Odd Thing

It seems that Grand Rapids is an odd thing for most Calvin people. It is most often dealt with in one of three ways: it is totally ignored, it is feared, or it is the target of complaint. These attitudes toward the city are listed chronologically—feelings seem to evolve in this order and in relation to the amount of time a person has spent in town.

Conversations with resident freshmen have revealed an absence of familiarity with the city. Many people seem to be acquainted with land not exceeding a strip on 28th Street or with the Mall corners. The city is represented, for them, by five-year-old buildings and by one of the busiest highways in North America. It is possible that a person could spend nine months at Calvin College without seeing Grand Rapids.

The fearful vision of the city probably develops alongside the ignorance. People seem to be afraid of the unfamiliar. We tend to shy away instead of exploring Grand Rapids, as an unfamiliar place, is dealt with in the same manner that any unknown thing might be; it is avoided or approached slowly and cautiously, and with assistance. This type of fear or the retention of ignorance about the city decreases opportunity for appreciation. Resistance to an acquaintance can only perpetuate the strange isolation of many Calvin people, especially those living at Knollcrest.

A third popular approach to Grand Rapids is one of exasperation and complaint. This often co-exists with ignorance and sometimes with fear. It is usually adopted after at least two years at Calvin and after a move away from the campus. The city has been declared boring, too many times by people who refuse to work at finding things. It has been described as dull by people who will not enter most of it. And it has been intolerable for many people who continue to live here even after graduation.

It would be ridiculous to assign every Calvin student to one of these categories. There is much tolerance, some appreciation, and a small particle of love for Grand Rapids. Some people are familiar with the city and do explore it. But the negative feelings are strikingly present. This is unfortunate because people who adopt them deprive themselves of at least a comfortableness and possibly of some enjoyment.

Amy Harper

About the Weather

One thing you'll never notice about Grand Rapids is the weather. Unless the sun shines, that is. Then the air is a mystical tulip festival of color and lightness. People laugh more, don't yell at the kids playing in the garden, lie out in the grass and enjoy the colors. Few people could explain this subtle festival of life, but no one would deny it. What has happened is that weather—good weather, sunshine, for Pete's sake—has stuck its head through the overcast grey-sky norm and has blossomed like a Holland tulip.

On most days, however, ten thousand-pound clouds hover inches above Grand Rapids. These are not the mackerel-sky-maverick clouds of the Great Plains states, nor are they the semi-truck-out-of-control cumulo-nimbus thunderheads which barrel down on hikers in the Rocky Mountain states. These clouds are even nothing like the unpredictable Zen rain clouds of the Pacific Northwest. In fact, nowhere in the universe has mankind discovered any clouds comparable to these gargantuans of total depravity which hang above Grand Rapids.

It is no mere historical coincidence of circumstance, nor is it purely providential, that Grand Rapids is (or was once) called the New Jerusalem of Calvinism. Jonathan Edward's metaphor of sin-
ners hanging by a slender thread above the yawning fire pits of hell is an unimpressive metaphor when compared to the anvil of unbroken grey which lies on the chest of Grand Rapids. Anyone who has lived in the city for a major portion of his or her life knows the fate which awaits them. Breathing becomes more difficult (and depressing) every day.

Three hundred some days of the year, Grand Rapids is weighed down with clouds that carry the blues with them like afternoon television carries romance. It is, however, exactly this soap opera weather which emphasizes the saving grace of spring sunshine to the city’s residents. The thought behind the old dictum that April showers bring May flowers is rather appropriate to Grand Rapids weather—i.e., the bad really makes the good seem fantastic. This is why when the sun shines embarrassingly above Grand Rapids, people lie out on the grass and quote Emily Dickinson:

> Success is counted sweetest
> By those who ne’er succeed.
> To comprehend a nectar
> Requires the sorest need.

Without a doubt, Grand Rapids knows the sorest need, and so, when in grace the weather blossoms, that nectar sure tastes sweet.

Don Hettinga

**Quiet Mysteries**

It’s nighttime. The car rides quietly through the murky blackness of the mountains. I shake the drowsiness from my head just in time to watch the vast sea of lights unfold as we wind around the bend and into the valley. A million tiny specks brightening their own tiny realms float at random in the dark expanse which opens before us. They belong to Chattanooga and as we ride around and above them, they hint at secrets that the city holds. As we gently descend, the luminous sea vanishes and in its place appears a lonely street with darkened gutters and shadowed curbs, a corner with a sharp-edged building peering into its light, an empty window in a secret spot on the face of the wall, a stark profile of a gangly building, the fender of a car, dimly lit intersection, an obscure mailbox and a seedy garbage can. They are snapshot glimpses and they also tell the city’s secrets. As the lights and the quick glimpses open before us in the night, a vague and simple understanding of Chattanooga’s spirit permeates our sleepy senses. A silent door, an empty lot and a dead smoke stack together intimate something of its routine and its people.

The nighttime skylines of New York and Chicago whisper the same secrets as Chattanooga’s group of tiny stars. The cavalcade of mammoth structures, the rise and fall of spindly buildings tell their mysteries with seeming significance. The brightly lit skyscrapers are actors in a quiet drama eliciting a sympathy from the observer, becoming a metaphor for the poet and a design for the artist.

William Carlos Williams writes of the city:

> —say it, no ideas but in things—
> nothing but the blank faces of the houses
> and cylindrical trees
> bent, forked by preconception and accident—
> split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stand—
> secret—into the body of the light.

The lights, the skylines, the mountains of buildings and valleys of streets define a certain energy that only cities own.
Although New York, Chicago, and Chattanooga all have the spirit that distinguishes a city from a town, they each also maintain an individuality, a flavor, a mood peculiar to themselves. Perhaps the positioning of the library, the museum, the nightclubs, the park and the restaurants shape this individuality. Perhaps a gothic cathedral, or a blatant MacDonalds, the geometric superstructure or the compact brownstones determine it. Maybe the Jewish or the Cuban or the Black ghetto or the combination of them all patterns a distinctive mood. Perhaps the steel or fishing, car or tourist industry does. Or maybe the leaders and the level of optimism they inspire create the self of a city. Possibly its location on a river, in the mountains or on the plains gives it a unique temper. Whatever the source is, cities such as New York, Chicago, Chattanooga, and Detroit have a twist all their own.

Some of the elements which shape this individuality are more subtle than the city's architecture, geography or government. The way the crowds move, the way the people relax, the way the schedule-keepers wait are difficult elements to define without living them. Chicago's nighttime centers of attraction are always bustling with a movement that maintains a constant pitch of excitement. The action is a stark contrast to Detroit's brooding quiet. The auto city lacks Chicago's centralization and numerous entertainment establishments. Its downtown seems empty in comparison. Ann Arbor, a combination of quaint and bold structures owns yet another flavor. Its running, unexplained contest to find the freakiest, artiest, earthiest personalities contributes a definite element to its character. New York possesses a definite bustle and busyness just as Chicago does. However, it is a different bustle—one containing a furtiveness, a more anxious energy than Chicago's relaxed and accommodating movement.

Grand Rapids is hardly as large as New York and Chicago but it too controls a spirit all its own. Its appearance is singular. The spread of the Vanden­berg center and absence of claustrophobic canyons lend an openness in which the pedestrian can breathe easily. At night a stillness contrary to the hustle of Chicago's Rush Street but also different from the brooding quiet of Detroit pervades. Its cultural centers are less extensive than the other cities but are growing rapidly. Its waterfront in comparison to the Rouge, to the Hudson, and to Lake Michigan seems a mere trickle. Grand Rapids possesses the same dimly lit intersections and empty parking lots as these other cities but its twist comes from elements that are absent in Chicago or New York and unique to itself. Its Christian Reformed community, generally speaking, contributes a good-natured peacefulness to the city's disposition. The White Rabbit, its crowd, and its surrounding community helps to shape a tone. The Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra and, on opening night, Lyon Street's crammed activity add something to the spirit. Cobblestoned Monroe, the webbed spire of Lagrave, the I-96 and 131 intersection, Lakos, Fountain Street Church's rose window, the Alma Latina and the Old Kent Building all shape something to the temper of the city. As with all cities, Grand Rapids' spirit stems from particulars. William Carlos Williams writes:

To make a start
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means—
sniffing the trees,
just another dog
among a lot of dogs. What
else is there? And to do?
The rest have run out—
after the rabbits.
Only the lame stands—on
three legs. Scratch front and back.
Deceive and eat. Dig
a musty bone

Grand Rapids hardly imitates the sprawling massiveness of New York, the cozy circular movement of Chicago, or the lazy organization of Detroit. Its uniqueness stems from such things as the County and Federal buildings' deserted patio, the Pant­lind's crusty pomp, the Calder's stark modernity, the minimal night life, the Dutch, Black, and Spanish communities.

Just as Chattanooga's tiny lights whisper intimate secrets to the night driver rounding that bend in the mountains so Grand Rapids' sea of lights unfold her quiet mysteries from the eastward curve on I-196. As the road descends and snapshot glimpses replace the sparkling multitude, the flavor and the mood of Grand Rapids also unfolds and, just like Chattanooga, Grand Rapids stands alone in its own temper.

Deb Ellens
contents

Comment
Odd Thing
Amy Harper ........................................... 2
About the Weather
Don Hettinga ......................................... 2
Quiet Mysteries
Deb Ellens ........................................... 3

Features
Reflections on Grand Rapids
M. Howard Rienstra ................................ 6
Sigsbee Street
George Harper ....................................... 12
The Unattached Poor of Downtown Grand Rapids
Ronald VanderKooi ................................. 22

Afterwords
Believe?
Ronald Wells ....................................... 31

Art
Shelley Smith ........................................ 9
Janet Hagedorn .................................... 21
Mark Borst .......................................... 30

Poems
Kim Gilmore ........................................ 9,16
R. Stravers .......................................... 11
David Westendorp ................................ 28

Photographs
Mike Brouwer ..................................... 8,18,20
Bill Melenberg .................................... 10,17,36
Don Hettinga ..................................... 17,26,27,30
William F. Reus III ............................... 25

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There is a cruel irony about modern American cities. It is an irony from which Grand Rapids is not exempt. A love-hate relationship has long existed toward American cities, but that they should have to contribute—even pay for—their own demise is the cruel irony. Grand Rapids is now—and will continue until about 1990—paying for the expressways that traverse the city at a cost of about 800,000 dollars per year. These expressways are one of the most important factors in the drain of population and industry out of the city. Grand Rapids thus has to pay for the convenience of suburban residential and industrial development out of the money which otherwise would repair and reconstruct streets within the city.

However, my purpose in this article is not a lament for the city of Grand Rapids, nor for cities in general. Rather my purpose is to convey a sense of what the city is. Cities are universally in crisis these days, but as a lover of cities I wish to convey my sense of what Grand Rapids is, and has been.

I begin with the "has been" because my first impressions of Grand Rapids came as a student in the early Fifties. There were two things I knew about Grand Rapids prior to my arrival. It was Dutch and sometimes referred to as Jerusalem. I came to see Grand Rapids as an overgrown Prospect Park, New Jersey, rather than as a midwestern Paterson, which it really was. Living near the Franklin Street campus in the early Fifties created that impression. While Paterson had its silk mills and dye shops, Grand Rapids reportedly had furniture factories. But they were carefully kept from the view of a casual visitor or student. I doubt that I ever saw a furniture factory as a student, but there was no way that one could enter Paterson without seeing the mills and shops. Rather than an industrial town, Grand Rapids appeared to be a city of quiet neighborhoods with single family homes on tree laden streets; a city of middle class respectability and modest affluence. There were none of the tenements of Paterson, nor even those two and three flat houses so common in Prospect Park. There were differences, of course, even then. Grand Rapids, for example, had bars whereas Prospect Park did not. Lindy's (short for Lindemulder's) was perilously close to the campus on Wealthy Street. The weak and the daring could venture there, but not without fear of observation. On second thought, perhaps Lindy's was to Calvin what Piersma's bar, just across the street in Paterson, was to Prospect Park. And Grand Rapids was like Paterson in having all those movies mostly in the downtown but with an "art theatre" next to Lindy's on Wealthy Street. Grand
Rapids did still have an authentic downtown in those days. There were three major hotels, four large department stores, office buildings, and even a genuine skid row with bars, a couple of greasy spoons, and a rescue mission or two. Even the Armory was downtown then. And factories were snuggled up close to the downtown, in fact part of it. They were nestled along the river. I remember the Bissell plant in particular, because it was customary to park freely in its dark passageways when attending the adjacent Civic Auditorium. The only danger was that an occasional bum might fall asleep next to or even under your car. There was color, contrast, disorder, and excitement downtown, and the sleepless ones among the Calvin students would venture there at 2 or even 4 a.m. for coffee and... During the day there was even a whistling cop who could be observed directing traffic with dramatic flourish on the corner of Monroe and Division. Candid Camera missed him.

Grand Rapids was changing already then, even though some of the changes were barely perceptible. Automobiles were being built by the millions in that post-war era, and a post-war housing boom was still accelerating. The pig farms on Burton Street had recently given way to the housing boom, but that was still politically part of one of the surrounding townships. Could and should the city annex township land? That was one of the most volatile political questions of the Fifties. Should city water and sewer by extended to these newly developing areas, or should they build their own systems? There was much prejudice, arrogance and short-sightedness on all sides of these questions and they still complicate relationships in the entire metropolitan area. The suburbs generally preferred to be independent if only their water and sewer problems could be solved. The city generally wanted to annex prior to extending those services. Annexation wars were the result, and the city of Wyoming built a completely separate water and sewer system for itself and others who might want to buy from them rather than from Grand Rapids. The result is the completely irrational borders between the central city of Grand Rapids and the surrounding new cities of Kentwood, Wyoming, and Walker. No rational mind can justify the line which separates Woodland Mall from the city of Grand Rapids, and Eastbrook Mall from the city of Kentwood.

From the early Fifties to the mid-Seventies all North American cities have been undergoing dramatic, if not radical, transformations. Grand Rapids is a fine example of the cumulative effect of a complex of destructive forces that have affected such cities from New York to Winnipeg. These destructive forces may be found in all the textbooks. They are: the automobile, mortgage money for suburban land development, expressways that permit the development of former agricultural land into industrial parks and shopping malls, and the extension of utility lines, particularly water and sewer. Age is also a factor. When age is coupled with the primary factors, and complicated by the difficulty of assembling land inside cities, the result is wholesale exodus. Everyone of these factors came into play in the decisions of Bissell and Meijer Inc. to move into the suburb of Walker. Even the decision of Calvin to move from the Franklin Street campus to Knollcrest is a case in point. Calvin could not assemble enough land in the vicinity of the Franklin campus to meet its expanding needs. The one tool cities did have to stem the tide of exodus was Urban Renewal, but it was too little and too late to prevent the major commercial and industrial flight from the city. It did permit Grand Rapids to build some public housing and to re-develop the downtown as an office and governmental complex, but that is all.

In Grand Rapids the downtown suffered most, and changed most. Skid row was displaced to Bridge Street, the retail core contracted, hotels closed as they lost out to motels along the expressway, and the theatres closed as they temporarily lost out to television. But neighborhoods changed too. The most visible changes occurred as the housing vacated by those moving to the suburbs was occupied by the most recent wave of immigrants to the city—the southern Blacks. They began coming in significant numbers during the war, and continued in a diminished but steady flow after the war. In the mid-forties a Black family that moved to the 1900 block of Sherman Street was visited by a delegation of Christian Reformed Dutch to be told that they welcomed them to the neighborhood, but they were not to cut their grass on Sunday. Some twenty years later the man joined one of those churches and reminisced with amusement about the incident. Grand Rapids was strictly segregated until the late Fifties. Even then, it is more accurate to say that the ghetto was expanding rather than breaking down. The first Black family to move east of Fuller did so in 1960 into the 1200 block of Thomas Street. First the rumors and then the decision of Calvin to move to Knollcrest had a devastating effect on property values and opened that immediate neighborhood to blockbusting realtors, panic sellers, and to Blacks who honestly needed more adequate housing. Thus, to add to all
the post-war pressures mentioned above, there was now the very considerable factor of racial prejudice and fear.

There have been many changes since the early Fifties in Grand Rapids. Even the trees have fallen victim to Dutch Elm disease. The aura of quiet middle class respectability has broken down in many areas of the city. What seemed to be an almost all Dutch Jerusalem I now know to be a city with a receding Dutch population, a stable and spreading Polish population, and other ethnic and minority communities that are increasingly coming to political maturity. A Dutch name is no longer a guarantee to political success, not even in the southeast side of town. Although many of the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches are still in the city, their membership is down and they are attended primarily by commuters.

Major efforts at revitalization are being proposed both for the downtown and for the residential neighborhoods. They may work, and on the whole Grand Rapids is a city with sufficient economic and cultural diversity to survive the urban crises of our times. The Dutch have moved to Jenison, but occasionally they return. Sometimes ambiguously. At four a.m. on a Sunday morning a year ago the police unit I was riding with responded to a call in the 500 block of Thomas. In the living room of a house with a red light in the doorway was a fellow church member from Jenison who was refusing to leave until the people there would accept Christ. He was eased out of the situation and, since his only previous criminal offense was a drunk driving charge, he was sent home with the admonition to evangelize at more appropriate hours and under more appropriate circumstances.

There should be a moral to this story, but I can’t seem to find it.
Yes, Is Not a Word for Shy Kids

Kim Gilmore

The sky dark came down
A mushroom crown, bulbed
With dew, its root in my face; the
Backside of a dream.
I smelt the puddles, glistening
Brown as snails, the new purples
Soft as ribbons on the wrist,
And it was so easy to say yes.
For a long time I was Jew-blind sitting
On a bagful of Christ—not knowing
What, who came and went.
Nobody asked me, my pigtails made my mouth
Too young to kiss.
I am not so shy now, yes came and like a fountain
I retrieved the clear insanity of it.

I said yes to people I could not have
When it would have been easier to be a shy kid
That nobody would ask—
I am the paleness of moon sleeve
Sloping unbroken thru a pane or
Limp as gloves, bending over chairs an inert
Swear on my tongue
The voice of Nada sometimes calls me
To open my mouth and swallow the big dream
Like a Communion bath that invites me
to live white, where blood is white as lettuce lines.
It says your face under the pillow is
So much nicer than three teeth and a dime.
Yes, well thank you but
No.

Lost Innocence I

Shelley Smith
He loves her.
He knows what those words mean.
It scares him when
the dog has dreams
and barks
and shakes
and will not wake up.
It scares him when
reading late
he finally finishes the book
and goes into the bedroom
to kiss his young wife
goodnight:
she makes sounds,
not seeing him,
not finding any words
inside her mouth.
He checks his pockets.
He makes sure nothing he has put there
has grown legs
or wings.
He sits down on the bed
and watches out the window.
He does not sleep
or move
til morning.
George Harper

The neighborhood in which I spent my summers and part of each winter was bountifully supplied with a feast of the senses for the young. Bounded by four major streets, Wealthy on the north, Eastern (the oldsters still called it East Street) on the west, Franklin on the south, and Fuller on the east, it was a kind of square village, with its own shops, a nearby fire-station, if not visibly part of the village then at least so by the sound of the sirens that leaked, then poured from it and drew frighteningly nearer when someone had set afire his barn or house; its own two Christian Reformed churches, one huge Protestant Reformed church, and one or two storefront assemblies with drums and wailings on Wednesday night;its own school (Baxter Christian—then an old building like the castle at Nagoya, high on its cut-stone base, towering over the street); and two steaming dairies with their reeking barns. A feast: of the eyes, with varying densities of white houses (each with a different color of shingles, some with the great badge of frugality: shingles of many hues from odd-lots at fire-sales)—small houses on small lots, large on small lots, small on large lots, which contained vegetable gardens in season, usually planted, it now comes back to me, to potatoes and kale, and now and then the real estate man’s large house on a large lot, usually newer, brick, and fancy, with, a sign of real class in those days, a two-stall garage, single story, much more classy than the garages converted from carriage barns with their second-story haydoors and pigeon aperatures. A feast of the nose: horse-dung in sprays and piles and mounds, cheap coalsmoke in the winter, Monday smells of violently boiled workclothes, marigolds around tree beds, lilacs and lilies-of-the-valley, and chicken-coop vapors, with the odd oil-pan smell of a Star or Durant tourer. A feast for the ears: the constant coconutshell stomp of horse-hooves from dairyhorses, fishcarthorses, rag-and-bottlehorses, hucksterhorses, Colonial-Breadhorses (thirteen-hand German Coachhorses, truebreds), and any other horses being led or ridden to the blacksmith on Wealthy street from the dairies or from the few barns of
horsecartmen left in the village. And then the ring of the anvil cutting across yards and fences and damping the growl of the streetcar on Wealthy Street.

A feast for the ears from human sources: the strangled cry of the leathery Lebanese bananaman with his pushcart (“Eyewannes,” he said: is there no b-sound in Arabic?); the low rumbling from each side of the open cab of the truck of Beiboer Brothers Buttermilk and Eggs: “Botermellek.” The rich bronze bell of the huckster (the Monday-Wednesday ones; the Tuesday-Thursday had a midrange International engine-noise which crept into kitchens by itself to summon housewives to buy or at least pinch yellow and red and green and striped fruit and vegetables); the flatulent twice-per-block summons of the fishcart; the Hasidic ritual noise offering to buy old rags and bottles; the squeaking Janesville cartwheel of the once-a-week delivery from the small grocery on Wealthy; another bell from VanderTuuk the baker, always in brown sneakers, winter and summer, for bounding up cement steps with his basket; and, mainly in the southern part of the village, the rarest sound of them all, not to be strewn about but rationed: “Tadeyoats”—the approximation of potatoes from the huckster with the thinnest horse since Chaucer’s Clerk’s. Now and then the bell of one of the churches, not on any plan, perhaps janitor’s whim or delinquents in the belfry; and often, what with coalstoves, the very masculine siren of No. 11 firehouse, thirty seconds down Diamond to Wealthy, a catch in the throat at the turn, increasing volume if the fire were in the village, decreasing if east or west on Wealthy, followed shortly thereafter by the Gangbusters wail of the Lincoln Black Maria from the third precinct police station, in case anyone severely burned needed superadded backtrouble from a ride in its dark interior on black leather benches over castiron springs. In those days a healthy youth in Keds could easily run after helpful vehicles all the way to the conflagration and arrive hardly winded, with reserve energy to use in pulling hoses and, when all had died down, inspecting again the hand-
sometimes colliding, blood-kin, creed-kin, job-kin, communities of interest (some repaired Fords in garages behind the houses, some Chevys, some Jordans or Stars; a few the rare Ogden or International truck, to the sounds of hammers and chisels, files, and among the few profane, near-curses or curses disguised as innocent expletives: "What the heck are you doing to that valve, Jake?"). There were unspoken censures still lying in the air after a generation or two of communal knowledge of apostasy, bastardy, infidelity, hatred of neighbors; subverbal spite-fences, and sometimes a wooden one to mark the spot of the far more deadly mental one... everyone knew that the elders had had a close vote but a binding one on Lam down on Logan Street, that Siers of Harm and Tena still worked alone at the greenhouse and took his coffee cold from the blue Mason jar by himself behind the boiler, with rye bread and cheese to sop up when it riled his maw.

The spheres of influence of the three churches were mainly self-contained, but the rims interpenetrated, and on these cutting-edges, as on the mission-frontier, theologies met, clashed, were bent, lost their visceral ethics, and died in bitterness and family splits. Whole cryptic code-systems were there to be learned by the young, along with knowledges intended for suppression but kept alive, even nourished into exotic growth, by intensified whisperings.

There were Wordsworthian Leech-Gatherers, the oddly-made and oddly-marked and poor, who were motile and likely to be found anywhere in the village, reminders of the curse glancing off Adam and onto genes, braincells, points of view, who called forth charity among those who had it to spare, and disgust among those who had more than enough. There were oddities, known piano-tuners, peripatetic piano-teachers, underemployed piano-movers; sometime organists with arthritis, now wistful but not up to the old tunes; chairmakers whose fingers had strayed into the gang-carvers at Widdicomb Brothers in the days before compensation: fifty dollars for a hand, ten for a finger, and goodbye. There were spoilt collegians, too nervous for the
ministry or the classroom, the only proper scope for the man who actually knew who or what Homer was or Kuyper is and said, going unprofitable rounds for Hastings Windstorm and Life Insurance Company. There was the very image of Rectitude, the collector for the Barnabas Society, weekly payments of thirteen cents against a decent burial—his rounds began at 5:30 after supper and the shucking of blackened printer's clothes and the reemergence as a Man, in black suit, black shoes, black tie, watch-chain, black hat, and black briefcase containing black recordbook. And of course those who had touched bottom long ago, had met (or kept away from) the Consistory, had submitted, and had settled for the nightly tranquilizer at Lindy's, then more white but less rabbit.

But not without Grace. Grace reinvading, often, after denial and banishment, but palpable, a kind of hush, the smell of catalpa blossoms. Men of great strength tender to women and children; heroes of industry who kept the struggling Christian school in funds and paint and pupils with upward looks and sharp wits and infinitely expansive hearts. Women of profound illiterate grasps of theological complexities; knowing of the power of forgiveness over obduracy and sin; who mixed a kind of grace into the leftover stew and porridges and soups of the poor and stitched it into the mended work and school-clothes and applied it to Sundaybests to make them last and last.

Neighbors who lived in dignified peace with the few blacks (who'd been there since Mr. Lincoln's benignity, before the schooners had released the cramped yeomen of Groningen and Freisland onto the docks at Hoboken and later onto those at Ellis Island to be transshipped to Michigan); they were surely zwart not wit, but as surely had souls, though their sons dressed too well for local tastes. There was Grace abounding all the Sunday, though it was a slow and black-clad grace, physically of very limited scope, involving the gluteal muscles mainly, no walking about, surely no heaving of baseballs or movement beyond the paths worn in the sidewalks to the churches. The eyes alone could encounter the world: whatever drove by was fair, but no seeking out pleasures, not even a fire in the next block. The energy conserved by all this was to be fed into the ears for two hours more, or less, twice, and if anything was left over it was reserved for the recap at the end of the day: usually murmured agreement with the dominee's lengthy efforts, or disagreement (to be fair, also murmured) with the behavior of the young in the last few rows or the novelties creeping in: driving to church, brown shoes, vestless suits, lipstick.

Not a bad place to grow up in, with certainties and clearly-drawn lines of division, and rhythms governed by human and animal muscles and seasons and heptads of days. Nostalgia, of course, is not improving much; but governed by the pressures of our times, it cannot be kept from moving back, and of course it will move selectively, and as far as the emotions that need no censor will permit. For a cheap time-machine 1925-1930 is not a bad setting, and will not disappoint, and if there's a choice-of-place button, put it on Sigsbee Street.
Visions

She listens for silence;
For the cold, white wheels of snow
For moths secret and dusty inside lamp shades.
Below her window leaves lie down
Aces, an afterbirth irretrievable
As inkblots.
Today when she didn’t regret stepping
On the lame cat’s tail, she had visions:
Unthundered grandfather spying like
An eye that lives in the air—
The eye didn’t miss the girl who didn’t
Care about the car or that he was lame.
He knew her then and did not want to
Kiss her anymore.
She saw her mother as a flat pill
Who grew an arm to stir the gravy, eyes to find
The other striped sock.
And the girl thought: my mother would not know
What to do with Florida, maids, and the kids
In Michigan.
When she is old she will sweep the floor
Sweep the floor until she falls into the basement.

The Bore Closet

Boredom does not fan me with minutes.
The tongue leans against my cheek;
A quiet beggar in a tunnel.
Every person I ever knew
Falls from my face like leaves—
I am open and as undreamed of
As a lawn—this is what happens
When your feet stop and the linen closet hush
Fills you like a dream.

There is nothing up but the hat of space
And beyond that, the godawful rush of black.
My fingers spin webs, I cannot ring the deadness from me.
I will wait for a leak; a bright hound
Displacing space, reveille barking
And yes when I see them
rising before like wheat
I will kiss the walls yes

Kim Gilmore
Winter/Grand Rapids

Janet Hagedorn
The Unattached Poor
Ronald VanderKooi

It is about five miles from Knollcrest to downtown Grand Rapids, but for many people the social distance between life at Calvin and that of the centre city is thousands of miles. As staff and students, most of us are occupied or preoccupied with our own work, and we live typical "urban village" lives, i.e., within our own routines and with our own people. It's not hard to break the barriers that exist between urban peoples, but it takes some time and effort.

Old Downtown

My own exposure to Grand Rapids as a Calvin student (1956-1960) was probably not different from yours. In those days, Calvin was half the distance from downtown and perhaps we got down there a little more often, but, off-hand, I don't remember many trips downtown, except those as noteworthy as the last one to pick up a Calvin diploma at the Civic Auditorium.

I do remember that the Monroe "Mall" was then a busy thoroughfare, and that there were no expressways rushing us around town to provide "free" parking at some shopping mall. I do remember that crowds shopped in downtown stores and rode buses to get there. Other folks came from Kalamazoo and Muskegon eager to shop downtown Grand Rapids.

Later an expressway was built to rush even more cars past the core of Grand Rapids. Expressway ramps were built to drop people into downtown. It is, however, interesting to note that one ramp, which necessitated the demolition of the grand, old Union Station, is now thought by some to be in the wrong place. Ironically, it is also now necessary to build a new passenger station for the restoration of the train service (which is becoming an increasingly desirable investment when compared to energy and resource wasting auto and air transportation).

I remember quite clearly a 1948 excursion two of us, in the sixth grade at Muskegon Christian, made to Grand Rapids. Prior to that, we had, on a Sunday walk, found a handful of change on the ground. By collecting newspapers and magazines, we parlayed that into the price of two round-trip train tickets to Grand Rapids. This "maiden voyage" (i.e., without parents) took us on the Grand Trunk's noon train from Muskegon through rustic countryside across the Grand River, twisting, finally, into the Plainfield Avenue Station. From the station, we walked across old Lookout Hill and south into downtown. We got as far as South Division and wound up at a lunch counter where we blew our remaining cash on hamburgers while listening to a new country song, "The Tennessee Waltz."

I also remember a little of the old skid row area down on lower Monroe where the "miracle" of VandenBerg Plaza stands today. The big Mel Trotter Mission, now on Commerce Street, stood there then. There were skid row cafes and taverns, and there were several hotels. There were other grand old buildings, including City Hall, the County Building, ornate theaters, and a large brewery. In 1960 it was all there; in 1961 the demolition began. So it was, that in 1970, when we moved back, Grand Rapids was in many ways a different city. But there was still a "skid row problem."

Changing Skid Rows

Skid row is a topic I've studied extensively through my sixteen years since leaving Calvin. The skid rows of American cities are all somewhat dispersed today, but the troubles of their half million or so residents are far from over. In fact, their problems have, in some ways, gotten worse. Having observed many skid rows and their "urban renewal," my analysis is that while some men may have improved their lifestyle, probably more men, without such skid row assets as concentrated police services, have died or will die sooner. Such may be the case in Grand Rapids where the men now find themselves dispersed to the downtown section of Bridge and South Division Streets. Both of these areas are white men's communities, the former tolerating Indians and the latter tolerating Blacks.

In Grand Rapids much was changed by the VandenBerg Plaza project. At the same time, however, some typical skid
row problems stayed the same or, perhaps, got worse. What happens, apparently, is something like this. When a concentrated set of their facilities is destroyed, it becomes harder for many of the men to manage. In the old concentrated skid rows, the police more easily found the drunk, the sick, and the injured. Today, as these people might go undiscovered if in need of help, they are more likely to suffer or even die as a result of assault, of accidents, or of exposure to the weather in the alleys and other unseen places of Grand Rapids. Another likely occurrence might be this. The old "pig's feet and cabbage" type cafes of skid row might not have been the kind of places where you would go on a date, but they were healthier than the fast-fried food joints now found everywhere—including Division and Bridge Streets (We may all become, as a new country song suggests, "junk food junkies," and, by the way, I am sure that America's eating habits kill many more people than even alcohol consumption kills).

Old skid rows never simply die; they simply fade into the broader fabric of our "centre cities." They are never, as newspapers have headlined it, "eliminated." Nor do skid rows simply relocate themselves in other areas as many people believe. When it become more economical to demolish than to maintain skid rows (and it is always politically beneficial to demolish them), skid rowers are dispersed into other deteriorating areas. Thus other areas suffer "wino" or, at least, poverty invasions, while the invaders lose the advantages of their skid rows.

Skid rows grew up in relationship to the railroads and a few other industries. They were vital, male, work-oriented communities. Today they have become demoralized and welfare-oriented, though most of the men are still about as psychologically-committed to the work ethic as you or I. Given their average education (less than high school) and average age (above fifty), they simply have less employability than the average adult, especially in today's economic climate.

Grand Rapids Skid Row Facilities and Men

Both Division and Bridge Streets have some skid row facilities, though Bridge St. has few left except several taverns. It might be suggested that Bridge Street be renamed "Sullivan Street" in "honor" of a business leader who now owns several buildings on the street. The businessmen in that area have successfully excluded most of the social agencies by purchasing the buildings the agencies occupied. They've done this in order to create a "better business environment" where potential clients of the furniture stores and restaurants will not mistakenly, as the businessmen admit, fear "dangerous" skid rowers and thus stay away.

The Bridge Street social and religious agencies which lasted into the 1970's included The Haven of Rest Mission, a block west of the Grand River. It finally was lost, however, when its elderly director died and no one surfaced to replace him. The large mission building, once a house of prostitution, was bought by the businessmen, and now it includes a bar serving a higher (and younger) class of drinkers. A state employment office in the same block (perhaps the oldest commercial block in Grand Rapids) was also lost.

After many months of providing free meals under the adjacent expressway, Capitol Lunch acquired a cafe across the street from the expressway. The free feeding on highway property had given some government officials fits as to whether people could be fed in a government-owned parking lot, even though, meanwhile, the food was freezing on the recipients' plates. But the building was finally lost last year when the lease expired. The businessmen bought the property, and have just demolished this little restaurant. However, a surprising and pleasing, if small, "ecumenical movement" has occurred in that Capitol Lunch now rents the basement of the Christian Reformed Guiding Light Mission on Division Street and feeds a hundred or more people every day.

The essential remaining question, however, is simply, "is everybody happy now that skid row seems more concentrated in one area, Division Street?" I doubt it. Moving the agencies hasn't eliminated the Bridge Street skid row. Not by a long shot! There are more taverns on Bridge Street (at least ten in four blocks) than anywhere else in the city. In addition, according to one owner, they seem to get away with more liquor violations. The situation is complicated by the fact that some Bridge Street businessmen are unhappy with certain of the lower status taverns but have no quarrel with others. In short, they strongly desire to get rid of the "skid row element" but yet, in some of the places, serve a higher class of drunks.

The large majority of homeless downtown people live in the Division Street area from Fulton to Wealthy. Most of their rooming houses are there or are close by, and just a few such houses are on Bridge Street. There are no hotels on Bridge Street. Most of the hotels—the Hillside, Brunswick, Kentwood, Carleton and the large, working-class Herkimer—are right on Division. The other larger hotels—the Merton and the Oakway—are on Oakes Street running west from Division two blocks south of Fulton. These two old "railroad hotels," for they served Union Station, which stood across from the Oakway on Ionia Street, now mostly
house and feed “adult foster care” clients who, though massively ignored by the community and kept with minimum care, are generally much better off than in the state hospitals which were their former “homes.”

Within a half mile of Monroe Street, there are, according to our best estimate, about 500 people who live impoverished, socially-detached skid row lifestyles. With the demolition of buildings, the population in this geographic area is decreasing. The number of people living the skid row lifestyle may well be growing, however, even as the skid rowers are spread out by downtown demolition. This possible growth of the skid row lifestyle is encouraged by the current depression and consequent unemployment during which less than ten percent of those who go to the state “daily labor” agency on Ionia S.W. at 7 a.m. each morning are able to get jobs.

Skid row is basically a male community. Only a very few women chance the life there. If they do, they’re much more likely to be picked up as out-of-place candidates for state hospitals. Studies done by myself and by other sociologists in Chicago and other cities suggest that the average age is about fifty-three and that over a third of the men, being over sixty years of age, are senior citizens.

The situation is saddened by the fact that some younger men (even a number in their twenties) are seen in skid row. They include victims of economic depression and of the Vietnam War (skid row growth seems to follow every war), and they include a variety of other misfits of today’s mixed-up society. My agency friends advise the young that “you don’t belong here,” one in Chicago advising them that “first you’ll abhor it, then you’ll tolerate it and you’ll embrace it. Get out while you can.”

Skid row, however, is chiefly an old man’s domicile. Around half of the men have served in the armed forces, and many of them have had long and surprisingly ordinary working class careers, perhaps interrupted only by family breakups, by individual job losses, by general work layoffs, by personality problems “coming to a head,” or by other sad but ordinary events of our society. They are often men who have worked, and, sometimes even at seventy, they still want decent work. Work is the most important problem according to men with whom I hold rap sessions weekly.

Skid rowers are surprisingly varied in their drinking behavior. Perhaps unexpectedly, twenty percent of skid rowers are teetotalers (for religious, health or economic reasons) and less than twenty percent are the “derelicts” you see prone (or weaving dangerously) on the sidewalk. The newspapers love to depict these derelict “downers” as the “typical skid row bums.” Between the nondrinkers and the derelicts are men who drink moderately or heavily, but who, when seen on Division Street, are often quickly perceived by the passersby as just so many “skid row bums.”

The very variety of people who live in skid row areas indicates that no simple label can be pinned on them, though some readers, when they’ve more or less forgotten this article, may find themselves using such labels as “derelict,” “wino,” and “bum.” But no simple label, or one-word-theory for their being in skid row—e.g., “they’re a bunch of drunks or psychological misfits”—can be accepted. In the old days of skid row, a bum was one who “drank and wandered,” a hobo one who “worked and wandered” and a tramp one who “dreamed and wondered.”

Today, we recognize the greater variety of people who live in skid row. We know that they include the partially-employed, include those who wish they were employed, and include those who have given up on employment. Skid row includes some who are completely detached from their families and some who have limited family ties. The street also offers a good deal of sociability which most residents accept but which some reject saying, “Why should I mess with these bums?”

The residents of skid row include, as we’ve seen, those with varied lifestyles. Skid row includes people with various educational levels and people with various physical and psychological handicaps. It includes people of various ages and races and, even, a small, but increasing, number of women. In titling my doctoral dissertation, I decided that the only specific label that could be accorded without prejudice to the people who live in the area designated as skid row was the term “skid rower.”

Skid rowers live in skid row hotels and apartment houses, but there are a variety of other facilities which they frequent in the daytime. The other facilities for these generally homeless and unattached people include restaurants, cafes, taverns (better labelled as saloons), state and private labor agencies, assorted businesses, and several religious and social agencies.

The Mel Trotter Mission, a spin-off of the fundamentalist Chicago Pacific Garden Mission, previously stood where City Hall is today, and it is now in the old, large Salvation Army building on Commerce Street. It seems to serve its fundamentalist members more than the men of Division Street, but it does house and feed a small number of men who are required to attend religious services.

The Guiding Light Mission, sponsored by various Christian Reformed Churches, has come a long way in a couple of years with a new director, Ed Oosterhouse. The former director died and, with other troubles, the place was closed for a few years. It now has rather traditional Sunday
afternoon Bible study services, but it also has week-day Bible classes, and very successful coffee time (three-four hour periods) three times a week with an average attendance of over seventy people! At these sessions, Ed and any other volunteers he can get (are you interested?) talk informally with the men and women and surely accomplish more in really human contact (as they also do in visiting many people in hotels and apartments) than, perhaps, is accomplished at the formal worship and study meetings.

The Community Action Program’s Alcoholism Incentive Ladder, located in an old railroad hotel on Ionia Street, north of the Oakway Hotel, is now a drop-in-center, with feeding, counseling, and residence programs. CAP’s most important service, I believe, has been 1) allowing men to get off the street, (where nearly all the problems happen!), and 2) providing good “soul food” meals which nearly all present devour completely (food is a most important physical need of those who are drinking excessively, not to mention those who are simply under-nourished). Incidentally, I’ll wager that this CAP center is the most racially-integrated place in town, being nearly half black and half white with the remainder consisting of a few Indians and Latinos.

Counseling is offered to all who enter CAP. Most of the people in rap sessions plead for jobs rather than Freud. Fortunately, the CAP men’s and women’s residence pro-
gram using the second and third floors, was, after a few year's delay, finally opened last year and is now doing well. Getting people into decent housing is very important. Getting off the street is an essential problem for those facing the wine-soaked atmosphere of skid row.

The Salvation Army Men's Social Center, to which many of the men migrate for decent living, is located in the old Steelcase factory at 1491 South Division, next to the C & O tracks. While not new, the building is one of the better "Sally" facilities in the United States. It houses about 120 men and has potential for more. With its fine, small dormitories, its attractive cafeteria, and its large recreation rooms, it is the best "home" many of these men will know for the rest of their lives. In addition, its large (basement and main floor) retail store keeps the men busy 1) picking up our discards, 2) repairing what is reparable (while shipping out the rest as bulk rags, etc.) and 3) selling goods to those who are trying to manage during recession and inflation and to book and antique collectors. The Salvation Army facility is the one that should be used when public intoxication is decriminalized by Michigan law. In 1977 alcoholics are to be offered detoxification programs rather than jail punishment.

The City of Grand Rapids is already relatively progressive in its handling of public drunks. They are still taken to jail, and, more than we'd care to know, they lie there sick or injured—sometimes even die there. If, however, they make it through their night of internment, they are most often taken to a municipally-funded Shelter at the Salvation Army where they spend a few days with treatment and counseling. They then generally just leave for the street, though they often enter the Salvation Army's own "Men's Social" work program, or they are referred to CAP, to the Owls Indian Outreach Program, or to the Christian Reformed-directed, state-funded Jellema (half-way) House. Contrary to some community fears, the Shelter program has operated with no damage to the community, though men stay a much shorter time than they did at the County Jail. The Shelter offers far more of an humanitarian situation than the Jail, and it is cheaper to keep men there.

Some Final Thoughts

The facilities, people and problems of Grand Rapids' skid row areas are fairly typical of those found in smaller cities across the United States, though there have been some improvements in Grand Rapids in the last few years. The CAP Alcoholism Incentive Ladder started a short time ago. The Guilding Light has also had a new start, and Capitol Lunch's absolutely free food service was begun. The Owls Indian Program was opened, as was The Jellema House. Finally, the new Municipal Shelter Program at the Salvation Army, probably the most important new program for the most men, was initiated.

Grand Rapids, however, is a very affluent city, as well as a very well-churched city. I'd like to think that a city with so many Christians could be a model for the nation. Perhaps it is, but I also continue to see problems no affluent or Christian society should tolerate. I see the high death rate in the hotels, on the streets and even in jail. For example, I know of witnesses who claim that Grand Rapids policemen last fall beat an Indian, White Cloud, in an alley so badly that he died in his jail cell, but the witnesses, out of fear or uncertainty, would probably not say that in court. More generally, I see people living in miserable circumstances and, as a result, dying, first spiritually and then physically.

I see the need for beat patrolmen to walk the streets, thus getting to know the men. Such policemen (I know of at least one highly-motivated Christian patrolman who covets the job) could prevent the crimes in the alleys, could help people who are sick or hurt, and could advise a great many of these people who are generally very respectful of policemen and other authority-figures. The problem is that statistics show that patrolmen in cars make more arrests
and it is harder to get statistics on the important matter of which policing pattern prevents the most crime or ameliorates other social problems to the greatest degree.

I see the simple need for more improved, regulated facilities—especially "flop" houses, "greasy-spoon" restaurants and saloons. Somehow, we are more willing to tolerate dirt and substandard facilities when they are not the ones we use, but are those serving poor people. There is, obviously, only one city health code, so why should there be this double standard for "skid row" areas and for wealthier areas of the city?

Why do we tolerate the violation of liquor laws and then condemn the intoxicated, as well as the social agencies that try to help the intoxicated? Why do some places repeatedly serve those who are obviously drunk, and why do bootleggers get away with their off-hour sales, e.g., of the current favorite, Italian Swiss Colony White Port? Why aren't Christians more involved in dealing with alcoholism and more particularly with the broad variety of the homeless people I've treated in two recent "interims"—run-away youths and wives and the variety of unattached males in this country? Even more, why aren't Christians more involved with the much more severe problem of homelessness in the rapidly-urbanizing underdeveloped countries of the earth?

In Grand Rapids some Christians are involved. For a few years now, some Calvin students have gone down to the Merton Hotel to socialize with its resident-clients. A few people have been involved through their churches but too often this involvement consists simply of singing or preaching at audiences rather than of real interaction. A few churches actively support the Guiding Light. Also, a little Christian Reformed help comes to the Owls. There are other limited church involvements with other programs, but too little is done to protest the social injustices that perpetuate skid rows or to change the subculture which skid rowers must endure.

Skid rowers are the most powerless people in American society. While poor Whites, Blacks, and Native Americans are also among the powerless, they have a somewhat better, if still inadequate, family and community structure, and, thus, they have been able to present a bit of protest which has resulted in an impressively-growing but still inadequate social power. Skid rowers need to be organized, if only to be able to present a little more information about their situation and to make a few more demands for decent living conditions. But they, as people who have come to accept themselves as "bums," are not able to organize themselves without the middle or upper class support that has always been necessary for protests and social revolutions to succeed.

For such a powerless, discredited people, the help of Christians and of other real humanitarians is needed. Skid rowers need help in organizing their interests. Will the social distance between Calvin, our churches, and our Christian people and between the impoverished, socially-unattached people of downtown Grand Rapids remain as it is or increase? Or can its churches and Christian people make Grand Rapids a better city for minorities, for lower class people, and even for skid rowers?

A few more students going down to the Merton and a few going to the Guiding Light would double our influence and also our own exposure (and thus our understanding) of Grand Rapids' skid row problem. A little more effort in providing more justice for skid rowers, if only by upgrading facilities and programs, would help make Grand Rapids a model, more Christian city.

* a term used in Europe and Canada denoting that the core city is the center of activity, of architecture, and, indeed, of most aspects of civilization.
Six Reasons

1.
10:30
(stopped snowing) and clean cold air
A dog runs ahead of him in the street

Before—
sipping wine with a dose of vodka
and then hot tea
(letting it grow tepid on the table)—

cigarette burning down to the filter
dropping an ash into his lap
He rubbed it into his jeans

Sour beer bleeds into the stomach
Water runs off the glass leaving rings
floating
on the table

Hunter Green
twitches through
the door
dressed like a comic book legend
—leading the wire sculpture of a dog

2.
The electric lights
glowing in glass bulbs
bracketed to the wall

The beer is served in heavy glass mugs
With her fingernail Jessie peels off

the ice skins

Change a dollar
Shove silver into the jukebox slot
(or the radio will snap on)

Airport medley:
Jet engine exhaust
Gin-and-tonics in the lounge at 11 a.m.
(Kent searching the kitchen
for someone to tend bar)
Pale airport ghosts and the rattle of
pinball machines
4. A burnt out dream of Mozart
yanks Kent from sleep
Across the room
the clock face in orange glow
He twist the knife slowly
catching a hint of moon on the blade
so that it shines
on Jessie’s face
(nights he climbed into mythologies
and stayed until
she pulled him ink wet
from the womb of his books)
Teaching his hands to pray
to the mother Mary
she winds the rosary beads
through his fingers
careful that he does not stir

5. "I was frightened by a dog last night"
says Kent at breakfast
Hunter Green tips a ladle
of pancake batter
into the bacon greased pan

6. Reading *Steppenwolf*
by the upstairs fireplace
Logs snapping
Memory of the taste of roasted chestnuts
bought on the streets of Bern
(fingering unfamiliar coins)
and light wine climbing into his head
wrapping his brains in a blanket
"Pablo was waiting for me, and Mozart too"
The gritty ragged clarity
that coffee brings at 4 a.m.
Nineteen hundred and seventy six is a difficult year in which to be a Christian academic whose specialty is United States history. During America's 200th-year celebration, there already has been, and there will be, a great deal of loose talk about "the meaning" of the bicentennial. In the coming months, many speakers will intone wisely on "what we should learn" from recalling the Revolution. Also, 1976 is an election year, thus making the speech-making about "the meaning" of America all the more prevalent.

It will be recalled that the editors of this journal began the year with an inquiry into the status of "the American Dream." That seemed particularly appropriate for America's celebration, because most observers would agree that Americans are "people of the Dream." The question they asked was and is important—what is the current status of the Dream as the United States enters its third century? As part of that issue, it was the editor's hope to include a review by me of a book by Richard M. DeVos, *Believe!* (Fleming Revell, 1975). The pressure of other things has deferred that writing until now, and I agreed to the review only if I could couch my argument in a wider context.

In October, I accompanied George Marsden and Henry Ippel to Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts, where we all participated in the annual meeting of the Conference on Faith and History (formerly the Evangelical's History Society). The theme of the Conference was "Christian Perspectives on the American Revolution." My task was to respond to a paper by Charles H. Wolfe, Director of the American Economic Foundation, New York City. Mr. Wolfe's paper was a difficult one to which to respond because it was such a good example of "civil religion," in which one combines and confuses religious and nationalist loyalties. In the discussion which followed, many affirmations were made about the "religious foundation" of American society. In keeping with the vow of graciousness to which I and another respondent had secretly agreed, we were hard on, but not unkind to, Mr. Wolfe's touching display of religio-patriotism. He spoke affirmatively of America's Christian heritage, to which I responded that there were Christians and there were other persons present at the genesis of the new society. I suggested that it was an exercise in myth, not history, to suggest that Massachusetts Christians (Pilgrims, Puritans) were the "real" founders of America. I affirmed that I too wished that America had been a Christian nation, and that I wished it even now would turn and do the will of
God. But, my wishing did not make it so, any more in the past than it does in the present. Mr. Wolfe thought I meant "untrue" when I said "myth," and he quoted from William Bradford to prove the contrary. Of course, by suggesting "myth," I did not mean to suggest that his data was "untrue." To the contrary, a myth is a true but selective recollection of the past which is cited in the present to legitimate present and future action (e.g., "As our fathers of old said, I say unto you . . ."). I noted that the United States, like all other nations, is a mixture of the sacred and the profane. To try to meet his objections, I even conceded that, perhaps, in early American history, there was more of sacred than profane in the mix, but that the point remained: the two were always present, and any account of America's heritage which omits one or the other of the two is myth, not history.

Some of the keenest observers of the American scene have been European visitors, and students of American history have learned a great deal from their observations. Gilbert K. Chesterton once said that "America has the soul of a church." Alistair Cooke, when asked to comment on Chesterton's affirmation, said, "That's true, but it also has the soul of a whorehouse." The historian who would tell the American story—who would try to answer the question about "the meaning" of America—must stand (somewhat uncomfortably, be it said) somewhere between the church and the whorehouse. If he is a Christian, he must point at the things of which he approves, but he also must point at the things of which he does not approve. For the historian, while he must let his views be known, he must not make "history" into "myth"—i.e., to make his preferences be "the real story."

Richard M. DeVos is president of Amway Corporation, Ada, Michigan. Along with his partner, Jay VanAndel, he has created a multi-million dollar business out of a venture which began in his basement seventeen years ago. When the publisher asked Mr. DeVos to write a book about his views on life, business, America, and Christianity, it was not for a specific bicentennial purpose. Yet, when Mr. DeVos put his ideas before the public in the bicentennial year, it became an important book to review, both because of its widespread public acceptance, and because of DeVos' views, which are an explicit rendering of what I have called above the myth of the religious dimension in "the American Way of Life."

Several persons have asked me to consider not doing this review, lest my largely unfavorable comments offend Mr. DeVos, who is a patron of the Arts in this city, and a keen supporter of worthy causes, not the least of which is Calvin College. Should Mr. DeVos, or those who share his views, read this, I would like to make clear that this review, like any review, is the honest judgement given on views which were publicly stated. I have not "gone after" Mr. DeVos; he has put his views, for acceptance or rejection, into the "marketplace of ideas." I should think it ironic if Mr. DeVos, such an enthusiastic supporter of "free enterprise," would accept his friends' suggestions that I should not enter the same marketplace with a "competitive product." Also, I think it important that his views receive public scrutiny because he and I are members of the same denomination, and because he and I share a common desire to discuss Christianity's relevance to leading our lives in contemporary America.

The book, mostly written by Mr. DeVos, is divided into nine chapters. Each has an introductory page or two written by Charles P. Conn, Professor of Psychology at Lee College, Cleveland, Tennessee, in which Conn relates aspects of DeVos' life to the themes of the ensuing chapter. There is a laudatory forward by Reverend Billy Zeoli, confidant of President Ford, and himself President of Gospel Films, Muskegon, Michigan. Since the book is intended for a general audience, the style is spritel y and informal, reflecting in no small measure the engaging personality of Richard DeVos.

Mr. DeVos is a "believer" in many things. In Belief!, he asks that the reader "believe" in (the chapter headings follow): Unlimited Potential, Accountability, an Upward Look, Free Enterprise, Human Dignity, America, the Power of Persistence, God and His Church, the Family. Needless to say, that is a full plate, even for those with the heartiest
appetites for such things. While we cannot discuss all the points raised, some deserve special mention.

The two best chapters in the book, in my view, are those on human dignity and on the family. Mr. DeVos writes with compassion and insight when he speaks of the worth of all work, and the respect which should be accorded workers, whatever their “station” in life. He rejects the notion that persons should be valued by the symbols of success by which our culture values, and asks that readers of his book reaffirm their faith in the dignity of individual persons. As to the family, Mr. DeVos suggests, correctly in my view, its importance as the primary unit of a viable culture. While DeVos advocates hard work over long hours, he stresses that the breadwinner’s job should not interfere with his “quality-time” with his family. He accurately observes that a person’s hours at his job are not usually the disintegrator of a family, but that the hours spent in front of the TV, or on the golf course every weekend, or at the bowling lanes or bars several nights a week are the real culprits.

Less helpful is Mr. DeVos’ chapter on “God and His Church.” Mr. DeVos is a committed and active Christian: he writes warmly and compellingly of his personal faith in Christ as saviour; his good works in the community are known to all who have lived in Grand Rapids over the past years. Yet his notion of the task of the church is, in my view, inadequate. His view is that the primary task of the church is personal evangelism—witnessing to individuals about the liberating power of the gospel. But, he does not agree that the church’s responsibility is also, and equally, to witness to social and political structures about the liberating power of the gospel. In his own words, “The work of the church is to tell the Gospel as effectively as possible to as many people as possible. There is nothing wrong with social involvement; it is just not the most important aspect of the church’s work.” I would suggest that, while many persons might share DeVos’ view, it is an inadequate view for a Calvinist Christian. The genius of Calvinism is its attempt to articulate an integrated “world and life view” which sees the entire task of the church as a body of believers who witness to the whole ministry of redeeming the entire creation, not merely the salvation of “souls.”

The least helpful part of Mr. DeVos’ book is on the Christian’s responsibility in the economic realm—and his views follow from the religious individualism noted above. While stopping somewhat short of stating explicitly that “free enterprise is a God-ordained system,” he writes that it is “a positive blessing” which we should reaffirm, and that it is “a gift of God” which we should embrace and in which we should believe. I cannot agree with that view. One understands that there has been a long and heated debate on the subject of the Christian in relation to the free enterprise system, and we can only discuss a small part of the argument here.

Several years ago, Calvin College hosted the annual meeting of the Conference on Faith and History. The theme that year followed Max Weber’s famous “thesis” on “the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.” Our featured speaker was American evangelicalism’s leading theologian, Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, who, during a discussion, stated his belief that evangelicals should embrace free enterprise because it “so accurately described the human condition.” I asked whether it described the human condition before or after an individual’s redemption—a question which, in my view, never received a satisfactory answer. It seems to me that a self-seeking, competitive individualism best describes the economic realm for the unredeemed man. However, the redeemed person should not be self-seeking, nor competitive nor individualistic; rather, he should guard the welfare of others in a cooperative and corporate way. This is a critical distinction, I believe, because I take it that the main point of the gospel is that God found us in our lost condition of individualism, but that (while he saves individuals, not groups) he did not leave us in our individualism—he made us “members incorporate of his body.” Our new view toward the world as redeemed persons should be one in which we forsake our own self-interest for the interests of others, competition for cooperation, individuality for mutuality.

There is a basic contradiction in Mr. DeVos’ views in that in one portion of his book, he accepts the principle of
accountability (that we are our brother's keeper) yet he will not allow any institutions, whether ecclesiastical or govern­mental, to see to it that that accountability is carried out in practice. He mentions that industry "had a bad record" in times past on the matter of exploitation of workers, but "that such abuses are rare today." What DeVos' ahistorical judgements do not seem to comprehend is that if exploitation is less today than in former times (an arguable view in any case) it is because citizens petitioned their government to interfere on their behalf with "the natural laws of free enterprise capitalism." If senior citizens can now look forward to their last years of life with some equanimity, it is because the general society has guaranteed some minimal standards for their welfare in the social security and medicare systems. If workers are less exploited, it is because the general society, once again, through governmental action, has guaranteed certain minimal standards of decent treatment in the form of laws governing minimum wages, unemployment, and disability. Mr. DeVos deplores governmental guarantees for minimally decent treatment for workers and consumers at the hands of the corporations; I would applaud those guarantees because any student of American history must acknowledge that the "old days" were "bad" days for most ordinary citizens. DeVos' assertion that the motivations of the corporations are typically respectable and honorable is, in my view, preposterous as a historical judgement.

If some of Mr. DeVos' views must be regarded as "not helpful," his desire that his readers "believe in America" is positively counterproductive to the ongoing tasks of the Kingdom. His mixing of "faith" in God and in the United States is an example of the civil religion which was discussed above. It is embarrassing to quote a brother-in-Christ who says: "I believe in America. In a time when flag-waving is discouraged, I don't apologize at all for an old-fashioned, hand-over-heart, emotional brand of patriotism." His reductionists definition of "faith" allows him to equate the faith "which binds us together and makes of us one people" with the assertion of "In God We Trust." He quotes approvingly the words of the Philippine diplomat, Carlos Romulo, that America "...is a spiritual country," which "began as a God-loving, God-fearing, God-worshipping people...."

Here we are close to Chesterton's assertion that America has the soul of a church. Apparently, Mr. DeVos accepts the notion that if one states such a proposition with great sincerity and conviction, it somehow makes it so.

I would ask Mr. DeVos to point out the "real America" between the following pairs. Is it a Mennonite community in Kansas or the emporiums of Las Vegas, New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral on Sunday morning or Harlem on Saturday night? Many other examples could be given, but the point is that the United States, like all other nations, contains within it elements of both the sacred and the profane, and, that it is monumentally pretentious to assert that one has more "reality" than the other. The plain fact is that the "believers in America" want to suggest that the United States is, somehow, different from all other nations in world history (except, with potential significance, the Hebrew nation). For reasons that are not clear to me, the devotees of the theme of "the uniqueness of America" desperately want the United States to be a place in which (in this book's phrase) "the American Dream is alive and well," and believe that by wanting that myth to be true, it will be true. Would that modern society were so malleable that we could so easily fashion it into the idols of our minds! Would that myth were history! Would that our wishing for the Kingdom to come could make it come!

In the year of America's bicentennial, it would be well for Christians to keep a critical distance from two equally unproductive assertions: (1) that the United States is God's country, (2) that the United States is the most evil nation in world history (as some observers suggest). In fact, something less antithetical is closer to reality. If one can accept Alistair Cooke's earthy metaphor, we can only encourage America out of the whore house and into the church, if we admit that both institutions are of long-standing. And, if we do that, it will be more God-honoring if we care less about the salvation of the nation of United States and work more toward the up-building of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will throughout his entire creation.
"Pristine saw the air-hockey puck first and screamed, but too late—it slammed into the small of my back. For a moment I hovered perilously on the edge of my chair almost falling onto the filthy floor. Pristine reacted quickly, though, and without a thought for her own safety reached forward and pulled me back into a secure position. Next time, I thought, I'll let Pristine sit with her back to the game room."

"Later, we toasted our adventure with Boerenjongens back in my dorm room. Why Boerenjongens? Nothing else tastes quite like it. Lighter than potato liquor, smoother than wood alcohol... a truly mellow drink for adventurous people."

Boerenjongens

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