Staff and writers of Dialogue

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Marlene Bos hails from Cerritos, California, and is a fifth-year senior. She plans to attend graduate school for English.

Evan Cater, a communications major, states that he does not discourage voters from writing him in on presidential primary ballots.

Kelly James Clark is a professor of philosophy at Calvin. His interim course, “Death and the Meaning of Life,” has filled rapidly each time he has offered it. It is reported, however, that Professor Clark took a bribe of cheesecake from a student who earnestly desired to get into this class even after it had filled.

Tessica DeHaan, a 23-year-old senior English major, claims to have an addiction to her red plaid shirt. She is currently seeking help.

Jonathan Eiten, a fifth-year art major, has thought of returning to his uncle’s farm in Iowa but does not recall there being too many agrarian artists that have made it big.

Jackie Frens, a senior English major, loves living on Camelot and anticipates a summer in Japan.

Timothy Ladd says that his poem was written for L.B., and that he “contemplated felicity and this is what happened.”

Shelly LeMahieu majors in English and will attend graduate school next year to avoid the job market.

Wendy Levy, a senior photography major, writes home to Jamaica. She transferred to Calvin this year from Atlanta School of Art.

RiRe Nakapodia, whose self-portraits were donated to this months magazine, states “Mo man renrin timba re ara me” (Isn’t it funny how we often see ourselves).

Lynelle Regnerus stands 5’3” tall, has bluish-gray eyes, and says that “everything else changes without notice.”

Christine Weeber “finally saw the light and declared a major in English.” This occurred last semester while she was a “wandering traveler”.

Daniel Voetberg wishes he were still in Oregon.
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Conrad Bakker
A Healthy Case of Mediterranean Fever

Dark-haired, dark-eyed people and all things Mediterranean fascinate me. I secretly envy my friends with last names like Balducci or Stelianopolis, with parents who make baklava or say capisci? A Swiss-Italian friend taught me a few words and phrases in Italian which I do not often have the occasion to use (including “please,” “thank you,” and “I want to make love on the moon”), but I often say them to myself, in no particular order, just for their lovely sound. I am convinced that people from lands that brush the edge of the Mediterranean have more blood, more teeth, and more taste (whether it be good or bad) than their northern European counterparts.

I recently found myself at a Greek dinner feeling tall, drab, and absolutely enchanted. The people with whom I went informed me that this event was “just like a Greek wedding, only without the bride and groom.” I tasted delicious foods. I was surrounded by people who looked (to me) very exotic—the women wore wild-hued dresses and dangly earrings; the men, quieter, had regal noses and flashing white teeth. Everyone laughed and talked effusively. As I stared at the brightly lacquered nails and sparkling rings on the tanned, vehemently gesturing hands of a woman next to me, I forgot that I don’t really even like nail polish, and tried, unsuccessfully, to imagine her hands holding a ham bun. Then I looked down at my own pale, unadorned fingers and short, white-flecked nails. I watched a plump matriarch wearing a black sheath splashed with enormous, sequinned sunflowers (so far as I could tell), dyed red hair, and lots of makeup, and she seemed brashly beautiful. She was Greek!

Then the dancing began. Men and women of all ages joined hands and glided and bobbed in undulating, concentric circles to strange music. I watched their feet, fascinated, and started to sweat from the sheer concentration of trying to imitate them. A few people threw their dinner plates, and some men formed a circle in the center of the dance floor, dropped to their knees, and crushed peppers on the floor with their foreheads. I forgot that I was at the Elks Lodge and not really in Greece at all, and that these colorful people were Greek Grand Rapidians. I felt like a kind of Anglo-Saxon protestant Emma Bovary at a twentieth-century ball, swept away
by the fragrances, sounds, and sights of a delightfully foreign world. 

My upbringing in a cultural milieu wonderful and rich in its own right, but in which fair-haired, blue-eyed, sensibly shod people of northern European extraction predominate, has made me particularly appreciative of the charms of Mediterranean cultures. I realize, of course, that fuchsia fringy dresses and feta cheese are by no means the sum total of Greek culture. My few blissful brushes with other Mediterranean people, food, music, and folk dancing hardly constitute a complete and fully informed understanding of their cultures’ historical importance and contributions to the world. What I have experienced or perceived, many people would argue, is not a completely accurate portrait of their way of life, and perhaps my attitude toward these cultures is somewhat romantic and naive. This may be true in part. However, I believe that such a view of other ethnic groups is preferable to a kind of weary, politically correct “tolerance.” We can and should aspire to more than tolerance! The multi-cultural movement and efforts to accommodate all ethnic groups are potentially good and valuable things. However, in automatically adopting the rhetoric of multiculturalism and ethnic awareness, we run the risk of simply giving lip service to other ethnic groups and seeing appreciation of them as a matter of duty. A love for other humans and their ethnicity should spring from genuine feelings brought on by experience with them, from recognizing and reveling in what seems strange and wonderful to us about their cultures. We should approach multi-culturalism as children or as students of the world, not as obligated participants in some kind of dried-out liturgy of ethnic awareness and appreciation. It can and should start with natural curiosity, not a compulsion to feel and say the “right” things. I know that rolling around on my tongue Italian words or delectable things wrapped in grape leaves or phyllo pastry does not mean that I truly understand a foreign culture. But it’s a start—capite?
Do Not Always Stay Content

Experience
    the unexperienced.
Scrape the bone of your dinner plate.
Why give it to the dogs?
    It's the sweetest part!

Push past the pleasantness
    filled with petite smiles—
rush into the harsh wind
    and find all that is tough, coarse,
and barbaric;
that is much more appetizing!

Christine Weeber
Out in the prairie states of the Midwest, several small communities huddle together against the stiff winds and the numbing emptiness of the countryside. They are not cities, not towns, nor even villages, but merely populated islands. Most are less than a thousand people, all told. They are centers of community where people migrate for the fulfillment of their basic needs—food, haircuts, gas, beer, school, and church. People draw their identity from places like these, even if they live miles away from them. We all need someplace to be from.

My particular community consists of a small grocery store, a small Standard station (they never changed the sign), a small school (kindergarten through ninth grade in six classrooms), a grain elevator (most people are farmers hereabouts), and a very small graveyard next to the church building. I guess that's pretty unusual nowadays. I've been other places and have
never seen a graveyard next to a church. And everyone who stops through here makes mention of the fact that we’ve got this graveyard right there next to the church without a fence even separating it from the parking lot. This is a problem in the winter because people can’t tell where the gravel stops and the grass begins, and when the snow gets deep enough to cover the stone plaques on the ground, people park over Bob Farson. Bob’s dead, so it’s no big deal to him, but I suppose some people think it’s disrespectful, like parking on someone’s lawn. Maybe next spring we’ll talk about putting up some sort of fence thing and I’ll get to do it.

I am the caretaker, groundskeeper, maintenance man, head janitor, secretary, plumber, and sexton of this church. I am also the minister. I enjoy all my jobs except being the minister. Not that it’s such a despicable job, I’m just no good at it. I have had enough people tell me this that I can say it without doubt or reservation. I am, as far as I know, the worst minister there has ever been. And while it’s possible that currently someone somewhere is worse at this job than I am, I have yet to hear of it.

Why this is, exactly, is hard to say. It could be that I’ve never been a particularly religious man. I was raised by Christian parents and went to church every Sunday for a long time, but that’s about it. I never studied theology, never learned Greek or Hebrew or Latin or anything, never saw a burning bush, nothing.

I admit that there are other things which make me a bad minister. I don’t like most of the people in my congregation and never have. I’ve had three affairs in my life and have been married once and divorced. One of my affairs was with the church organist whose husband was a deacon. I tried to get her husband kicked out of the church by accusing him of stealing money from the offering plate, which he really never did. Eventually the whole thing was exposed, and it was pretty messy for some time. When I meet other people, I tell them that I am a plumber or something, because I’m afraid that they might not care to have me around. Nonetheless, I feel that in some way I am still a Christian. And that in spite of my numerous shortcomings, God still has some sort of purpose for this absurd calling of mine.

The reason that I have this job is simple. One night when I was driving home from town we got one of those late summer rainstorms—the kind that are painful to stand in, the kind that scourge the land. I was driving through the night in my Ford pickup, crossing the south branch of the Magaloosa River, when two things happened. First, my headlights went out, and the radio started playing Johnny Cash—"Because You’re Mine, I Walk the Line." The second thing was that at that exact same moment, the bridge washed out completely, and my truck fell into the rushing river.

As my truck and I were swept downstream, I began praying for salvation in any form. I was ready to promise anything. The water was pouring in through the holes in the floorboards and the bottom of the doors as my truck was cast downstream. I swore off smoking, and the radio shorted out. I promised to stop drinking, and a huge limb smashed down on the roof of the cab. I dedicated my life to the ministry, and my truck slammed broadside into a tree that had fallen across the river. Another branch shattered the passenger-side window and went straight through the cab and out the other side. Fortunately, I had been hunched over the steering wheel in a penitent position, and it missed my vulnerable skull completely. I crawled
out through the broken passenger side window, cutting my hands and forehead on the glass. I flung myself down onto the trunk of the huge cottonwood that had stopped my descent and held on for dear life. The water was washing over me, but I didn’t dare let go. While the tree kept me from being swept away, it barely kept my head above water. So against all reason or safety, I began to move, inching my way blindly against the livid current to the ground that I sincerely hoped the tree was rooted in.

I recalled at that moment my youthful belief that trees weren’t permanently rooted but could get up and walk whenever they wanted. I have no idea why that notion occurred to me then. But at the time I feared that it might actually be true and that the tree might suddenly decide to stretch its legs and let go, and we would both be swept downstream where it would float and I would not. Trees don’t have much to fear in situations like this. But, thank God, it was attached to the bank, its roots still in the earth even though its trunk had been broken by the rainy winds.

Why that tree saved me—whether it fell just for that purpose, or if it was just by chance that it fell—was a question that bothered me all that night as I sat in the shelter of its enormous stump. Nestled between two protective roots, I rested, waiting for the dawn to come.

As I lay there, watching the storm blow over, I realized that the tree had no more fallen just for me than its roots had grown specifically for my comfort that night. If someone else had been swept downstream, it would have stopped them as well as me. Whether they would have made it to the bank is anyone’s guess. My truck had been completely submerged by the end of the storm and had been swept away under the tree, breaking off the limb and taking it along. At any rate, I was simply thankful that the tree had been there, no matter who it was for.

What makes the story fascinating, at least from my point of view, is that on that same night, Reverend Campball, the minister of the church at the time, had been outside to see if his potatoes were getting washed out by the rain like they had the summer before. I don’t know what he thought he would do about it if they were, besides rant and rave for a while, which he was awfully good at, for a preacher. But at any rate, as he was crossing his driveway on his way back to the house, he was struck by lightning and died instantly.

Reverend Campball was a great minister, and I guess that being struck by lightning was the next best thing to being driven off in a fiery chariot. Everyone was sad to see him go. He always gave wonderful sermons that never ran longer than twenty-five minutes or five printed pages. He knew each person in the congregation intimately and was always ready and willing to talk to anyone about God. Everyone wondered how they were ever going to get another minister, because they didn’t know where to look. The church never really had a specific denominational affiliation that anyone could recall. Reverend Campball was over seventy years old and had been with the church for almost thirty years. Nobody could remember where he had come from in the first place, and nobody bothered to ask. It seems that he just showed up one day in May and offered to be their minister. They had given him a trial run the next Sunday and decided to keep him. So that’s how we got Reverend Campball.

Like I said, everyone was wondering about who
to get for a minister now that the Reverend had passed on. So when I told the congregation of my promise to God to dedicate my life to the ministry, nobody could very well turn me down. A couple people made a motion to set up a committee to continue looking for a pastor and let me serve in the interim, but it was almost time to start bringing in the crops, and one thing pushes out another, and that was over fifteen years ago, and I'm still here.

There are times when I simply feel like quitting the whole business, telling God that the deal is off, that I've done my time and don't owe him any more. When people are upset with me, when some kid in Sunday school—another one of my pastoral responsibilities—stumps me with some theological problem dreamed up by his demonic ten-year-old mind, when I have to marry off some lovely girl in the congregation that I've always wanted to marry myself, when I wake up on a bright and sunny Sunday morning and think to myself how much more I would rather be fishing than preaching that morning. Or when people start to talking about how they would rather have a raving lunatic or a babbling moron on the pulpit than listen to one more of my sermons.

There are those who have specific complaints against me. Those who think that a man of the cloth should never be seen having an unmarried woman at his house. Those who feel that the pulpit is too sacred a place to swear from. Those who feel that, to use their own words, a minister should be a "paragon of moral virtue," not a remnant from the lowest moral strata of the congregational sediment. But, like I said, no one knows where to get another one, and no one else wants to volunteer, so here I am every Sunday, and most still come because it's the only place within fifty miles for folks to get their weekly dose of religion.

In all fairness, though, there are those who actually appreciate me. Jim Logan comes every Sunday to tell me exactly where I was wrong in my theology. Harriet Millson sits in the front row and hangs on my every word, but I think that's because I'm the only unmarried man she knows. Larry Tollefson still asks me to be his marriage counselor and to preside over his weddings; I've done so five times for him. And on occasion, it seems, by some strained sense of grace, I do the right thing at the right time, and I help somebody.

For instance: Phil Bergman.

I went rabbit hunting with Jim Logan back behind Bergie's place one Saturday morning. It was one of those gorgeous late fall mornings when the air is crisp and cold like fresh apples, and there was frost on the grass of the fields. The area where we were hunting still had a few stands of small trees in it as well as some dense bushes and a few brush piles; it was ideal for rabbits, and we hoped to bag a few before lunch.

By ten o'clock, we had only scared up one rabbit, which both of us missed. I called over to Jim, "I think they're all hung over and still in bed yet."

"I know I wish I was," answered Jim. He was wearing a bright orange hunting cap and a ratty old tan hunting jacket that he had worn for as long as I had known him. "Maybe we should go back to Bergie's and get that damn dog of his."

"Why," I asked, "so you can at least shoot something with four legs?"

Jim nodded mischievously. There was no love lost between himself and Moosha, Bergman's big black Lab, which was one reason that Jim's coat looked as ratty as it did. When the three (or rather four of us, including the dog) went hunting together
earlier that fall, Jim had bagged a rabbit that Moosha had scared up. He cleaned it and put it in the game pouch of his coat. Later that morning, Moosha got separated from the rest of us. But in a few minutes she came storming through the brush behind Jim, baying like a hound in heat. Jim turned immediately, looking for the rabbit that was causing the commotion but saw only Moosha. He realized too late the dog had been tracking him. He went crashing to the ground beneath the force of a massive black Lab that was tearing at his coat with her paws, trying to get at the still warm rabbit inside. Bergie was laughing so hard that he couldn’t call off his dog, so I, being closer, tried to convince her to release the death grip she had on Jim’s coat. Eventually, she ripped a big enough hole in it to get the rabbit out and trotted proudly over to Bergie, who laughed even harder, rolling around on the ground, tears running down his face. I had never seen anyone get that much pleasure out of anything in my entire life.

But on this particular Saturday Bergie wasn’t with us, and I doubt he would have been much in a laughing mood if he was. He had looked pretty bad when we pulled up in Jim’s pickup, and he told us to go ahead, he didn’t feel much like hunting. I asked Jim later what was wrong with Bergie.

“I don’t know,” he answered, sounding like he didn’t care either. “I’ll bet he doesn’t even know himself. He’s probably just in some kind of mood again. You know how he gets.” He shaded his eyes and squinted off into the field.

I looked at him a moment, trying to figure out why he seemed so put out by this topic. “Has he said anything to you about it?” I asked him.

Jim heaved a sigh and began polishing his gun barrel with his glove. “It’s nothing, really. Margaret went and called him the other night and ended up telling him what kind of scum he was, and he started to believe it. I think he just needs to get good and drunk again.” Jim looked at me and grinned. “That’ll cheer him up.”

Phil Bergman was a very unforgiving person. Not that he would never forgive anyone else if they did something to him. In time, he would just act as if nothing had ever happened, and life would go on like before. But when it came to himself, Phil Bergman could be as stern and unbending as his father had been to him. When he was alive, and for as long as I had known him, Abraham Bergman, ruled both his family and his business with an iron hand. He demanded obedience and perfection from everyone under his authority. Poor Phil, the oldest, had most of this demand placed on his shoulders.

He survived remarkably well in spite of such a rough upbringing and was a pretty likeable guy, differing from his father in only two respects: he was a much kinder person than his dad, and he never went to church again after his father’s funeral.

Abraham Bergman was one of the most outspoken and faithful members of our church when Reverend Campbell was still here. The two of them would meet for breakfast every Monday morning so that Abe could argue about the sermon. His voice was always the one most often heard at congregational meetings. Fortunately for me, he died two weeks after Reverend Campbell did.

Abe made his children attend church with him twice a Sunday, which is not unreasonable, I suppose. But the sternness with which he enforced this rule made his children, and his wife, too, I suppose, resent the entire notion. He also made them all read the Bible for an hour every Sunday
and then meditate for another hour. Anyone who expressed a complaint was treated to such a harsh tongue-lashing that they were convinced they were going straight to hell. So when Abraham Bergman died, his son, Phil, the only one of his children still living in the state, swore that he would never attend church again, hoping to lose the yoke that he felt his father had placed on him. I'm afraid that all he succeeded in doing was removing himself from the church while not getting any further away from his father's influence, which he carried around him like luggage he couldn't lose.

Bergie had run into a lot of bad luck recently. His father’s business went downhill and finally ground to a halt. He started drinking, and his wife Margaret left him, which only made him drink more. He began running around with other women. He only saw his kids, Tommy and Martha, once a month and missed them as much as he missed his wife. He lived alone in the house that he grew up in. His mother died the year after her husband and left him the house, which he didn’t like, but couldn’t get anyone to buy. Or else he didn’t dare sell, which could also have been the case. It must be rough being the oldest son of Abraham Bergman.

By about eleven o’clock, Jim and I decided to call it a day. We had only seen three rabbits and had missed all three. We hadn’t had Moosha with us, so it had been difficult to flush out anything. We were walking up to the little hill that led up to Bergie’s house where Jim had parked. That’s when I heard a voice.

“What’s that?” I asked and we stopped walking so we could listen.

Jim had heard it too. “It sounds like Bergie. Maybe he’s calling for us to come in.” He started walking again. But when we heard it the second time, it was obvious that something was wrong. We looked at each other and went quickly up the hill.

I heard Bergie’s voice more clearly then. He was hollering loudly, like he was calling for his children to come to supper. “Martha! Tommy!” His voice was urgent, as if he was afraid they were lost. “Martha! Tommy!” His voice began to crack, and it sounded as if he was crying.

We came to the top of the hill and saw him standing in the middle of the yard under the mulberry tree. His back was toward us and he was calling across the soybean field to the stand of pine trees that he and his father had planted years before, a place where his kids used to spend a lot of time after they moved to the house. He called their names out, paused a moment and called again. “Tommy! Martha!” His words were swallowed whole by the immense sky. Then he fell to his knees still facing the trees and screamed “You son of a bitch!” He sank his face into his clenched fists and began to sob.

Jim looked at me and motioned that we should circle around to the road where we parked and just leave him alone. After we walked a ways he said to me, “I think he just has to be alone for a bit. He looks pretty upset. Just leave him be.” He shifted his gun to his left shoulder and kept walking toward the gravel road. I heard Bergie’s back door slam. Then there was nothing but the birds and our boots swishing through the grass. I hurried to catch up with Jim.

I felt like we should go back and talk to him, not so much because I was the only minister around, and because when you’re that upset a minister is a good person to talk to, unless it’s me, of course. I figured that maybe Bergie needed just anyone to
talk to, especially his friends. But Jim had known him longer than I, and he was closer to Bergie than I was, so I trusted his instincts.

We jumped the thin trickle of water in the ditch and climbed the bank on the other side of the road. Jim opened the window to the cap on his pickup, and we were placing our guns inside when we heard the gunshot.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

Jim said nothing but grabbed my arm, looking up the road to Bergie's place.

"Maybe we'd better go have a look," I suggested. Jim nodded and took off running.

I followed him past the truck and up the long cinder driveway to the white two-story house. We beat on the door leading from the garage. It was locked and no one answered. We could hear Moosha barking in the basement. We ran out of the garage and around the back of the house. Then down the outdoor stairs to the basement door. It was open. We stepped in and called for Phil. I heard a groan from my left. Phil was on the floor, leaning against the concrete wall. A bullet wound in his left shoulder was bleeding badly. His .38 pistol was lying in his open palm next to him.

"Oh my God, Phil," whispered Jim.

Phil opened his eyes and looked at him. Jim looked back for a moment. "I'll go get some help," he said hoarsely and ran out the door and up the stairs.

Moosha nudged Phil's left arm and he winced. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm dirt, Chris," he mumbled. "I can't even kill myself right."

"Don't move," I said and looked for something to stop the bleeding. I found a box of clean rags. I took an old tattered tee shirt and ripped it in half. I wadded up one of the halves and placed it on the wound. With a quick sucking of air, Phil winced and then grimaced, closed his eyes and let the air out.

"Feel free to tell me what a wretched sinner I am for trying to do this, Reverend." It was the first time that he had ever called me Reverend. "Tell me how fortunate I am that I didn't die. Tell me what happens to people who kill themselves. Tell me how lucky I am that I can reform my life now. Tell me how blessed I am to have this shot at redemption. Tell me, man of God, how after living such a messed-up life, I can finally start living one that is worthy of salvation. One that is worthy of God's great love."

"Who told you this?"

"I remember your sermon, Reverend. The only one of yours I ever heard. The last sermon before my father died. It was about how we should all be living good lives. That was how you put it—'God says we should all live good lives so we can go to heaven.'" He laughed darkly at my first and worst attempt at a sermon. "My father couldn't wait to discuss it with you. 'Someone like him trying to tell us how to live?' he said. 'Even Phil here could teach him a thing or two about good living.'"

"Phil, I was wrong. I didn't have any idea what...

But he wasn't listening. "My father thought I was shit. He thought I was going straight to hell. He was right, but he didn't have to tell me that. I already knew. He just made it worse." He was trembling with anger. "I'm a bastard, Chris. I don't deserve to live, and I don't care if I die. I know where I'm going, so I might as well get it over with."

"And why are you so sure you know where you're going?"

"Bastards go to hell, Chris," he said sharply.
“Everyone’s a bastard, Phil.”
“Not like me they ain’t.”
“Everyone’s a bastard. You think God cares? He loves us anyway. If he didn’t love us bastards, there wouldn’t be anyone left for him to love. Do you have any idea how many bastards like us there are going to be in heaven?”

He stared at the floor. I heard Jim’s truck skid to a stop on the road in front of the house. He looked up at me. “Why didn’t you tell me that a long time ago?”

“Because I’m as much of a bastard as you are, man.”

Jim and his wife Helen ran in. She was a nurse when she and Jim got married and the closest thing to a medical expert we have around here. I moved out of her way, and she hunched over Phil trying to get a look at the wound in the dim light of the basement light bulb. Phil kept looking at me oddly, like he wasn’t sure who I was. I felt the same way. I’m not the best at pastoral counseling, but for one of the precious few times in my life, I felt like I had said the right thing.

Helen shouted orders to me and Jim, telling us to get Phil upstairs and take off his shirt so she could get at that thing properly. We helped Phil up and got him upstairs, and he didn’t do anything, he just let us. Helen washed the wound and made Jim take him to the hospital, eighty miles away. The bleeding had slowed significantly, and she went along with extra bandages in case the others needed changing. They were in a hurry and Helen was giving orders left and right, and Jim was trying to calm her down and do everything she wanted at the same time. But Phil just sat there quietly, not saying anything, just staring at something he couldn’t see. He didn’t argue with anyone, didn’t answer Helen any more than he had to, hardly even showing that the pain bothered him, or that he even noticed it.

The pickup took off down the road, throwing a spray of rocks and gravel behind it. I was left alone on the side of the road. I watched them disappear behind a cloud of white dust from the dirt road. When they reached the paved county road half a mile down, I could see them again. The big truck turned left and took off across the wide flat expanse towards the hospital. I watched until they got too small to see before I started walking toward the road myself.

The loose gravel of the shoulder slid beneath my boots, making it hard to walk, so I crossed to the middle of the road where it was better packed. It was quiet then, even the birds seemed far off. The stillness was only occasionally interrupted by a passing car on the county road ahead. When I got to the road I turned right and headed north towards the church and the tiny parsonage nearby where I lived. If no one picked me up I might make it home by the time it got dark.

After I had gone about a mile or so, an ancient light blue Ford pickup slowed down behind me. The old man inside had a seed cap resting on the back of his head and thin white hair underneath. He asked if I wanted a ride and I got in.

“Where you heading?” he asked, hunched over the steering wheel with both hands.

“To the church. You know where it is?”

“Sure.” He was silent and watched the road for a while.

“So what do you do at the church?” he asked finally.

“I try.”
"Say no more," he said,
"and this suburban paradise is yours!
Yours to explore and pillage;
the middle class pilgrim
sent out on a holy crusade
for a guaranteed 20% off and 3-year rebate.
Spread forth and multiply
upon this blessed promised land
and join your coupon clipping brothers and sisters,
the Huddled Masses yearning for the Free
(or at least the significantly reduced . . .)
With your trusty pocketbooks of
plastic promised currency at your side
and your guardian angel
(Paula Abdul)
watching over your Rush Rush
from her electronic vantage point."

Evan Cater
Frederick Buechner (pronounced Beek-ner) loves to laugh. He writes about crazy and sane people, about sad and joyful people, about himself and his readers. What makes him laugh may shock some people until they know what it means to truly laugh. He once heard a minister say that “Christ is crowned in the hearts of people among confession, and tears, and great laughter.” Buechner took “great laughter” very seriously and became a Christian soon afterward.

Buechner was born to an aristocratic family in 1926 in New York City. When he was ten, his father committed suicide. Later this unbearable tragedy would appear next to comedy in all of Buechner’s works. But before becoming an author, he spent some time in Bermuda with his mother and brother. He attended Lawrenceville School in New Jersey and then went on to Princeton. Because he had not had a religious upbringing, Buechner’s friends were surprised when he enrolled in Union Theological Seminary in 1954 on a fellowship and decided to become a Presbyterian minister.

Since then, Buechner has had to deal with being called a “Christian writer.” For most people this label conjures up visions of a shallow teller of moralistic tales. Buechner, however, has a shameless way of using arresting images to place our
relationship to Christ within the context of everyday life. Both tragedy and comedy are present, as in Buechner’s first book, *A Long Day’s Dying*. In one scene, a monkey takes a razor blade to its neck, imitating its owner, and unintentionally commits suicide.

Often readers discover themselves between the pages of Buechner’s books. In his autobiography, *The Sacred Journey*, he describes childhood as “living for you do not know just what, and living, as you live in dreams, with little or no sense of sequence of consequence or measurable time.” In other works, even saints search for answers to difficult questions. Buechner’s Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Godric* tells the story of a real-life saint who feels completely undeserving of the title.

Some readers do not find themselves reflected in Buechner’s books. They are instead introduced to that strange era known as the seventies and to the kinds of people who roamed through those years. Buechner’s tetralogy, *The Book of Bebb* captures that period in the character of the rotund Leo Bebb. Bebb sells mail-order pastoral ordination certifications. In addition to this, he may or may not have exposed himself to a group of children. The narrator is a level-headed young man named Tona whose suspicions of Bebb’s questionable past take the reader from New York to Florida to Texas and back. The reader must decide with Tona if Bebb is (gasp!) a saint.

This sensitive, witty author was the subject of a small English class at Calvin last semester. Professor W. Dale Brown led the class in studying all of Buechner’s works and many critical studies written on them. The following interview was conducted by three students from the seminar. It introduces a man who has taken notice. Buechner listens for Christ in everything and helps his readers to do the same.

*Your work has been slowly gaining recognition by Christians as well as non-Christians, and the amount of criticism written on your work is also increasing. How comfortable are you with this attention?*

Like any other writer I can think of, I am delighted with all the attention I can get, by which I mean, of course, attention not to me personally—I wouldn’t want to be continually stopped on the street for my autograph—but to the books I write. I can’t imagine writing for myself alone. I write for readers, and the more of them there are, the better pleased I am. I suppose I would feel that way no matter what kind of books I happened to write, but I feel it especially because the books I do write—whether fiction or non-fiction—have to do with things that seem very important to me and because there aren’t all that many other people writing about them. I mean things like the elusive presence of God even among people who don’t believe in God and consider the whole religious enterprise as bankrupt and boring as it often is. And I mean saints—not plaster saints but that quite identifiable breed of human beings who are life-givers, bearers of grace.

*Some critics are not always accurate in their observations and opinions. Because you*
are labelled a “Christian writer,” do people try to read too much of one sort of theology or another into your writing?

What always makes me a little nervous about being labelled a Christian writer is not so much that people try to read one sort of theology or another into my books—if they do that, I don’t hear about it—but that people think that in my novels I am writing as a Christian propagandist. I am a Christian writer in the same sense that I am a male writer, a white writer, an American writer. All those categories clearly leave their mark both on me and on my books and so of course does my being a Christian. But except in the broadest sense, I am not trying to evangelize, let alone propagandize, in my novels but, like any other serious writer, simply to be as true as I can be to the experience of life as I have lived it including the experience of Christ.

You have stated that you write for an audience of “believing unbelievers,” but you are continually being requested to speak to Christian audiences, and a majority of your avid readers are Christians. Does this create any tension for you in your writing?

If it is true that the majority of my readers are Christian or at least generally speaking religious—and I suspect that is indeed the case—I certainly am not going to complain. A lot of the things I have to say are probably best understood by people who believe more or less as I do, and some of the critical things I have to say about the Church—particularly in the realm of preaching—are of course specifically aimed at a Church audience. On the other hand, in everything I write, I am thinking also of the people who have pretty much written religion off but who I think might at least consider it as a possibility again if somebody approached them with it in a fresh, interesting, somewhat off-beat way. People who don’t believe need to hear the ancient verities in a new way, and of course believers do too.

Is it true that there was some talk of a Bebb film or miniseries? Are any of your other novels going to be converted to film? Do you write with a consciousness for film?

The actor Ned Beatty, himself a Christian, has for some years had an option on the film rights to the Bebb books. He wants to play the part of Bebb himself and I think he would do a wonderful job. Among other things, he looks like Bebb. His problem is to raise enough money to finance the project. Movie-making is an expensive business. I don’t write my novels with an eye on Hollywood, but I sometimes fantasize about what good movies they would make if the right people got hold of them.

In the Bebb tetralogy, Bebb wants to reveal himself because if people could see the “shadow side of himself he would be healed and forgiven in ways that would have been possible in no other way.” Do you think this type of confession and openness is possible in today’s society, and particularly in the church, where perhaps it should be?
I think the extraordinary success of Alcoholics Anonymous and the various other twelve-step programs that have grown out of it show pretty conclusively that “confession and openness” as you call it are indeed possible in today's society. In my experience, it is often more in the church basement, where the twelve-step groups meet, than in the sanctuary upstairs that Christ is present and real healing takes place.

Many fiction writers are dealing with Christianity again in their work, but they often demythologize Christianity or add to it elements of Eastern religions. How tolerant do you feel we as traditional Christians should be of these changes? Should we try to identify particular writers as Christian, or is this finally an empty and impossible process?

The issue for me is not whether writers are Christian or what kind of Christians they are, but are they telling the truth about the way life is as they have found it. Whether they have experienced God in their lives or only the absence of God, they are in my books religious writers if they write honestly about what they have deeply felt and seen. The atheist Albert Camus, for instance, I think of as a profoundly religious writer. And so is the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh.

Have you read John Updike, Anne Tyler, John Irving, or Annie Dillard in terms of Christian faith?

I am a great admirer of the work of Annie Dillard. Her short book *Holy the Firm* is an almost unbearably eloquent and powerful treatment of the problem of theodicy. I also rejoiced in John Irving’s *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, which I consider a religious book in the best sense, i.e., in the sense that the reading of it is itself a religious experience.

In your writing you often mention your admiration for The Power and the Glory, King Lear, and The Brothers Karamazov. What do you value about these classics, and what characteristics make a book a classic, in your opinion?

All three of those works—different as they are from each other in countless ways—deal with what I have referred to as the elusive presence of God in this world. All three of them also face the terrible darkness of the world in which God makes himself present. They are all extraordinarily honest—affirming what they affirm but not for one moment suggesting that it can be done easily. As to the second part of the question—what makes a book a classic—I heard the other day about an English professor in an entirely secular university who, when asked the same question, paused for a few moments and then said that he supposed that a classic was a book that one way or another expressed the truth of Christ. Obviously he did not mean this in any narrow, parochial sense and I assume intended to include books written before the Christian era. It is as good a definition of a classic as any I know.
How do you view the task of the Christian college today? More specifically, what should be the function of literature classes in a Christian college setting?

The only Christian college I know at first hand is Wheaton where I taught for a semester and which I came to love. At their best they do what I think all such places should—they listen for Christ in everything that is studied there. If they were to start forcing things into a Christian mold or to avoid or bowdlerize subjects that challenged what they considered properly Christian, I would be very disappointed in them and very surprised. I can’t think of a better place to listen for Christ than in a literature class, though here the caveats are especially important.

At Calvin as well as in the Christian Reformed denomination we are in the midst of numerous debates concerning the interpretation of the Bible. Some want to take the Bible very literally, while others are trying to view the Bible in a different light. How do you think we should approach the Bible?

I think you should approach the Bible with the same reverence with which you would approach any great work of the human spirit. I think you should look in it for what is actually there rather than for what you believe is going to be there or what you think ought to be there or what other people have told you is there. Except insofar as it leads to tragic divisions within the religious community, I don’t think the question as to whether the opening chapters of Genesis, for instance, are to be read literally or otherwise is a question of first importance. What is important, it seems to me, is to read the Bible for the great light it sheds on how God has been and continues to be present in a world that seems so often to be godless and without hope and in our own lives, our own inner worlds as well.

We understand that you are currently working on a novel about a biblical character. What can you tell us about it? Also, what new ground do you hope to cover in your future work?

I have written a novel about the Biblical Jacob entitled *The Son of Laughter*. It is to be published next winter. As to what new ground I hope to cover, who knows? Maybe it will just be more of the same. I’m waiting to see.

As academic research on your work increases, what parts or messages from your books would you like to see featured, focused on, and remembered?

The parts that seem most important to the academics involved.

Editor’s note: Frederick Buechner will speak at Calvin on April 29, 1992, on the topic of religion and art.
Hear the Old Lady Breathe: a five act in miniature

1. hospice
Even yellow summer butterflies die.
People too, but not so nobly.
And never a Priest consulted as she
Feels the throes; mauls, coronary concussion;
Plain old age; brow furrowed new doctors re­
Peating the old doctors’ diagnoses.
So why get god and religion now just
To travel Beyond. Go, stick a bald head
Into the black, ask for directions. Then—
Ahgodthepain! We scream, felicitous
Voices don’t respond: not even slightly
Anechoic echoes of dead laughter.

2. the jest-scythe
Will I die, will I die, will I die, now?
Azrael: Boo! perhaps not this second.
Think of it as a near slip on ice in
Front of an almost naked TV vamp—
Ire at my own human ludicrousness.
Maudlin, maudlin, what an old fool I’ve been.
No, don’t leave, my dear, I feel loquacious.
Heethh, the lady breathes. See seething life moil,—
Sucked—oil nervously from the turtle-skinned corpse—
No; not even that: not a riddle, but a
Conundrum; puppy-piddle on the floor.

3. not John: a flower review
The Baptist preacher eulogized her when
She “entered into rest” and not death.
Not a paean from the chorus; flowers.
He said she was like god, with god because
She had always read People magazine.
I’d scour his denominational guise
But for Revelation 21: 8.

4. Freitag’s crux
How much hell do we need to feel the heat?
(Where is Venus? or Cupid-randied Dido
To repulse Aeneas?) Over briny Atlantic,
Hitler’s moustache is panagyrized in chants
By New Berlin’s not-so-new Right with
Bravado. It must be the beer. Beethoven’s ninth knew
Better. But he was deaf. Geography answers
Everything—(She could have been embraced by
Blind grandma-graces in Brahma’s budding bosom,
Minus personal worth and spatiality, had the
Stork airmailed her to some other place.)—
That’s what causes June Gulf of Mexico
Hurricanes. Perhaps Botswana’s plains could
Best foster innocent life: Lions’ leaden jaws only
Kill fleeing hyenas when they’re bored.
Elsewhere, tofu looks like gook-puke.
Give a good Italian fist-fig to those
Japs ‘a la Vanni Fucci.

5. Exodus  [minus deus ex machina]
The woman in hell, (Not too close to the
Edge, there; the hideous harridan can reach this
Far.) hating her own soul she croaks, The things
I see, won’t you help me!—with clarity, the
Times when she gladly spat in God’s face and
Loved it or schemed to with all alacrity—
I’d carve my bulbs out myself but my fingers;
Eternal torment—

—O Judicious God,
I am wroth with Man
Who has wrecked these generations—
All of them.
And we,
Hors de combat,
With Adam’s covenant, both leather-bound testaments . . .
Hear the old lady breathe
In Hell.

finis

Timothy Ladd
Several years ago I was hiking in the Tetons with a well known mountain guide. We took a lunch break in a wondrous canyon, surrounded on all sides by magnificent wildflowers in full bloom. I had recently read that one of America's most famous climbers and pioneers of many desperate and classic ascents professed to be a Christian. Since my guide knew this famous climber, I asked him about the circumstances surrounding the conversion. He sneeringly replied that the famous climber had joined the "Cargo cult." Since I was unaware of this rather exotic sounding cult, I asked him to explain.

During World War II, the guide said, the United States military mistakenly but regularly parachuted supplies to a blissful group of natives living on a small island in the South Pacific (they knew nothing of wars or rumors of wars); they grew especially fond of canned peaches. Once a week they would look to the eastern skies for the return
of the cargo plane which would miraculously deliver their tin bounty. They began to look upon these deliveries as a sign of favor with the gods. Upon termination of the war however, the deliveries ceased. But, like Pavlov’s dogs, they regularly gathered at the appointed time to await the “sign of the gods’ favor.” According to my guide, becoming a Christian is tantamount to joining the cargo cult—one must be benighted, misinformed, obscurantist and credulous while waiting for a messenger of a non-existent God.

We have all had the fear of joining the cargo cult. Although we have committed ourselves to Jesus Christ, we are often anxious that we await his return as the natives awaited the return of the cargo planes—benighted and misinformed.

In the book of Psalms there is more of an emphasis on hoping for, yearning for, and seeking God than on certain or infallible knowledge of God. Consider, for example:

I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me? ...”
Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my savior and my God. (Psalm 42)

Both an angel and the Lord appeared to Gideon to declare that he would be the mighty warrior to free the Israelites from the oppression of the Midianites (Judges 6). But his clan was the weakest and he was the least of his clan, so he questioned God’s choice of a leader. In response, God gave Gideon a sign—a fire miraculously flared from a rock which consumed a portion of bread and meat. Now convinced that the message was from God, he built an altar to the Lord. As the Midianites and their allies gathered strength and amassed at their borders to attack Israel, Gideon, full of the spirit of the Lord (v. 34), asked God to give him one more sign. He placed a wool fleece on the threshing floor and asked the Lord to cover it with dew while leaving the ground around it dry; the Lord complied. But one fleece was not enough to convince Gideon, so he “fleeced” the Lord a second time; again the Lord complied. Then Gideon went out and defeated his enemies. It took the call of an angel and the Lord, a miracle, and two fleecings to convince Gideon, hero of the faith, of God’s promise. How can we be expected not to doubt when our fleece returns dry so many times?

Abraham—the father of our faith. Abraham believed God’s promise that he would make Abraham into a great nation. God also promised Abraham a child to be his heir. St. Paul comments: “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Romans 4: 3). After receiving this promise the father of our faith lied twice to foreign kings in order to spare his own life, claiming that his beautiful wife was his sister and allowing the kings to sleep with her. Abraham believed God. Rather than wait for a child from his own wife, as the Lord had promised, he slept with his servant, Hagar, and she conceived and bore a child called Ishmael. Abraham believed God. When God appeared to Abraham again and told him that he would have a child
through Sarah, his ninety-year-old wife, he fell down laughing in unbelief. God said that the child would be called Isaac—“he laughs.” Abraham believed God.

Nowadays people treat faith as something easily acquired and maintained, not as a lifelong process. Both intellectually and morally, society downplays the genuine struggle of faith development. As Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher observes in Fear and Trembling: “In those old days it was different, then faith was a task for a whole lifetime...” The erroneous modern view of faith is manifest in his ironic comparison between the comprehension of Hegel, the monumentally difficult philosopher, and Abraham, the father of our faith: “It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, but to understand Abraham is a trifle. To go beyond Hegel is a miracle, but to get beyond Abraham is the easiest thing of all.” The resolution of doubt, the embracing of faith, includes the entire individual, heart as well as mind. Commitment to the person of Christ entails much more than understanding and believing a set of propositions; genuine faith involves the entire character of an individual. Faith is a lifelong process and development which intimately and necessarily involves the complete transformation of the whole person. Fundamentally it involves a terrifying and total denial of self. Kierkegaard excerpts the title of his book from Paul’s sobering and serious injunction to “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” The true Christian can never say, as does the rich man in the parable, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease.” Total fellowship with God and complete sanctification are goals of the Christian life and are only partly present realities in this finite existence. For Christians, there can be no genuine Sabbath, no final point of rest until they have arrived at their ultimate destination. When our faith has withstood its tests, God will grant the Sabbath’s rest.

It is of meager comfort to recognize that atheists as well must remain uncertain of their fundamental commitments. We live in an age of uncertainty. As A. Maillot writes in Credo: “To be sure, I’m not proposing to condemn or even to deny the name of Christians to those who find the resurrection of Christ a stumbling block...if only for the simple reason that just like the apostles, like all Christians in every age, like the Athenians and the Sadducees, I too feel my reason stiffen, my intelligence sneer, and my common sense murmur, when I confess that the third day he rose again from the dead. Conversely, it’s probable that when the same phrase is pronounced, an unknown longing, a mad hope, quivers in the heart of the unbeliever. So much so that it would take a good deal of cunning to say who believes fully in the resurrection of Christ and who does not. There’s not a believer in the church who does not ask him- or herself, ‘Is this possible?’ nor an unbeliever who doesn’t mutter, ‘Couldn’t this be possible?’” In an age of uncertainty, both the atheist and the theist must have the anxiety of doubt.

Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth-century poet, writes of the retreat of faith and the spread of doubt in his generation. This lack of faith is no cause for celebration as the world now lacks a personal, moral, loving, and redeeming center which would ultimately reconcile all things. There is now, he writes elsewhere, no place to lay his head. In the classic poem “Dover Beach,” subtitled “The Eternal Note of Sadness,” Arnold hears the sadness of silence in the crashing of waves. He laments in the last two stanzas that the sea of faith is no longer “at the full,” and its loss is a cause for
The Sea of Faith,
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-winds, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confus'd alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The Christian, of all people, should be honest about the plight of human beliefs. But Christians are curiously silent on the topic of honest and sincere doubt. It is for many an unspeakable sin. The Christian should heed the comment of Leslie Stephen in “An Agnostic's Apology:” “Why, when no honest man will deny in private that every ultimate problem is wrapped in the profoundest mystery, do honest men proclaim in pulpits that unhesitating certainty is the duty of the most foolish and ignorant? Is it not a spectacle to make the angels laugh?”

The Christian faith does not engender doubt merely because of the intellectual doubts that have been raised by modern atheism. Christian belief speaks not only to our mind, but also to our hearts. It declares a moral Lord of the universe who has no penchant for individual autonomy: “Ye are not your own; ye were bought with a price.” While we may desire and require forgiveness, we have little interest in surrendering our autonomy. God is not only perceived as lover, but also as threat; not merely Savior, but also Lord. If the Biblical portrait of humanity is correct, then we must advance from despising God to revering him to loving him. We may, out of self-interest, desire the benefits of belief in God, but our heart of hearts rebels against the constraints imposed by his divine will. The process of sanctification is a lifelong struggle to learn to love God because he is good and worthy of our love and trust and not because of the perceived benefits. In order for us to proceed to genuine love of God, he must break through the hoary crust of self.

We may also doubt that we have committed ourselves to the one true God. This doubt comes in many forms. Some may feel that if they had not grown up in Western culture, presumably of Christian parents, in “one nation under God” (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), they might instead be Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, or Hindu.
Is it merely a fluke of birth that makes Christianity seem so true and Jesus so real? Is our religious conviction merely a historical accident, like having a southern accent if one were raised in the south? Our culture not only favors Judeo and especially Christian beliefs, but it prepares us to prefer dying and rising gods, forgiveness and sanctification, baptism and Judeo-Christian moral beliefs. Are we Christians simply because of our socio-cultural upbringing?

Blaise Pascal writes of humanity’s contradictory nature of belief—that we are both believers and unbelievers, desiring certainty but always unsure of our deepest commitments. Pascal’s insight into the human psyche is revealed in the following: “This is what I see and what troubles me. I look on all sides, and I see only darkness everywhere. Nature presents to me nothing which is not a matter of doubt and concern. If I saw nothing there which revealed a Divinity, I would come to a negative conclusion; if I saw everywhere the signs of a Creator, I would remain peacefully in faith. But, seeing too much to deny and too little to be sure, I am in a state to be pitied.” Unlike the animals, who care little for their future and are unconcerned for their souls, people are conscious and self-conscious. We are aware of our needs and desires but are unconvinced that they will ultimately be satisfied. Our consciousness and self-consciousness extends well beyond the ken of mere survival. We see too much to deny and too little to be sure. We are the most pitiful of all creatures.

My father suddenly died only days before Thanksgiving. I had not seen him since the preceding Christmas and was eagerly anticipating the holiday visit. Only two days before we were to arrive, my brother called and reluctantly delivered the news that my father had died. Rather than celebrate the Thanksgiving feast together, we prepared to mourn my father’s death. The first time I had seen him in nearly a year was the viewing in the funeral home. Prior to the viewing, I experienced denial—believing that when I returned home, he would be sitting in his usual chair, wearing his favorite flannel shirt, watching the Lions football game and that we would go out for a walk in his garden for the lone cauliflower that had survived fall’s frosty mornings. Instead my first glimpse of him was of his body lying in a fancy lacquered box, “resting peacefully,” they say, as if he were asleep and soon to rise. Drawing closer, I saw his ashen face, touched his hardened body, and felt the lack of the living’s warmth. Denial no longer possible, I felt the sharp pain of my dad’s death. I was gripped with the sad loss of my father. And rather than rejoicing that he was “in a better place now,” that “he died doing what he wanted,” that “he had lived a full life,” I was convinced that death had finally won, and that the eternal separation of father and son had begun. Never before had I experienced such a profound sense of unbelief. The Apostle Paul was wrong—death did have it victory and its sting; I mourned as one who had no hope. My father was simply his body and there he lay—stiff and lifeless, forever.

My contradictory nature, my divided self, was revealed (if only to me) only days after my father’s death when I was asked to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. Whereas I had recently been plunged into the deepest depths of unbelief, now I was called upon to make expression of my faith. And so I spoke of my father:

“This afternoon I am in the unenviable and unfamiliar position of publicly mourning for my father. We are all here to grieve: son for father, daughter for father, my mother
for her husband, Keith for his grandfather, and friend for friend. Of my many regrets on this day, one stands out: that my children will never know their grandfather.

"Indulge me as I remember my father: kind, compassionate, longsuffering without grumbling or complaining, and devoted to his family. There are few here whom he did not go out of his way to help. He carried with him and lived by this saying: 'I shall pass through this world but once. Any good that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.' He was, indeed, a good man. Perhaps his greatest legacy, his family aside, was his work at the Lincoln Community School. Long before black was beautiful, my dad demonstrated (more in deed than word) that no man ought to be deprived of his rights to education, occupation, meal, shelter or play simply because of the color of his skin. Throughout the turbulent times of the sixties, he went to Kalamazoo's north side early in the morning to administer the breakfast program, the job skills training program, to ensure that his friends received a decent education, and to organize recreation. If my children see in me any kindness, compassion, longsuffering, devotion to my family and a commitment to justice and fairness that pays no heed to the color of a man's skin, then they surely will see my father.

"God granted a unique glimpse into the divine-human relationship through fatherhood when he said, 'Our Father, who art in heaven ... ' For better and often for worse, He has granted the general right to learn of divine love for His children through the frail earthly institution of fatherly love for their children. I say God granted us this right; he also gave me the special privilege of learning that love through my dad. As I have mourned the loss of my father, I have considered how much more he would have mourned the loss of me or any of his children: not because I am so worthy of his love—for surely I am not—but because he loved so much. In this day of broken homes, child abuse, and utter self-concern, I am thankful that my earthly model of fatherly love was no less than my dad; 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name ... ."

"Our heavenly father suffered the loss of his only son and thus gave us new life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." We embrace, this morning, Christ's promise that he has gone ahead of my father to prepare a room for him in the heavenly mansion. We affirm the faith in the words from Handel's Messiah:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.
And tho' worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.
For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.

"I believe that at the heavenly banquet Christ himself will 'dwell among us and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; and all things will be made new.' And my dad, no longer able to constrain his love, no mere bystander he, will run to us, embrace us, and with Christ will wipe away every tear. Amen.

John Calvin writes of a convinced and certain faith, of belief without wavering. However, he quickly proceeds to add:

Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own
unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all.

How does Calvin attempt to resolve the believer’s dilemma? In this earthly life, the believer is a divided self, both a sinner and a saint:

This variation arises from imperfection of faith, since in the course of the present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith. Hence arise those conflicts; when unbelief, which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith that has been inwardly conceived.

While Calvin sees perfection in faith without doubt as a goal for which Christians ought to hope and towards which we ought to strive, he is never insensitive to the believer’s inevitable doubts.

Why do so many Christians require that we be perfect in belief? Why do doubters not feel welcome? The Scriptures teach that we are to believe without doubting. But just as we are not perfect in practice, so too we are not perfect in belief. In the present reality of the Christian life, just as wickedness and righteousness are present in the same person, so are belief and unbelief; the flip side of belief is doubt.

Hence, we need to deal with one another in belief as God deals with us in our sinning—we ought to relate to one another in grace and not justice.

I was surprised to learn recently that my nine-year-old niece still believes in Santa Claus. My mother-in-law told me that my niece never questions Santa’s existence because she is afraid that if she does, she might no longer receive any presents. This seemed to me to capture Christians’ reluctance to honestly express their doubts. Any manifestation of doubt is disdained because God will deny us his gifts. So doubt is repressed rather than expressed. Why do we so often choose to relate to God as my nine-year-old niece relates to Santa?

The Christian self-help manuals often offer ten steps which, if fastidiously followed, will guarantee that our prayers will move mountains, businesses will prosper, perfect children will be raised through proper discipline, we will correctly understand Scripture and set the date for the return of Christ, and we will become giants of faith. Can similar steps be followed to easily deliver us from the pits of doubt? These manuals treat doubt as we would a headache, broken arm, or athlete’s foot. Simple following of the doctor’s orders, quick application of the healing balm, or the popping of a pill will relieve both symptoms and malady. But doubt is really more like arthritis, near sightedness, or the common cold. While these are not necessarily terminal ailments, they are not fully curable either. Some of their symptoms can be masked for some of the time, but they manifest themselves, sometimes quite powerfully, at some time or another. We must simply learn to live with these ailments. But learning to live with them is not something we desire or welcome—it is like learning to live with pain. And so too with doubt; we ought not relish this malady, for it surely is a source of a
different kind of pain. But with it, we must make our do.

I am speaking here of the doubt that comes from belief, not the doubt of unbelief. This doubt is endemic of belief in God and is distinguished from obstinate unbelief. The Bible, when it speaks of unbelief, refers to a hardness of heart, a stubbornness, an unwillingness to trust, hope, or desire God. The sincere doubt of believers is quite different: it is an expression of anguish over humanity's wretched believing condition. It is to cry out, with Job: “Oh, that I might see God face to face.”

The church should understand that each of its members is only partially sanctified in belief and ought to provide sympathetic care and support to those who honestly express their doubts. The doubter ought not be looked on with pity, derision or fear, but as a fellow struggler on life's way. So the Christian community should pray not only that we become good parents, get good grades on exams, not get angry with our employer or spouse, that God will bring justice and peace to this broken world, but also that the faith of our broken souls will be strengthened. The Scriptures teach of God’s faithful love in the midst of our faithlessness: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Matthew 12: 20). The church should model God’s patient and steadfast love in its relation to doubters. It is the task of the church to pray for the gift of faith to increase—without demeaning those for whom it prays. This means honest recognition of the lack of faith in the lives of every Christian, including ourselves. We should be the last to snuff out the smoldering wick of faith. And it entails a willingness to pray for and support doubting brethren—it is not the church’s task to cast the first stone. It is, however, her task to embrace those who have been assailed, even by pebbles of doubt.

In *The Four Quartets*, the great Christian poet T. S. Eliot writes:

These are only hints and guesses
Hints followed by guesses;
and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Maybe the Egyptians Had It Right

Maybe the Egyptians had it right
they said
Time was a snake with its tail to bite
to me
life is a circle with each day a web

what we enjoy today
we inflict tomorrow

my right hand is caressed by him
but you feel the back of my left

what is left
to ease the sorrow.

Lynelle Regnerus
Wendy Levy
Thank you to those who entered the contest. The winning pictures below were colored by Maureen DeHaan, Mark Mihevic, Derek Huisjen, Sunmee Jo, Dan Emshoff, the Griggs Girls, and Brian Brunsteeg. Each winning contestant will receive a personal certificate of achievement that can be picked up anytime at President Diekema’s office.