to prevent their children from growing up, American adults worship at the altar of eternal youth. And at times all of us desperately grasp for moorings that seem to be collapsing. And we can never get away with it.

One of the arresting images that has presented itself to some of those reporting their near-death experiences is that of bewildered spirits: shuffling about, and, dull and confused, somehow caught between the physical world and the spiritual world. As one person put it, "They seemed to be trying to decide; they were looking back... they kept looking downward and never upward."

Whatever one may think of this as a glimpse into the after-life, the picture reminds us of ourselves at times: refusing to die to our old lives. "He who would save his life will lose it." Perry says of his schizophrenic patients that it is disastrous to attempt to return them to where they were before the onset of their symptoms. With them, as with us, the Spirit must have its way.

Perhaps now an appropriate way to conclude a sermon on rebirth is to go back to the beginning, to our initial question, and then answer it. Have you been born again?

Oh yes. Many times and many times and many times more. "Truly, truly... unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Or she cannot be delivered into God's future. But here we are! Born we are!

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