A Gratuitous Polemic

The Questions of Ecumenism

Rain

Trusting Nicaragua
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The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, or, if we prefer, the beginning of wisdom. The Wisdom of Solomon says that the beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction and that concern for instruction is the love of her.

But we don’t read the Apocrypha. We are so fervently trying to fear God that we fail to seek after knowledge. Aristotle says that all persons by nature desire to know. Another heathen, Montaigne, says that there is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. Both may be wrong—we may by nature want to obscure, and our deepest desire may be our own immortality.

But we find ourselves on a 165 acre lot with the manifest purpose of acquiring knowledge. If not our deepest desire, it should at least here be our motivating desire.

Desires demand habits in order for them to be fulfilled. The pursuit of knowledge is a habit. But it is a habit we have failed to acquire. We are busy running, running toward and running away. But we do not pursue knowledge. Yet Solomon, this time in Proverbs, says that knowledge is a priceless treasure, a treasure to be chased and hunted down.

The warnings against the dangers of knowledge are strong. Look at Faust: the lust for knowledge delivers pride and death. But lust is a perversion of love. And the sin of lust assumes the virtue of love. We are only in a position to heed warnings about knowledge when we love knowledge.

What God wants most of all things from us is truth, truth in all things, truth in relationships and actions and knowledge. We, by more seriously pursuing knowl-
edge, also more passionately seek after God. We can all twist the phrase to our own satisfaction: all knowledge is knowledge of God. However we take it, the implicit demand is absolute. And absolutes abhor lukewarm passions.

Farm Protection

Gary De Boer
So summer comes in the end to these few stains
And the rust and rot of the door through which she went.

This is the chair from which she gathered up
Her dress, the carefulest, commodious weave
Inwoven by a weaver to twelve bells . . .
The dress is lying, cast-off, on the floor.

Now, the first tutorys of tragedy
Speak softly, to begin with, in the eaves.

—Wallace Stevens, “The Beginning”

Finally, at the end of October, we found a house to stay in. It was made of faded red brick and had both a front and back porch. Joseph slept the whole first day. We watched him turn and whimper through his dreams while the sun rose. Then, soon after, we discovered a room upstairs that had been locked. None of us was very curious for the first week. We sat on the back porch like old people, discussing the cloud formations or the fact that my watch was broken. Then, after Joseph was awake a whole day, he came and whispered to me, “Please come upstairs.”

In the room, we found these things: a candle, almost gone; two books, very worn; a black and white photo of a woman holding a baby; a letter, folded and unfolded so often that it was coming apart, with a postmark on the envelope that was blurred and faded; and three boxes containing clothes—one had all dresses, bundled together with string; another, suitcoats, black and brown, moth-eaten; the last, socks and white shirts and small black ties that were made of silk. These we found before the flood.

The book was like this: green, with thin pages that I could almost see through and very small print. I sat on the front porch and noticed the pencil-drawn cats that had been inscribed on the inside cover. Then more appeared on further pages. The cats, at least most of them, smiled. They had long whiskers and tails with tiny spikes all over. At the back of the book, in a water-stained corner, a dog crouched. He had no teeth. What I read in the book I didn’t understand. So I closed it, put my feet on the porch railing, and watched a cloud, dark and irresistible, form over the forest not far away. This was after we had been at the house for at least a week . . .

As to why Belinda tried on one of the dresses I can only say this: that she has, like many women of her nature, the strange well within that wants to be a part of the lives of others. A belief that a life gone in the flesh is still contained within the articles of that existence and that perhaps through a connection of any kind the breath will quicken and you will be transformed. The first dress was blue-gray, loose fitting on her, and quite simple. She came out of her room and walked downstairs, and when she came to us, out in the garden, she slowly paraded between the rows, her arms outstretched, as if she longed for something that would come eventually but only after a great period of darkness and ignorance as to the outcome of that longing.

I looked at the photograph one day, in the afternoon, while Joseph and Belinda were asleep upstairs. I had just awoken from a nap myself, and there it lay on the table beside me, curled up and cracked. For a few minutes I stared at it, at this frozen moment of a woman with her child. Then I began to realize the curious fondness we have for the past that is only half ours, the other half being something that we create and imagine with the intensity of our dreams and nightmares.

She couldn’t have been more than thirty, and the baby no more than a year; she reminded me of Belinda, especially in the way her hair was barely parted to one side, and her lips formed such an obvious smile that one could hardly resist smiling also, as if to frown would be a sacrilege or something.
One Sunday evening, while we were eating in the kitchen, Belinda decided to try on another dress. Joseph and I were not at all surprised by this, for she often would jump up in the middle of a conversation, even a very serious and intimate one, to do something which she had conceived just a second ago.

She came down in a long, tight-fitting white gown that seemed to be a wedding dress but void of much lace and extra cloth. She stood there, looking ashamed (for she considered herself hardly holy enough to wear such an outfit), the light of the soon-to-be-gone sun striking her one side and giving it a pale orange cast. We were all silent for a minute; then she left, and, as she went up the long staircase, we heard her secretly trying to get out of the dress even before she reached her room.

When a couple of days later it began to rain, Joseph had been peeling potatoes, gazing at the field out the window, when he saw me running up to the house, my hair wet, my hands full of stones and flowers. As soon as he saw me running he knew it was coming. I came in and threw down everything in my hands and for some odd reason the pencil-drawn dog I had found in the book kept appearing in my mind.

When I got in bed later that evening, the dog still troubling me, I heard the continuing sound of the rain on the roof, and, trying to evade that toothless animal, was suddenly reminded how much the rain sounded like my father, long ago, spanking my younger brother.

Somehow, though, that next evening was subtly permeated by a kind of joy that only came in minute clues but were there nonetheless. I believe it was because we all knew what was going to happen, and it was mainly a matter of being content with that. But in spite of this small grain of satisfaction lodged in each of us, it wasn’t until much later that we fully realized how much we had hidden such feelings that night. Because this is how we acted: Belinda in another dress from the box upstairs, barely pregnant, twisting the corner of a handkerchief that was knotted around her wrist, humming to herself a song no one else knew. And Joseph in front of the woodstove, hands in his pockets, a book tucked between arm and shoulder, listening to his wife hum and watching the slight swaying of the lamp on the other side of the room. Then I began laughing, because the rain was leaking on him and he didn’t even do anything about it.

That was part of Joseph’s problem, at least as I saw it. He felt, for some odd reason, that almost all, if not all, aspects of our life had to be accepted and dealt with in the most serious manner possible. Even the fact that rainwater was dripping on his shoulder and he wasn’t aware of it held no humor for him. Nonetheless, I continued in my amusement with him, as he shifted his position and kept on staring at the swaying lamp.

So after an hour of little conversation, we went to bed. Belinda kept her head bowed as she ascended the stairs with one hand on Joseph’s waist and the other behind her back. By this time I was beginning to understand why she would survive as well as she did; she was able to gain independance by pretending to be weak. Those around her would believe she was frail and thus lend all their help to her. I believe this was how Joseph and Belinda married; that is, Joseph, in his struggle to unify those around him, felt he had no other choice but to take in this woman who was so easily deceiving him. Maybe it was all wrong what she was doing, but it worked wonderfully for her.

Then morning came and the rain continued. It filled the gutters and washed all the vision away that was possible before, when we looked out the windows. A kind of dark filled the house, especially in the corners of the rooms and the insides of the closets and cupboards. The storm troubled me now; I went upstairs to the room where we had found the boxes and books. I sat on the floor, while water fell through holes and dripped about me. Finding the decaying letter, I carefully pulled out the message inside. And when I read it I kept remembering the way Joseph and Belinda would watch me as I opened the short pieces of correspondence I was receiving from Hannah before we left. They would almost hide (like happy parents) around a corner, in an obvious attempt to reassure me that love was woven in those envelopes and papers and that perhaps by being near the disclosure they too could partake of its strength.
Those brief notes I still carried with me. Each one was no more than a couple of pages long, sloppily written, with words missing or spelled wrong in every one. In the days when I received them, these errors upset me, and, although I never pointed them out in my replies, I couldn’t help but wonder about this girl, who would often ask the same question three or four times in the same letter, who would write out my full name like I was royalty or something. I had kept them all in a box under my bed. Some I read five or six times, trying to interpret the connotations of certain paragraphs. But what always hindered me most was their shocking way of being so literal. She stood, like an animal perfectly at home in an ancient forest, without symbols, everything for her as simple as the taking in of air or the grasping of a hand in sudden affection.

Somehow, I don’t know how, I began receiving more mail from Hannah. We had been living in the house for six months and had decided to stay for good. But how she knew where I was I can’t explain. Maybe through friends. A letter came every week usually, and when I woke in the morning I would go downstairs and there it would be.

By this time we had already lived through two floods. Neither had been very bad. The water had reached the top steps of the porch but never higher. There was a warping of the wood where the water had been. Above that, the wood was straight but still grey and cracked. The house had lost all its paint long ago. Three windows were broken, with small vein-like faults running through them. The brick chimney on the south side was chipped and crumbling. But the letters came, and that was what mattered.

By the end of nine months I had enough letters from Hannah to hold in two hands. So one day I found some nails and tacked each letter, opened and wrinkled, on the wall of my bedroom. Above each one I put the envelope it came in. Then every morning as I put on my pants and buttoned my shirt, I would glance at the half-visible postmark or crooked, ripped stamp. And looking down, I would read brief sections of the messages, the quick lines of “It is so hot here,” or “... the cat says hello too.” And so by the time the next big rainstorm started, I had five or six interpretations of what exactly she was saying. It got so that every day had a different meaning: Monday, a theme of indifference; Tuesday, a hopefulness that was constantly weakened by fear and regret; Wednesday, an almost pure love disguised as friendliness; Thursday, a recognition that a spiritual longing was being gladly fulfilled, that by certain prayers we had ascended beyond any desire either of us felt even when we wrote and thought otherwise; Friday, Saturday, no meaning at all, every line blinded by the heaving and trembling that was a fear of the next letter; and Sunday, when I thought that I would pound my head with my hand and smile at my foolishness as I went downstairs to watch the descent of geese or the grazing of the deer by the back door, she hated me.

The day was ending when I looked at Belinda and knew that very soon she would deliver her baby. It was the middle of another flood, and this time we all feared that the water would come up above the top step of the front porch.

Belinda sat on her bed that evening, her hands on her enlarged belly, perhaps listening to the vague sound of the water running down the roof, or perhaps to the even vaguer but slightly more moving sound of two heartbeats battling each other within her, one louder yet weary and the other more erratic and frightened. This child would be born amongst death and the rising quiet water of the storm. He would not understand what was happening around him, but that wasn’t necessary, for his first few moments could all be made meaningful by the fact that he had made it safely from one world to the next, away from the strange heart of his mother.

Here’s what I wrote in one letter to Hannah, which was something of a diary for that unforgettable week. Although sometimes I wrote beyond her, I believe she nonetheless could detect how strange everything was becoming. It said:

“Now Joseph comes up to the house, the splashing of his feet preceding him as he tramps through the puddles, comes up the steps, through the various doors that are never really closed, and finally up more stairs to the room where his wife lies, panting and sweating, awaiting the moment wherein all time stops so that the newborn may breath eternity which is required of him....

“Why he has been outdoors so long I don’t know. He didn’t tell me anything, as usual. When he does talk to me, it is all murmuring, a turning aside of the slow-moving head, a hand run through oily hair. I can barely see his crooked grey teeth as he quickly smiles at the sight of the child emerging from the womb. I ask him if he is feeling alright, but he doesn’t answer. We call
ourselves brothers, but oftentimes I wonder. . . ."

Then this, what you might call a climax:

"As he slams shut the windows in the room, he finds it difficult to approach the bed, to grasp the hand of his wife. She closes her eyes when he looks at her, but I find it hard to believe that he pains her that much. She'll accept him no matter what. Even the silence that he so pretentiously upholds now, that strange despair he tries to convey whenever he feels disaster coming and there is nothing he can do about it.

"But finally he comes forward, slowly, like a regretful parishioner ready to confess everything, coughing and walking crooked, wet with sweat and rainwater, and smelling of wood smoke. He takes the infant in his arms and is so shaken he nearly drops it on the floor. Then he falls, his mouth half-open, his hands formed like the claws of a dead crow."

Some things I am so unsure about that I'm barely able to distinguish as to whether they are dreams or reality. Such as the afternoon, after the last small flood, when I went out in the woods to look for blueberries. I was near a large clump that hung heavy with fruit. The water came up to my ankles, but I ignored that for the most part, because I was so used to it by now. Then, suddenly, I heard my name called once, and again. It was Hannah's voice, but I was dumb-founded, for I had believed all along that she was living in another state. But the voice came again, although I saw no one. Then, slowly, I parted the bushes before me and there she sat, in a wet crumpled dress, her hair partly covering her face, sighing in relief that I had discovered her. I took one hand and led us away, sharing my blueberries with her. All the way home we talked little; I didn't even ask her how she got here. Heretofore all I knew of her was the wavering lines of her letters and the blurry snapshot she had sent last Christmas, before we had left. Now I faced her fully, and I was scared. Walking back to the house, we didn't even talk.

That evening, while Joseph lay in bed and coughed and laughed to his wife and new daughter, I sat with Hannah on the front porch, our feet wet in the recently created puddles from the previous storm.

It was near midnight, and we were still saying very little. Why does it happen this way? I asked myself. Why are we so haughtily casual when writing but then when forced into each other's presence we withdraw, like angels thrust into a room full of angry demons? For here I sat, my hand touching hers, asking stupid questions about her house and family and about childhood games forgotten long ago, clumsily forcing my tired opinions on her as if she couldn't expect such words from me. So we hastened to look at the night sky, because that was all that was left—to ignore Joseph's shouting and try as forcefully as possible to find joy in the depressing possibility that we had very little to discuss.

I could almost cry, but it wouldn't do much good. As quickly as she had appeared, Hannah was gone. It doesn't matter now whether it was truly her or not (although I'm quite convinced it did all happen), for just like the advancing rain and the bundle of wrinkled folded flesh that is a baby, everything has become a little mixed up, like life is an odd collage put together by a five-year-old at school.

She was gone, and it was her physical presence that had helped me the most and that I longed for now. Not her talk, or her occasional tense silences, or even the way she helped carry furniture from one floor to the next to escape the water. It is a memory of her body that impinges on me now, making me realize my all-so-common obsession with the incarnation of one substance into another, the blatant love of the senses and all that fills them, including words and papers and books and the unexplainable impression that one body makes against another.

So Joseph died three days after his fall next to Belinda's bed. He sat up in a chair most of the time, telling stories and laughing like never before, trying to believe that he had done all he could for us. Of course he hadn't, but I wasn't angry with him. He had died in the room next to mine, where he had sat alone with a brown glass bottle full of tea and a scrap of wallpaper he
had grabbed when falling before. The last day he seized that fragment and scribbled on it with a pencil, causing me to believe that he had at last found the face of God, perhaps covered by wings and feathers and leaves but there nonetheless, half hidden and ready to start the wheel of seasons again. But when at last Joseph died, and I went in the room and found the paper, crumpled in his hand, it said this, and nothing more: “More tea, paper. Bring me my daughter.”

My brother gone, I remember finding the articles up in the attic of the house. One thing I failed to mention before was one seemingly strange but important item that I discovered on the last day of the final great deluge, as we hid out in the attic and watched the sun disappear and appear, casting its light through the scattered rain, the dying rain. It was the end of another season and we knew that now. I had lain down in a corner and found a small bundle, a handkerchief that was wrapped about a tiny cardboard box that contained a gold ring, void of any jewels or embellishments of any kind, a wedding band perhaps. Slowly unwrapping it I realized that maybe it was a ring intended for someone long ago, a man or a woman who had waited patiently for months to receive this gift which was really a promise of something more. After awhile I tried it on, but it wouldn’t fit. I could only get it as far as my second knuckle. It was tarnished badly, almost as if it had been worn by a man his whole life then stolen by a greedy family to sell to a traveling merchant. I took it off my finger and tied it on a string and hung it on the wall. The handkerchief lay before me, and picking it up I carefully spread it across my face like it was a veil of snow. Then I fell asleep.

When I awoke I left the hanky on my face and watched through the cover the sunlight as it increased outdoors. The baby was crying, and Belinda soothed her and fed her from her breast. I got up and crawled to the window. The water had come half-way up the house, almost to the top of the first story windows. I looked at the sun and the ring hanging on the wall nearby. The room was slowly warming. Searching through another box, I found an envelope that was full of dried seeds. I emptied them on the floor. Addressing the envelope to Hannah, I proceeded to write her a letter, explaining that Joseph had died, that we hadn’t buried him yet because the water was too high. We had left him in the room he died in, I explained. Had carefully shut the door and left it at that. Then I wrapped the ring in the hanky and sealed it in the envelope along with the letter. There was no explanation accompanying it, no indication as to what I expected her to do with it. It was a thick letter so I put two stamps on it, my last two. Of course I didn’t know when she would get it, if ever. All I could really do was imagine the ring hanging by a string, in front of her window, and the handkerchief crumpled and wadded in her hand as she slept away an afternoon.

Now it’s summer. Hannah’s letters are still on the wall, faded and fringed. The book with the curious drawings inside I have begun to read, a few pages a day. The baby is growing but she still is bald. I can’t help but laugh at her. Belinda is better also, now that a few months have passed and we were able to bury Joseph. It’s a sick joke that he sat in that stuffed chair for almost five days. We didn’t go to that end of the house much.

This evening, I went to bed early, but couldn’t sleep. Belinda was in her room, sitting on her bed. I could hear her get up and move to the window to open it wider. The baby was quiet. She started asking me questions, about Hannah, Joseph, and the weather. I obliged myself to answer them but didn’t feel like talking. It was the type of conversation that goes on between two people who barely know each other, who perhaps have a common acquaintance but have never really carried on a conversation alone. That was what it was like. So I had to lie for an hour or so past midnight, uttering the obligated words and responses. It was always the constant flux of word trailing word, like all was carried on a tide and no one knew when it was going to end. I would stop and wait, wondering if that was the end, if we had exhausted our supply of empty verbiage. But then one more half phrase would come across the hall from her, through the darkness, as I lay there with my eyes closed, the lids becoming constantly heavier, but my mind still very much awake, lost in the dread of Belinda’s words. I didn’t know what time it was but all of a sudden I felt a hand on my cheek, warm and small, barely touching. I knew it was hers immediately, but I was nonetheless surprised. I opened my eyes and looked up, but could only see the outline of a small head, surrounded by curls, two barely imperceptible spots of light striking the moist surface of her eyes, quivering.

“What is it?” I asked.

“This humidity, I think; I can’t get to sleep.”
"Well, we've been talking for the last two hours. That doesn't help any, you know."
"You're not mad at me are you?"
"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I thought you wanted to talk, and not sleep."

She faced the window. "Well, actually, the reason I was blabbering so much was because I couldn't get to sleep. I had to have something to do."
"Oh. O.K."
"Are you tired yet?" She asked. I could barely hear her.
"What? Oh, well, yes. I'm getting there."

She began to move closer, one step, then another. I was perfectly still. I knew what might have been in her mind but did not want to admit to such a possibility. It was all I could do to stay calm, even though she said nothing to worry me. Outside, one of our roosters crowed, though it was the middle of the night.

Finally she sat on the edge of the bed, her hand white and exposed nearby. I sat up a bit and brushed the hair away from my eyes.

At that moment I cannot say that anything appeared very real, which was why I was so scared deep inside myself. It was the dangerous appeal of giving in to every disguise that floated to you through the night, that made you think any idea you might have believed at noon had absolutely no relevance now. But for me, any nighttime doctrine was shouted at by the remembered rationality of morning, the brutal brightness of fact that woke you when everything was over. But even that was not what stopped me, nor, I believe, was the long, long distance of Hannah important or the fact of my brother buried not far off, or the weakness of my own body to carry on in a nocturnal act with Belinda. It was, in the end, the rain and the clouds and the letters on the wall and the beauty of a past worthwhile now that it was inside me. For the moment, it was enough, and the temptation of her hand so close to mine was, in its now startling concreteness, too much, and so great was its presentation of what mattered that I had to turn away and close my eyes and listen to the sound of the baby beginning her two o' clock crying and the whisk and rustle of Belinda's gown as she moved from the room to soothe the hurried weeping.
A journalist friend of mine managed to get an interview with musician/songwriter Bruce Cockburn in Toronto this spring and asked me to come along, supposedly to contribute my photographic skills. Unfortunately, Cockburn was on tour until after Calvin's classes started, so I missed my chance to meet him. This article serves a surrogate function for me: if I can't talk with Bruce, at least I can talk about him.

Bruce Cockburn confronts the poverty of the modern world with powerful lyrics and equally intense music. Refreshingly difficult to categorize, Cockburn changes his compositional style and the focus of his concern from album to album. He is a Canadian yet considers himself a citizen of the world and thus a member of the environment he critiques. His attention to social, religious, and political issues has developed over time and in reaction to personal experiences. Beyond all the innovation and change, however, Cockburn consistently and effectively captures the joy and the suffering of human experience.

Cockburn is decidedly on the fringe of today's Christian music market, a rare example and a cause for celebration. His approach balances the themes of the joy of creation and the suffering of the fall, whereas most Christian contemporary music dwells simplistically on the happiness of the new creature in Christ. Part of Cockburn's uniqueness, then, is that he does not let us focus solely on the sweet, positive side of the Christian faith, but also identifies us with "The numb and confused/ The battered and bruised." His hard-won faith is still plagued with doubts and fears. Cockburn poignantly admits his fallenness: "And even though I know who loves me I'm not that much less lost." Being saved does not ensure one an incredibly happy new life, and Cockburn avoids the vacuous self-righteousness which often accompanies an overly optimistic view of the Christian life. This harsh realism does not mean, however, that Cockburn cannot celebrate life. "and i'm thinking about eternity/ some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me./ and i'm wondering where the lions are." His joy accompanies and grows out of real complexities and conflicts. "but nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight—/ got to kick at the darkness til it bleeds daylight."

Cockburn's position in the music market has undergone a series of changes since his guitar-strumming troubador days when his poetic vision was more subtle and his social critique more escapist. From Taoism to black magic and from dualism to dope, he drifted until he realized that the form of spirituality he adhered to was Christian in everything but name. He is still striving to describe the place of spirituality in everyday contemporary life. Cockburn expresses his commitment to Christianity in these words: "all the diamonds in the world/ that mean anything to me/ are conjured up by wind and sunlight/ sparkling on the sea/ i ran aground in a harbour town/ lost the taste for being free/ thank God he sent some gull-chased ship/ to carry me to sea."

More recently, Cockburn's music has become full of sounds and images of his urban environment. Their harshness matches that of his own life in the city. The brutality of life is juxtaposed with intimacy: "We were lying in bliss/ Love was cooling into sleep/ There was a dream on the horizon/ And a punch-up in the street." Images of back alleys and billboards have supplanted earlier images of "pine-framed space and harmony of kin." His contemporary terminology and emotionally down-to-earth phrases convey a credible expression of his own suffering and misery. "Way out on the rim of the galaxy/ The gifts of the Lord lie torn/ Into whose charge the gifts were given/ Have made it a curse for so many to be born/ This is my trouble—/ These were my father's/ So how am I supposed to feel?/ Way out on the rim of the broken wheel/... No adult of sound mind/ Can be an innocent bystander/ Trial comes before truth's revealed/ Out here on the rim of the broken wheel."

On the title track of The Trouble with Normal, Cockburn questions the complacency,
normality, and contentment he finds prevalent in modern society. His attitude is strongly anti-establishment. "Callous men in business costume speak computerese/ Play pinball with the 3rd world trying to keep it on its knees/ Their single crop starvation puts sugar in your tea/ And the local 3rd world's kept on reservations you don't see/ 'It'll all go back to normal if we put our nation first'/ But the trouble with normal is it always gets worse." There can be no easy answer to this chaos and stagnation. The reconciliation he calls for seems somehow too simplistic—the optimistic reggae rhythms ease the pain: "We need to put our hearts together/ Set up a rhythm in combination/ And if we put our hearts together/ We get a rhythm that will shake creation." Here is a call to action, but a rather vague one. Cockburn's strength lies not in specific suggestions for change but in his insightful and vexing understanding of culture. We need to be shocked out of our comfortable shells; "Some people never see the light/ Till it shines through bullet holes."

Cockburn's percussive lyrics, "bullet holes" and "kick at the darkness," not only hint at changing and redeeming the world, but they also illustrate the force with which he is fighting injustice and complacency. While side one of Cockburn's latest album, Stealing Fire, sounds like he's fallen in love, there is intense anger on the flipside. He expresses anger at injustice, specifically in Central America. Following his recent visit to Nicaraguan and Guatemalan refugee camps, Cockburn writes, "Here comes the helicopter—second time today/ everybody scatters and hopes it goes away/ how many kids they've murdered only God can say/ if i had a rocket launcher . . . i'd make somebody pay/ . . . situation desperate echoes of the victims cry/ if i had a rocket launcher . . . some sonofabitch would die." This controversial piece is not a rallying cry; rather, it is better seen as an expression recognizing and regretting a feeling of intense hatred. The desperate conditions of these people, their sense of human dignity and self-respect, and their oppression under the hands of the military incite Cockburn to this rage. He laments that "for every scar on the wall/ there's a hole in someone's heart/ where a loved one's memory lives." Cockburn's angry songs motivated my interest in Central American politics more than any newspaper headline or journal article.

There is a broad spectrum of human and artistically valuable purposes for making music, and Cockburn has explored this spectrum with imagination. His songs have always had a political edge, even back in 1975 with "Gavin's Woodpile," but recently they have become more explicit. Still, he insists, "Art is art. If one is a Christian artist, one has to be a good artist first or sell nothing. Its the same if one is a marxist artist. If he's a marxist first, he's limiting his artistic range." His current songs come closer to that tenuous line distinguishing politics and art. But this is not to say that his art should not address political issues. The purpose of his art is to resist injustice and to expose the politics in the relationships between people. Cockburn's strident social critique remains a conscious effort to view human life honestly and in a kaleidoscopic way.
The following is a discussion on ecumenism with George Marsden, Richard Mouw, and Henry Vander Goot.

**Roundtable**

Dialogue

We can begin by considering the unity of the body of Christ. Paul writes in Ephesians 4, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." What is this unity, and how can it be strengthened?

Mouw

Another text is John 17, the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, where he asks the Father that his disciples may be one even as he and the Father are one. That text is the one that gets quoted most by people who are gung-ho about efforts to find visible organic unity. People who have been skeptical about the efforts toward visible unity respond by pointing out that Jesus doesn’t say in some open-ended way that we should all be one but that we should be one as he and the Father are one. There are some ways that Jesus and the Father are one that we have to work at reflecting.

Vander Goot

Another important thing to remember is that there isn’t a necessary conflict between unity on one hand and diversity on the other. Though Jesus and the Father are one, trinitarian teaching is that they are three in one. This means to me that unity does not stand over against diversity that is good and necessary. The question is, what kind of diversity are we talking about? How much emphasis do we put on unity, and how much should human beings be allowed to enter into their own cultural, social, and ethnic particularity?

Marsden

It seems to me that we should take as given the fact of the unity of Christ’s body. What we are dealing with is a situation in which the body of Christ is unified and there is an organism of the body of Christ which is made up of all believers. The question that we have, then, is, in what ways ought the unity that already exists organically be expressed organizationally and symbolically. Does the actual unity entail that it is sinful for us to have organizations that are not unified with each other? It is not obvious that it is unless you have some grandiose view of your organization and think that it is the true church. But if you have a rather lower view of what denominations are, that they are names for different groups within that unified organism, then there is a unity that we can express in various ways.

Mouw

Let me ask the two of you a question. In 1944, there was a blue-ribbon synodical committee of the Christian Reformed Church which gave the big report in Christian Reformed history on ecumenical relations. That committee made this statement, just forty years ago this year, that the Christian Reformed Church ought to be organizationally united with any church with whom it shares the same confessions and view of church government except where geographic and linguistic barriers prohibit that kind of unity. Do you agree with that? Do we have an ecumenical mandate to merge with any such church?

Vander Goot

That “except” clause is important to me. I might be able to come up with a few other characteristics which might stand in the way. But my first impression is that it sounds like a reasonable expectation.

Mouw

Let me take it in this direction. Is there such a thing as an ecumenical imperative? Does the gospel, does the Holy Spirit compel us to be seeking unity in very concrete ways with other Christians? If the answer is yes, then
how? What sorts of things ought we to be doing?

Marsden
I think the answer is yes. The next question is, how important is that unity relative to some other important things? For instance, reserving the distinctiveness of your particular tradition. It does seem there ought to be unity, and it ought to be expressed in some way. But if that means unity is the number one obligation of Christians, then the only way to go would be back into the Catholic Church. With this emphasis on the unity of the church comes a strong view of the authority of the church. Then the question becomes, how much authority can the institutional church have?

Marsden

You see, the problem is that we lack a sense of the one church as a universal entity; we don't really take seriously the body of Christ as a unity. We all think that for the sake of convenience a few individuals unite together and form a church and that church draws up its own rules, which are a reflection of what the individuals are saying. We don't have a conception of a unified entity that we are all part of just by the virtue of being redeemed, individuals. Now it may be that conscious raising would be a way to get at it, since there doesn't seem to be much of a way through structural changes.

Marsden

The denominational system, particularly as it has developed in the United States with a sort of free-enterprise principle, invites competition. And that competition invites a false witness: everyone has to claim that his denomination is better than the one down the street. So the whole system is structured in such a way that it encourages competition rather than cooperation. That is the sort of thing that needs to be combated. Maybe that does constitute a strong imperative to merge churches despite the obvious bad effects of losing traditions and the like.

Vander Goot

Don't you have to raise the central question: what is the basis of the unity of the church? Is it teaching? And if teaching does in fact become the focus, then aren't you asking for diversification?

Vander Goot

There is something compelling about the Catholic model. In the Protestant community there is the World Council of Churches. What do we have happening there? What kind of community does this organization have in mind? Isn't it something like the Catholic conception? Aren't we here beginning to play with the idea that the unity of the church has to do with the cooperation of the organizations and agencies of the major and sometimes minor denominations? In other words,

Vander Goot

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Marsden

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The unity of Protestantism is increasingly being imposed through the central organization of the denominations in a larger superstructure, along the lines of the Catholic model.

Mouw

What worries me about discussions on such a high level of organizational unity is
that it is all dead anyway. There are maybe a few people in every denomination who still have these romantic ideals, but most people who are talking about merging denominations are now talking much more pluralistically than they did back in the mergers which produced the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ. That old-fashioned organizational unity kind of thing is dead. Billy Graham and Pope John XXIII are, I think, the leading ecumenists of the twentieth century in terms of actually bringing Christians together. Billy Graham has been putting Christians of all kinds of denominations together since the 1950's in ways that no council of churches has done. The breaking down of barriers between Catholics and Protestants has had much more to do with that guy in Rome who says “let’s have a council” and opens the windows of the church than all the discussion that had taken place before that. Forget about all those silly schemes for organizational unity. Aren’t there still a lot of things that we ought to be doing by way of working for the unity of the body of Christ? Isn’t it sinful that, for example, students at Calvin College can graduate from this place and still carry all those stereotypes about other denominations? There are Christian Reformed people who don’t know what a Presbyterian is. They think they are like Jehovah’s Witnesses or something. Isn’t it sinful that somebody could be so ignorant of the Christian commitment of people who, in so many ways, are very much like ourselves?

Aren’t there still a lot of things that we ought to be doing by way of working for the unity of the body of Christ?

Marsden

There is some way in which institutional churches stand in the way of the unity of the body of Christ. There are two ways to go on that. One is the Catholic way, in which we all get into the same institution. The other way is to have a very low view of institutions. Neither of these is entirely good.

Vander Goot

But when talking about ecumenicity, what are we talking about? Are we talking about the specific problem of denominationalism and the various confessional traditions and how they ought to be expressing unity? Or are we talking about the body of Christ in the world, working to bring in the kingdom?

Mouw

Denominationalism can mean one of two things. It can become an excuse for not having to take other people seriously. This may not even have anything to do with your loyalty to confessions; it might be a sociological identity that builds up walls so that we never have to relate to Episcopalians because we do everything with Christian Reformed people. That seems to me to be bad. And a lot of times all this talk about a strong institutional church is really a cover-up for preserving a sociological notion of the denomination that has very little to do with confessional loyalties. Now there is the other sense of denominationalism which I strongly support. That is to be loyal to your confessions and to what a denomination really stands for, in terms of its historical struggles. You can identify denominations in that sense and still be very open to relating to people of other denominations.

Dialogue

What about the view from outside the church? People can look in the phone book and find the different names of denominations, all with the label “Christian” attached. But they see this diversity. Are there other ways than the World Council of Churches and such organizations to express unity to people outside the church?
Mouw

I think there are. There is a lot of confusion about the diversity of denominations because the people who support church unity in an organizational sense talk about the scandal of our divisions and how the unbelieving world is so deeply offended and so confused by these differences. Perhaps this isn’t a decisive argument, but it is at least a fact that the churches that are exclusivistic are much more successful in attracting people from the outside than those who are interested in manifesting unity. This is at least one piece of evidence that maybe the world isn’t all that offended by diversity. Maybe they are offended by the blandness of liberal churches.

Marsden

I wonder why the World Council of Churches has not succeeded better. At the same time that it has been trying to unify the churches, it has also been trying to politicize them. What is most offensive to a lot of the churches that are members of that council is the idea that they are arming Marxist groups. Is it possible to promote the organizational unity of the church and its socio-political responsibility at the same time without those two things canceling each other out?

Mouw

The prominent theme of the World Council for many decades was that doctrine divides and actions unite. That theme is perpetuated in certain ways today by the whole orthopraxy versus orthodoxy distinction. I think that theme is wrong. I think action divides more than doctrine when there isn’t a unity of doctrine. That is where the main-line ecumenical movement has gone wrong.

Vander Goot

Action cannot be done in a doctrinal vacuum. Actions have meanings, too. You can move backwards from actions to teachings which are being taken for granted. So you return to the original diversity.

Dialogue

In conclusion, perhaps we can consider what the center of the unity of Christ’s body is. Is it that we all take the same communion? Or is it fundamental doctrinal beliefs? Or is there some deeper, more mystical unity?

Marsden

The unity involves primarily the sense of unity among Christians, that this is your highest loyalty. You are united with someone else who is a member of the same body, in spite of other differences that doubtless divide you. The bottom line is where your loyalties lie.

Mouw

I think that in fact what makes us one is that we all confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. I know that all who cry, “Lord, Lord,” do not necessarily belong to him. So there has to be a certain conservative watchfulness and care in the whole area of ecumenism. We don’t want to yoke ourselves with those who deceive the elect. But at the same time, there is the other danger of drawing lines too quickly. To be ecumenical is to be open to the Spirit’s surprises about who belongs to Christ. My most productive ecumenical relationships have been those in which my own stereotypes and misunderstandings have been surprisingly violated by the Spirit’s work.

Vander Goot

The symbolical aspect of the life of the church seems more easily to be the basis for that life than doctrinal consciousness. For example, in the church the story of the scriptural narrative is shared. Everyone in almost all the Christian denominations repeats the stories of the Bible. So the language of the religious community and its ritual acts are surely a basis for unity. It is when people work out from the symbolical that diversity occurs in the religious community. Nevertheless, this working from out of the religious text is inevitable as the church tries to make its message intelligible and defends its claims. Doctrinal definiteness can no longer be avoided or circumvented without the church becoming retrogressive. Hence, to avoid a needless splintering of Protestantism, we must decide on what is doctrinally essential.
In the Hour of Division

One
The time is come, was always here,
When skies cry loud with vile showers,
Spewing hail towards ground,
Empowered through the thoughtless folly
Of blindness in the wake of deeds
Whose actions went unthwarted.
These consequences, striking forth,
Bear their actions back to earth.

Bitter turns the soil, life perishes in seed,
The dryness of the harshest winter
Breaks the dirt to deathly slumber.
Winds, once hearty, scoured the air,
Yet too, they quiet for this hour.
Shadowless vapors subdue the sun,
Their persistance shrouds the globe
With a vast, unyielding power.

Useless wandering shows no aim,
Dispelling not the clenched knot
Of hunger in the human heart.
A void, more dark than blackest night,
Rues the loss it knew naught of,
Till stagnant breezes blew the dust
Which was its life and soul.

Two
A day yearned for yet not forseen
Breaks forth from shadowed sky.
My soul leaps up in drunken joy
To course these meadows, strangely changed,
Echoing with majestic roars,
As high above the spirit soars.

The oceans deep reveal their strength,
Through foamy speech of silence
Impart a new-found salted breeze
Which washes me of sorrow.
The mountains clamour with the trees,
Stand tall with expectation,
While sunlight shatters dusty veils
That once quenched whole her vibrant power.

Clean-limbed and fresh I stride the earth,
Soft cleansed by singing showers.
A trail unknown lies at my feet,
Its scent of young bloomed flowers.
Direction settles in my heart
Compelling me to follow
Eternal routes which nurture life
Their passage washed in wonder.

With back firm turned against the past
I wander toward my final home.

— Dan Scheeres
General Solution

One form for one idea.

Contemplate the Universe
Continuous, complete,
Bound within the infinite
In reality replete.

Postulate as one idea
Reduced to single form
Projected into complex space;
Equate . . .

—Dan Scheeres
Steve Wykstra

Many of us aren't sure what to believe about Nicaragua. Many more of us are. Our problem isn't having too little information; it's having too much "information"—most of it from conflicting sides. Many of us, in response, take the way of sureness, trusting one side only, ignoring or dismissing the other. Others of us take the way of agnosticism, suspending judgment about both sides until "sufficient objective evidence" is in.
A few things about Nicaragua are undisputed. We know that in 1979, after a decade of struggle led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, virtually the whole population rose up against the Somoza dynasty that had ruled the country for forty-five years. At the cost of 50,000 lives, Anastasio Somoza and his brutal National Guard were ousted, and the Sandinistas began the task of national reconstruction. We know, too, that the new Nicaragua is under assault by “counter-revolutionary” guerillas funded, trained, armed, and orchestrated by the C.I.A. at our administration’s behest.

Beyond these facts, however, are conflicting pictures. One side portrays the “contras” as freedom-fighters, resisting a Soviet-outpost regime that is exporting revolution to the region and that has made Nicaragua a Marxist-Leninist “dungeon of totalitarianism,” replete with religious persecution, tyrannical press censorship, and concentration camps for dissident Indians on the east coast. Another side, in stark contrast, tells of a Sandinista government infused with a Christian presence leaving its revolutionary project, trying to encourage private enterprise while serving the impoverished majority with a far-reaching program of health centers, education, and agrarian reform. The contras, says this side, are recruited and led by the former staff of Somoza’s National Guard and are terrorizing villages in their holy war against “godless communism.”

So our problem is too much “information” from radically conflicting sides. Some one portrays the “contras” as freedom-fighters, resisting a Soviet-outpost regime that is exporting revolution to the region and that has made Nicaragua a Marxist-Leninist “dungeon of totalitarianism,” replete with religious persecution, tyrannical press censorship, and concentration camps for dissident Indians on the east coast. Another side, in stark contrast, tells of a Sandinista government infused with a Christian presence leaving its revolutionary project, trying to encourage private enterprise while serving the impoverished majority with a far-reaching program of health centers, education, and agrarian reform. The contras, says this side, are recruited and led by the former staff of Somoza’s National Guard and are terrorizing villages in their holy war against “godless communism.”

Mr. Elgersma’s shock is not to be scorned. It helps us see that behind “information” are always persons, that behind issues about what to believe are questions about whom to believe in, and that, in consequence, even to listen seriously to “conflicting information” is, in some contexts, to begin to betray those covenants of trust and fidelity that define who we are. Mr. Elgersma’s shock betokens the seriousness with which he takes covenants of trust and loyalty; the complete iconoclast cannot be as shocked as he is. There is thus, I believe, something we must deeply affirm about Mr. Elgersma’s response to The Banner. I do not know Mr. Elgersma. Perhaps his trusts and loyalties were, as for many, forged in the great sacrifices of the Second World War. There, too, is something we must deeply affirm.

But some of us find it more difficult to affirm the placement of that unambiguous (and so ultimate) trust that is Mr. Elgersma’s. To us, the United States does not seem quite so purely “the champion of freedom,” especially in the history of its dealings with Latin America. Following the Freedom of Information Act, we have been shocked to learn that since World War II, the U.S. has twice used the machinations of the C.I.A. to overthrow democratically elected governments in Latin America, putting in their place military dictatorships. Our shock deepened as we studied earlier episodes—of William Walker, of the Panama Canal, of the Bryan-Chomnoro treaty, and of the 5,000 Marines by whom we installed the Somoza dynasty that would keep Nicaragua in its grip for almost half a century.

To be sure, the U.S. has always had “good reasons” for upholding the tyrants of Latin America against change. But are the proffered “good reasons” the real reasons? When Calvin Coolidge began the intervention in Nicaragua that was to put Anastasio Somoza in power, he said his reason was to protect “the investments of all classes of our citizens in Nicaragua.” It took his Secretary of State, Kellogg, only three days to manufacture a “good rea-
son": to protect Nicaragua from the designs of "Bolshevist Mexico." This has, ever since, been our "good reason" for maintaining oligarchies that take from the campesinos their small plots of land, ensuring labor at subsistence wages for the seasonal harvests of their profitable export crops. Children starve; plantation owners and the United Fruit Company prosper. Those who call for change—for labor unions, say, or genuine land reform—are always "communists"; their mutilated corpses are found on the roadsides.

Given our sorry history in Latin America, some of us find it hard to share Mr. Elgersma's unambiguous covenant or to trust so completely what our State Department now tells us about Nicaragua. We are, some of us, perhaps even tempted to trust the "other side" as completely as Mr. Elgersma trusts his. But "other sides" often have their own sorry histories. So our real tendency is toward academic agnosticism about both sides—until "sufficient objective evidence" is in.

This way of agnosticism has some problems. One is that it inhibits committed action. Those who act do so on the basis of their confident pictures; we who are agnostic are ineffective in the realm where things get done. Despite this problem, two years of studying about Nicaragua left me in a state of agnosticism. The problem troubled my agnosticism but did not remove it. Then, two months ago, something unexpected happened.

II.

It happened in Camp of the Woods, a family Bible camp in upstate New York where I'd gone for my wife's family reunion. The camp's patrons are mostly middle-upper class evangelicals of a Republican stamp. At the first evening's Bible teaching, the camp director, M. Purdy, introduced a missionary of 30 years in Central America, whom the camp has long supported. The missionary, John (now Juan) Stamm, has worked for the last six years in Nicaragua and had ten minutes to tell us about his work. As he got up to speak, I sank down in my seat: I wasn't sure I wanted the delicate equilibrium of my academic agnosticism disturbed by a Republican missionary with the authority of 30 years in Central America, telling about the godless communism of Sandinista Nicaragua.

In ten seconds I was upright. The missionary was speaking about pastors being executed by the counter-revolutionaries raiding from across the Honduran border. The contras, he said, were attacking the health centers, mutilating and then killing those working in them. Oddly, most of the 800 Christians in the auditorium seemed unperturbed. Later I understood why. Stamm didn't explain, at that time, who these "counter-revolutionaries" were. Most in the audience assumed they were another group of communist terrorists. They didn't know that Nicaragua is the one government in Central America we are trying to destroy and that the contras are our protégés. In smaller groups, Stamm would be more explicit.

The next day, on a bench by the lake, I talked with Juan and his wife, Doris. Later I called my sister Nancy in Hoboken, mentioning this missionary. "Let me get John," she said, "he's talking about a trip to Nicaragua." John, her husband, teaches at Rutgers and has worked with the Democratic Socialist party for the last twelve years. Over the past year, he had shared with me his growing sense that some sort of "language of innerness" was essential to the struggle for justice. He was, I knew, circling Christianity like a moth around a flame. I didn't know, though, the significance Nicaragua had for him. It was, so far as he could see, the only "people's revolution" in which the struggle for justice had been, from the beginning, informed by a Christian spirituality. He asked me on the phone whether this missionary could suggest people he might look up in Nicaragua. Juan and Doris Stamm would do more. In a week, my brother-in-law was on an Eastern flight to visit the Stamms in Nicaragua. I was right beside him.

We bounced in a small pick-up truck around Nicaragua, Juan and Doris in front, John and I
in back, ponchos at hand for the drenching rainstorms. Juan seemed to have friends from the top of the government to the bottom of the barrios. In Nicaragua, we talked with friends. We pressed them with questions. What they told us was important. How they told us was also important: the tone of the voice, the look in the eyes, the gesture of the hands. . . . We weren’t just analyzing information printed on a page. We were groping our way toward trust, or distrust, in the persons before us, as they told us specifics that they had themselves seen and heard and touched. If this essay were on Nicaragua, I would speak of these specifics. But it is not; it is on something that happened soon after I got back.

III.
I went to a communion service at my alma mater. Following it, I met a professor who had taught me political science some fifteen years ago. He was then, and is now, a thoughtful man whom I greatly respect. Learning of my trip, he asked me what I learned from it. "Well," I ventured, "I guess it has led me to believe that our government has spun a fabric of deception over us about Nicaragua."

Looking down, he said, "And you don’t wonder whether you might have had a fabric of deception spun over you while you were there?" Off-balance, I stammered something about having been shown around, not by the Sandinista government, but by a missionary who’d been there thirty years. "And you don’t suppose," he pressed, "that the government allowed this because they knew what he’d show you?"

I wasn’t ready for such questions. I was ready to share specific things I’d learned, that had led me to believe that specific charges about Nicaragua are false. I was even ready to speak of specific problems with the new Nicaragua, for I’d seen some of these, too. But the conversation wasn’t turning to such specifics. It was being turned to general questions, and the questions were pressed, I think, not in inquiry but to make a declaration. The declaration was that for a reality like Nicaragua, we have no access to the truth. We have only conflicting views, each based on selective samples biased by preconceptions. The wise man, realizing this, will take all claims to truth, and all charges of deceptions, with many grains of salt. Perhaps, from some future historical perspective, we will be in a better position. But in the meantime the wise man will suspend judgment, going out on no limbs. Something like this, I think, my former professor was declaring by his questions.

These questions-that-are-not-questions disturb me far more than Mr. Elgersma’s "Why shouldn’t I believe President Reagan?" They disturb me partly because, had not the unexpected broken into my vacation at Camp of the Woods, they would be my questions too. As it is they are not my questions; I can only remember a time they might have been; but, tonight, they haunt and trouble me for my brother’s sake.

They are, I find myself now thinking, akin to a question asked long ago, by one who was also in a situation of conflicting "information." On this one, too, fell the burden of acting, of having to get something done, and of sifting charges from implacably hostile accusers. This one, too, finding little substance in the accusations, inclined to resist the destruction the accusers demanded. But his resistance was overcome by those confident of their picture; and at a place called The Pavement, the accused was handed over.

The ancient question has thus become our question too. In the face of a reality luminous in its complexity and depth, the question is not an inquiry but a declaration: that on some matters, the wise man will suspend judgment. For us now, as long ago, this declaration has become—so it now seems to me—our only escape from a terrible burden. We, too, acquiesce in the demand for destruction of a reality which some cannot endure to see continue. But for this question, we could not live with ourselves; it is our only shield from seeing the enormity of the injustice of the destruction we acquiesce in. As long ago, this question thus becomes our declaration, too: "What is truth?"
As part of a sabbatical leave of absence, I lived and traveled in Nigeria for six weeks in the Fall of 1983. I collected musical instruments, recorded songs, and talked to singers and musicians from two Nigerian Reformed denominations, the NKST and the CRCN. The CRCN (the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria) was established in 1951 after years of work by pioneering missionaries Johanna Veenstra, Edgar Smith, Anita Vissia, and others. The NKST (Nongo u Kristu henn Sudan ken Tiv, “the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv”) was established in 1957 after years of evangelism activity—since 1911—by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa and was taken under assistance by the Christian Reformed Church of North America in 1954.

The purpose of my trip was threefold: to find out first hand about the state of music in these two denominations and the place of music in the life of each church; to discover the relationship between the music of the church and traditional, indigenous music; and to suggest ways in which Christian Reformed World Missions might better understand indigenous music and use it more effectively in carrying out the work of missions. To help me in realizing my goals and accomplishing my stated purpose, I put on tape some thirty hours of music with my Marantz field recorder; I bought or received as gifts fifteen musical instruments, all hand-made from available materials found in field, forest, trash heap, or stream bed; and I collected 550 slide transparencies of musical activities, churches, wildlife, and landscape.

Most of the music I heard and recorded is not notated. It is preserved in the communal memory—passed on from village to village and generation to generation — as an integral part of a people’s identity. Music is part of the oral tradition along with stories, legends, and fables. Written alphabets have been developed for most African languages only within the past 70–80 years, and most African people have become literate only in this century. There is yet no rich African written tradition of literature and poetry and drama as there is in Western cultures. The oral tradition is still powerful even among African peoples who have been literate for two or three generations.

Can the oral tradition survive? Should a notation system be devised to help preserve the rich instrumental and vocal music traditions of indigenous African peoples? Does notation allow the preservation and preparation of a culture’s music or does notation ossify and make conventional what is vibrant and exciting? These are questions which all serious ethnomusicologists face. I do not have the tools of either the ethnomusicologist or the cultural anthropologist; I’m only a composer—however, a sympathetic one with an observant eye and a keen ear. I believe that, while the collective communal memory may be entirely adequate for the
storage of their music, with the increasing technological pressures and Western influences on their culture and life style, many an African people may indeed want to learn how to write and read their own music as many have learned to read and write their language. Notation may be the most effective means of both preserving it from being forgotten and transferring it from generation to generation.

Notation also serves the Westerner who wants to know about African music but needs it presented in a form he can understand. The two pieces notated here are done in conventional Western five-line staff notation. The Hausa song was taken from a tape recording and is a very accurate representation of what was actually sung. It already exhibits a good deal of European influence, especially in the use of four-part harmony and dominant-to-tonic chord changes. The Tiv song, on the other hand, has been adapted by myself. It has been arranged and harmonized and made to fit into a regular meter and rhythm. It now exists in a form readily available to Western choirs and Western-trained ears but scarcely recognizable to a Tiv person. It is in the form which we might call, to use a literary analogy, translation: it isn’t a notated version of the actual sung original, but is an adaptation, a translation, if you will, in a form understandable in terms of Western convention. Both texts are my own; the one for the Tiv song, however, is a very free adaptation of an English translation of the original Tiv text.

One might well ask, “But do you do an injustice to this music by squeezing it into your mold? After all, the American audience receives, then, inaccurate information about genuine Tiv music, and real understanding remains impossible.” But the Tiv, as well as any other African people, for that matter, who have been influenced by Western music, do the same to our indigenous songs. They squeeze our songs (I’m referring mostly to hymns and psalm tunes and gospel choruses heard in church) into their system so that they come out sounding African and no longer European or North American.

So I offer you two examples of Nigerian music filtered through American ears and seen through a Western notation system. I have gained a great respect for this music, indeed, for the several Nigerian musics that I heard and recorded—Jukun, Hausa, Kutev, Ndoro, Mambilla, and especially Tiv. I think they are strong, sturdy, and dignified as well as subtle, intricate, and complicated. And I think that any one of these indigenous musical styles can withstand any squeezing, arranging, or adaptation and still retain its essential quality and integrity.
1. Come listen now to what the prophet Micah told: The Lord will come
2. For out of thee a mighty ruler will appear; In majesty;
3. He is the shepherd of his flock his greatness known: Saviour, Come;

A Saviour will be born in Bethlehem of old to rescue men.
His reign of peace will reach to people far and near eternity. AL-LE-LU!
And we will live securely in his strength alone make here thy home

SHOUT! SHOUT! AL-LE-LU-IA! AL-LE-LU! LE-LU-IA!
Shout for joy for the Lord will come
1. December comes the time of joy: Jesus Christ our Saviour is born; In a lowly manger lying small; but yet a boy.
2. December comes my heart is glad: Jesus Christ our brother is here; Living, loving, dying more feeling sad.
3. December comes my eyes rejoice: Jesus Christ our herd so good Care-ing for his flock so tenderly; making them laugh with heart and voice.
4. December comes my lips shall praise: Jesus Christ the heaven-ly one Come to earth from mansions in the sky. To him all my songs I shall raise.
5. December comes all Christians sing: Jesus Christ our Prince of Peace now; All the nations shall come near his throne Chant-ing "Praise to the mighty King."

Dialogue/33
The first time you take an East German coin in your hand, you're startled. You juggle it, rub your finger around its edges, and hold it up to your eye. If you weren't so self-conscious, you might even try to bring it up to your mouth to apply the tooth test. Everything in you says, this coin has to be a fake.

But it isn't. It's a real coin, and even though it weighs but a fraction of most Western coins its size, it is a part of the valid currency in use in the German Democratic Republic. You can use it toward bread or beer, toward a piece of furniture or a new car. East Germans don't bat an eye any more when such a coin crosses their palm. By now—some thirty-five years after their government was founded and its currency system imposed—they have gotten used to aluminum alloy coins that are almost feather light and decidedly unmusical.

For the most part East Germans go around with their money the way we go around with ours. Currency is the residue of one activity which we can apply toward another activity. We work and then watch our work itself pass away. What we are left with is money, a transformation of our expended energy and resources. We can turn around and use that residue to buy goods and services of our own, and so keep the economic cycle going.

But there is one difference between us and the East Germans. They really can't "go around" with their money. Their money is valid only as far as their external border's reach. Beyond those frontiers their money is almost as good as worthless. Tourists from Japan, West Germany, England, France, and the United States can use their money outside of their home countries; not so the East Germans. Theirs is a "soft" currency; its validity is limited to a rather narrowly circumscribed realm. The personal effort and resources behind the money are real and valuable, but the money itself gives that reality and value the lie as soon as East Germans try to test its transferability in travel beyond their own frontiers.

Friends of ours in the entertainment industry in East Germany have mentioned the problem of non-transferability as a source of great frustration. When they go to the West as a group, they receive a small amount of hard currency that allows them to get around in only a limited way. Excursions, special events, even souvenirs remain out of their grasp. The residue of their personal efforts cannot be transferred to the new situation. The payment for those efforts—though seemingly substantial at home—is lost when taken abroad.

We Americans are very practical. We demand transferability. How often I hear my thirteen-year-old son, Paul, say: "What good is it?" when I urge him to get at his practicing. He doesn't plan to major in music, so why should he play an instrument? He is not sure that the residue of his practicing and playing will be of value in realms other than music. It's hard for him to believe that the understanding he gains and the discipline he develops will transfer to another area. And don't we frequently show our concern for transferability—especially immediate transferability—when we question many of our pur-
nipulation of students or colleagues? We see enough examples of residues like these around us—and in us, too, if we are honest. Will such residues have transfer value in that country to which we all are traveling? Will they be of help to us along the way? Will they allow us to meet the needs of others?

When I was asked to write a meditation for Dialogue, many topics—several of them “catchy”—crossed my mind. In the end, however, I was left with only a concern that we be reminded as a community of the necessity to test the values which our lives express and develop. The pressure for us to accommodate ourselves to other than lasting values is all around us—and in us, too. Let’s encourage each other to be truly practical. Let’s question today, tomorrow, and each day of the semester the value of what we are asked to do and what we want to do. Let’s especially question the things we do unthinkingly. The Lord has made it possible for us to be practical in a most fundamental way. To turn away from what he achieved for us is not simply folly but betrayal as well.

Lord, you know our need to achieve value. Help us to look to that which you hold to be worthy of us as your children. May we as individuals and a community respond to your call to seek the Kingdom, both for here and for eternity. Amen.

James Lamse