Alumnus of the Year: Bernard M. Loomer

Bernard M. Loomer: S-I-Z-E

Langdon Gilkey: Religion and Technological Future

Frank E. Reynolds: Education and Modernization

Paul Ricoeur: Parables of Jesus

Martin E. Marty: A Mission of Clarity

Clyde J. Steckel: Inside the Idols
CONTENTS

VOL. 13          SPRING 1974          NO. 3

PAGE

3       Preface

4       Citation
        Alumnus of the Year

5       S-I-Z-E
        Bernard M. Loomer

9       Religion and the Technological Future
        Langdon Gilkey

14      Education and Modernization
        Frank E. Reynolds

18      Listening to the Parables of Jesus
        Paul Ricoeur

22      A Mission of Clarity
        Martin E. Marty

25      Inside the Idols
        Clyde J. Steckel

Contributions requested: $5.00 per vol., $2.00 per no.

Editor:
       MARTIN E. MARTY

Assistant Editor:
       LARRY L. GREENFIELD

© The University of Chicago (The Divinity School) 1974
While an easterner by birth and now a westerner by residence, Bernard Loomer has long been identified with The University of Chicago and its Divinity School. Recognizing his special place in the life of the institution, the Baptist Theological Union named the former dean “alumnus of the year.” On the day he was honored, Professor Loomer spoke informally at the Wednesday noon luncheon in Swift Commons. His text captures, we believe, the Loomerian mien, manner and spirit. In fact, the text will be an invitation to those who have heard him before to add their own recollections of appropriate pauses, gestures and inflections.

Two members of the faculty travelled far to make comments on modernization and technology. Professor Frank Reynolds spoke on modernization and education at a conference in Thailand; his remarks have been slightly edited for publication. The paper demonstrates something of the far-flungness of faculty activities. Professor Langdon Gilkey made his comments on technology in the light of Robert Heilbroner’s book at a conference at Syracuse University.

Closer to home, two blocks away, Rockefeller Chapel is often the scene and site of preaching by faculty and alumni. Two of our own professors are represented in this issue’s sermon sampler. We think that those in our midst who preach and that larger number who hear preaching on the parables will find new ways to think about the parabolic form after they read the sermon of John Nueven Professor of Theology Paul Ricoeur on the subject. Professor Martin E. Marty spoke on Convocation Sunday. An extraordinary number of listeners to the sermon by an alumnus, Professor Clyde J. Steckel of United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, asked that his apologia be published.
CITATION

Alumnus of the Year

Bernard MacDougall Loomer, alumnus of the Divinity School (Ph.D.) became its Dean, and concurrently Dean of the Federated Theological Faculty, and served with distinction in this administrative capacity, 1945-54, inclusive. At the same time and subsequently he served the faculty as Professor of Philosophy of Religion.

During Professor Loomer's tenure with the Divinity School (and the Federated Theological Faculty) he continued with creative and constructive determination the experiment of the Federation begun under his predecessor, Dean Ernest C. Colwell. His leadership was a decisive factor in establishing the Divinity School as a prominent theological school in the United States. He has helped bring to focus many elements in the heritages of process philosophy. In this effort Professor Loomer left his stamp on a generation of students. His manner exemplified the best in the Chicago lineage: he taught students the value of encountering primary sources, of intensifying their critical faculties, and of becoming personally involved with their subject matter.

Professor Loomer as Dean of the Divinity School provided the initiatives which led to the present general structure of the School, a pattern which influenced the curriculum of theological studies elsewhere in this country. His vision and tenacity are both evident in the development of the fields of inquiry and the interdisciplinary studies that, to a great extent, distinguish the Divinity School. This achievement includes the establishment of the dialogical fields, whose current prestige and eminence cannot fairly be accounted for except through recall of Dean Loomer's pioneer work and his initial insights.

As a centrifugal personality Professor Loomer has a keen sense of humor. He displays an utter disregard of time and brings an unbelievable intensity to anything that seriously attracts his attention. Coupled with this manner, he reveals an almost defiant and immovable commitment and devotion to his causes, and an independence and distrust of institutions despite his involvement in them. His gregariousness engulfs everyone with whom he comes into contact. His friends treasure an endearing trait, his interest in and ability to theologize about the world of sports.

Outstanding alumnus, Bernard MacDougall Loomer has been chosen by the Board of Trustees of the Baptist Theological Union to receive the citation as Alumnus of the Year of the Divinity School of The University of Chicago. October 17, 1973
This is the richest room in the house, richest in terms of appointments, and richest in terms of memories, great encounters, great occasions, great things said in many memorable ways. It's a pleasure to be back. And I can see that Bob Grant has not lost his touch. I think it probably improves with age.

Last night at a little informal dinner Chuck Long asked me what I am calling it now. This question is not original with Mr. Long, but he is the one perhaps that has capitalized on it more than any other member of the faculty—since he knows what I used to call it. And I replied, and that is what I want to talk about: Today I call it S-I-Z-E.

I suppose as one gets older, things sift through his total being as he moves along. Weights of emphasis alter and you find that the living of life requires simplification in order to make it manageable. The scientific method, as I would understand it, is the greatest illustration of the attempt to simplify life to manageable terms, with all the strengths and weaknesses and privileges apertaining thereto.

For myself, I find that I operate with fewer principles. I know much less than I used to. I have many more questions, and fewer answers. Sometimes I am not even sure that I am interested in the answers anymore. I get so interested in the questions that I do not have the patience to listen to someone who has gotten it all worked out in ways that I do not believe belong to life.

Finally, for me, the one basic principle that I operate with is the principle of size. That is the category of largeness or smallness. If it is small, I am not interested in whether it is true; I do not care; it

Mr. Bernard M. Loomer is Professor of Philosophical Theology at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

Spring 1974
really is not worth bothering with. If the idea is fertile, if the person has stature, I am interested.

I am first of all interested not in order to criticize, but rather simply to be with it for awhile. The criticism, if it comes, will come later. Moreover, the criticism, when it puts in an appearance, will arrive after I have lived with this largeness, this size, for a considerable amount of time.

By size I mean the stature of a person's soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.

To me, this is the fundamental category, this is the essential principle. Everything else, I think, in my life is an abstraction from this or a commentary upon this. And I have concocted a few examples or dimensions of size to illustrate what I mean.

Bernard Meland not too long ago wrote a little credo, and usually what Bernard Meland does is a good thing to do. (However, this is not true in regard to the way he goes to motion pictures, for when Bernard Meland goes to a movie, all the standards of evaluation that he has acquired go out the window, and he's for the good guys against the bad guys, and he ends up cheering when the good guys finally win out over the bad guys.) On the other hand, his example of a credo is one that I want to follow this afternoon.

I believe that value is greater than truth. I am addicted to truth, but the problem with being addicted to truth is that it can throw you off from many of the deeper dimensions of life that I would include under the notion of value. Truth is a value. But truth is not the ground, not the source of value. If you want to put it differently, value is the genius and truth is the species.

I believe it is actually more important for someone to say something by which we can live, even if it is wrong, than it is to be preeminently concerned about the legitimacy or the validity of what can be said. I say this partly autobiographically because when I was in your position, I believed that no theologian should say anything until he got this question of truth straightened out. I thought that there ought to be a moratorium on theology until all the theologians, at least in this country, got together and settled the question of truth; and then on that basis, we might begin to make some assertions, hopefully. And I found that after a while I was eating out of my own stomach. But this really is a very meager diet and I decided to give up that way of life and try something else.

The difficulty is that scholars do not have to say anything by which people can live. They can in some legitimate way preoccupy themselves with whether or not what has been said should have been said or could be said with any validity. And sometimes I think biblical scholars are wholly dependent upon some damn fool theologian making some damn fool statement or another, and having the biblical scholar search throughout the Bible to find out whether it can be said in that way and on what, if any, biblical grounds. Otherwise they would have nothing to do.

I believe in reason; but I believe it is better to be right for the wrong reasons than to be wrong for the right reasons. Hopefully, it is desirable to be right for the right reasons, but it seems to me that this alternative all too seldom occurs in life. I would rather link myself with those who attempt to say something important, or even interesting, than to wait for the scholarly group to find out whether it is true. But fortunately, life moves ahead of scholarship, and we do not have to wait for the scholars to tell us whether we can actually live or even think or speak in the manners and styles that we have to use in order to live.

I believe it is of more size and therefore better to listen and to analyze than it is to argue or to counterthrust point by point. I believe that the greatest criticism of another can be given by one who is first of all content to understand the other, to hear the other out, to let the other be, to help the other become even greater than he is. To do this without fear, without being insecure, without feeling threatened; to let the other be, to provide the conditions and atmosphere by which that other person in his point of view can become more fully what he is to become. This is size. Later the criticism may come, but by that time the criticism will be quite different. It will take place in a different context and you will be addressing yourself to the largest possible other. On the other hand, where one is not careful, in argumentation one may address oneself to the worst possible other, or one may fail to provide the conditions whereby the other can be as strong and able as he could be.

I think this is the first obligation of the scholar: to let the other be as fully as he may become. Then later you may have a point or two to suggest to him. But, as I say, by that time you will be addressing quite a different individual, and you, yourself, doing the addressing will be quite a different individual, because you cannot, I think, deeply live with another without having that other become part of the very fiber of your being. At least, as I look around this room, I
know from whence much of what I am came. It came from many, many hours listening to others, not always listening, I'm afraid, in ways that would help the others to become as great as they might become, but trying at least. And in this attempt finding myself being transformed by virtue of the relationship. Whether the others were being transformed by the relationship was their business, but it was my business to attempt to provide the conditions necessary.

I believe that an idea that can be generalized is greater in size than an idea that is simply a competent idea. I believe that the process of generalizing an idea or a meaning is a way of illustrating the size, the fertility, the creativity, of an idea. In this sense, generalization is an art lying beyond, presupposing but nonetheless transcending competence. I think if I had to do over again and if we were still to keep the ranks of professors, I would attempt to preserve the title of full professor only for those who either have the capacity or concern to generalize the meaning of an important idea found in one field and to apply it to some other field beyond their competence. All other ranks would be reserved for those who are competent. Even if the person were the renowned expert, recognized world-wide in his field, and had neither the interest nor capacity to generalize, he would remain an associate professor.

Because until we generalize our ideas to apply beyond the source from whence we derive these ideas we contribute to the creation of the tower of Babel. We create the confusion because we cannot communicate with others in terms of our competencies. There are too many languages, too many niceties. Life is too short. Furthermore, as long as you are only competent, you have not paid the price in full of what it means to be human, the full price.

That full price has to do with size. This means you must generalize basic meanings in your field beyond their specialized meaning. In this respect I do not think the universities are justifiable in terms of the way they now operate.

I live in a state, California, where it is not that Mr. Reagan is right for wrong reasons. He is wrong for all the right reasons, in many respects. But underneath it there is a germ in which he is right, although he does not have the wit to see it. One cannot justify what he is saying, but neither can one justify what the university professors are saying by their rebuttal. They still operate in terms of the self-justifying character and the self-sufficiency of the idea of competence and research and knowledge. I still think that it is possible to live very well without knowledge, important though knowledge is. We do not always live in terms of the manageabilities of life, and I wish that university professors would take this opportunity of great crisis and freely exercise the initiative to rethink what it is they are doing. Because the way things are going, I think it is quite possible (as this possibility has been explored in science fiction literature) that the public could end up by destroying all books and all scientific knowledge because the price of the knowledge has been too great and too dehumanizing with regard to the larger aspects of life itself.

I believe furthermore that the idea of the communal individual is larger than the idea of the non-communal individual. I believe in the importance of the idea of the communal individual, although I would rather add the notion that the individual is an emergent from his communal relationships. And as one thinks of process thought, as I have tended to do for more than a little time now, the point of process thought is not simply the notion of a process as such. This is only one half of the story. The other half is the relationships of the process. The key, the punchline, the drive of process thought is not process in the abstract. It is the dynamic character of relations in process, relations leading to something emergent from the relationships. For this reason we need great communal, great societal institutions. We need great communities in order to have great individuals, in order to have great relationships out of which concrete individuals can emerge with their power and with their strength. We need great communities, great academic communities, in order to produce more fully fulfilled students and faculty. I think the idea of a communal individual is a greater idea, has more size, more power than the notion of individuality that we have had before.

I believe that concrete individuality is greater than possibility. In certain respects we can say that there is a richness to potentiality that is never exhausted by actuality, but there is the other sense in which you do not have and cannot have a possible individual. The individual in his concreteness adds something, something indefinable, that possibility cannot include. I say this in order to emphasize the point that incarnation is not the embodiment of an idea. The idea is an abstraction from concrete individuality which has its own surdness, its own way of transcending all the forms and structures that have gone into its making.

This is one way of saying that the individual is an emergent from its relations. You do not write a book on how to play golf by sitting down and thinking about the idea of golf. You write a book about how to play golf from watching somebody actually hit a golf ball. (A little minor fact: the pros who write books about how to play golf themselves need to be the subject of criticism because certain scientific experiments indicate that they do not always in fact do exactly exactly what they say they do. But this is another reason why you should trust their actions much more fully than...
their statements about what they think they are doing.)

*I believe, accordingly, in the principle of embodiment, the principle of incarnation, or, if you will, the principle of revelation.* You start with the concreteness of history, with the people and persons doing things and saying things in their concreteness. Out of this comes the theology. But the theology is subject to what has been disclosed in the concreteness of individuality; and, therefore, the christology itself is a matter of size.

What we mean by revelation refers to some person or societal situation or group of events of such size, of such compelling power, of such attractiveness that you are formed and shaped in relationship to it. This is not the case where you are talking about disclosure in any unimportant sense, it seems to me. Now in this respect no individual can claim his own messiahs, and if he does so, the claim is really not important because that claim does not manifest the power that is involved. Somebody else has to contribute this truth, and I assume that George Herbert Mead of blessed memory of this institution would agree with this proposition, or he should.

*I believe, by the same token, that every important revelation, every important incarnation, carries with itself the principle of self-transcendence.* Every revelation exists to be surpassed and every revelation therefore contains within itself a pointing beyond itself. The tradition of Christian faith has tried to assure us of the size of Jesus Christ by talking about his unsurpassability. But for me the emphasis throughout Christianity upon the finality of Jesus Christ is ultimately treason to the human spirit, and treason I think, finally, to Jesus Christ himself, if that is important, and I think it is.

*I believe there is a meaning to life, but I do not think it can be stated.* I operate increasingly in ways that do bring something of a smile to Bernard Meland’s face, once in a while. I do operate more in terms of what he wants to call the margins of intelligibility. (Actually I have always been that way all along, but he has just misunderstood me all these years.)

I do not know what ultimate sense it makes to speak of a God who needs man, anymore than it ever made sense to me to speak of a God who does not need man. This is just the way, I think, that we are today.

But the mystery has not been anymore resolved by the movement from non-process modes of thought to existentialist and process modes of thought.

*I believe that if war is too important to be left to the generals, then theology may be too important to be left to the theologians.* Increasingly over the years, I find myself moving in the direction of stories, rather than explication of stories, that is, with the theologies and philosophies. In many respects, theology is the dullest or one of the dullest, of all human disciplines, and this is in part the product of those who produce it. I mean the theologians. I suppose the dullest subject of all for me is straight epistemology: how we know what we know. In this inquiry, you tend to end up not knowing anything about how you get on with the business of life. It seems, fortunately, that life or mother nature or whoever is running these things these days cannot wait for final returns.

I conclude with this little story from Elie Wiesel:

When the great Rabbi Israel Ball Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Mazid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, “Master of the Universe, Listen. I do not know how to light the fire but I am still able to say the prayer!” And the miracle would again be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

Wiesel’s conclusion and mine: “God made man because he loves stories.”
Religion and the Technological Future

Langdon Gilkey

A short—unbelievably short—time ago (let us say day before yesterday) science and technology painted for us a bright, new future, a new day for humans in which they would do what they willed with nature, society and themselves because now they understood each of these. Understanding them, they could control them. This was to be a day of freedom and self-realization brought about by the new human powers scientific knowledge had made possible. Even more recently—perhaps yesterday morning—political and theological gospels of liberation also painted a new future of human realization, gained, to be sure, politically rather than technologically by overthrowing the yoke of domination of rich owners over workers, of capitalist nations over undeveloped ones, of whites over blacks, of males over females. To both visions—and Herman Kahn’s futurology hardly denied these prophecies—the future was resonant with hope, bright with the promise of human self-realization: growing affluence, more leisure, widespread well-being, universal security, equality, self-determination and true community.

Now, strangely playing with our hopes and fears as if on a roulette wheel, technology sounds a precisely opposite note concerning the future, a note first heard from the Club of Rome but now expanded into a veritable funeral dirge by Robert Heilbroner who has drawn out the human, the social and the political implications of the limits of growth. We face, he says in his remarkable piece, An Inquiry Into The Human Prospect, because of science and technology and the industrial civilization they have fathered, an oppressive, terrifying future. It will be not only repetitive of the darkness of our human past but almost certainly one in which the values flickeringly achieved in past and present will be radically threatened and in all probability extinguished. The future is a descent into a darkness of bare survival, a survival characterized by overcrowding, material want, rigidly determining systems of life, authoritarian governments—and no prospect in history or in time of its alleviation. And if we fail to choose that deprived and confined future, he says, we shall as a race surely die of domestic and international conflict, of gross starvation, and/or of thermal incineration. If religion was made irrelevant by the brightness of yesterday’s view of the future, it is made almost incredible by the darkness of today’s and tomorrow’s. Liberal Catholics can well ponder the magnificient historical irony here set before us: science, technology and industrialism, by promising that “nature” would become a garden, have together over the past century dismantled entirely the traditional supernatural religion of Catholicism with its grace beyond nature and its goal beyond space, time and history. Now, by threatening to turn nature into a prison or a tomb, the same trio will in all probability summon to resurrection that discarded supernaturalism as the only possible principle of meaning in the dreary stretches of hopeless time!

My point in these remarks is neither to advance nor to dispute this new, dismal view of our future pervasive among some scientific and now social scientific groups; unfortunately Heilbroner’s arguments are hard to counter. Rather it is to outline some of the essential anatomy of this picture of the technological future as many secular commentators have painted it, and to reflect on the relevance of religion and of religious symbols to a future so portrayed.

The first thing to make clear—and all critics of the technological future do so—is the inescapability of technology and industrialism. As these have been the bases of present affluence, comfort and social order, so too they will be the sole grounds of future survival. Capitalism and socialism have both been as socially peaceful and successful as they have because of an economy of expanding affluence. At present, and especially at future population rates, life will be possible only if technical production is not abandoned but improved, made more and more efficient; any creative redistribution of goods and power—any hope of social justice—is inconceivable except

Mr. Langdon Gilkey is Professor of Theology in the Divinity School, The University of Chicago.

Spring 1974
on the grounds of continuing mass production; and
any semblance of human well-being presupposes in
future as in past the medicine, the sanitation, the
warming and cooling, the communication, the transpor-
tation, and the "goods" which only
technology and industrialism can provide. Thus
though in truth they threaten many levels of human
realization, science, technology and industrialism
are from now on also foundational for it. No society
can relinquish or reject them and survive, let alone
achieve order and well-being; any human society
must be based on them; they are a "fate" which, in
willing to be at all in the future, we cannot escape.
Here begins the paradox or dilemma of modernity:
that technological expression on which we are utterly
dependent for our well-being and our very life, is
also that which in the end appears to threaten our
well-being and even our existence.

Technology as it is discussed in social criticism
has two interrelated but distinguishable meanings,
both of which are important here. It first refers to the
organization of machines and tools, and so of the
means of production and distribution, based on
scientific understanding. But it also refers, as Daniel
Bell and Jacques Ellul have rightly pointed out, to a
wider concept derivative from the first: the
rationalization and organization of any common
social enterprise in the name of efficiency, the
rendering, so to speak, of joint and cooperative work
into a human machine whose parts, made up of per-
nsonal, are rationally and efficiently coordinated
because the goals and the labors of each are subor-
dinated to the one common goal. Thus can one
ante up the rationalization or technologizing of any
institutional process: of government, of corre-
sictions, of university — insofar as each is made an
efficient organization of interrelated human parts,
directed at the common goal and all determined
by the modes of procedure determined according to
the criteria of efficiency. In the first case one can
speak of the technologizing of the tools of society, of
its means of production; in the second of the
rationalization of the community and of society
themselves. Even aside from the problem of natural
resources in a technological future — the most recent
but the deepest problem of all — many have seen
such an increasingly organized social system, with
all its obvious possibilities for future security and
affluence, as a threat to our humanity — not so much
that men and women become subordinate to their
machines as that they become themselves parts of a
social machine.

I do not refer here to the dangers of making men
and women objects of experiment and readjustment
and so of dehumanizing them in that way, nor of the
dubious rule of an all-powerful scientific elite —
issues long pointed out and thoroughly discussed.

Rather I wish to point out the problem or threat for
individuality, originality, inwardness and spontane-
ty, (in short nonconformity and transcendence) —
surely the essence of the human — which participa-
tion in such an organized life necessarily entails. For
as active participants in communal life, men and
women are now as never before parts of a rational-
ized organization. Their creative worth, mental and
emotional, is therefore judged solely by their
cooperative harmony with the purposes of the
system and not by their own intrinsic value. Thus
their intellectual originality and their personal and
unique moral conscience tend to be stifled in the
name of cooperation. Whatever individual unique-
ness or radical inwardness they might achieve
becomes a threat rather than a creative resource.

Correspondingly, this inwardness and indi-
viduality are located not in their participation in
communal economic or political life, in their free
determination of their world, but in their private
leisure, a leisure now dominated by the enjoyment of
the goods and services the system produces, again a
passive mode of being human. Thus results Mar-
cuse's "one-dimensional man" and Fromm's "empty
consumer" — a human being who is a mere cog in his
or her work and an objective, hedonistic observer in
his or her leisure. The massive "malaise" of dis-
satisfaction that dominates both present capitalist
and socialistic societies, says Heilbroner, stems from
this inner emptiness of industrial, technological
society, and it tends in no way to decrease as the level
of goods mounts. Technology thus raises precisely
the sorts of problems it promised at the beginning to
make irrelevant or at best peripheral: the classical
question of what it is to be human, of what really
constitutes human fulfillment, and of how true
humanity both in active participation and in
celebratory enjoyment may be achieved in a world
dominated by organizational systems geared to our
material well-being. The old religious question of
saving one's life only to lose it, of living for bread but
dying in the spirit, are by no means irrelevant
pieties but the most real and most pressing
questions of our technological future.

If the growth and expansion of technological
organization to every corner of our social existence
characterizes our present and increasingly our
future — and there seems little doubt that this is in
fact our "fate" — then this has immediate repercus-
sions on our traditional and cherished social
symbols and so on our political life. Men and women
are, and they are creatively active in our world, inso-
far as they participate. Nothing is done alone or by
oneself, a se, whether one is a worker, a manager, an
owner, a civil servant, a professional man. Thus the
symbol of the self-made man, the self-created man of
power and of property, is in our present world more
and more a false myth. Every position of eminence, of privilege and of power is created, sustained and made possible by communal work, not by individual vitality and ability alone—and all property is likewise the product of communal, participatory labors. No doctor or professor is self-made: his education, his instruments, the knowledge he uses, his place of work (the hospital or university he works in), are produced and made possible by communal funds. He is thus a public servant, created by participatory labors, and so responsible to the public not out of benevolence or for a fee but out of fundamental obligation and debt.

In a participatory culture, a technological culture, self-made roles and powers, self-created properties and so private property rights in their traditional forms are anachronistic, unrelated to social actuality, rationalizations through which the privileged classes grasp for themselves illegitimately the rewards and privileges of common labor. And their results in an interdependent society in terms of massive poverty, urban decay and an expanding proletariat are evident on every hand. A technological culture requires out of its own historical logic a massive reevaluation of social—economic and political—symbols away from our traditional capitalist emphasis on the rights of private well-being in a sea of misery, of private property and privilege, towards the socialist rights of the whole community, the obligation of sharing, and so of the more equal distribution of commonly produced goods and services.

Lest, however, the tone of my remarks seems to have shifted from an introductory black to an intermediate red, let me add that in a technical, organized society, where systems of rationalized conformity (economic, political, academic and social) dominate us all, our own traditional symbols of individuality, of individual rights, of individual conscience and initiative—of the protection and nurture of the person against the overwhelming force of the collective—will have increasing relevance to the survival of the human being. Thus is our democratic tradition from the 18th century (and the 17th) by no means to be rejected in a future apparently dominated by the corporate 19th. Both traditions, the capitalist-democratic and the socialist, have failed to deal creatively with the social demands of technology. Our essential individualism has led to economic injustice towards the community; their political collectivism has led to political oppression of the individual. What is needed, then, in the light of technological developments is a reworking of political, economic and social theory on both sides, new forms of syntheses of corporate responsibility and individual rights, so that personal humanity is possible in our participatory social future. Policy decisions are, to be sure, of the grarest importance in the social future; however, new policies to meet new problems require new evaluations and new creative reworking of fundamental symbols—and thus political and economic reflection as well as political and economic techne. In turn this reevaluation and restructing of symbols—fully as important, as Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse reiterate, as empirical inquiries in the social sciences—is possible only if the discussion reaches to the level of consideration of the deepest levels of social theory, of authentic humanity and authentic community, of the place and role of men and women in their social world and in history, to fundamental questions of human nature, human community and human history. Again, science, technology and industrialism do not dispense with philosophical and religious questions; they cry for their answers in themselves becoming human.

Such a process of the transmutation of fundamental social symbols is, however, not just an academic enterprise, though academics tend to avoid it in the peaceful conformity of mere empiricism. It is also political; and it produces vast anxiety. New social symbols make possible new political and economic policies, else they do nothing; and new policies effect redistributions of power. Thus while such new policies may give more security to one group, they inevitably take it away from another. The threat of such loss of power, status and property on the part of dominant and secure groups—among, for example, the managerial and professional classes in America, and on the part of America as a whole within the wider world—generates great anxiety. This anxiety has the immediate and dangerous political implications of political reaction, increased aggression and ultimately of tyranny. Also in itself, even without the factor of the loss of power, the loss of a symbolic world where one feels at home, identified and placed, and the appearance of a new symbolic world in which one is a stranger, produces anxiety, and with the same results. A technological culture will increasingly require political and so symbolic transformation, the continual creation and recreation of the social world. Change is one thing when it is—as in America we have always deeply assumed,—change in the direction of our values and of our world; change is something else again when it is change of that world and the possible appearance of another, strange world where we have little identity, status, role or security.

To enter that world resulting from continuing change without anxiety, fanaticism and destructive conflict, will require courage and serenity in the face of the impinging unknown. These are deep spiritual
requirements of a technological age. Not to change in the face of the moving technological future is surely to die; to be open to change, in symbols, in status, in power balance, in distribution of privilege, presupposes a serene confidence in the future, a sense of meaning that transcends the transformation of even our American symbolic world, a ground for confidence in history itself which has religious roots. A faith in providence is by no means irrelevant in this future; it may be a necessity if we are to live peaceably through it.

The third issue raised by a technological future—we have spoken of dehumanization threatened by technology and of sweeping political and economic changes required by technology—is not just added to the other two. Rather it compounds each of them and renders them almost uncontrollable; it changes, or threatens to, each of them from "problems" into nightmares—and thus is it the deepest, most lethal element of the technological future. This is, of course, the ecological crisis taken in its widest scope, impending with utter certainty we now know, but the date and form of whose arrival no man certainly knows. Many have pointed out the collision course between an expanding population requiring growing and expanding industrial production—an expansion already in exponential terms—and on the other a finite and so diminishing world of resources, not to mention the effects of industrial and technological pollution. One can also add the absolute limit of the production of heat through the use of energy: in order to survive, an expanding race needs the use of more and more energy, yet to increase the energy and so the heat output is in the long term to threaten survival. As Heilbroner says, the growth of industrial production will have to halt in a generation or two and diminish thereafter—and yet that same growth is the only apparent basis of both survival and of social peace. Thus "whether we are unable to sustain growth—because of diminishing resources—or unable to tolerate it—because of heat—a radically different future beckons." And it is the economic and especially the political implications of this industrial and technological dilemma that make the prospects of this radically different future so bleak.

An expanding technology in itself entails a growth in total, systematic control. In turn the control of technology and of industrial expansion, the halting of the latter and a fortiori the diminution of rates of production, will require even more control. Thus increased economic and social planning and with that increasingly authoritarian governments are in any case parts of our seemingly more and more restricted future. Moreover, a diminution of rates of industrial growth will have immediate social repercussions, domestic and international. It has been the expansion of production and with that rising standards of living that have kept peace and order, first among the unequal economic classes in capitalist societies, among the unequal political classes in socialist countries, and between the have and the have-not nations in the wider world. When standards of living go down rather than rise, these areas of injustice will become suddenly intolerable—and social conflict or the threat of it will certainly appear. Again authoritarian governments will be needed whatever sorts of attitudes and decisions people adopt in the face of this situation: to effect redistribution of diminishing goods, or to defend externally the levels of life that a community has already reached, or, worst of all, to seize the earth's remaining resources for those with power so that present rates of affluence can be briefly maintained—a possible, and by no means improbable, reaction of the powerful nations to the new future.

Technology in the long look will not free men and women from the temptation to dominate and exploit their neighbors, as had been hoped; it will by the historical logic of its own developments increase that temptation to an ultimate pitch. For men and women on a raft or in an internment camp, faced with dwindling supplies, are more sorely tempted to seize and to hoard, to grasp for themselves, than are others. A vast increase in political authority, a diminution of political and individual rights—on the part of both individuals and groups—seems inevitable, either for the sake of conquest by one dominant group or, and surely this is the preferable if hardly probable alternative, for the sake of achieving an equal and so more just redistribution of the world's dwindling goods.

This is by no means a pleasant prospect. But it is surely one in which spiritual strength and security, compassion and brotherly love will be fully as intrinsic requirements for survival as will technical proficiency, and more helpful for survival than will the most finely developed pragmatic self-concern. The prudential argument common to the "realists," that human cooperation will arise and flourish, even in the tightest situation, because pragmatic intelligence can see that if we do not work together we shall all die separately, is, unfortunately, always in actual practice countered by the other prudential argument that if we grab for ourselves—and succeed—we shall live even longer. The main lesson of all this is that according to a number of analysts technical reason and the technological system it produces and maintains has a built-in self-destructive factor. Although it promises and even seems to guarantee survival, in actuality it threatens it in our future—unless, strangely enough, it is qualified by moral and spiritual limits. The latter
are, so to speak, absolutely necessary for survival, a survival which an uncontrolled technical reason has now rendered infinitely precarious. The creativity of mankind is being experienced in the light of our apparent future in a way some of the profoundest myths have portrayed it, namely as self-destructive as well as creative, unless it is redeemed by something more than mere techné. Also through the same strange and unexpected sequence of events leading to this grim future, our age is experiencing in concrete social existence what historical judgment might mean, how dubious deeds have in the end inexorable consequences, consequences whose "justice" no man can reasonably question, although consequences which are universally and rightly feared and deplored.

What are we, finally, to say theologically to such a prospect? Technology clearly calls more dramatically for moral behavior, moral strength, faith and confidence than have other human cultural and social creations of history—which likewise supported and benefitted but also oppressed men and women in the past. To find science and technology thus ambiguous, destructive as well as creative, is a shock to the scientific and engineering community—as it was to the priests, clergy and theologians when the ambiguity of their enterprises had at last to be admitted—because those communities were so certain that their cultural enterprises alone embodied the creative in human history and not the destructive. But does not technology at the same time—now because of its threat rather than its promise to our future—make such religious courage based on faith in God and confidence in His future impossible?

Certainly, first off, this grim vision of the future demonstrates that the modern myth of Prometheus is far less true than was the Greek myth, and a forteriori less profound than the Christian. Modernity, as Heilbroner notes, adored Prometheus as representative of the daring and the creativity of man. But to the modern consciousness that creativity was purely innocent and benevolent; thus its punishment, the enchainment on the rocks, was utterly arbitrary and undeserved, unrelated to anything remotely characteristic of reality. The figure of Zeus, therefore, who administered this punishment, was to modernity a symbol representing nothing objective in the nature of things, but only the projection outwards of that in culture which we have outgrown, namely the old religious order that punishes creativity, or that in us which is petty and jealous, the weakness of the authoritarian father now challenged by a daring son. In the light of this new technological future, however, this modern "subjective" interpretation of Prometheus’ fable and of Zeus, its perpetrator, now seems vastly naive and uncomprehending, both of what the Greeks were saying through myth and of what reality is like. For surely suddenly the sequence in the myth of daring creativit

spring 1974
we are destroyed. But if the “fault”—and it is massive indeed—is a taint in our creativity, not the creativity itself—and here lies the difference in the symbolic accounts—then perhaps the punishment has a different character, the perpetrator of the punishment a different role, and the issue a different possibility.

Inevitably, therefore—and utterly surprisingly—the question of questions with regard to human destiny arises for us too. Is “Zeus” providential creation and salvation as well as iron necessity and so inexorable punishment?—an ancient Greek and even more a Biblical question now made vividly relevant as we look ahead. Two things can be said, more of proclamation than of theological analysis, but nonetheless important.

First, in a Christian world there is and there can be no Fate—and it is an apparently fated future compounded of a finite nature, technical creativity and their inescapable social consequences that we here face. But contingency is the name of history. There are continuities in history; and developments in technology, in population growth and their relation to natural resources do have their consequences. Also pride and greed, injustice and domination do have their historical effects, and these must be undergone; and new moments in time do portend new and terrible temptations to unwisdom and sin as well as new opportunities for creativity. Nevertheless, the future is open. No “force” or dynamic factor in history but operates through human beings and through their common behavior—and thus contingency and freedom enter each interstice of historical life. Freedom, therefore, remains, freedom to create as well as to fall, in technology, in economic structures and in politics. Thus no sequence of determined events, benevolent or nightmarish, is fated for us in the unknown that is to come. The nightmare itself illustrates this: it was unguessed less than a decade ago, and so it is quite unexpected. And itself it is based on what we can now see, in technical possibilities, in economic and political forms, in the general dynamic of historical process itself. This is not to say that this future is not possible, a resultant we must ponder and prepare for; it is to say that, like Kahn’s “benevolent future,” it is not a certainty that should make us despair. A new constellation of all the significant factors in historical process is always possible. No determined future is the truth.

Secondly, both our experience and the Biblical witness assure us that even within the most tragic situation of captivity a new covenant in history is promised, that in the darkest hour new birth and new life arise—that damnation, either ultimate or historical (and we have here gazed at the latter) is never the final divine word, but that the providence of God offers continually new possibilities in each historical situation and ultimate restoration at the end. Thus is there meaning in each moment of time, and hope for even this future. I cannot see how a technological culture can view itself honestly, and not seek to understand itself and its future in the light of this word: as creative and yet as demonic, as threatened with self-destruction, and yet as always upheld by the divine power and the divine promise. Such faith in a non-fated future, in the continuity of open possibility, and in a divine completion of our every abortive creation, is now more necessary than ever.

Education and Modernization

Frank E. Reynolds

As an historian of religions I have long been concerned with the life of human communities and the way in which they are maintained and enriched by each succeeding generation. In every such community, whether it be a traditional “religious” community, or a modern national or ethnic community, this process of maintaining, enriching, and sometimes reconstituting the life of the social group involves a process of education. And in every such process, or at least in every such process which has been effective over a significant period of time, certain key structural elements are involved. I propose to focus on four of these elements which I believe are basic to every educational process, and therefore to education in Thailand. These four closely interlocked but nevertheless distinguishable elements are a concern for ideals, a concern for empirical realities, a concern for methods and technology, and a concern for the limits imposed by man’s humanity and finitude.

Throughout the course of man’s history, effective education has always been concerned with ideals for the simple reason that the communities which

Mr. Frank E. Reynolds is Associate Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and in the field of History of Religions in the Divinity School, The University of Chicago.
education has served have been grounded in ideals which had to be continually nurtured if the community was to survive. Every significant human community, whether it be a specifically religious community, a national community or an ethnic community, derives its basic structure and dynamics from a particular, religiously valorized conception or vision of the world, of society, and of man. When this ideal or vision is a vivid element in the life of the community and its educational process, then the community is alive and can evoke, channel and creatively absorb the energies of the individuals and groups which compose it. But when its basic communal ideal becomes impotent or is neglected, the community loses its integrity and spirit, and the people who compose it lose their sense of identity and their purpose in living.

Again speaking from an historical perspective it is clear that effective education has always been concerned with the empirical realities of personal life, of social life, and of the natural world, and that this is so because the communities which education has served have required a realistic understanding of themselves and their environment in order to maintain a stable existence. When a community has such a realistic understanding of itself and of its natural environment built into its consciousness and into its educational process, it is able to maintain a creative contact with the daily experience of its members. If, however, a community fails to provide its members with tools which enable them to conceptualize the actual conditions and environment of their daily lives, it will soon lose the respect and involvement of its constituency, become irrelevant and die.

Thirdly, effective education has always been concerned with methods and technology because the communities which education has served have always been involved in a continuous process of making over themselves and their environment. Thus, if the community was to survive and prosper, it had to provide the intellectual and practical tools which could enable its constituency to achieve cultural and social skills, and to utilize the resources of the natural world for human purposes. Or, to put the same point in a somewhat different way, every significant human community has had to develop an educational process through which its members could acquire the methods and techniques which enabled them to narrow the gap between the ideal upon which the community was based and the actual realities of the personal lives of its members, their social conditions, and their environment.

Finally, effective education has always been concerned to grapple with the limits of human existence because the communities and individuals which education has served have always been confronted with boundary situations which they could not avoid, and to which they had to respond. At one level every community, and therefore every educational process which strives to be complete, must come to grips with the fact that its basic ideal or vision holds out goals and hopes which can never be fully realized within the limits of human history. And on a related but somewhat different level, the community and its educational process must help its members to recognize and to grapple with the fact that, as human beings, their lives are inevitably permeated and bounded by certain hard realities of human existence including, above all, suffering and death.

Having, I hope, made clear what I consider to be the primary structural elements in any truly effective educational process, I would like now to make a few suggestions concerning the tasks which are posed for educators if they choose to give each of these elements the serious attention which it deserves. In making these suggestions I will again be drawing on my own historical perspective and studies, but at the same time I will give particular attention to the unique kinds of problems and possibilities which confront contemporary educators, and especially educators in a rapidly modernizing nation such as Thailand.

Let us begin by considering the kind of work which is required in order to give the concern for basic communal ideals its appropriate place in the educational process. In most pre-modern societies these basic ideals have been expressed in the myths, legends, and chronicles through which communities have remembered their origins and history, in a variety of literary and artistic works which were current among the elite, and in various folkloric traditions which were present at other cultural and social levels. In such societies these ideals have also been expressed in accounts of the lives of sages and heroes which depict various aspects of the ideal in personal form, and in various kinds of rituals through which the ideal and the community's commitment to it were dramatized. And what is more, they have been transmitted through an educational process which both preserved these religious and semi-religious forms, and at the same time continuously modified and enriched them in accordance with the changing experience of the community and its constituency.

In recent times, of course, the process of preserving, renewing, and transmitting the basic ideals of established religious and national communities has become increasingly difficult with each passing year. The traditional ideals and the forms through which they have been expressed in the past are now being severely challenged by the rapidly growing contact between cultures, and by the critical and rationalistic modes of thinking which have come to dominate so
much of modern thought and consciousness. And what is more, the challenge is sufficiently powerful that any purely conservative or reactionary response is doomed to failure; if the challenge is to be met, the new cultural and intellectual currents must be directly confronted, appropriated and transformed. More specifically this means that any attempt to maintain integrity and continuity not only in the life of great religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, but also in the life of national communities such as America and Thailand, must develop a distinctive style of humanistic scholarship and education which welcomes the new universalism and critical methods which characterize modern intellectual life, but utilizes them for a positive rather than a destructive or reductionistic purpose. Such a style of humanistic scholarship would utilize critical methods of research to discover and to illuminate the ideals which are embedded in the traditional forms of communal expression. Such a style of humanistic scholarship would utilize the modern knowledge of cultural diversity as well as rational (rather than rationalistic) modes of thinking to reflect upon those ideals in such a way that they could be clarified, updated and enriched. And beyond this, such a style of humanistic scholarship would take up the creative task of reformulating these renewed ideals in an idiom commensurate with contemporary experience and sensibilities.

The development of such a new and distinctive approach to humanistic research and teaching is—to say the least—a very demanding task. But unless a serious effort is made in this direction education, particularly in rapidly modernizing countries such as Thailand, will not be able to fulfill its basic communal responsibilities. Without such an approach to the task of humanistic research and communication the communities which education claims to serve will wither and die. However, with such an approach, the way can be opened toward significant social and cultural revitalization.

As I have already suggested, the effective educator’s concern for ideals has always had its necessary counterpart in an equally serious concern for the empirical realities which have constituted and provided the context for the life of his constituency. Every society has developed concepts which have enabled its members to objectify and to understand their own psychological processes. Every society has developed concepts which have enabled its members to objectify and to understand the actual structure and dynamics of their own political and social life. And every society has developed concepts which have enabled its members to objectify and to understand the natural environment in which their personal lives and communal existence depended. Moreover, in every case, it has been the responsibility of educators to identify these concepts, to clarify and to update them through reflection and to communicate them to each new generation.

As human societies have become more complex this task has retained its importance, while the problems involved in implementing it have become ever more serious. And the seriousness of these problems is especially apparent in contemporary societies which are undergoing a process of rapid modernization. In such rapidly modernizing societies the highly complex structure and dynamics of personal, political and social life have made the traditional forms of knowledge and insight ineffective, and have made it both appropriate and necessary to utilize the powerful new tools of conceptualization and analysis which have been developed in modern psychology, in the social sciences, and in the natural sciences. But the effective utilization of these tools is no simple matter. Educators must first of all appropriate not simply the knowledge which these sciences have generated, but more importantly they must appropriate the basic methodological principles upon which the sciences are based. They must then utilize these methods to describe and to interpret the distinctive conditions and context of life in their own community. And as they proceed they must, particularly in psychology and the social sciences, adapt these methods in light of local modes of thinking, and in light of the particular local phenomena which they are seeking to understand. Such a process, which involves nothing less than the indigenization of the empirical sciences, is necessarily difficult and will obviously require a heavy investment of both time and energy; but there appears to be no other practical way in which educators in modernizing communities can generate the kind of realistic conceptions of self, society and environment which are essential to the stability and well-being of the communities which they serve.

When we turn our attention to the third element which we have discerned in the structure of effective education — namely the concern for methods and techniques — we are focusing on an aspect of education whose universality and importance hardly need to be defended. Educators in every society have been responsible for identifying and transmitting those intellectual and practical skills which were basic to the cultural, social and economic life of the community. And what is more, they have been responsible for refining and improving these skills, and for introducing new skills which could aid the community in its efforts to enrich its life and more adequately to actualize its ideals and hopes.

Whenever the pace of historical change has been moderate and steady, this educational task has been
relatively routine. However in many contemporary societies the pace of modernization has become so rapid that its effective implementation has become very difficult. In such contemporary settings success in this endeavor requires that educators appropriate a wide range of alien practices and procedures; and if the results of this process are to be truly useful, educators must creatively adapt these new practices and procedures both to the particular empirical realities in the life of their own communities and to the distinctive ideals and hopes to which that community is committed. Moreover, it is essential that a proper balance and reciprocity be maintained among the methods which are appropriated at various levels such as the cultural, the social and the economic. Or, to put the same point somewhat differently, attention must always be given to the ways in which the methods and techniques which are available to achieve one kind of purpose will effect other aspects of communal life. If educators fail to give careful attention to these basic issues of indigenization, balance and total communal impact, the concern for methods and techniques may well have a disruptive rather than a constructive result.

If, on the other hand, educators take these problems with the seriousness which they deserve, the educational concern for methods and techniques can exert a highly creative and positive influence on the modernizing process.

Among the four basic elements which we have discerned in the structure of education it is perhaps the final one — namely the concern with the limits and boundaries of man’s existence — which is the most difficult to discuss. To be sure, this concern has been a focal point of attention in almost all traditional forms of education. However, in many modernizing communities this concern for the most part has been ignored, relegated to the background, or left to institutions and processes which stand outside of the mainstream of community life.

The reasons for this tendency among modern educators to ignore or to bypass the issues posed by man’s limitations and finitude are not difficult to discern. On the one hand the experience of modernization has demonstrated very vividly that many of the limits which traditional societies had placed on man’s possibilities and capabilities can, in fact, be overcome through new forms of knowledge and technology. And this has quite appropriately encouraged communities to place a heavy emphasis on the realization of these newly discovered possibilities. On the other side, the encounter with cultural diversity and new modes of thinking which are an intrinsic part of the modernizing process have seriously challenged the established religious and philosophical orientations in which the most basic problems of human existence have in the past been dealt with, given meaning and ultimately transcended.

However, in spite of the fact that the reasons for the modern tendency to ignore the questions posed by human limitations and finitude can easily be understood, the realities themselves have not been eliminated and, in fact, cannot be eliminated. At one level it is becoming increasingly obvious that unless modern men very quickly recognize the limits imposed upon them by their dependence on nature, technological “advances” may well destroy the environment on which life itself depends. At another closely related level it is becoming apparent that each new advance in man’s capacities creates new problems at the same time that it resolves old ones, and that the process is such that the ideals and hopes which bind communities together and motivate their members can never be fully actualized in history. And at still another level it is all too obvious that despite the many improvements in life which modernization has achieved, and the further advances which will certainly come in the future, men can never escape the harsh realities of suffering and, finally, of death.

Thus, if education in modernizing societies is to be faithful to its responsibilities, it must move to reactivate its traditional concern with basic existential issues. A naive return to the old ways of defining and responding to the boundaries of man’s specifically human mode of existence is, of course, not only inadvisable but also impossible. Rather, what is possible, and what is required, is a new intellectually responsible and imaginative effort to define these boundaries and to grapple with the issues raised by their presence. What is needed is an effort of this kind which will take serious account of the wisdom embedded in the traditional philosophy and religious orientation of the community involved, an effort which will take serious account of insights which can be creatively appropriated from the philosophical and religious orientations of other human communities, both past and present, and an effort which will, at the same time, be fully sensitive to the new kinds of possibilities and limits which are continuously being generated in and through the process of modernization. Contrary to the view which seems to be dominant among many modern educators, such an attempt to become conscious of human limitations and to confront them realistically and creatively is not a luxury which should be appended to the educational process only if time and budget permit (which, of course, they never do). Rather, this kind of endeavor must be given a prominent place on the agenda of any educational system which intends to address those issues which are most fundamental to the life of a modernizing community and to the lives of the individuals who compose it.
Thus far I have tried to identify and to describe four distinct, though closely inter-related and interdependent elements or concerns which are basic to any fully effective educational process. Thus I have focused attention (1) on the importance and meaning of the concern to discover and to reflect upon basic communal ideals or visions; (2) on the importance and meaning of the concern to identify and to conceptualize the basic conditions of personal and social existence within one's community; (3) the importance and meaning of the concern for the methods and techniques which a community needs in order to develop its cultural, social and economic life, and to mold its environment; and (4) the importance and meaning of the concern to recognize and to grapple with the realities which inevitably circumscribe the existence of the community and its individual members. And what is more, I have attempted to highlight some of the specific problems and possibilities involved in implementing these concerns in a rapidly modernizing nation such as Thailand. In so doing I have tried to cover a great deal of ground in a very short time, and therefore it has been inevitable that a number of important points have remained implicit, and that many significant issues have been neglected. By way of conclusion, I would like to refer very briefly to one crucial point which I have touched upon only implicitly or in passing.

Those who have followed closely what I have been saying may already have noted the fact that in my discussion of the various elements in the structure of education I have spent a great deal of time dealing with the problems involved in the generation of content, but have given little explicit attention to issues which concern the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. However, since I would not want to leave an incorrect impression, I would like to make the reason for this seeming omission quite clear. The reason that I have proceeded in this way is not that I consider the communication or transmission of knowledge and skills to be unimportant or incidental to the educational process. Rather, the reason is that my own teaching experience has long since convinced me that what effective communication really involves is a reenactment of the process of generating knowledge—that is to say a reenactment of the process of discovery and reflection—at a level commensurate with the background and abilities of the teacher and his students. Whenever communication is reduced to a process in which an intellectual or educational elite simply indoctrinates its constituency with the ready made results of its own research and reflection (or even worse, that of others) learning becomes a matter of rote and has an impact which is primarily negative. However, when communication becomes a process in which teachers guide their students through as much of the creative process of discovery and reflection as is possible at their level of sophistication, then real communication takes place. That is to say, the knowledge and skills which are learned in this way become a part of the very fabric of the students' lives and consciousess. And what is perhaps even more important, the students who engage in this kind of process learn how one goes about generating knowledge and skills, and therefore prepare themselves to carry forward the process of education on their own.

Listening to the Parables of Jesus

Paul Ricoeur

Text: Matthew 13:31-32 and 45-46

To preach today on the Parables of Jesus looks like a lost cause. Have we not already heard these stories at Sunday School? Are they not childish stories, unworthy of our claims to scientific knowledge, in particular in a University Chapel? Are not the situations which they evoke typical of a rural existence which our urban civilization has made nearly ununderstandable? And the symbols, which in the old days awakened the imagination of simple-minded people, have not these symbols become dead metaphors, as dead as the leg of the chair? More than that, is not the wearing out of these images, borrowed from the agricultural life, the most convincing proof of the general erosion of Christian symbols in our modern culture?

To preach today on the Parables of Jesus—or rather to preach the Parables—is indeed a wager: the wager that in spite of all contrary arguments, it is still possible to listen to the Parables of Jesus in such a way that we are once more astonished, struck,
renewed and put in motion. It is this wager which led me to try to preach the Parables and not only to study them in a scholarly way, as a text among other texts.

The first thing that may strike us is that the Parables are radically profane stories. There are no gods, no demons, no angels, no miracles, no time before time, as in the creation stories, not even founding events as in the Exodus account. Nothing like that, but precisely people like us: Palestinian landlords traveling and renting their fields, stewards and workers, sawers and fishers, fathers and sons; in a word ordinary people doing ordinary things: selling and buying, letting down a net into the sea and so on. Here resides the initial paradox: on the one hand these stories are—as a critic said—narratives of normalcy—but on the other hand, it is the Kingdom of God that is said to be like this. The paradox is that the extraordinary is like the ordinary.

Some other sayings of Jesus speak of the Kingdom of Heaven: among them, the eschatological sayings, and they seem to point towards something Wholly-Other, to something beyond, as different from our history as heaven is from earth. Therefore, the first thing which may amaze us is that at the very moment we were expecting the language of the myth, the language of the sacred, the language of mysteries, we receive the language of our history, the language of the profane, the language of open drama.

And it is this contrast between the kind of thing about which it is spoken—the Kingdom of Heaven—and the kind of thing to which it is compared which may put us in question. It is not the religious man in us, it is not the sacred man in us, but precisely the profane man, the secular man who is summoned.

The second step, beyond this first shock, will be to ask what makes sense in the Parables. If it is true—as contemporary exegesis shows—that the Kingdom of God is not compared to the man who... to the woman who... to the yeast which... but to what happens in the story, we have to look more closely at the short story itself, to identify what may be paradigmatic in it. It is here that we run the risk of sticking too closely to the sociological aspects which I evoked at the beginning when I said that the situations described in the Parables are those of agricultural activity and of rural life. What makes sense is not the situations as such but, as a recent critique has shown, it is the plot, it is the structure of the drama, its composition, its culmination, its denouement.

If we follow this suggestion, we are immediately led to look at the critical moments, at the decisive turning points in the short dramas. And what do we find? Let us read once more the shortest, the most condensed of all the Parables: Matthew 13, verse 44. Three critical moments emerge: finding the treasure, selling everything else, buying the field. The same threefold division may be found in the two following Parables: Matthew 13:45-47, 47-49.

If we attempt now to let these three critical moments expand, so to say, in our imagination, in our feeling, in our thought, they begin to mean much more than the apparent practical, professional, economical, commercial transactions told by the story. Finding something... This simple expression encompasses all the kinds of encounters which make of our life the contrary of an acquisition by skill or by violence, by work or by cunning. Encounter of people, encounter of death, encounter of tragic situations, encounter of joyful events. Finding the other, finding ourselves, finding the world, recognizing those whom we had not even noticed, and those whom we don't know too well and whom we don't know at all. Unifying all these kinds of finding, does not the parable point toward a certain fundamental relation to time? Towards a fundamental way of being in time? I mean, this mode which deserves to be called the Event par excellence. Something happens. Let us be prepared for the newness of what is new. Then we shall "find."

But the art of the parable is to link dialectically finding to two other critical turning points. The man who found the treasure went and sold everything he had and bought it. Two new critical points, which we could call after a modern commentator, himself taught by Heidegger: Reversal and Decision. Decision does not even come second. Before Decision; Reversal. And all those who have read some religious texts other than biblical, and even some texts other than religious, know how much has been invested in this word "conversion," which means much more than making a new choice, but which implies a shift in the direction of the look, a reversal in the vision, in the imagination, in the heart, before all kinds of good intentions and all kinds of good decisions and good actions. Doing appears as the conclusive act, engendered by the Event and by the Reversal. First, encountering the Event, then changing one's heart, then doing accordingly. This succession is full of sense: the Kingdom of God is compared to the chain of these three acts: letting the Event blossom, looking in another direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision.

Of course, all the Parables are not built in a mechanical way along the same pattern. If this were the case, they would lose for that very reason the power of surprise. But each of them develops and, so to say, dramatizes one of the other of these three critical terms.

Look at the so-called parables of Growth: Matthew 13:31-33. This unexpected growth of the
mustard seed, this growth beyond all proportion, draws our attention in the same direction as finding. The natural growth of the seed and the unnatural size of the growth speak of something which happens to us, invades us, overwhelms us, beyond our control and our grasp, beyond our willing and our planning. Once more the Event comes as a gift.

Some other Parables which have not been read this morning will lay the stress on the Reversal. Thus the Prodigal Son changes his mind, reverts his glance, his regard, whereas it is the father who waits, who expects, who welcomes, and the Event of the encounter proceeds from the conjunction of this Reversal and this Waiting.

In some other Parables, the emphasis will fall on the decision, on the doing, even on the good deed, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But, reduced to the last critical turn, the Parable seems to be nothing more than a moral fable, a mere call to “do the same.” Thus reduced to a moral teaching, the Parable ceases to be a Parable of the Kingdom to become an allegory of charitable action. We have to replace it within the inclusion of the Parables of Event, Reversal and Decision, if the moral fable is to speak once more as a Parable.

Having made, in that way, this second step and recognized the dramatic structure, the articulation of the plot which makes sense, we are ready for a new discovery, for a new surprise. If we ask: “And finally, what is the Kingdom of Heaven?” we must be prepared to receive the following answer. The Gospel says nothing about the Kingdom of Heaven, except that it is like... It does not say what it is, but what it looks like. This is hard to hear. Because all our scientific training tends to use images only as provisory devices and to replace images by concepts. We are invited here to proceed the other way. And to think according to a mode of thought which is not metaphorical for the sake of rhetoric, but for the sake of what it has to say. Only analogy approximates what is wholly practical. The Gospel is not alone to speak in that way. We have elsewhere heard Hosea speaking of Yahweh as the Husband, of Israel as the Wife, of the Idols as the Lovers. No translation in abstract language is offered, only the violence of a language which from the beginning to the end, thinks through the Metaphor and never beyond. The power of this language is that it abides to the end within the tension created by the images.

What are the implications of this disquieting discovery that Parables allow no translation in conceptual language? At first sight this state of affairs exposes the weakness of this mode of discourse. But for a second glance, it reveals the unique strength of it. How is it possible? Let us consider that with the Parables we have not to do with a unique story dramatically expanded in a long discourse, but with a full range of short Parables gathered together in the Unifying form of the Gospel. This fact means something. It means that the Parables make a whole, that we have to grasp them as a whole and to understand each one in the light of the other. The Parables make sense together. They constitute a network of inter-signification, if I dare say so. If we assume this hypothesis, then our disappointment—the disappointment which a scientific mind perceives when it fails to draw a coherent idea, an equivocal concept from this bundle of metaphors—our disappointment may become amazement. Because there is now more in the Parables taken together than in any conceptual system about God and his action among us. There is more to think through the richness of the images than in the coherence of a simple concept. What confirms this feeling is the fact that we can draw from the Parables nearly all the kinds of theologies which have divided Christianity through the centuries. If you isolate the Parable of the Lost Coin, if you interrupt the dynamism of the story and extract from it a frozen concept, then you get the kind of doctrine of predestination which pure Calvinism advocated. But if you pick the Parable of the Prodigal Son and extract from it the frozen concept of personal conversion, then you get a theology based on the absolutely free will of man, as in the doctrine that the Jesuits opposed to the Calvinists or the Protestant Liberals to the Orthodox Protestants.

Therefore, it is not enough to say that the Parables say nothing directly concerning the Kingdom of God. We must say in more positive terms, that taken all together, they say more than any rational theology. At the very moment that they call for theological clarification, they start shattering the theological simplifications which we attempt to put in their place. This challenge to rational theology is nowhere more obvious than in the Parable of the Good Seed spoiled by the darnel sowed among the wheat. The farmer’s servants went to their master and said, “Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? Then where has the darnel come from?” Such is the question of the philosopher when he discusses theoretically the so-called problem of evil. But the only answer which we get is itself metaphorical: “This is an enemy’s doing.” And you may come through several kinds of theologies in agreement with that enigmatic answer. Because there is more to think about in the answer said in a parabolic way than any kind of theory.

Let me propose one more step, a step which I hope will increase our surprise, our amazement. Many people will be tempted to say, “Well, we have no difficulty dropping all systems, including rational or rationalizing theologies.” Then, if all theories are wrong, let us look at the Parables as mere practical
teaching, as moral or maybe political teaching. If Parables are not pieces of dogmatic theology, let us look at them as pieces of practical theology. This proposal sounds better at first sight than the first one. Is it not said that to listen to the word is to put it into practice? This obviously is true. But what does that mean, to put in practice the Parables?

I fear that a too zealous attempt to draw immediate application from the Parables for private ethics or for political morality must necessarily miss the target. We immediately surmise that such an indiscreet zeal quickly transposes the Parables into trivial advice, into moral platitudes. And we kill them more surely by trivial moralizing than by transcendent theologizing.

The Parables obviously teach, but they don’t teach in an ordinary way. There is indeed something in the Parables which we have as yet overlooked and which they have in common with the Proverbs used by Jesus according to the Synoptics. This trait is easy to identify in the Proverbs. It is the use of paradox and hyperbole, in such aphorism and antithetical formulae as: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.” As one commentator says, the paradox is so acute in this overturning of fates that it jolts the imagination from its vision of a continuous sequence between one situation and another. Our project of making a totality continuous with our own existence is defeated. For who can plan his future according to the project of losing “in order to win?” Nevertheless, these are not ironical nor skeptical words of wisdom. In spite of everything, life is granted by the very means of this paradoxical path. The same has to be said of hyperbolic orders like: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Like paradox, hyperbole is intended to jolt the hearer from the project of making his life something continuous. But whereas humor or detachment would remove us from reality entirely, hyperbole leads back to the heart of existence. The challenge to the conventional wisdom is at the same time a way of life. We are first disoriented before being reoriented.

Does not the same happen with the Parables? Is their way of teaching different from that of reorientation by disorientation? We have not been aware enough of the paradoxes and the hyperbole implied in those short stories. In most of them there is an element of extravagance which alerts us and summons our attention.

Consider the extravagance of the landlord in the Parable of the Wicked Husbandman, who after having sent his servants, sent his son. What Palestinian property owner living abroad would be foolish enough to act like this landlord? Or what can we say about the host in the Parable of the Great Feast who looks for substitute guests in the streets? Would we not say that he was unusual? And in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, does not the father overstep all bounds in greeting his son? What employer would pay the employees of the eleventh hour the same wages as those hired first?

The Parables of Growth are no less implausible. Here it is the hyperbole of the proverb that is at work. What small seed would yield a huge tree where birds can nest? The contrast is hardly less in the Parable of the Leaven. As to the Parable of the Sower, it is constructed on the same contrast. If it points to eschatological plentitude, it is because the yield of grain in the story surpasses by far all reality.

The most paradoxical and most outlandish Parables as far as their realism is concerned are those which Joachim Jeremias has grouped under the titles “The Imminence of Catastrophe” and “It may be Too Late.” The schema of occasion, which only presents itself one time and after which it is too late, includes a dramatization of what in ordinary experience we call seizing the occasion, but this dramatization is both paradoxical and hyperbolic; paradoxical because it runs counter to actual experience where there will always be another chance, and hyperbolic because it exaggerates the experience of the unique character of the momentous decisions of existence.

At what village wedding has anyone slammed the door on the frivolous maidens who do not consider the future (and who are, after all, as carefree as the lilies of the field)? It is said that “these are Parables of Crisis.” Of course, but the hour of testing and the “selective sorting” is signified by a crisis in the story which intensifies the surprise, the scandal, and sometimes provokes disapproval as when the denouement is “unavoidably tragic.”

Let me draw the conclusion which seems to emerge from this surprising strategy of discourse used by Jesus when he told the Parables to the disciples and to the mob. To listen to the Parables of Jesus, it seems to me, is to let one’s imagination be opened to the new possibilities disclosed by the extravagance of these short dramas. If we look at the Parables as at a word addressed first to our imagination rather than to our will, we shall not be tempted to reduce them to mere didactic devices, to moralizing allegories. We will let their poetic power display itself within us.

But, was not this poetic discussion already at work, when we read the Parable of the Pearl and the Parable of Event, Reversal and Decision? Decision, we said, moral decision comes third. Reversal precedes. But the Event opens the path. The poetic power of the Parable is the power of the Event. Poetic means more than poetry as a literary genre. Poetic means creative. And it is in the heart of our imagination that we let the Event happen, before we
may convert our heart and tighten our will.
Listen therefore to the Parables of Jesus.
Matthew 13:31-32 and 45-46
And another parable he put before them,
saying, “The Kingdom of heaven is like a
grain of mustard seed which a man took and
sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all
seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest
of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the
birds of the air come and make nests in its
branches.”
“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a
merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on
finding one pearl of great value, went and
sold all that he had and bought it.”

A Mission of Clarity
Martin E. Marty

“Man has a mission of clarity upon earth.” The
fact that Jose Ortega y Gasset made this comment
about human beings does not make it true. Its validi-
ty has to be tested in context. For the Spanish
philosopher that context was the struggle to bring
together reason and life. He complained, “This very
opposition between reason and life, so much used to-
day by those who do not want to work, is in itself
open to suspicion. As if reason were not a vital and
spontaneous function! . . . Not everything is thought,
but without thought we do not possess anything ful-
ly.”

“Those who do not want to work” are not alone
among those who would break the tie between
reason and life. In our time they are joined by those
who oppose ecstasy and enthusiasm to reason; they
provide the context in which I wish to speak of
humans having “a mission of clarity upon earth.”
They create problems for both the academic and
religious communities, both of whom have interests
not only in the coming together of “reason and life,”
but also in speech and clarity.

A man who has been called “the speech-thinker,”
Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, tried in our time to show
how in biblical religion the concern for speech brings
us to the reality of God himself. “The power who
puts questions into our mouth and makes us answer
them is our God…. He is the power which makes us
speak. He puts words of life on our lips.”
The apostle Paul in this spirit was constantly
concerned with the way early Christian communities
carried out their mission of clarity upon earth. In a
context so apparently different from our own, that
of a congregation at Corinth, one which had been
experiencing outbreaks of “tongue-speaking,” a
kind of ecstatic language, he compared speaking in
tongues to prophesying. I have no interest in getting
into the debate over the value of tongue-speaking in
Christian communities today, but rather to take the
interpretive translation of the New English Bible—
the phrase “the language of ecstasy” does, in a way,
interpret the original Greek—and extending it into
the question of reason, life, clarity, and mission in
our place and time.

Paul was not simply opposed to speech which did
not promote clarity; he said, “Thank God, I am more
gifted in ecstatic utterance than any of you.”
However, “in the congregation,” he would “rather
speak five intelligible words, for the benefit of others
as well as myself, than thousands of words in the
language of ecstasy.” He speaks well of that
language; it represents “talking with God”; the
person who uses it is “inspired”; it is “good for the
speaker himself”; he would be pleased for all
members to use the tongues of ecstasy.

In the religious community those who favor the
language of ecstasy and even the experience without
language or speech have tended to predominate in
recent years. They are “talking with God,” speaking
mysteries if they speak at all. Those who favor the
religion of the paperbacks found at our new shrines,
the airport newstands, ordinarily exalt life at the ex-
pense of reason. Their devotion to the occult and
metaphysical, the astrological and the oriental, is
often born of a desire to transcend reason and
speech. The Hasidic movement in Judaism enjoys
the ecstatic and the enthusiastic at the expense of
reason, but it must be said that Hasidic love of dis-
course often contributes to the mission of clarity.

Within the Christian community, the Jesus
Movement, Pentecostalisms old and new, the
charismatic tendency—all of which may bring gifts
of the kind Paul celebrated to the Christian
community—unite in opposing life to reason.
all dwell on the immediate experience of God, and enjoy mystery at the expense of clarity. Their simplicity is often a simplicism born not of passage through and beyond the complex but of avoidance of it. Anti-reason and anti-intellectual characterize much of their effort. Paul was worried about what would happen if “the Spirit in me prays, but my intellect lies fallow.”

The three most devoted participant-observers in the Protestant Jesus movement, Ronald Enroth, Edward E. Ericson, and C. Breckinridge Peters complain about the tendency of The Jesus People toward being anti-social, anti-cultural, anti-intellectual. They write, “A Children of God elder reacted sharply to our question about education: ‘Education is all just shit.’” Linda Meissner refers, somewhat more mildly, to what is learned in college as “general blah … For the hard-core Jesus People, we say it’s a waste of time. It is man’s wisdom.” These folk had allies in the counter culture; the Berkeley “wandering priest” Charlie (Brown) Artman combined LSD in his Indian-sign necklace, a chatelaine of Hindu temple bells, and when he ran for Berkeley city councilman post in 1966, the campaign slogan, “May the baby Jesus open your mind and shut your mouth.” The mission of clarity is reduced to the bumper sticker, “Honk if you love Jesus.” In a traffic jam, to use Paul’s language in this chapter, “the trumpet-call is not clear.”

I have not made much here of the actual devotion to tongue-speaking and ecstatic utterance in today’s religious community, not wanting to make this a polemic against a movement of great complexity. But the pentecostal and charismatic literature comes down on the side of life versus reason, and often at least in effect downgrades clarity in speech, thought, and interpretation.

Before we can relate all this to today’s setting, which is also an academic context, Paul is to be heard on the side of the kind of speech which he favors by a mathematical ratio of 2000:1, clear language, which he termed prophecy as he defined it to the Corinthians. How does it carry on the mission of clarity upon earth?

Prophecy, he says, represents talking with men; such “words have power to build; they stimulate and they encourage.” It is prophecy that “builds up a … community.” “The prophet is worth more than the man of ecstatic speech.” Prophecy yields “precise meaning.” (It may be born of mystery, but it is clear. Rather than be obsessed with reason at the expense of life, it makes possible the word of a prophet to a guilty king: “Thou art the man.” On the matter of the central Christian affirmation, that God is at work in Jesus Christ, prophetic language makes its point when it says clearly that all this is “for you.”)

For these reasons Paul becomes the “speech-thinker” and apostle of clarity. He pictures that if someone who does not share the assumptions of the community comes upon it when its members are prophesying, such a person “hears from everyone something that searches his conscience and brings conviction, and the secrets of his heart are laid bare.” Let me quote Rosenstock-Huessy on this point, too: “From the liturgy I have learned to think rightly!” he once said about the language of religious community. The mission of clarity is carried on in the context of community: “True partnership puts my mind at the service of my partner, and his mind at my service. Our minds work much better for our partners than for ourselves. The Spirit was not given to man for himself. Self-reliance is an abuse of the greatest gift of the Spirit, or our reason.”

Those words permit transit to the other aspect of community and partnership represented here, the academic or university context. No one pretends that it is gathered on the grounds that gave a basis to religious community of the kind that existed at Corinth and is reflected in our biblical text. The academic community is not united by a religious faith or confession; it is concerned with inquiry, exploration, investigation, the discerning of problems in the human venture. Yet that community is again and again threatened — not least of all in our time — by the tendency toward “opposition between reason and life.” Some of the threats always comes from “those who do not want to work.” But the greater attack comes from those who fail to recognize that reason is also a “vital and spontaneous function,” that man has a mission of clarity upon the earth.

The tests of the search for clarity occur in many places in an academic community. The question of verbal clarity may well be a moral issue in a university. This is not to say that mystery and obscurity never have a function; much exploration will move in the murky and the uncharted. Even literarily, obscurity may have a purpose. In that case, William Strunk, Jr., in the classic Elements of Style offered the appropriate word: “Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!” He summarized our theme in three words on page 65: “clarity, clarity, clarity.”

The attack on vital or ecstatic reason, on lives and communities and words of clarity has come from two fronts in our recent past. In the 1960s the legitimate attack on what Lewis Mumford called “mad rationality” often came to be mixed up with an attack on all reason and clear speech. The mad rationality reflected in the terms used to disguise the reality of war — escalation, body count, deterrence, incursion, protective reaction strike — was seen as the be-all and end-all of reason itself. The attackers themselves did not counter with non-mad rationality or clear speech; they resorted to the force of the
brute, the breakdown of discourse in the non-negotiable demand, the weight of numbers, the grunts and mutterings of slogans, or, at best, a few cherished graffiti.

They were answered in kind by "the establishment's" defenders on the right. The hard hat, the backlasher, the Middle American, the Silent Majoritarians—none of these made contributions to civilized speech or the survival of reason. They used a subtler but more durable kind of brute force. And their language was also obscuring. Just because a man says, "let me make this perfectly clear" does not mean that he succeeds in doing so, or that he may not use speech to obscure dark actions and deeds.

In the still more recent past the polar opponents of reason in defense of life on one hand or mad rationality on the other have been largely supplanted by other enemies of speech and clarity. The religion of the counter culture, we have already noted, lives on to celebrate ecstasy and sense over word; back in The Dharma Bums a Kerouac character asked why Zen masters threw their disciples into a mud puddle: "That's because they want them to realize mud is better than words." ("I would rather speak five intelligible words, for the benefit of others as well as myself, than be thrown into thousands of mud puddles.")

Some attack is anti-verbal, anti-rational. From Ionesco: "The human voice conspires to desecrate everything on earth." Samuel Beckett: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness." These literary artists have their own reasons for carrying on the attack, for projecting their alternative to the mission of clarity. More widespread and subtle is the assault from those who work out today's analogies to "ecstatic utterance" by seeking non-rational and non-verbal ways.

Kurt W. Back's "Story of Sensitivity Training and the Encounter Movement" is appropriately titled, Beyond Words. Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls advises devotees: "Forget your mind and come to your senses." "Stroking" takes the place of thinking; Beck quotes Thomas Gray, "Thought would destroy their paradise." We have neither time nor competence to explore the dimensions of the ecstatic and somatic movements of our time. Some of them exist to promote clarity, even if not always on rational terms; it is possible to build, stimulate, and encourage without words or constantly focused reason. These movements, no doubt, offered much of help to many people, when in the proper hands.

They here only symbolize part of today's academic communities' frequent temptation to oppose "reason and life," to underestimate the vital and spontaneous functions of reason. The university does not exist only for a mission of clarity, but it reasserts that mission when it is compromised or endangered. Its most gifted humanists through the centuries have known that "not everything is thought," but in their own ways they have said that "without thought we do not possess anything fully." And they then connect thought to intelligibility and clarity, two endangered species in the human habitat.

The idea of a conference on "the condition of language" has been proposed at this university. A linguist reminded us that language does not have a condition; cultures and people that use language have a condition. Paul at Corinth was concerned with the condition of love, of encouragement, of stimulation, of building. I have no doubt that the carrying on of the mission of clarity in the academy can also play its part in improving the human condition. Goya's etching title still speaks: "The sleep of reason brings forth monsters."

Reason does not live on automatically simply because we provide and support, however miserably, the academic communities. Having universities does not guarantee a vital culture, unless we shall listen to, and accept as fully accurate, Simone Weil's charge that "culture is an instrument wielded by professors in order to produce professors who in their turn will produce professors." Convocation Sunday symbolizes the time when we at this school again recognize that we have produced, among other things, professors. But we have also learned from these people as persons, and have hope that they go into various callings carrying on the mission of clarity. They may consider themselves secular, but they can still prophesy, in the terms of intelligible speech, in tentative provisions for meaning.

David Hays in last summer's Daedalus wrote, "Contrary to a vein of popular anti-intellectual sentiment, most professional opinion holds that language is the vehicle of socialization, of group solidarity, of tension release, of psychotherapy, and of love." I almost forgot: our text occurs after the famous chapter, I Corinthians 13, which devotes itself to the mission of clarity upon earth. Before the apostle compares the language of ecstasy to clear prophecy he sets forth three words which can send us forth: "Put love first."
Inside the Idols

Clyde J. Steckel

Scripture readings: Isaiah 44:14-20
Matthew 23:23-32

One of the most delightful scenes in the Wizard of Oz develops as Dorothy and her friends enter the sanctuary of the mighty Oz, filled with dramatic sight- and sound-effects, only to discover, when Dorothy's dog, Toto, pulls aside the concealing drapery, that the mighty Oz is merely a blustering charlatan speaking through a public address system and working the switches and levers which operate the effects. Though his wizardry proves none the less valuable, his sacral manifestations have been completely de-mystified.

In the apocryphal Old Testament book of Bel and Daniel, the shrine of the great God, Bel, is occupied by some seventy priests with their wives and children, who steal out at night to consume the sacrifices left to the god, thus happily meeting their own needs for sustenance as well as maintaining the belief that Bel is a living god. Daniel is on to the trickery, but cannot convince the King that anything is amiss, until he scatters fine ashes around the temple precincts one night, ashes which next morning reveal to the King and Daniel the footprints of men, women and children coming and going with the sacrifices.

Inside the idols, said the prophet Isaiah, there is exactly the same wood which the man has grown in the forest, some of which he uses to cook his food, some to warm himself, and some to make into a god to which he bows down and prays. "Such a man will not use his reason," says the prophet, "he has neither the wit nor the sense to say, 'Half of it I have burnt, yes, and used its embers to bake bread; I have roasted meat on them too and eaten it; but the rest of it I turn into this abominable thing and so I am worshipping a log of wood.'"

Inside the idol of the devout and holy life, said Jesus, is a neglect of justice and mercy. "You are like tombs covered with whitewash," he said, "they look well from the outside, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of filth."

Getting inside the idols is a strange and harrow-

ing experience, for, indeed, you discover trickery and truth, wildly absurd and dreadfully commonplace things, self-indulgence and death. The only truth I can share with you today comes from my own journey into the idols of my own religiousness. It is a provisional report, for the journey continues. And I call it a journey rather than a pilgrimage, for the latter term, pilgrimage, suggests a divine call and an active response. Though that may be what is occurring and what my faith prompts me to name it, in fact my feelings are very strongly opposed to the whole business. I have gone reluctantly, at best. I would still, if I had the opportunity, return to the simpler securities of my more complex theology—but I run ahead of my story.

The two idols into whose precincts I have been drawn and pushed, idols which I was at work fashioning in my years here at The University of Chicago, are my status-quo theology and my surrogate personhood.

It may seem sad and foolish to suggest that one could pass through The University of Chicago Divinity School and emerge with a status-quo theology, since Chicago is world renowned for its progressive and radical character. And I cannot blame my Alma Mater for the failings of a wayward son. But that is what happened—I developed a comprehensive interpretive framework which could accommodate conflict and ambiguity as dimensions of an on-going process—expressed in the theological symbols of hope and the Kingdom. When the Pax Americana began to crumble in the 1960's, it was plain to me that my theology warranted support for the oppressed peoples—support for the blacks, Chicano, Indians, war resisters, students, Third World Peoples, and women, in their struggles for justice. And my theology helped me to avoid the excesses of utopianism and despair which constantly plague social change movements.

My theology, however, did not appear to help me on two matters: One was the painful personal ques-
tion of how, practically, to support these movements, for they seemed to demand an ultimacy of personal commitment and risk which I could not justify theologically and morally — theological and moral judgments which I could not always distinguish from cowardice. I have close friends, as perhaps you have, who made those commitments in those days, with whom I contended regarding what faith requires. And now often a wall of guilt and pain appears to separate us.

The second dark corner into which my theology once cast a deceptively bright light was the matter of my own personal complicity with the system of oppression. I remembered the prophetic awareness that the bearer of the word of judgment comes under that same word, and accords with the Niebuhrian analysis of the ambiguous character of the good we can attain. So I was intellectually prepared for the realization that my life represents the white, male, rational, elitist, imperialist oppression which has been in command in the western world. But I was not prepared for the depth and permeation of my own complicity with oppression. Somehow I believed that some vital part of me — God knows what, my thinking or beliefs or something — some vital part of me was exempt from complicity, was pure, was innocent. And that innocence, that essential goodness continued to justify my position of domination. Events and persons — my own faculty of tutors, some of whom I meet only on the printed page — King and Carmichael and Cleaver, Chavez and Deloria, Reich and Brown and Laing, Ruether and Daly — and some of whom are my dearest friends and the loved ones with whom I live, have finally helped me to see and feel a bit more clearly the depth of my own complicity in the system of oppression, and to discover that what counts is neither my presumed innocence or guilt, but that I am loved nevertheless.

Which brings me to my second idol, surrogate personhood. Here I refer to the process of mistaking my training and practice in psychotherapy and group work for being a genuine and loving human being. That is a common enough mistake among persons in the so-called helping professions, but it has functioned for me in several particular ways. I have been able to “help” people without becoming involved in their lives. I have been able to convince many people that I am kind. I have benevolently controlled people “for their own good.”

And so there is a nice complementarity here — my second idol — the appearance but not the substance of personhood — supports and extends the worship of the first idol — a theology which justifies the status quo. For if I appear to be a genuinely kind person, concerned to facilitate the well-being of those around me, and if they believe that, well, the opportunities for maintaining and extending control are nearly limitless, and so I continue the fiction that in the divinely ordained scheme of things, I (and men like me), are just the tiny ever-so-much better qualified ones to take charge of things and other people, than are the rabble, who always seem to be at the gates.

And, I must confess again, I would never have explored the inner precincts of this idol if it were not for the loving confrontations of my clients and students and groups and loved ones. Sometimes they have smelled the fraud and cried, “foul,” and then they have said “we love an old fraud like you,” and I’ve said, “You can’t possibly be serious.” But I’ve begun to hope they are serious. And perhaps one day I’ll trust that they are.

These journeys inside the idols have not ended, but certain provisional conclusions have emerged. One is to affirm the value of waiting — an expectant, hopeful waiting — but waiting: not doing, not organizing, not confronting or shouting or even responding, maybe not even thinking, though I hesitate to breathe such heresy here in this citadel of thought. Waiting for what? Not just for the revolutions of the oppressed peoples, though these are bound to overtake us, with both gains and losses in human justice. Not just for the promised apocalypse, whether it will issue in war or famine or environmental collapse. No — waiting for and waiting upon the signs and fragmentary realizations of the Kingdom of justice and mercy in our midst. The earliest Christians actively waited. “Maranatha — Come Lord Jesus.” Perhaps we should also learn to wait.

A second conclusion has to do with vocation, calling. My vocation, for now at least, is to express these provisional truths from my experience as plainly as possible. That is what I find I increasingly do in my teaching and counseling and committee work and in my other relationships. Underneath all the data-gathering, analyzing, organizing, and whatever else comprises “good works” in our time, the only truth I can tell is what I have experienced and for which I have found expressive words and symbols. Whether this truth gives anyone else offense or aid or amusement does not concern me as much as formerly. But I do not judge this sense of vocation to be any less political or socially responsible than my previous vision of Christian life as political engagement. In many ways I am more politically effective now than when I was more politically active.

A third conclusion has to do with the character of the theological task. I once assumed that theology critically shaped and informed the churches, guiding their worship and worldly service. Well, I knew it did not really work that way, but I thought it should,
and I hoped that if clergy and laity and theological professors in sufficient number and vigor acted as if theology did shape and inform the churches, then somehow it would. I believe that is properly called superstition. Now it seems clearer to me that the contrary proposition is closer to the truth, namely, that the social and cultural experience of the church shapes its theology.

Thus the urgent question becomes the degree to which our flawed and broken words and symbols still mediate the experience of the divine in our common life. It is surely much less than we had supposed, for the highly general theological and moral framework of western Christendom has been exposed as the handmaiden of imperialism rather than the queen of the sciences. But I cannot agree with those who argue, often on the basis of untested and unexamined moral assumptions, that all religious words and symbols are more-or-less equally valid intimations of the divine. That view makes the divine ground of our being either unknowable, or so remote as to be functionally useless, or else known only as the collection of all that is. This latter view holds a certain attraction in an age of confusion. I have “religious” friends who are excited in turn by discoveries in the world’s religions, philosophies, various sects and movements, all of which inspire in them a mood of wonder and celebration. They seek to affirm and claim all. But it is difficult for them to make moral decisions. There is no time or place to resist evil for there is no evil. One of them said to me, “Man, that evil business is a poison in your head.” Well, he is right about that. My generation is the generation of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Vietnam and Watergate, and that is a lot of poison.

But my own experience and that of my community of faith requires me to affirm that some things are true, some false; some things moral, some immoral; some words and symbols are better mediations of the divine than others. And that it is vitally important to search these matters out all the time, with the best resources we have.

My own sense of the theological task today is illuminated from the several so-called liberation theologies, particularly the Latin American and the feminist varieties, not only because of their painfully accurate analyses of the misplaced objectivity of white, western, male theology disguising the underlying structure of oppression, but also for their call to all Christians to work out the meaning of faith in the midst of their own concrete social and personal situations—to begin with as much clarity and honesty as we can about who we are and where we are, and what faith, worship, service, and love mean in those contexts. That is precisely where feminist theology may prove to be one of the most important developments of our time, for it requires us all, men and women, to look at the rules of the game, and one of the male rules has been that it is forbidden to look at the rules or to admit that a game-plan exists. And all the liberation theologies, it seems to me, are not afraid to confess a God who is known in what human beings and human society can become and are meant to become.

So I have hope regarding this sense of the theological task in our time, though I confess it is not the kind of capstone theology I once understood, in which each generation added decorative capstones to the great edifices handed down from the past. Now it is theology in the rubble, but some of those broken bricks and stones and pieces of glass give off a new beauty and truth beyond previous imagining.

Well, these reports from my own journeys inside my idols may be more personal and particular than is desirable in a general exhortation. But if your journey and mine have touched at points, I am more than gratified. And if some of you have found any encouragement to continue or to undertake such a voyage, I will thank God, for I have needed such encouragement many times. And if any of the rest of you still resist such a voyage, believing that life should become clearer, more stable, more settled as it moves along — to you I say, “take heart, it may not be too late even for you.” It proved not to be too late for me. At age 15 I knew God. At age 25 I knew the truth. At age 35 I at least knew what should be done. Now at age 45 I only know that there is love, that I am loved, in a broken and fragmentary way, that I resist being loved, and that I can give love, and that there can be love among people. What the next decade will bring I cannot guess. But it will be a continuing trip. So, I hope, will yours.