



Christ College Newsletter

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A Note from the Dean

A widespread perception of college students in recent years has been that they are career-oriented, attracted by the appeal of financial success and drawn toward positions of influence and power. Given the cost of financing a college education in the eighties, one can understand the pressure students feel to get a high-paying job as soon after graduation as possible. While it is true that college students feel relatively poor and powerless (haven't they always?), I am not convinced that they are more concerned with success and security today than students were in the past.

My primary contacts over the past ten years have been with Christ College students and alumni, and some people may feel that this limitation has distorted my image of reality, but I have never thought that Christ College students are significantly different from the vast majority of students at Valpo. What I have observed in these students and alumni are a deep commitment to the personal (personal values, personal beliefs, personal relationships) and a desire to serve other members of the communities in which they live. Since the drive for economic security and the desire to nurture personal relationships are not necessarily incompatible, the difference maybe primarily a matter of orientation.

One evidence of this characteristic in Christ College students is that fewer than half of each senior class in recent years have had career plans when they graduate. Many, of course, go on to graduate school where they continue the search for identity and direction, some take a year or two off to unwind, travel, and explore, others join volunteer organizations like the Peace Corps or Lutheran Volunteer Corps. None of them seems preoccupied with climbing the ladder of financial success, even if they get married shortly after graduation and settle into the mainstream of American life.

I have noticed also that the lives of Christ College alumni are marked by a strong sense of personal values and a dedication to serving others. These qualities are present in the two articles in this issue of *The Spillikin* written by Chris Schulze and Steve Volz who, after teaching with the Peace Corps in Botswana, are struggling to find ways of reaching students in American classrooms. Both Greg French and Ken Karsten have established careers in the legal and health professions, but they seem more concerned with the lives of the people they serve than with career goals and personal success. And Kathy Piehl's career as a librarian and scholar is rooted in the personal values and relationships she formed as an undergraduate at Valpo. On the basis of conversations with many other alumni, I could multiply these examples tenfold.

In most cases, I suspect this service orientation results from a strong Christian faith, a humanitarian instinct, and a communal concern for the welfare of others. Whether students come to Christ College, and to Valpo, with these dispositions or whether they are developed and nurtured on campus is a question I cannot answer definitively. But I would like to hear your thoughts on the subject.

--Arlin G. Meyer

Third Annual Homecoming Symposium

The topic of next fall's Homecoming Symposium is "Film and Society," and the date is Friday, October 20. For the past two symposia, we have had interesting presentations and discussions, and we anticipate this topic will also elicit lively responses. However, we would like to encourage more of you to attend these sessions--to share your perspectives, to visit with friends, and to engage in lively intellectual discussion. We have engaged six of your fellow alumni to present some of their ideas and initiate discussion, but we are counting on you to be active participants as well. It is not necessary that you see all four films on which the discussions will initially focus, but they have all played in theatres around the country this spring and will be available on video by mid-summer. So come and join us; we will be delighted to have you here.

FILM AND SOCIETY

Christ College Refectory
October 20, 1989

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 10:45-12:00 | Keynote Address by Jeff Smith, '79 (<i>Mississippi Burning</i> and other films) |
| 12:00-1:15 | Lunch Break |
| 1:15-2:15 | Panel Gail Budlow Kempster, '75 (<i>Rain Man</i>) Jill Brickey, '87 (<i>The Accused</i>) Kristin Jass, '85 (<i>A Cry in the Dark</i>) |
| 2:15-2:30 | Break |
| 2:30-3:30 | Four Discussion Groups <i>Mississippi Burning</i> <i>Rain Man</i> <i>The Accused</i> <i>A Cry in the Dark</i> |
| 3:30-3:45 | Break |
| 3:45-4:30 | Latchnote Address by Rick Barton, '70 |
| 4:30-5:00 | Concluding general discussion |
| 5:15 | Reception at the Meyers, 1610 Chicago Street |

ANNUAL HOMECOMING OPEN HOUSE

Christ College invites you to attend an Open House in Mueller Hall on Saturday, October 21, at approximately 11:30 a.m. The Faculty hopes to see many of you at that time.

Perspectives on The China Workplace

K. P. Karsten

Discussion with protesting students in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in mid April was a refreshing, unscheduled diversion. My purpose in this capital city and elsewhere throughout the Peoples Republic of China was technical not political. As a member of the Citizen's Ambassador Program-Occupational Health Delegation, my intent was to establish a technical exchange regarding issues surrounding the prevention of illness and disease in the workplace. With now only a month to reminisce, my understanding of the basis of Chinese student unrest pervades my professional thinking as well. In fact, it is inextricably bound with my hope for continued progress in China's occupational medicine and industrial hygiene efforts.

The occupational health movement in the United States, prior to massive involvement by Congress in early 1970, was fraternal. There was little legal motivation or financial incentive to initiate radical change in workplace environs. A relatively small number of dedicated health professionals (read industrial hygienists) existed to recognize, evaluate, and control chemical and physical hazards in the workplace.

Where industrial hygiene programs existed in the U.S., they arose from hybridizing institutional medical practice and analytical chemical laboratories. Workplace health is naturally a consequence of medical activities. Evaluating workplace exposure for chemical hazards is a natural consequence of being able to measure minutia in parts per million, the task of an analytical chemist. Such was the amalgam in the early and mid portions of this century. With new emphasis created by 1970's legislation, and a growing recognition of the sanctity of workplace life, the industrial hygiene discipline matured into a uniquely recognized craft separate from its parents, medicine and chemistry.

The character of occupational health in China is a mirror of U.S. activities distorted only by time. Much of what was revealed to our delegation was an effort analogous to our own but half a century out of phase. Occupational health programs were exclusively the domain of physicians. As such, they performed critically important functions of diagnosis and treatment. Progress to the final function of preventing workplace illness has only just begun.

A glossary of the U.S. occupational health enterprise would list as one of its early chapters of this century the recognition and control of disease arising from excessive exposure to rock dust (crystalline silica) by miners. The consequent disease, silicosis, to us today is a malady with the same connotation as tuberculosis or polio, i.e. past history. In China today around 1,000,000 active cases of silicosis have been substantiated. The Occupational Health and Epidemic Centers we visited in Beijing, Wuhan, and Shanghai spend considerable time diagnosing cases, providing treatment, and collating statistics. A meager effort has begun to make workplace hazard evaluations and recommend controls.

Another aspect of the current success of the U.S. occupational health program is the vast technological resource of computerized, extremely sophisticated analytical instrumentation. Gadgets like a GC-MS (gas chromatograph-mass spectrometer) can, in short order, take an unknown mote and provide a detailed chemical description of its composition. This mainstay in the analytical chemist's arsenal proliferates in U.S. industry, academic, and government institutions. The two Chinese Medical Universities we visited each had a GC-MS. There were in total only 7 such devices in the entire People's Republic.

What has any of this to do with the students' revolt? The students' desire for self realization, choosing their own

life's pursuit as an example, seems far removed from the 1,000,000 individuals suffering from silicosis which will assuredly shorten and at worst take their lives. However, the key to preventing occupational disease is a recognition of the worth of the individual we want not to be diseased. The rhetoric of the Party Line speaks of the "people" collectively, as does any socialist diatribe. When self determination is allowed to bloom, concern for self and the selves of others becomes a driving force in defining how a culture will accept illness and disease in its workplace.

The major push in the U.S. in the early 1970's was directed by what can be termed the 11th amendment to the Bill of Rights--the right to a workplace free of recognized hazards that could kill or disease. The Occupational Safety Act of 1971, though an act of legislation, was nonetheless a mandate from a culture that recognized the inherent sanctity of life in the workplace.

The Chinese people have been awakened by a loud strong voice in Tiananmen Square that refuses to silence itself. The Chinese government must now grapple with a growing populace that is demanding some measure of self determination. I will watch with keen interest the progress of its occupational health community. They assuredly are bound up in the struggle and the growth.

[Ken Karsten (BA, '72) is employed by Aluminum Company of America. As Staff Industrial Hygienist he directs the occupational health effort at ALCOA's largest facility. Ken holds an MS in Hygiene from Graduate School of Public Health at University of Pittsburgh, is recognized as Diplomate of the American Academy of Industrial Hygiene, and was contributing author to two textbooks on industrial hygiene. Ken wrote this article upon his return from Beijing in May, only weeks before the massacre in Tiananmen Square.]

Reflections on Thirteen Years of Representing Older Persons

Gregory S. French

At the invitation of Dean Meyer, I have taken the opportunity to reflect on thirteen years of providing legal representation to older persons. Perhaps some of my fellow CC alums might find some of these observations thought provoking as we and our parents age.

There is an enormous difference between the aging process and aging stereotypes. The overwhelming majority of older people (those of us age 60 and older) are not senile, do not suffer from Alzheimer's disease, and are not in nursing homes. We need to understand the aging process in order to adjust appropriately for hearing, vision, and metabolic changes (particularly in how aging affects the effect of medications). While some mental processes gradually slow down with age, the aging mind is every bit as capable as the younger mind.

Age is determined much more by our attitudes than by chronology. I have represented clients in their nineties who are far younger than clients I have represented in their sixties. Other than health factors, the essential difference seems to be whether the client viewed his life as being over or whether the client viewed life as an ongoing array of ever-different challenges. Attitude not only affects how people cope with the health problems that sometimes accompany aging, but it plays a major role in the development and extent of such health problems.

Older people want to make, and are as capable of making, their own decisions as younger people. We, as children, far too often risk killing our parents through kindness. An older person's desire to live is directly related to his ability to control his own life. Most older

persons understand the various courses of action available to them and the likelihood of the risks and benefits associated with each course of action. In such circumstances, the older person rather than we should determine what is in the older person's best interests.

Procrastination permits many problems planning could avoid. Long term care need not necessarily deplete the savings of a lifetime and impoverish the spouse and family. Families and health care providers need not guess as to the health care and other decisions a person would make if he were capable. Careful utilization of durable powers of attorney, living wills, and other planning documents can protect the family's financial well-being. More importantly, they can maximize the likelihood that should incapacity occur, someone the older person trusted will make the decisions he would have made if he were able.

We need to prevent work and caregiving from interfering with one another. Most care for older persons is provided by families, not health care or other service providers. We need to encourage and support family members to continue providing this care without adversely affecting their time and productivity on the job. Employers need to provide employees with more flexible hours and access to information and community resources. The government needs to further support the development of home and community based services.

We need to provide universal access to high-quality health care at a cost individuals and the government can afford. We spend a greater percentage of our gross national product on health care than any other nation. Nevertheless, our life expectancy is no better than that of the rest of the Western world, and our infant mortality rate is the worst, next to South Africa's. Furthermore, more than 35 million Americans have no health care coverage whatsoever. Despite draconian efforts by the government and employers since 1980 to hold down health care costs, the cost of health care has continued to increase at twice the inflation rate for the rest of our economy. We need to study and implement far more cost-effective systems, such as Canada's.

We need to eliminate the institutional bias in our health care system. I have yet to meet the older person who wants to live in a nursing home. Yet, the primary source of state and federal payment for long term care, the Medicaid program, rarely pays for long term care unless it is provided in a nursing home. Community based care frequently costs less than nursing home care, and it is what people want. Its time has come!

We need to pay as much attention to chronic and preventative care as we do to acute care. Most of the care older persons require is care for chronic conditions, conditions that can be prevented or whose symptoms can be ameliorated through preventative care. Yet, the principal health insurance program for older persons, Medicare, primarily pays for acute hospital care. It pays very little toward nursing home and home health costs and will only begin paying a small percentage of prescription drug bills in 1990. One way to reconcile the "right" to health care with fiscal responsibility is to pay for services to prevent the need for acute care rather than waiting for people to require high cost acute care.

Government programs to aid the poor and the elderly have worked. It is tempting to attribute current social ills, such as homelessness, the feminization of poverty, and the millions of Americans without health care, to the failure of government programs. However, the reality is that these programs, such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps, have effectively provided income, health care, and food to millions of Americans. The cause of far too many Americans failing to benefit from these programs lies not so much with the nature of the programs as with the programs too often being overly narrow and overly rigid.

Rather than retreating from public efforts to correct social ills, we should further fine tune such effort in conjunction with private efforts to correct systemic problems.

We need to address the challenges of an aging society through an intergenerational approach. We cannot afford to have one generation concerned only about long term care and another generation concerned only about child care. Our concept of the "common good" needs to be broad enough to encompass both good schools and high quality long term care. Just as we can no longer allow age alone to determine employment opportunities, we can no longer allow age alone to determine the benefits to which one is entitled. An individual's needs and his ability to meet the needs of others depend on far too many factors to allow age alone to determine public and private policy.

[Gregory French, '73 B.A. (philosophy/humanities double major) and '76 J.D., is executive director of PRO Seniors, Inc., a six-attorney elderly law project serving southwest Ohio. He and his wife, Dianne, '76 B.A., are both former editors-in-chief of *The Torch*. They reside in Cincinnati with their two children, Charlotte Amanda (age 4) and Carolyn Johanna (age 2), and are looking forward to the birth of a third child in August.]

The Noah Question

Kathy Piehl

My Noah research began over 10 years ago with a question from my husband Chuck: How come there are so many Noah's ark picture books? I didn't have an answer. Because Peter Spier's *Noah's Ark* had just won the Caldecott medal as the previous year's outstanding picture book, the question seemed especially appropriate. I started exploring.

Our local public library owned a dozen variations. During a summer research visit to the Library of Congress, I tracked down almost 50 versions. Certainly no other Bible story generated this much attention from children's book authors and illustrators. Why?

One conference paper and two journal articles later, I still hadn't answered the question completely. Publishers kept producing Noah books with surprising regularity. But even more surprising were the clues I had been gathering that the fascination with the theme was not limited to those who made children's books.

Cartoons, toys, greeting cards, note cards with jotted references to paintings and plays began to clutter my desk and bookshelf. I kept promising myself that I would expand my research, but establishing a deadline eluded me.

Then I had a deadline set for me. Each spring, faculty members at Mankato State are encouraged to submit proposals to give a research lecture for campus and community members a year later. Three years ago I met with the selection committee and explained that I intended to expand my previous studies of children's materials to encompass artistic, musical, and literary works that used the deluge theme and were intended for adults. My shock and delight at being selected quickly gave way to panic followed by hours and hours of research. Every spare moment that year was devoted to exploring the deluge theme. The hard work and intellectual pleasure of that research came from connections of various kinds.

The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love

Christoph Schulze

The most obvious connections were those I had to make intellectually as the research progressed. What I love most about doing research is the element of surprise. I never would have predicted that I would find Noah in the writings of Lord Byron, H. G. Wells, and Mark Twain or that I would cry as I read a modern short story based on the last days of Noah's brother. I discovered that deluge paintings had enjoyed tremendous popularity in nineteenth century France and England and that artists of that era had been inspired by Poussin and Milton. I found Noah in the Koran and in Jewish legends, in medieval plays and Chagall stained glass windows. I read books by creationists and geologists. I perused accounts of ark seekers on Ararat. And then I faced the challenge of presenting some of my findings in an hour and a half.

Enter the second kind of connection: the human. Never have I experienced such a sense of academic community as I did that year. People from many disciplines suggested avenues for research. The interlibrary loan staff secured books from libraries across the country. Chuck took dozens of slides from the materials I gathered. People helped record music, arrange lighting, set up slide projectors. To bring excerpts of plays, stories, and poems to life as part of the presentation, I asked the chair of the Theater Department for help. Intrigued by the topic, he took on the project with his advanced acting class. Consequently, the audience was able to see and hear sections of the Chester mystery play, "The Skin of Our Teeth," and a dozen other literary works.

My Noah research has continued during the two years since the lecture. I have visited museums, libraries, and churches in England and France as well as the United States. Whenever I speak or write on the topic, people provide additional ideas for me to pursue. What delights me is the interdisciplinary nature of this research. I can range from art to science to music to theology, and they all converge.

The urge to explore, to make connections, to ask questions and to try to answer them was encouraged during my time in Christ College. So was the belief that Christianity and intellectual curiosity are not incompatible. However, the most tangible reminder of Christ College is Chuck. Through nearly 20 years we have supported each other's research, delighted in new ideas, listened to drafts of papers, typed manuscripts, and shared the conviction that learning is never over. After all, he posed the Noah question in the first place.

[Kathy (Kracke) Piehl ('70) is a member of the Mankato State University Library faculty. After earning Master's degrees in English at Washington University and in Library Science at the University of Illinois, she taught at Michigan Technological University, Concordia College-Seward, and in secondary schools in St. Louis and Seward before assuming her present position. Kathy has published a number of articles and reviewed over 200 books for library journals. She and her husband, Chuck Piehl ('70), have three children: Norah, 12; Jacob, 5; and Renata, 1.]

For your summer reading, we highly recommend

Xiang Lake--Nine Centuries of Chinese Life

by R. Keith Schoppa ('66)

(Yale University Press, 1989)

The F.B.I. had checked my background and found it acceptable. I had completed all of the many application forms in triplicate. Even the fingerprinting, done by a surly officer at the downtown Valparaiso police station, was out of the way. I was more than ready for the phone call from the folks at Peace Corps when it finally came. On the other end of the line was a woman who wanted to know if I would be willing to serve as a volunteer in Botswana, Africa. My first choices for assignments had been Latin America and Asia, but I am not one to quibble about continents. I answered, "Yeah, sure," hung up, and ran to the nearest encyclopedia to see where I was going.

In late spring of 1985, when I volunteered to serve, Botswana ranked with Benin, Burundi, and Malawi on my personal list of least known African countries. Over the next two and a half years, though, I would get to know the place intimately. Botswana is a semi-desert, landlocked country about the size of Texas located directly north of South Africa. By any American standards people in Botswana are poor. However, they do have enough to eat, roofs over their heads, and a stable government; that is much more than most people in southern Africa can hope for.

My assignment was to teach history and geography at a small community secondary school in Mahalapye, a large village in the eastern part of the country. My students were 12-16 year-olds from the area, most of them the sons and daughters of subsistence farmers. Again, by American standards the students were poor: mostly ragged clothing, worn out shoes, and used to a diet of corn meal and cabbage. Over there, however, these were the children of middle class families, and the kids were proud to be in school.

The problems we faced at school were those of many a developing country: lack of water, lack of certain essential teaching aids, and all the hazards that come with 500 people using one set of pit latrines. There was also a severe shortage of classrooms at my school when I arrived; I remember thinking, as I taught an outdoor class to a mixed audience of children and goats, that I was finally having a real Peace Corps experience.

So, the toughest job I'll ever love, right?

Well not exactly. I returned to the U.S. in April of last year and, after several months of "re-adjusting," took a job as seventh grade teacher in an inner city public school near my home in New York City. To put it simply, this job is a lot tougher than anything I ever did in Africa.

The junior high school where I now work serves mainly the children of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Many of these students come from broken homes, and most of them are used to spending several hours a day hanging out on the streets. Since this neighborhood is one of New York's worst crack dealing centers, these kids are regularly exposed to the horrors that come with the use and sale of drugs. All this means that my students here do not readily concentrate on schoolwork, and are wary of entering into relationships which involve trust. The atmosphere inside the school building is often chaotic; I sometimes spend half a class period getting the students into the room.

But the background of the students is not the only factor which makes education such a difficult process at this junior high school. Part of the blame must rest with the teachers also. It seems to me that many of my co-workers have given up on the school; they are punching

their time cards, hanging on until retirement, and making sure they leave the building no later than 2:15 every afternoon. I rarely hear a good word about the students or school from a fellow teacher. The humor on staff is of the hopeless, cynical type found in episodes of M*A*S*H. Teachers gripe about the administration, the administration complains about the attitude of the teachers, and all that seems to get done is paperwork.

Educationally speaking, Botswana and inner-city New York both face big problems. Botswana is facing its problems with a young, energetic education system and a relatively stable social structure. New York's public school system strikes me as decayed, directionless and old--as though it has functioned now for so long that senility is setting in. It makes me wonder where the aid money, Peace Corps workers, and "development work" are really needed.

[Chris Schulze graduated in 1985 as a Christ College Scholar and a History major.]

Steven Volz

It was more than a year ago, but I still remember the moment. The classrooms were deserted and strangely quiet, the chalk dust had all been swept out the door, and the heap of discarded papers and tests was slowly burning on the other side of the soccer field. My students had all graduated and gone to their family fields for the summer, and after two years as a secondary school teacher in Botswana, Africa, I too was going home. As I locked up the Science labs for the last time and handed the keys over to the school caretaker, he asked me, "So what are you going to do now?" "I'd like to be a teacher back in America," I answered. "Teach well," he advised.

As I walked through the village, from the school to my little metal-roofed house, I thought about "teaching well." Had I done a good job during my two years in Botswana? Did I help make life more livable for my students and their families, or was "the toughest job you'll ever love" just a big waste of the U.S. taxpayers' money?

I looked around at the village of Thamaga. Clusters of tidy, thatched-roof huts encircled by stick fences. A young woman with a baby on her back, steadily pounding sorghum grain into flour. A group of old men reminiscing in the shade of a big acacia tree. A small boy herding goats on a rocky hillside, searching for green evidence of last week's thundershower.

It seemed to me that the village's teenagers could have benefited more from a heavy rainfall than from any of my lectures or homework. Why did these children have to sit all day in classrooms, reading and writing in a foreign language? What advantage could this tranquil, timeless, God-fearing community possibly have gained from my being there?

My thoughts were answered by the heavy rumble and dust of the TEBA bus passing through on its way to the South African gold mines. TEBA--The Employment Bureau of Africa. A first year miner with a grade-school education can earn over \$300 per month, much more than the average farmer in Botswana can hope to earn. Mining is exhausting, dangerous work, but many bored young goatherds see it as a lucrative initiation into modern manhood. Botswana cannot compete with the industrial might of South Africa. The wood, leather, and clay of rural Africa are no match for the steel, plastic, and glass of urban Euro-America.

To find a reason for teaching in Botswana I had to look beyond theories of "development" or "neocolonialism" and notice the compelling hunger in my students' eyes.

Their hunger for knowledge, for self-determination, for change. For cars, watches and sliced white bread. The possibility of a more comfortable and secure future. The opportunity to do things that their parents could never do. To achieve their full potential. As professed by the school motto stitched onto the breast pocket of the students' uniforms, "The secret of success is education."

"Success" in the close-knit society of Botswana means being able to take care of one's family. In the past, plentiful rainfall and the traditional cooperation of the community would have been enough, but in the rapid transformation of Botswana's economy from subsistence farming to wage-earning it is becoming increasingly necessary for at least one family member to do well in school and get a job. School is a privilege, and each student has a great responsibility to study hard and perform well on exams. With an emphasis on memorization and discipline, not creativity, Botswana schools retain some of the strict moral overtones of initiation rites. With most of Botswana's population under the age of eighteen, the survival of the country depends upon the energy, skill, and dedication of its youth.

Most of my students seemed fairly aware of their responsibility. Even if they did not always know how to study, they were usually anxious to try. All of my students attended Sunday afternoon study halls, and some even requested Saturday classes. Of course the students at my school had the same distractions and playfulness of adolescents anywhere, but they also must have had a strong sense of duty, and great stamina, to keep running several miles to school every morning and home again to do chores every evening.

If I taught well in Botswana it was not as an encyclopedia of facts or preacher of the Western gospel of progress but as a facilitator of student ambitions. There were things I could have done to make the classes more memorable and conducive to learning, but when it came time for final exams and graduation the students' lives were ultimately in their own hands. Appropriately, the Setswana word for "learn," *ithuta*, literally means "to teach one's self." As I walked away from Botswana, what seemed most important was not my teaching efforts but rather the continued determination of my students to overcome the constraints of poverty, drought, and ignorance and "teach themselves."

Now, over a year after leaving Botswana, I am completing my licensure to teach in the secondary schools of the United States. I hope to be teaching History and Geography at some high school by fall, but I am a bit apprehensive about teaching American teenagers. I suspect that they will see school, and the opportunities it provides, not as a privilege but as an inalienable right. Will they feel a responsibility to teach themselves, or will they just try to change the channel when extra effort is required? Is an "American success story" typified by great contributions or by great acquisitions? American schools seem rather consumer-oriented, treating education more as a commodity, purchasable in credit-hours and grades, than as a process or attitude toward life.

Schools are not perfect in Botswana--far from it--but they are still new enough that they are not taken for granted and can be respected for what they are, vehicles for social change and personal growth. As one former student in Botswana recently wrote me, "When do you think your ambitions will be satisfied? For my part I still want to grow up sky high in this field of education." I admire his enthusiasm for life and pray that we can all continue to exercise the same willingness to learn, and teach well.

[Steven Volz, a 1985 CC Scholar, is pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching at Washington University, St. Louis.]

Blank (After the Plague Years)

Eric Appleton

There is no war here.
Not here, not now.
We are not expatriots
living in Paris tenements.
We do not drive Red Cross
ambulances madly through rugged
Spanish countryside.
No Blitz. No fading days
in Berlin before the onslaught.
We have not braced ourselves
in the Fascists' path,
nor faced down an Establishment;
no banners, slogans, marches.
No challenges called up
against the foundations
of art, of literature.
We have not waved our canes
and scratched our names
in a snowbank to label it
'The Alps,' to label it art.

Lying on our backs, we plane
legs and arm and say,
laugh: there, we have made
snow-angels, now let us move
on to where it is warm,
let us knock snow from cuffs
and gloves and caps.
We slide on icy sidewalks
and call it sliding on icy
sidewalks. This, we tell
each other, this then is the culmination
of three millennia of western
civilization: the ability
to say, we do this
and it is not art.
It has all been done before,
conventions exploded before
our births, the frame beaten
and broken to frail sticks
that will enclose anything
we care to throw upon the wall
over our sofas.

All this and nothing;
the trail blazed for us
through leveled forest,
we are left to color in
the white spaces of the map.
To exist we must work,
and to work we must work at it;
nothing comes all too easily.
Nothing is the void
at our backs, the vacant
lots and subway gratings.
Nothing is the shutting
off of heat, of the phone.
Nothing, calls the bagman
wheeling carts fitfully
across the street, easing
his mound of other people's refuse
from curb to curb, halting
traffic. At night he spreads
his savings on the sidewalk
around doorways, squatting
among the bags and boxes,
his hand out. And we would put
money in his palm,
we would, but between taxes
and rent, etcetera,
etcetera, etcetera --

We have not remodeled
ourselves into the intelligentsia
of our era, though romance
urges we illusion ourselves
in those colors; speaking
of the death of, the movement of,
the politics of politics,
reviling nations for what
they have done and what
they will do and what

the men we think we have somehow
put into power will do to us.
We live on the ground,
the other end of the trickle
down. We cannot claim
a place in the great labor
complex of our friends' fathers,
butchering, building, milling,
smelting, laboring.

No. We are the service
generation. We flip the burgers.
We rent the videotapes with a smile.
We tend the bars and wait
the tables. We are told
this is the future but my God
you can't survive by doing
each other's dry cleaning
someone once said but I can't
remember who. So.

We sit here despite
education that will be paid
off in nine more years,
we sit and we wait
while our art calls:
I gave up chemistry;
I gave up engineering;
I gave up the humanities;
but my sister, she's going
into business management
and she says she'll have
a BMW and a wide-screen TV
and she will have all the things
they tell us we should have,
and she will bite and claw
her way into this television
induced vision and will
die of stress but by God
for that brief moment
I had it, I had it, I dreamt
I had the American dream.
I fought for it. I deserve
it, and they told us
we really ought to fight
for something.

We said sure,
but let us shed no blood,
let us wave no guns,
let us level no villages,
no saturation bombings,
no madmen with rifles
in schoolyards.
Let this Cold War end
and someday vote someone from our
era into office. We would
rather live on this bread,
we would live and cry
and faint and say yes
no maybe maybemaybemaybe
here on the edge, the cutting
edge we call it. Looking
for reasons dammit, there should
be reasons here somewhere;
they should have left
us with more than the mere
materiél for existence.

Where do we get to howl?
Where do we get to scream?
These alleys, they all look
the same, the light at the end
the reflection of streetlamps,
of mouldering garbage behind
fermenting dumpsters, strung
with limp sweeps of power
line from crumbling building
to crumbling building.
Have we followed a shining
path only to find New York
at the end? Only to live

in the shadows of skyscrapers
sundialing across our world?

And we think, we hope,
we turn to one another
and ask: Is this it?
Have we finally gotten
somewhere and can say yet
we've found it?
Found what, they say,
and we go on.
We go. We always go on.

We sing blues for the last Victorian:
My era done left me,
my era done left me, uh-huh, uh-huh --
rock side to side like a blind
bluesman, grinning in time
to these blue notes, these throbbing
red tones --
sway gently, sway deep,
swing me daddy, swing me this be-bop
generation, this decadent jazz;

not beat me daddy eight to the bar;
not even johnny be good --
it's not dangerous anymore
and even the Sex Pistols
cloy after the realization
it's all just hype.
Goodbye Ruby Tuesday,
this innocence is over.
Can I stop being shocked now?

I want to meet you
in the coffee shop
to mourn our losses, lick
our wounds, complain, wail,
gnash our teeth with a great
frustration, a rumbling,
a sigh for something beyond
this call of context we cling
to like crazed existentialists,
this stained napkin
the most real thing
imaginable. These crumbs,
this black coffee swirling
around your spoon. This
packet of sugar.
All concrete.

Turn to the pane of unbroken
glass between you and the world,
between us and the street,
say: don't be petty --
ask: where is the big poetry?
The ennui, the madness,
the rapture and overwhelming
mumble into the void:
shanti shanti shanti --
No, not with a bang,
no, not ever, not even
a whimper because nothing
ends, ever, and after
this universe crunches to a halt,
something, somewhere,
will be left to change.

You and I have
as good a chance as any.
So.

Drink your coffee,
let us move on to other things.
Besides, it is not our choice
as to whether there will
be war.

Lamentations
are for those who want
to live in Paris and wear berets.
(Mandy Arnold)

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