Dialogue

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You Can Dress Him Up...

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A Gentler Reign

“This place is intense, powerful, holy, erotic, stark, and lush, and always grand. I feel all of that in me at times here. Erotic, intense, laidback, funky, flowing, churning, churning, gurgling, powerful, weak, afraid, fearless, and on and on, the river keeps on flowing.”

-Lauren Crux, on a rafting trip down the Grand Canyon
Women in the Wilderness

It is night, humid and still. I’m lying in a shelter that I’ve rigged between two trees with some rope and a tarp. I’m hoping that I’ll stay dry, and cursing myself for choosing to forgo the weight of a tent. When the storm comes she is fierce and violent. I hear a wind that makes me shiver and thunder that perforates the sky. A wild exhilaration comes over me and I pull on a parka over naked, clammy skin and slide awkwardly out of the only gap between the tarp and the ground. A night like a holocaust shrieks in my face and the intensity of the sights and smells and sounds nearly lifts me off my feet. I slog across the muddy forest floor to the edge of the lake some yards beyond the trees. It was smooth as glass hours ago. Peering out the hood of my jacket I think how vivid everything is seeming, and how glad I am to be alone. As I am sliding down a too-steep bank closer to the water’s edge, a clap of thunder picks me up by the scruff of my neck and drops me on my backside. The involuntary yell scared out of the pit of my stomach gives me away: I am frightened. I dash back to the tarp when a finger of lightning strikes the lake without permission and the lake and all the trees around it are suddenly busy glowing. I stop, transfixed. For a moment, it looks like a piece of heaven has pushed right up through the ground.

In my shelter again I shiver from wet cold and from humiliation. I remember my bravado at the trailhead a few days ago, how I nixed a tent and checked my list of skills, confident that I understood nature well enough to coexist for a few days. Well, I know her better now that I have remembered something. She could eat me alive, this mother of mine. One bolt of lightning, a glacial avalanche, a swirly undertow, a hungry bear, and my common sense and Gore-Tex footwear would disappear like proverbial smoke. Here, I tell my awed and humbled self, here is strength and passion unchecked by tears.

But then I am driving back home, leaving the lake and the sheltering trees behind, and I am driving into a haze hovering over the city in the distance. Balled up Soft Taco wrappers and rusty car parts litter the sides of the road. I pass through the section of forest south of the road that has been craftily clear-cut by the BLM. Cleverly hidden just beyond the scenic highway driver’s view, a raw and bloody wound mars once tender curves. It begins to rain again, but this time the rain sounds more to me like weeping.
Lately there is much writing from women about the Feminine, what it means, what it brings us, how claiming it can undo molds and stereotypes and enrich us, women and men both. The Feminine does not belong to women alone, but to all of us. It is about a way of life that embraces paradox and mystery, strength and fragility, intuition and wildness—a sensitivity that does not cave in to the spiritual deadening of the post-everything world. It is wrapped up in an encounter, a sensuous and holy one, with the earth; a mirroring of ourselves and what we hold sacred in the natural world. I glimpse hints of this spirit in myself. It ripples beneath a veneer of control and detachment, but bursts out from time to time in shouts and cries that ring with old growth grandeur. Admitting to raw passion in myself, and knowing it must be in others, I tremble; claiming it both shocks and illuminates me. I am a shining, glowing lake.

Part of the lure of the Feminine wildness is this confidence and gusto. But just as integral is the way it gives me strength of a different sort—strength tempered by weakness. When men and women seize this sort of strength—we have been too long denied it—and when we nurture it in each other, we can be gendered beings interacting in a new paradigm, not one defined by rusty old rules or rigidly defined rewards. The language of hierarchy and the grammar that controls it will never be finally liberating, whether spoken by women or men. It stands at the crossroads of relationship like a propped-up graven image, just substantial enough to bar connection. But thinking about strength in a new way, fraught with passion rather than power, we gain momentum and promise. Thinking about strength in this context of weakness, I hope. There is no room in me, no energy, to grip life with bloody jaws all the time. There are times when the wildest, fiercest bear crawls into her den to lick her wounds or wait out the storm, or just sleep all winter long. Such vulnerability strengthens me, us all. Weakness does an amazing thing by turning upside down the caricatures that power etches. Like a swiftly rolling stone, it shatters idols. It brings us all to our feet of clay, and then our iron knees.
She put the things she meant to say
    in a crockpot
    to simmer
and in the same way
    that celery loses its crunch,
the phrases became soft and muddled.

It was love and anger
    all stewed
with salty blood
    for boiling.

When he came home
    and lifted the lid,
he breathed the steam and let it swirl thick in his lungs
    saw his reflection in the bubbling liquid
closed his eyes and felt the wet heat collect on his eyelids
    her tears became his.

Knowing he was hungry,
she filled his bowl. A bowl over full.
On her way to his place, it sloshed red and warm on her wrists
dribbled down
down onto the carpet
    aiming to stain.

He ate reverently,
each bite a word soaked in steaming life,
flavored with new leaves simmered grayish,
He ate till spoon and bowl became intimate in nakedness.
He ate till he was half sick.
He asked for more.

He waited till she had set the next bowl in front of him
    before he whispered the words raw.

She laughed at the drama and fed the rest of the soup to the dog.
About twenty years ago, on a wall poster at Trinity College, I read a sentence attributed to Goethe: *As soon as you learn to trust yourself, you will know how to live.* It startled me. Something about it was definitely wrong. But it also fascinated me. The words stayed with me, a kind of de facto motto for my life, though not because I chose them, as an evangelical might choose a “life verse,” nor because I understood or affirmed them. They just stayed with me.

These words set off loud, insistent warning bells. *Trust yourself?* The word “self” figured importantly among the emotionally loaded s-words defining the battle for my childhood soul: on the one side, the fiendish forces of sin, sex, the satanic; on the other, ranged against them, salvation, sanctification, the spiritual. When I say them aloud, the former seem much more interesting. Thicker, mediating a more substantial reality. Sinister, but enticing. (“Sin is sweet,” hissed Fyodor Karamazov.) Dangerous.

“Self” belonged in the “sin” group. It was me, the soldest, deepest part of me, construed as criminal, bent on evil. Self could rear its ugly head in almost any situation, shouting its demands, its greedy fingers reaching, clutching for such delights as it could shove into its devouring mouth. I had to be on my guard—against myself. I could draw on certain resources as helps on my lonely watch. A plethora of Bible stories in which those who faltered before the onslaughts of self were duly chastened, by falling walls or crumbling pillars or flashes of fire and brimstone out of the heavens, accompanied by words of terrifying finality: “I never knew you. Depart from me....” Choruses like “Jesus, others and you, that is the way to spell JOY” offered a handy guide for decision-making in the warfare against the self. First, what would Jesus want me to do? Second, what do others need from me? I’m last. Which means I’m virtually not at all, since the first and second steps tend to exhaust the available time and energy.

Douglas Frank is a professor at the Oregon Extension, an off-campus program associated with Calvin and accredited by Houghton College in New York. He lives in a small community in the mountains outside of Ashland, Oregon, where he and his students read and discuss history, philosophy, theology, and anything else they encounter that interests them. Doug wrote this essay for OE, the journal of the Oregon Extension, where it also appears this month. Dialogue thanks him for permission to reprint it here.

The Rest of the Story

The advantages of this construction of the self for managing the challenges of aberrant childhood behavior are clear enough to suggest that they, and not fidelity to the biblical narrative, may have been the originating inspiration. If you wish to shape a child to do your will, rather than the child’s own, delineate carefully between the child’s self and the part of the child’s spirit that can hear or identify with Jesus and with others. Throw all the things you don’t like into the canister marked “Self”, mark it with a big black X (or a skull and crossbones), and urge the child, under threat of doom, to keep the lid tightly clamped. Throw all the things you do like into the canisters marked “Jesus” and “Others”, and urge the child to draw on these and these alone. Odds are you’ll have a pretty compliant child.

But you might want to watch out for a thinly suppressed anger or a slightly depressed conformity to break out as time goes by. Because the price of this tripartite division is the isolating of the deepest part of the self in the darkness of its own canister, where it is lonely and needy and angry without knowing it for a very long time. With the deepest part so buried away, so guarded, that the place in us where we try to listen to Jesus and others and identify with their stories will of necessity be a surface place. We learn to be compliant in order to keep the peace, to avoid rejection, to evade moral judgment and punishment, not because we have really heard Jesus, or others. Not because in our own depths we have recognized in Jesus, or one another, a lonely, hurting, human soul like ourselves, and felt drawn. Our depths are bad. We can love Jesus and others only by turning away from our own deepest places. From ourselves. No wonder so many struggle so hard to feel love for God and others, to feel close to Jesus and others. We have closed off that which feels most deeply; and conjured up the prescribed feelings instead. We live at a distance, often an adversarial distance, from...
ourselves. And thus, since the self is never really engaged, we live at a distance from Jesus and others as well.

I could describe this life-at-a-distance as a kind of deadness. It happens when the need for goodness dictates that we distrust all that lies compressed within the canister marked “Self.” That canister holds not only terrifying possibilities for misbehavior and mayhem; it also represents the wellsprings of our life, the source of our vibrancy, our possibilities for growth. It is the site of any experience we will ever have of faith, hope and love. To turn away from it is to sentence ourselves, quite unwittingly, to death at an early age. But notice: this is a question, not an answer with the finality of even Billy Graham’s relatively tame fire-and-brimstone sermons. And it’s followed by a remarkable image and a startling prediction:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’

The chapter has been preparing to snap something closed on these men. The judgment appears final. But before he quits, Jesus is opening things up again. The last sentence is mysterious. It goes in one direction, resolutely, but then it goes another. It heads down the road of judgment, of a finality from which there is no appeal. But then it turns almost effortlessly in mid-journey, opens up possibilities, hints at a continuation, implies a process that is on-going. It beckons us into an undefined but hopeful future.

You could almost say it’s relaxed.

Canadian scholar James Breech has found this same quality in what he calls the core phonodramatic stories of Jesus. We generally call these stories “The Prodigal Son,” “The Good Samaritan,” “The Unjust Steward,” “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” and “The Great Supper.”

In Jesus and Postmodernism, Breech claims that Jesus’ stories are different in one respect from every other story that we have available for study in the western tradition during the six hundred years surrounding Jesus’ life: they lack a proper ending. They don’t end, as stories normally do, with a final sequence correlated to the beginning sequence of the story, bringing that sequence to closure.
Perhaps that is why we're so inexplicably drawn to stories that end with a finality of moral judgment. They offer the illusion of power. They entice us with the promise that we can conduct our lives so as to end up on the right side of judgment, so as to avoid the verdict of "guilty" and the sentence of doom.

Breech offers plenty of examples of ancient stories that feature travelers falling into misfortune, plots paralleling “The Good Samaritan.” They illustrate his point: “Every single extant story, Greek, Roman, or Jewish, exhibits closure, or if closure is lacking in the events of the story, the narrator intervenes to award approbation or reprobation to the characters.” Only Jesus’ stories are different: where you expect to find an ending, you find a gap.

John Linton notices that many of his Christian students are “white-knucklers.” They pilot the ship of their lives with hands tightly clutched on the captain’s wheel. He tells them Jesus wasn’t a white-knuckler.

The winter before Marge and I were married, we drove from Buffalo to Nashville to visit her sister’s family. For some reason known only to careless youth, we drove back to Buffalo at night in a howling snowstorm. We crept along a slippery interstate through most of Ohio, blinded by pelting snow and the slushy wakes of passing truckers, peering frantically into the white in hopes of finding the elusive center-line. In my mind’s eye, we’re both leaning toward the windshield, hour after endless hour, my hands clutching the wheel, Marge’s clutching each other, or her knees. We’re white-knuckling it.

What was it that made us tighten our grip? It was knowing that only one false move separated us from disaster. One misperception of the center-line, one misjudgment about passing a semi, one unexpected patch of ice or spray of slush, one panicked over-correction, and the jig would be up. “Reality” would come crashing in with its potentially final judgment. Each slight turn of the steering wheel threatened that moment of closure. Our white knuckles signaled an automatic response to life in a rigid, unforgiving moral universe, a universe in which all judgments potentially kill.

Who can relax in that sort of universe? On the other hand, we’re strangely drawn to that sort of universe, and perhaps not just for the purpose of childrearing. That’s what our taste in stories seems to suggest. Humans tell stories, and their stories—whether “made-up” or “the truth,” like the stories about our lives or the histories of our civilizations—have endings. These endings invariably embody a finality of judgment. Breech offers a variety of scholarly perspectives on the closure required of stories: every one of them suggests that storytelling has to do with our taste for judgment. We seem drawn to stories that leave us with the ability “to judge who wins and who loses, who is rewarded and who punished, who succeeds and who fails.” And when we constitute our own individual or group lives as stories, to cite Jacques Derrida, we do so because we feel both the need and the desire to pass judgment on ourselves, to give an accounting of ourselves, both to ourselves and to one another. Closure serves that need.

Of course, Derrida believes this need (and desire) is deeply rooted in a Western obsession with control. Perhaps that is why we’re so inexplicably drawn to stories that end with a finality of moral judgment. They offer the illusion of power. They entice us with the promise that we can conduct our lives so as to end up on the right side of judgment, so as to avoid the verdict of “guilty” and the sentence of doom. So while these stories exhaust us, they also exhilarate us. Perhaps it was this
exhilarating illusion that allowed me, for years after that nerve-wracking night in wintry Ohio, to remember it fondly. I had dodged an entire fusillade of silver bullets, and escaped unscathed. Not guilty. What an adept and masterful driver I must be.

But in the moment, I was a nervous wreck.

We read William Stringfellow from time to time in our fall program—a puzzling, challenging, sometimes infuriating writer. Until his death in 1985, he hammered away, in a uniquely incisive prose style, at his essential insight: that the world of our time, particularly America in our time, is caught in the stranglehold of death. The task for Christians, he wrote, is to live in hope as aliens in Babylon:

*Hope is the reliance upon grace in the face of death; the issue is that of receiving life as a gift, not as reward and not as a punishment; hope is living constantly, patiently, expectantly, resiliently, joyously in the efficacy of the Word of God.*

But Stringfellow knew what stands in the way of Christians accepting life as a gift, instead of as reward or punishment: our persistence in grounding our ethical lives in a claim to possess sure knowledge of the judgment of God. It is not ours to know the judgment of God in specific cases, he wrote. We must not seek assurance before we act that God will judge our act good or right. Such a quest, he thought, betrayed “an unseemly anxiety for justification quite out of step with a biblical life-style that dares in each and every event to trust the grace of God.”

These words come as a shock to me and to most of my students, each time we read them. We are moralists. We were weaned on stories with closure—Bible stories (appropriately interpreted), fairy tales, lessons from history, cautionary sermons. We live in a world of numerous daily intermediate finalities, in the shadow of a final finality. We are hemmed in by the menacing noise of gavels, large and small, coming down all around us, all the time. We must be sure we are right in each and every act, and that means that we must know the will of the Judge before moving forward confidently. This Judge sits in our peripheral vision, commenting (often just below his breath, so we cannot quite make it out) on the shape of our lives. We lean forward, peering through a glass darkly, straining to discern the right and evade the wrong, alternately exhausted by the necessity and exhilarated by the opportunity for controlling our lives in slippery weather. Our knuckles shine.

Stringfellow says: loosen up. No decision and no deed can be confidently charted as a second-guessing of God’s will. As Christians we confront the same limits as anyone: we know nothing of “the specifics of the historicity of God’s judgment.” But Stringfellow hears freedom in this, not despair. For while we know nothing of the specific judgment of God on this word or that deed, we do know the character of God’s judgment. We know God’s judgment is finally merciful and forgiving. Our task, then, is to uphold “the freedom of God as judge” rather than to determine ahead of time the specifics of that judgment in relation to our course of action. (133). In so doing, we inhabit our own freedom as well.

*The freedom of God as judge*—is this what Jesus was doing when he told stories without endings, or when he reopened stories which had seemed to end with finality? And if we took Martin Luther’s advice to read the Bible as if it were everywhere about Jesus (rather than about our projections of a God apart from Jesus), would we stumble upon a theme that we might have overlooked in our insistent moralizing? Would the closure we had assigned our most familiar stories—say the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah—show themselves up as our own creations, rather than as the intentions of the text?

One of the favorite texts of our Sunday morning Bible study is Ezekiel 16. Here the nuttiest of the biblical prophets tells a story about the faithfulness of God to an unfaithful people, Jerusalem.
Ezekiel writes a rich narrative of birth and nurture, love and marriage, unfaithfulness and rage and judgment. By the middle of the chapter, the mood resembles Jesus' denunciations of the Pharisees. Even Sodom, that haughty and abominable city, is "more in the right" than God's chosen people.

But suddenly the mood changes and an opening, not unlike the one we observed in Matthew 23, appears. It begins abruptly with "I will restore the fortunes of Sodom" and winds itself out over ten verses to end almost as abruptly: "I will establish my covenant with you and you shall know that I am Yahweh when I forgive you all that you have done, says Yahweh." The door that seemed to have been slammed shut with such words as "I will requite your deeds upon your head" reopens. More unexpectedly, the door that seemed to have been shut when God brought down fire and brimstone on Sodom in the Genesis account also reopens.

All of our certainties about the final judgment of the Sodomites must be revised, and their symbolism at the center of our incessantly moralizing lives abandoned. Because the Bible is reminding us of the freedom of the judgment of God. A freedom that blows through the nice neat moral rooms we make of our lived worlds and rearranges the furniture. In the process, the windows open to a future where all the air blows fresher than anything we have ever breathed before.

Now is perhaps not a good time for an evangelical to raise a critique of evangelical moralism. The specter of nihilism, mirrored in the perceived lowering of both private and public morality since the 1960s and celebrated in the citadels of intellect by Nietzsche's belated postmodern offspring, has scared us badly. Not to mention what's happening to our kids. Our response to fear and godlessness is to reach for fresh doses of moralism in order to restore the exhilarating (though white-knuckled) illusion of control. This sets us apart from Jesus, who seemed to know a secret about the judgment of God that kept him from yearning for that sort of control. But it doesn't set us apart from our evangelical forbearers, in whose minds the judgment of God of their loss of title to America, a title they considered rightfully their own. Moralism is the staple of our diet, the only recipe we can imagine for making people good.

It is too early to say whether the surprising political strength of the moralism of the right will translate itself into real social or moral change across American society, any more than did the evanescent visibility of the evangelical left. But in the meantime, it has been quite successful at generalizing a climate of fear and retributive vengeance within evangelical circles. It has vastly delimited the possibilities for honest conversation among evangelicals, substituting ideology for dialogue and a doctrinal checklist for spirited theological exploration. The evangelical outcry against "political correctness" cleverly distracts from the manifold hidden coercions governing its own discourse.

Moral Relativism is the current bogeyman. Even though it's an abstraction, it's one that makes us quiver. Hearing its fearsome taunts, we thrust forward not a vulnerable human like the youthful David, or even the One who suffers on Golgotha, but our equally fearsome Goliath: Moral Absolutism. That's also an abstraction, but one that seems to trigger a comforting sense of safety and rightness. It's a false comfort, I believe, binding on us "heavy burdens, hard to bear,"
making of us proselytes of the Pharisees and “twice as much a child of hell” as they themselves (Matthew 23). So though we cannot imagine it, perhaps Jesus is beckoning specifically to us, as a mother hen to her confused chicks, presaging a time when we too, moldering in our forsaken and desolate moralistic house, will say, in a burst of freedom, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

At which time, perhaps, we will relax.

In the meantime, though, we evangelicals will suspect any voice that casts doubt on the efficacy or biblical fidelity of moral exertion. We will warn that chicks who let down their guard and rest beneath their mother’s wings, who nest in such strange security as is offered by the name of the Lord, will doubtless throw the proper love of God and of other human beings to the winds, unleashing the whirlwind of Moral Relativism with its carte blanche for bad behavior. We will predict that such a chick would no doubt take as its motto: “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Brother Paul might interrupt, with wearied impatience: by no means! Then he might try painstakingly, once again, to invite us to step out afresh onto the road we cannot imagine in advance, where love grows from the freedom to be the persons we are, a freedom vouchsafed only by the faithfulness of God, experienced only in the trusting relationship such faithfulness animates.

But our ears are not open to this good news, any more (or for any longer) than were the ears of the Galatians or the Corinthians. We believe our moralism sets us apart as exemplary Christians, when it merely confirms our mutual fixation, with the rest of humanity, on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It testifies to a road American evangelicals have not taken, and so a journey impossible to imagine.

It was a journey Jesus took, and finally took alone, though not without calling friends to walk along beside him.

I believe that journey, and the stories Jesus told as he took it, are the Bible’s response to the rivetingly simple question Dietrich Bonhoeffer posed: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world? William Stringfellow asked it too: What does it mean to live humanly in the face of death? James Breech asks it this way: What mode of being human do Jesus’ stories represent? The Bible’s lifegiving response lies at a subtle but emphatic remove from the labyrinth of moralism and the abyss of nihilism, both of these just fancy names for death. In truth, it is an answer that doesn’t really function as an answer but as a still and, among our society’s electronically enhanced noises and images, very small voice raising the questions not asked, beckoning toward a road not taken except as a step into the unknown.

Here is how Breech encourages me to see it. Jesus’ phonodramatic stories end, or better, they pause, not with closure but with continuing dialogue in process. In the story of the prodigal son, for example, the father has been engaged by the claims of his older son, a minor actor in the story who now steps to the fore. The older son complains to his father. His father turns to him, coming alive to his pain, dignifying his anger by addressing it undefensively but unapologetically. The father, in the previous episode vividly present to his younger son, now becomes vividly present to the older. He awakens to, and embraces, the ambiguity into which his relationship with the older has been cast by his relationship with the younger. The older brother is a moralist, judgmental, calculating, governing himself by little finalities, giving evidence of moralism’s psychic costs in his crabbed, unhappy spirit. The father’s response is not a counter-moralism, closing down the space in which the older son might speak. Instead, it opens up a space for ongoing encounter. It confirms the father’s relationship with the older brother, securing the older brother in the father’s love. It places the music and dancing of the younger brother’s homecoming within a similar context of living relationships: “your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” The father’s response embodies his own coming alive to the older brother and calls the older brother to a similar resurrection. It presumes a living conversation that
The fruits of the Spirit, then, are not virtues that we may attain by living under the spell of our moralizing stories or by shutting up the unpredictable flow of the self behind the restraining walls of judgment. At best, those moral exertions will produce the tinny kindness of well-meaning persons who are not entirely engaged, not entirely there. Death, not life, is so served. The fructification that comes of the Spirit, rather, is the infinitely varied and often ambiguous form which real encounter between human beings takes when it rests on trust. This trust looks, and feels, like the trust of oneself which Goethe's motto enjoins: not a confidence that whatever one does or thinks will be perfect, as measured by moralism's finely-calibrated stick, but a confidence that love will happen and life will be served when we permit ourselves to give voice to all that lies within.

But this trust, if it be of oneself, is animated by a larger trust, that though we do not know the judgment of God in ways readily assignable to the specifics of our lives, we know the One whose judgment it is. We know that One is always and irrevocably for us, even though what flows out of us when we listen to the voice of our hearts gives evidence that we are not always for ourselves. The writer of I John assures us we may even give voice to our heart's self-condemnation, engaging it in conversation with the One who is "greater than our hearts." It will remind us that we are chicks of a mother hen whose steadfast love, never ceasing, frees us to live as humans in a story likewise never ceasing.

This is a new mode of being human, Breech thinks, and so do I. He calls it the personal mode. It is a mode in which old things are continually passing away and all things are always becoming new. And Breech does not let us forget that Jesus' stories are not just ones he told but ones he lived. When Pilate asked him to give an account of himself, to offer the closure of judgment on his own life, he remained silent. In his death throes, he responded to the claims of others, giving meaning to their humanity and to his own, reopening worlds whose finality seemed settled. And when his followers saw him alive, in the startling aftermath of his tortured crucifixion, they took their own always halting steps down the same road he took. Their faith bespoke a conviction, perhaps no greater than a grain of mustard seed, that "it is finished" was not an ending but a prelude to yet another of the Bible's astounding new beginnings.
From Kazakhstan

A friend of mine travelled to Kazakhstan to teach English for a year. During his term, he asked certain students of his to write letters to some friends of his from Michigan, choosing correspondences based upon, in his judgement, which folks had overlapping interests or concerns. Olga Babich wrote to me about ecology and environmentalism, basically to ask my thoughts about it, and to look for inspiration about defending the environment around us. I wrote her back, mentioning some wilderness stories which inspired me. A month later, I received this reply:

Dear Dave,

Thank you for your sincerity. Your letter was very interesting. Earlier I have only listened about people who take care about natural world, but now I know one of them— you. I'm afraid that I'll never be able to belong to them. I also have read inspiring stories, but I have never seen them in reality. It needs to say, that I live in Balkhash (a small town near the lake named Balkhash). Now I'm studying in Karaganda, but Balkhash is my home. You may see my lake on the map. It's situated in the middle of Kazakhstan, a lake without a name in the steppes. Legend of Balkhash is very simple and beautiful. Many years ago, two people loved each other. They were: a fellow Balkhash and a girl, whose name is forgotten because of natural human virtue to forget everything that doesn't concern them. The girl was married to somebody by her parents, and her fellow jumped into the lake from a big mountain, also without a name. Since that time the lake has the name of that fellow. Sixty years ago, few people got to know about its existing, but when the town was built, people discovered for them its beauty, unfortunately. Since that time our pearl of steppes began to die away. Some years ago when cows at school, my friends and me tried to
defend our lovely lake from the mud which was throwing into the lake by a big metallurgical plant. We had an organization for safety of the lake. We tried to clean the shore from mud, stones, etc. We have been at dirty parts of the plant, spoke with people, with the administration. We did everything what we might do but we weren't able to stop it. Now I know the history of my lake and town, I know from whence the mud gets to my lake, I know how we could help it, but I can't do anything, because it's a very big problem and I can't decide it alone. Many people wanted and want to decide it, but they also can't. We can't clean the shore every day, because the lake is very big for us (200 kilometers long and 50-100 km width). May be, since that case I became a philosopher inside, what must die, that will die. It's a law of nature, but I know that my lake will outlive us, because we'll die from our own mud. Now when I return to my home, we (my friends and me) sail far into the lake, stop in beautiful places whith which are existing still, and I can see the places, where people have been living is big mud, but they went from these places because of themselves. I understood that my lake is stranger than we are all together, we'll die but the lake will exist. It'll clear itself of us and another useless things, but we already won't able to see it.

You touched my "ill" topic. Nobody knows how I love my lake, how I like to swim and merge with it. I feel how strong is my lake, feel it's beautiful and destructive force, but many people never can understand it and will die from their own ignorance. And I don't want to prevent my lake from doing its work.

I'm sorry, my letter is very sad, but I'm happy that the man, who can listened to my story, is existing. I hope, that you will have time to write a letter for me. I will glad to get it.

With respect,
Boulder scene

snow melt hissed stone tossed mist matching mall stream din 'til bagpipe's amazing grace gloried human flow stock still.
Pearl Street
Mall
the night
was cool
and the tourists
were out in force
to shop and
to see the
street magic
the street
players
and rushed
along
until
the bagpiper
started the
hymn and we
were glued
in place
for
surely
God
spoke and
we all could
but
listen and
know that
prophets
still
have their
say.
CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATIONS

After two years at Calvin I transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee school of architecture and urban planning. Both of the following projects were completed during the year I spent there. Each is an effort to push an intangible concept to its tangible conclusion.
In my studio section of twenty-five students we were all to submit drawings and a model of this securable storage unit. The class then chose our favorite solution and in a collaborative effort built one for each student to use throughout the semester. Crucial elements to the program were cost, security, and ease of construction. When my project was chosen, I was given the opportunity to manage the construction process which involved ordering materials, communicating my design intentions, and delegating the work. The eight threaded rods represent points and lines. The horizontals demarcate the planes. The last element was a volume which became the lockable portion. The event which turns the composition of point, line, plane and volume into architecture is the attempted escape of the volume from the rigid frame.
STUDIO INSTALLATION

When we experience a building or object, our final impression is of our recollection of certain key views such as an entrance, a window, etc. If you were to take pictures of each of these highlights and arrange them in a chronological series, you would be able to experience the varied perspectives from one vantage point. In our group project we treated the four bays of Arch Hall, an architectural studio, as our presentation board and considered the courtyard four stories below to be the vantage point. We used the simple form of a cube as our object and rotated it ninety degrees in each successive bay. This decision allowed us to bring our concept into realization while still adhering to the program requirements.
STUDIO INSTALLATION

PETER VANDEN KIEBOOM
Three in One (Disjointed)

Woodcut
if all thumbs wrap shaped odd gift showing white slip 'neath ragged green-red hem 'til package perfect final fold or grace?

'twas several nights before Christmas and the table was full of scraps and ideals of how it should go wrapped right in the mind but coordinated not by hand so not until the last fold did it look good and I wondered was this hypocrisy of the poorest sort or how Grace came so that our final folds are perfect tucked by Him into our manger sheep fold.
Old Stone Bridge

In the middle of the hazy cloud of images representing my earliest childhood memories stands an old stone bridge. Although the majority of my recollections of daily life in the small village of Wendleburry often seem as foggy as the English countryside, I can still vividly remember my daily walks down the lane outside our town to a weathered stone bridge. I would drag along anyone willing to take the short hike with me—mommy, daddy, my nanny, or visiting relatives from the States. With my companion beside me I'd set out down the lane leading away from my house on Rectory Close.

The narrow road before me runs off into meadow lands beyond. My right hand lies firmly in my grandfather's grasp as I lead him down this special lane, running and skipping and amusing myself. The sun shines on our procession, and a brisk breeze tussles my hair and rustles the leaves of the trees lining the sides of the road. My school clothes are wrinkled; faint grass stains hide embedded in the knees of my pants. Wispy clouds float overhead as we enjoy the rare beauty of a pleasant English day.

Suddenly, I stop. "Papa! Listen!" I soon spot the source of the disturbance—a babbling brook to the left side of the road. The stream swings into view for a brief moment, then disappears back into the thick woods. I move closer and watch the mysterious brook
for a few moments. Where did it come from? Where is it heading? What enchanting wonders lie in the depths of the dark forest? I am an intrepid explorer, fearlessly charting a swiftly flowing river as its mighty rapids crash through the rugged wilderness.

Papa and I continue our excursion. Soon a familiar trickling reaches my ears. I recognize an old stone bridge in the distance. The stream has returned! Racing ahead of Papa, I head straight for the bridge.

I cross the bridge and scan the bushes on the right side of the road. Spying the entrance to my secret path, I push branches aside and force my way through the hedge. I find myself on a small trail snaking its way down the far bank of the stream. The path is barely wider than I am, and branches and thorns scratch my arms and legs. No one follows me. I am a top-secret jungle army man, quietly positioning for a daring raid on the enemy base.

When the path gets too rough for my body, I sneak back up to the road, cross to the other side of the bridge, and tumble down the grassy bank to the stream. No thick hedges block my way this time; I simply forge my own path past the tall clumps of thick grass that clutter the hillside. Part of an old crate rests near the edge of the
creek; it lies on the muddy bank and teeters above flowing water. I step onto its weathered boards, gain my balance, and crouch over the stream, carefully following its currents with my intent gaze. I am the captain of a ship, bravely piloting my vessel through a crowded harbor despite the fierce storm raging about me.

Out of the corner of my eye I spot a twig in the grass. Time for Pooh sticks! I find a branch for Papa as well and we meet at the center of the upstream side of the bridge. Simultaneously dropping our sticks into strategic locations in the current, we race to the other side of the bridge and wait to see whose branch will appear first. Time and time again we repeat our contest. We are Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet, romping and teasing as we compete in a jovial game of Pooh sticks deep in the Hundred-Acre Wood.

Slowly the shadows around us begin to lengthen. I challenge Papa to a final match of Pooh sticks before I take his hand and we head back to my house on Rectory Close. The setting sun silhouettes our image against the graying evening sky.

Someday I will return to the old stone bridge. Taking my grandson’s hand, I will show him where the rippling stream appears briefly only to swiftly disappear back into the mysterious woods. I will unveil the entrance to the secret path through the bushes on the far bank, race him down the grassy slope on the other side of the stream, and join him in a good-natured game of Pooh sticks. Again the sunset will signal the end of our excursion. We are two generations, equally enchanted by the magical lure of the old stone bridge. ∞
Untitled

Photograph on canvas
Weather
The Bridgers June 1994

on a mountain
    not quite the top
in the wind, rain
and the sound of my body
I let myself believe
    words will never alleviate the differences

    we are alone

but,
    that belief does not account for one afternoon.

on a mountain
    not quite the top
hills stretched out like skin
a resemblance so close
I thought they were breathing
fire into the sky
    raining
waving curtains of gold in all direction

the original experience
    was silent
we were one amazement
the memory is alive
only in your presence

How can conversation
remain in memory as
    solidly
as wind and rain,
a sky full of fire,
    and the shining impossibility of flowers
tiny and stunted
    growing in rocks for only God to see.
At Tim's Farm

Oil on Canvas; 32x40
...But You Still Can't Take Him Out.

In an attempt to represent the artistic interests of the entire Calvin community, Dialogue presents the following. For those who appreciate nudes please enjoy the sculpture at the center of the page. For those of us who are more clothes-minded, we have provided suitable cut-out props to make this piece more palatable. Clothe or don't clothe, as you wish. But don't stop thinking about art.