

Speaking Silence:
A Novel

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Chapter 1

Infallible -- Every Now and Then

Teaching is a lot like comedy, thought Fraser. You have those days when everything flows, and you feel you have them eating out of your hand. But then there are days -- and Fraser remembered all too many of them -- when nothing seems to work. You start to talk, and you know at once that you don't have it. Why not? You blame yourself for not preparing properly. But then you remember other days when you skimmed on preparation and the class went very well. And so you hope someone raises a question to divert the class for a while. But sometimes a question turns into a little lecture of its own. There are a few students who love to hear themselves talk.

Fraser snuck another look at his watch -- seventeen more dreary minutes before the scheduled dismissal time. Then he could make a dignified retreat.

Finally Fraser did get one of the students to say something, but his own attention wandered as the student droned on. Always the guys, he thought to himself. They're the ones who are entranced by the sound of their own voice. He had read some of those slanted studies about how male teachers don't encourage the females to

Speak out in class, but he didn't believe a word of it. Girls were often far more pleasing to hear from. But the male students, well, that was a different story. Once they got going, how were you going to shut them up?

The minutes wound down. Fraser did his best to insert a few points in lecture style, thereby thinking to redeem the class in part. As soon as he could, he bundled up his notes and books and slipped out the door. He was relieved that no one followed him. It's true, he thought to himself, education is wasted on the young.

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Fraser was a philosopher, although he was a little afraid to say so. He'd once heard a professor explain that "philosopher" is really an honorific term -- it's what someone else calls you, like "scholar." As for Fraser, he had a Ph.D. in philosophy, and he was sort of a professor -- at least he had a part-time job teaching philosophy, and some of his students addressed him as "Professor." He liked the sound of it, and so he made no effort to correct them.

Perhaps the truth was that since Fraser was a real philosopher, teaching was like pulling teeth. The sheer difficulty of the task proved Fraser's worth -- or so he told himself in his darker moments. Didn't Plato have some such analogy in one of his dialogues, something about how you have to pull it out of the student?

The old bromide about leading a horse to water came to mind. Ah, what he wouldn't give for a more willing audience, for real

dialogue partners, for listeners who knew they had something at stake in the great battle of ideas.

Just the evening before he had laid out his new plan to Lucy, his wife. "The trouble with students nowadays is that they have no motivation," he told her. "They don't know why they're in school. If there was something in their life that was bugging them, that would help -- I'm sure of it. But to them philosophy is just a bunch of stuff to memorize."

By this point he had gotten up a head of steam. Lucy had said nothing that would serve to deflate him, and so he decided to take a risk. He would tip his hand, let her know what he was planning.

His ever skeptical wife looked on with genuine interest in her eyes. "The way I see it," Fraser ventured forth, "philosophy should be able to offer its wares on the same footing as psychology. Look at all those counselors -- the money they pull in! Why do people go to them? Because they have problems -- real problems."

"But the people know they'll be getting something for their money," Lucy interjected.

"Exactly," Fraser shot back, choosing to ignore the hint of disagreement in her comment. "And I could be giving them something for their money too."

Lucy was too practical to be stirred by Fraser's dream. She knew her clients got something from her, but they were all of lesser

intelligence and would easily be outshone by even the dimmest of Fraser's students. Lucy's clients were pets, for she was a veterinarian.

How did Fraser wind up married to a vet? Although he was used to the question, he did not have a stock answer ready when someone asked him. He usually pointed out that Lucy wasn't a vet when they met, but she was already headed in that direction. And it was already clear that her chosen occupation fit in neatly with her charming mix of sympathy and a no-nonsense attitude. Fraser recalled how he had been greatly attracted by that mix at one point; now it irritated him at times. He wished she were more of a thinker, more inclined to challenge accepted wisdom -- yes, more of a dreamer.

He decided to counter her directly. "Don't you see that the line between philosophy and psychology is artificial -- indeed, arbitrary?" he asked. "About a century ago, or a little more, psychology and philosophy were the same thing -- they were one department in the university. William James showed how easy it is to move back and forth between them. So why shouldn't a philosopher be able to offer counseling on the same footing as a psychologist?"

To Lucy it was quite simple: "Because a psychologist is a doctor, someone who helps people."

"Well, I'm a doctor too," Fraser shot back. "Have you forgotten that?"

"Oh, come off it, Fraser, you're not a real doctor. It's different - - you're a Ph.D."

Fraser pounced. He had her: "So is the typical psychologist -- just check their credentials. Remember that show we used to watch on TV, the one with Bob Newhart? He had a Ph.D."

Now Fraser had Lucy on the run. He knew he was taking a bit of a risk, for there was a good comeback available to her, but he was quite sure she wouldn't think of it: it was that business of Freud and the psychoanalysts needing to have medical training before they could start offering the famous Freudian talking cure.

Fraser was right: Lucy did not think of the Freud angle. Her knowledge of Freud was too vague: she knew the story only in general outline.

Fraser had gotten by with his gambit. But he felt a little guilty for not revealing it: it was a like failing to disclose evidence at a trial simply because you knew it would be helpful to the learned counsel at the opposing table. You were supposed to tell the opposing lawyer what you had: this rule was called "disclosure." But Fraser had lost enough battles in his marriage to Lucy to feel justified in cutting corners here and there.

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Fraser was glad his best friend was more encouraging. He decided to give him a ring as soon as he got home.

Lucy wasn't home from work yet when Fraser arrived. After getting himself a cup of herbal tea, he settled down in his study and

managed to raise Folkert Smith on the phone. Folkert was at his desk in the German Department, where he had taught happily for the past four years.

Folkert was well aware of Fraser's counseling ambitions and even approved of them. He had a very high view of philosophy and sometimes wished he had gone into the field himself -- not that he had reason to complain about his own lot in life, for he loved his work and reveled in his position at the university.

Folkert and Fraser had worked on their degrees at the same time, but whereas Folkert had landed a teaching job without stirring from home, Fraser suffered the usual fate of the student who finished the Ph.D. program: he was shoved out the door. But then there was a small reprieve for him: a year later he was readmitted as a part-time instructor. It was something, and it gave Fraser a bit of standing, but there was no hint of a full-time or permanent position in the offing.

Folkert was one of the lucky ones: he had taught in the department while finishing his own Ph.D., and hints of a permanent position reached his ears long before he turned in his dissertation.

Fraser's standing in the university was something different. Some chose to call it faculty status: you could say you were an "adjunct." People outside the university would be impressed.

Folkert was both consoling and encouraging as Fraser went over his plans to establish himself as a "counselor." He advised Fraser to downplay the philosophy angle -- just say that you're in counseling

and that you have a Ph.D. and so forth. He even told him what to put on his business card:

Fraser McNaught, Ph.D.

Existential Counseling

Rates Negotiable

Individual and Group Sessions Available

Fraser hadn't gotten his cards printed yet, but Folkert already had a referral for him. It had something to do with birth control. He was supposed to see a couple that already had three kids, and it looked as though birth control would be in order, but they disagreed on the subject.

Fraser was a little embarrassed about his lack of a proper office to receive "clients," as he had begun to call them in his own mind. His study at home was too messy -- books and papers everywhere, also some computer disks. Renting a clinical-looking space was out of the question for now. Besides, what would he do for a receptionist? And so the "existential" label on the projected business card came in handy. Fraser would meet his clients at a respectable restaurant. They would sip tea and coffee and talk in low tones and generally act sophisticated. After all, it wasn't as though intimate revelations would come tumbling out -- at least, Fraser didn't think so.

Fraser was in the business of "conceptual clarification." That's what he told himself, at any rate. But he did not intend to impose such a notion on clients: to level with them about his methodology would be too much like a Rogerian therapist making it utterly

obvious that he had nothing to say. People had to believe they were paying for something.

Fraser's counseling creed had taken shape gradually during his days in quest of a Ph.D. The notion that a philosopher should be able to collect money for talking with people and helping them had been in his mind for many years. But his unique understanding of the method to be used was grounded in his fascination with the split between knowing and believing that ran through much philosophy of the past two or three centuries. When professors discussed this split, they usually made reference to Kant, who had said: "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith." The knowledge in question, declared the commentators, was what we would today call science: it was entirely grounded in the givens of the senses. As for the faith (Glaube in German, and Fraser prided himself on knowing a bit of German) of which Kant spoke, it was not some sort of religious fervor but ordinary belief. It was roughly akin to not being entirely sure but nevertheless possessing some confidence, to the point that you were willing to act on what you felt deep within as right or true.

Since he accepted this split, Fraser did not feel that he had a professional's right to impose his views on people. It was not a matter of telling his potential clients what the world was like and then drawing the obvious conclusion that they were obliged to do such-and-such. He was convinced that the impulse to issue what amounted to orders could not stand in the face of the fact/value split that was now accepted by ethicists and philosophers. And so a counselor would just have to work with the notions people already had in their heads and help them clarify those notions. The long-

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range goal was to bring them to the point where they would come to regard those notions as resources for finding their way out of some perplexity. It was like that business that Wittgenstein had talked about. You were supposed to help the fly find its own way out of the fly-bottle.

But if the perplexity turned out to be a basic disagreement between a husband and wife -- what then?

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Three days later Fraser found out that he was dealing with a disagreement of major proportions. He had to remind himself again that the trick was not to pontificate. He was not about to rule that the one was right and the other wrong -- that would be the dogmatic attitude. Instead he would challenge each to think through the consistency and consequences of his position.

The couple Folkert had arranged for him to see were Greg and Sonya Ross. He asked them to come to an upscale restaurant-cum-coffee shop where he was known to the proprietor. The appointment was for three o'clock -- Fraser wanted to avoid both the lunch rush and the dinner hour. They would be able to talk in peace. Fraser hoped that inquiries from the servers as to how things were coming along could be kept to a minimum: perhaps he could keep the servers away with dirty looks.

He started the session by collecting some information, acting and sounding a bit clinical, he thought to himself. After all, he was a doctor. Then, gently, he pressed on to what he perceived as the

difficulty in their situation. Greg and Sonya already had three children and were still quite young: family planning seemed like the obvious thing to do.

Perhaps Sonya needed "permission." But Fraser did not like to think of himself as dispensing "permission." People had to learn to take responsibility for the string of choices that made up their lives.

Fraser knew he could not side with Greg, the husband, for that would violate the creed he had worked out for his emerging "practice." But he was willing to help Greg show his wife that her thinking was somewhat short-sighted.

The problem was that Sonya was a devout Roman Catholic. Of course Sonya did not see her Catholicism as a problem, but that's what it was in Fraser's mind. As a Catholic, she believed that married women have a "vocation," as she put it, somewhat hesitantly, to bear and rear children. She admitted freely that the prospect of birth control, when considered in the abstract, made a good deal of sense to her. Nevertheless, for her it was a matter of simple obedience not to use or do anything in the way of "family planning" -- even the euphemism came forth haltingly from her lips. Yet she admitted that she and Greg did use the much maligned and ridiculed "rhythm method" of birth control long permitted by the Vatican.

"Has it occurred to you that the pope might be mistaken in his opposition to birth control?" asked Fraser gently.

"Of course it has," she responded. "Believe me, I've thought about this long and hard -- from all kinds of angles. But the problem

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is that the pope is infallible. If he was just expressing a preference, that would be one thing. But he knows that birth control is objectively wrong -- it's his duty to remind us of that. And so it's not so much a matter of the orders that he may choose to issue; objective truth stands in my way."

Fraser was caught somewhat off guard. In preparing for the session, he had reflected on the notion of teleology, which suggested that whatever had the potential to develop should be encouraged to do so. Hence nothing should be done to block the conjugal act from attaining its intended end: procreation. Teleology was a notion which had entered Roman Catholic ethics through Thomas Aquinas, who in turn got it from Aristotle. But Sonya was not concerned about teleology, it seemed; at least, that wasn't her primary focus as she dug in her heels and presented her thinking to him. It had to do mainly with this business of the pope being infallible.

Of course Greg, her husband, had heard it all before. He sounded an objection that quickly gave Fraser some hope, for he made it clear that he was not a Catholic. Fraser had surmised that he probably was. Well, it turned out that he wasn't -- and he was having none of this infallibility business.

Fraser saw an opportunity to demonstrate his even-handedness. "Now Greg," he broke in, "I gather from the way you talk that you're some sort of Protestant"

Greg admitted that he was a Baptist. They had planned to settle the business of which church to attend before they got married, but nothing had come of it. The children (they had three of them by

then) were being raised as Catholics, but Greg continued to keep his distance from Sonya's church and maintained his membership in a fairly strict Baptist congregation.

"Don't be too quick to dismiss infallibility, Greg," said Fraser, choosing his words carefully, lest he be taken as an adherent of the notion himself. "As a Protestant, you believe in it too -- or you should, if you're consistent."

Greg shook his head. "No, it's entirely different with us," he replied.

"I'm not so sure about that," Fraser countered. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'paper pope'? Some theologians suggest that Protestants have a pope, but their pope is a book -- it's the Bible. Isn't the Bible infallible?"

Here Greg confused the issue -- so Fraser felt, at any rate -- by starting to talk about the "autographa." The phrase rang a bell with Fraser, but he was a little fuzzy on it. He encouraged Greg to explain it.

Infallibility, as Greg understood it, seemed to apply to some sort of "original manuscripts" that made up the Bible -- or had done so at one time -- but not necessarily to the Greek and Hebrew texts we now possess. What, then, of the oodles of translations that are offered to people as faithful renditions of the Greek and Hebrew? Fraser was tempted to raise this question but felt it wiser to just let Greg talk. As he continued, Greg argued that the current Greek and

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Hebrew versions of the various Bible books contain copying errors. Just look at Hosea

Sonya then demonstrated that she understood more philosophy and theology than Fraser had realized at first. She pounced on Greg's admission in triumph. "So you only pretend to believe in infallibility," she said, her eyes shining. "You leave yourself an escape hatch. If you don't like what the Bible says, you start talking about how there must be copying errors. The original Bible was infallible -- but not the one we hold in our hands today -- isn't that what you're really saying? Don't you maintain that those autographa of yours no longer exist?"

Greg was not sure how to respond. Sonya pressed him on what that original Bible was -- what had become of it? Greg admitted that it had somehow been lost. But if it was truly God's infallible Word, Sonya wanted to know, wouldn't a God with no limits on his power make sure that it did not get lost or corrupted? With the pope's infallibility there was no such temporizing. The pope was infallible -- that's all there was to it.

Fraser took this little exchange as a cue to bring their session to a close, for the allotted hour had passed. He promised to do some thinking -- and also homework -- about the snag they had encountered. He also explained that he would not be taking sides in their disagreement -- neither about birth control nor about infallibility. All he would be doing was "clarifying." He would help them think through the issue for themselves.

Greg brought up the matter of payment -- what did they owe him for the session? Fraser stalled. He didn't want to admit to them that they were his very first clients, and that he had no fixed policy in place. He said they would talk about fees later, once Greg and Sonya had a chance to reflect on how much they had been helped by the sessions. He hinted that if they felt they had not been helped, they would owe him nothing. He wanted to make sure they would continue, so that he could book a solid success in his first real "case."

Greg then insisted on paying for the coffee and deserts which had been consumed while they were in the restaurant. Fraser made no objection.

"When shall we three meet again?" asked Fraser, quoting a line from Shakespeare's Macbeth. Greg and Sonya did not seem to pick up the reference. It's just as well, thought Fraser. They probably don't like to think of themselves as witches.

It was agreed that "we three" would get together again in exactly a week. Same time, same place. That would give Fraser a few days to do some homework.

He decided to head down to one of the theological libraries at the university. He would also drop in on one of his Catholic friends and ask for some help. He wanted to make sure he understood this business about papal infallibility.

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The next day Fraser looked up Marty O'Toole, one of his friends from university days. Marty was another of the lucky ones who managed to hang on at the university. He was now ensconced in a modest office which he used for some chaplaincy work with students from overseas. He also taught a few courses in the Catholic college -- both philosophy and theology. Marty considered himself a flexible guy.

Because Marty was also doing counseling, Fraser decided to level with him and let him know what it was about. But he didn't want Marty somehow solving the "case" for him.

It turned out that he had nothing to fear in that regard. Marty pulled a face and started to mutter something to the effect that nobody believes in infallibility nowadays. Fraser corrected him: "My client surely does." He deliberately did not reveal her name -- that would be "unprofessional," he thought.

Marty supplied some academic information-- mainly stuff that Fraser already knew, although he was not so clear on the subject. Marty even made fun of the concept: "What did you think? That if you ran into the pope at Starbucks and asked him whether the Yankees will win the World Series this year, he'd know? Suppose he did know that kind of thing -- then he'd have people after him all the time with questions. Just think of the stock market implications. No, the pope knows better than to be all-knowing. He's only infallible once in a while -- when it suits him."

Marty also explained that, strictly speaking, the pope had only been infallible since 1870 -- that's when the doctrine of papal

infallibility was officially proclaimed. Fraser couldn't resist asking an infinite regress question: wouldn't there have to be some infallible authority on hand even before then to pass on authority to the pope? The notion of apostolic succession came to mind.

Marty had heard that objection before and had the standard answer ready, although he hardly seemed to affirm it when delivering it. The ultimate authority was God, and surely he was infallible even before 1870 -- at least, according to the theology on which Catholicism had long relied. And God somehow transferred his infallible teaching authority to the church as such -- or perhaps shared it. What happened in 1870, in effect, was that the teaching authority of the church got crystallized and focused in the person of the pope. Presumably the leading lights of those days thought it was more efficient to operate in such a fashion.

"What would Martin Luther say?" Fraser inquired. He knew about Marty's ambivalence about his first name and thought he should tease him a bit.

Marty pulled a face before answering. He preferred "Marty" to "Martin," his official name, because there was less connection to the Reformer; he had always wondered why a solidly Catholic family had stuck him with so obviously Protestant a name.

On the other hand, in recent years he had begun to appreciate something of the rebel streak in Luther, although he disdained the Reformer's later hard-headedness, which had helped immobilize the newly emergent Lutheran church in another scholastic orthodoxy. In

short, he hadn't made up his mind yet about his great theological namesake.

"Well," said Marty, "Luther's career gives you the answer. He wasn't afraid to confront the pope, and even the whole church. 'Here I stand,' said he. It wasn't 'Here we stand,' or 'Here you must stand.' No, Luther was an individualist -- perhaps even something of a modern."

Then Marty paused, realizing that he was starting to sound like one of those conservative Catholic professors that he used to despise. Luther, he admitted to himself, was a quicksilver figure in history. You could view him from all sorts of angles and see different things in him each time. Perhaps that was what accounted for his greatness.

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Fraser thanked Marty and went his way. That wasn't much help, he thought to himself. He headed for Starbucks to drink some coffee and reflect. But he didn't even get in the door before a familiar voice hailed him: it was David Hasselfreud, one of his closest friends. They sat down together.

Marty had not planned to consult David about infallibility, but now it might be hard to avoid the subject. If he made an effort to dodge David's usual "What's up?" query, he would surely wind up sounding evasive, for the "case" he was working on was certainly occupying his attention.

Fraser decided to treat it as an academic question. He told David a white lie: he was considering writing a paper on the concept of infallibility. He went on to explain that infallibility is closely related to such notions as truth and knowledge, and therefore is really a topic within epistemology, which is surely a respectable field for a philosopher to concern himself with.

Fraser knew he could count on an interesting opinion from David, whose keen mind embraced all sorts of subjects, from computer science (his own field) to musicology to philosophy. Although he was an orthodox Jew and quite strict about observing the many commandments, David was amazingly open-minded about Christianity -- at least on a superficial level. In fact, he knew a surprising amount about Christian theology. And he had also read a lot of philosophy. He knew most of the terminology.

It did not take David long to get into the subject of infallibility. "We Jews get along without it," he declared, with a wave of his hand.

Fraser was puzzled. "But there is such a thing as Jewish fundamentalism," he ventured. "You read about it in the papers all the time -- how the fundamentalist element has such an influence in Israeli politics nowadays."

David cut Fraser off and asked why he was equating Orthodoxy with fundamentalism. Fraser didn't know what to say in response. It just seemed the natural thing to do. "Isn't it just the same as Christian fundamentalism, epistemologically speaking?"

"Not at all," replied David, warming to the subject. "You're forgetting about the Talmud."

Fraser squelched the impulse to defend himself on this score. He hadn't exactly "forgotten about" the Talmud, but on the other hand he didn't know exactly what it was. He asked David to explain.

David was pleased to oblige. He told Fraser that Judaism is intellectually more sophisticated than Christianity. Christians think they can base everything on one text, and that all parts of that text can somehow have the same standing. In the process they ignore hermeneutics or interpretation theory. The Jews, on the other hand, know that any living text needs constant interpretation and application (the Gadamer element, David added, almost as a mild reproach to Fraser). The Talmud, in brief, was an open-ended tradition of interpretation that breathed life into the Torah and kept believing Jews from falling into simple-mindedness.

Fraser knew he had to fight back and uphold the honor of the Christian tradition. "But lots of Orthodox Jews follow their rabbi just as blindly as Christian fundamentalists follow their authority figures."

"True," admitted David, "but there is still this difference: we have the Talmud as an brake on our simple-mindedness, but you have nothing of that sort. And so you go on talking nonsense -- 'by Scripture alone' That sort of thing. Of course Scripture can't stand alone."

David was starting to sound like a postmodernist. Fraser decided not to take that tack with him. Instead he reminded David

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that there are authoritative "creeds" in many of the Christian churches. And those creeds provide an interpretative framework for key elements of Scripture (call them "Torah" if you like), such as the Ten Commandments.

"Fair enough," responded David, for whom this was not news. "But notice that there are commentaries on the commentaries: think of all the commentaries written on the Heidelberg Catechism. Take that business of the second commandment: 'Make no images' What's that supposed to mean? Well, you're told to read the Heidelberg Catechism commentary on it. You do so, and it's still left unclear. So then you have to read the commentary on the catechism. The business never gets settled. It's the same way in Judaism. But our understanding of the Torah as dynamic allows us to be at peace with the open-endedness of it all. So juvenile a notion as infallibility doesn't enter into it for us."

Fraser felt rebuked. He knew he could not use David's reasoning on Sonya -- she would feel yelled at. It was back to the drawing board. Somehow he would have to clarify the concept of infallibility in such a way that she herself would realize her intellectual responsibility in assenting to it in the first place.

He had written a paper on this very thing in graduate school. The professor hadn't thought much of the paper, but Fraser was still convinced that the reasoning was sound. The paper attempted to prove that however authority-bound a believer might be, there was always a "Cartesian" element in his thought. Descartes had doubted absolutely everything -- or claimed to do so. Some philosophers maintained that it's impossible to doubt everything at once. But

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eventually, after proving to himself that God does exist, Descartes got back his belief in the material world and all the other stuff he had set aside at the beginning of his historic thought experiment. And so it was with the believer. Even if one chooses to be a fundamentalist and decides to accept everything God says without question, one must first realize that such a step has been taken -- even if only on the level of an implicit presupposition. If there was such a thing as blind obedience to the Word of God, it was not really a case of blindness so much as of forgetting: one then forgot about having given assent and allegiance to the authoritative text at some point in the past.

Somehow he would have to show Sonya that she was a Cartesian whether she liked it or not. And once she realized that she was, it would dawn on her that the responsibility for the choice she was making regarding birth control was hers -- not the pope's. The infallibility plea was really an unconscious evasion on her part -- almost a dodge.

Fraser was pleased with himself. He had solved the "case." Or maybe "solved" was too strong a word: perhaps he should only think to himself that he had figured it out. And he would keep his conclusions from Lucy, for she had a way of getting him mixed up with her curious blend of abruptness and pragmatism.

* * * * *

That evening Fraser found an unwelcome visitor at his door. It was Lucy's older sister, who bore the improbable name of Corky Calabash. Under certain circumstances he would have been happy to see her: she was often quite entertaining. But just then he felt

vulnerable to her assaults, which were liable to come at any time and were born of a mixture of certitude and ignorance. Her sheer energy made her a fearsome foe.

Whatever Corky had on her mind, she felt strongly about it. She was a handful, emotionally speaking. Two former husbands could testify to that. Although she was twice divorced and had no kids to show for her two marriages, Corky radiated a supreme confidence about almost everything. That confidence stemmed from what she called her "close walk with the Lord."

Corky was a self-styled "charismatic." Fraser knew that this word had an honorable history; all the same, it made him feel uncomfortable. It seems that she had "found the Lord" between her first and second husbands. A couple of times Fraser had tried to explain to her that it didn't work that way. In fact, it was just the other way around: the Lord went out looking for you. That was the proper Calvinistic understanding of these things. But Corky scarcely knew what Calvinism was. When Fraser tried to talk Calvinism to her, she would respond with a blank stare.

Since her conversion, Corky had tried to haul Lucy and Fraser into her energetic (her term) charismatic church. Lucy flatly refused to set foot in the place; she regarded her older sister as slightly deranged. Fraser had gone twice -- mainly to observe, he told himself. As for Corky, she regarded her brother-in-law as one of those "lukewarm" Christians they talk about in Revelation 3, where the church in Laodicea gets told a thing or two. Still, she had some hope for him. At least he called himself a Christian.

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But evangelism was not her mission that evening: she was all aflutter about her friend Gloria, and she needed to talk, even if the reception she got was uncertain. It seemed that Gloria had some rare, hard-to-diagnose cancer -- at least, so the doctors suspected. Or maybe it wasn't a cancer. The trouble was that they weren't really sure. And now the question was: How are we supposed to pray for Gloria if we didn't know whether she has cancer or not?

Fraser didn't see a problem here. He leaned toward the Anglican style of praying: there was no need to give God a medical rundown on the condition of the people you were praying for. God probably knew just what was wrong with them, Fraser reasoned.

But Corky needed certainty, and so she turned to her sister and brother-in-law -- two docs, who should therefore know something about medical matters. She wanted to get their opinions before she tried to formulate one herself. So what about it -- was it cancer or not? That was the issue.

Lucy remained quite calm. These things aren't so easy to determine, she began to explain. And among animals it was even harder than among humans: we don't know all that much about the physiology of various of the animals. And the animals can't tell us much about their symptoms.

Fraser was more philosophical in his response. Corky seemed intent on getting either a yes or a no, but Fraser wanted her to understand that not all questions admit of this degree of precision. He tried to make her see that science cannot be expected to give us

precise answers in every situation. He could not help but pontificate: "Science does not deal in certainties."

The stare of incomprehension he got back from Corky reminded him of his students. Fraser thought back to his philosophy of science days -- especially a fine course he had taken in the subject in graduate school. He'd been impressed especially with the approach of Karl Popper, who talked about "conjectures" and "refutations." As Fraser understood it, science never really got beyond offering us working hypotheses. The "truth," if one still dared use such an exalted term, was just the current best hypothesis, but one could never be sure that it would not be overthrown one day.

"Why not?" Corky inquired.

"Good question," added Lucy. "I'd like to know too."

Fraser came up dry. He knew it had something to do with Popper's insistence that every hypothesis had to be of such a nature that under certain specifiable circumstances it could be falsified or proven wrong. He began to explain this "falsifiability criterion," as he called it.

"But why? I don't get it." Lucy looked slightly annoyed. "I mean, if you had a hypothesis that's beyond dispute, what would be wrong with that? Are math statements no good, according to this theory?"

Fraser felt the need to explain that the theory wasn't his own - it stemmed from an eminent philosopher named Karl Popper.

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Beyond that, he wasn't sure what to say. It had all made excellent sense in class. But that was years ago.

He tried a different tack. "Science isn't infallible," he told Corky. "People look at their doctors as scientists, and then they take them too literally. They are too easily impressed by the big words doctors use. They don't realize that much science is basically guesswork -- medicine too. We have to live with a degree of uncertainty" He was groping for more words.

Corky was already off in another direction. "Infallibility," she said slowly, as though rolling the word around in her mouth. "We looked at that word in my Bible study group the other night. It's what Catholics believe. Our group leader was explaining that they cling to the idea that the pope can't make a mistake. It's all because they don't rely on the Holy Spirit. If you have the Spirit, you don't need the pope to tell you what to believe."

"That's not quite it," responded Fraser, feeling the need to stand up for the rationalist side in the debate. He paused.

Lucy then entered the fray with her take on the idea: "Infallibility doesn't mean a thing unless you know that you're infallible. But what if you're right about something and don't know that you're right? What if you're somewhat unsure of your opinion and find out later that you were right on the money? Are you infallible then?" She paused. Then she answered her own question, haltingly: "No, I suppose you'd have to be dogmatic in order to be infallible."

Fraser then threw in some of what Marty had told him, explaining that the pope was not infallible all the time but only when he made certainly carefully considered pronouncements about weighty matters (no trivial stuff) under such-and-such official circumstances. As he talked, Fraser acted as though this was somehow his own material: he did not want to leave the impression that he was repeating what someone else had told him. But he didn't sound convincing -- or even convinced -- to himself.

In his determination to clarify the concept, he realized that this conversation with his wife and her sister was a sort of practice run, preparing him for his next encounter with Greg and Sonya. The whole enterprise was proving a bit more difficult than he had expected.

Trying to make things simple, he proceeded to explain that an infallible person might well be infallible only some of the time. You had to leave an infallible person the freedom to say something stupid every now and then.

But Lucy could see no practical use for such infallibility. It seemed to her that on Fraser's account, you could only be infallible after the fact. It was like predicting the attack on the World Trade Center after it happened: you might explain that such an attack was inevitable, but somehow no one was impressed. However, if you took the trouble to record your prediction -- especially if it was something highly unlikely -- and then it actually came true, maybe then you would have a useful kind of infallibility. Lucy, it seemed, was all pragmatism.

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Fraser was getting discouraged. Was Lucy mocking him? She was known to do such a thing on occasion, but always in an affectionate spirit.

As for Corky, her interest in philosophy of science was short-lived. She returned to her concern for her friend Gloria. "Whatever you call it," she said, "I do believe the docs owe us the truth about her condition. We can't live with a mere 'hypothesis,' as you call it, Fraser."

The conversation then turned to other things. But Fraser was left with an unsettled feeling. He had solved the "case" in his own mind, but it was becoming unglued again.

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Fraser sensed that he needed another rehearsal. The next opportunity came up soon enough: his friend Folkert Smith telephoned, inquiring how the case was coming along. Folkert wanted to come over and discuss it. But Fraser put him off, fearing that if he had to deal with Lucy at the same time as Folkert, he would be in trouble. After some delicate footwork, Fraser got Folkert to agree that Fraser would come over to Folkert's place instead. Folkert promised to make sure there was beer in the fridge.

Folkert was genuinely curious how things were going. Clearly the subject of birth control interested him. And so he seemed disappointed to hear about the infallibility roadblock. But his disappointment was soon replaced by enthusiasm for the new subject.

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Folkert settled into his chair, took a sip of his beer, cleared his throat, and began to talk. Fraser sensed that he was about to be treated to a lecture. He braced himself, taking special care not to look bored, even if Folkert should wind up repeating some of his pet ideas.

Folkert first brushed aside what Fraser had tried to say about the pope. That was clearly nonsense on Rome's part, declared Folkert, ever the loyal Protestant. Infallibility has to do with the Bible.

Folkert then admitted that real infallibility -- which belongs to the Bible and to no one and nothing else -- had been quite a problem in his church; in fact, the Christian Reformed denomination had lost many members over it. The exodus also had to do with the ordination of women, he hastened to explain, although the underlying issue was what many chose to call a "battle for the Bible."

Fraser threw in a question: Was the Bible of such a nature that it could be thought to make infallible pronouncements about matters of church order? Folkert shook his head.

Yet he sounded hopeful as he warmed to his subject, explaining that his church had essentially solved the issue. Unfortunately, not everyone accepted the solution and saw the brilliance of it.

It was all contained in a synodical report known as "Report 44," which dealt with the "nature and extent" -- here Folkert paused to emphasize these two weighty words -- of Biblical authority. The key to the whole business, he explained, was the realization that the Bible is only infallible in what it intends to teach. The beauty of this

formula is that it gets rid of the "inerrancy" issue, which is really a red herring.

Fraser would like to have heard more about inerrancy, for he had never talked with anyone who took it seriously enough to explain it carefully. But it didn't look as though Folkert was about to give this notion much credence. Fraser then asked a follow-up question to indicate that he was not quite satisfied with the dismissal of inerrancy, but Folkert gave him a condescending look.

Fraser took a different tack and asked: "How do we know what the Bible intends to teach?"

"A fair question," responded Folkert. "It's really a matter of common sense -- theologically speaking, of course. The whole Bible is about Christ, and Christ is the Savior. The Bible, in short, is the book of our salvation -- salvation is its intended message. When it speaks about redemption, it's infallible; when it makes passing comments on other matters, or when we realize that its human authors were a bit out of date in their understanding of this or that -- all of that stuff falls outside the scope of what the Bible intends to teach."

Fraser tried to be helpful. "Sort of like the pope speculating about the Yankees' post-season hopes?"

Folkert looked annoyed. "This is a serious subject," he reminded Fraser.

But Fraser was not about to be put off so easily. "Listen," he argued, "much Christian teaching is about ethics and practical life and so forth -- stuff like dealing with your anger. There's good psychology in the Bible. But such passages have no direct bearing on what you're calling salvation. Is the Bible allowed to speak to such issues? Or are you telling me that it then has to come down from its pedestal of infallibility?"

Folkert thought for a moment and then allowed that these, too, were fair questions on Fraser's part. In groping for a response, he brought up a term Fraser had heard before -- "creational revelation." It seemed that there was more to God's revelation than the Bible -- much more.

Fraser had not heard this term often, although he had noticed years before that Folkert loved to work the word "creational" into all sorts of settings; indeed, Fraser would not have been surprised to hear Folkert say that the beer they were sipping was "creational."

As far as Fraser knew, the business about "creation" and "revelation" -- and especially the link between them -- had something to do with Folkert's being Dutch. Yet, to make things still more complicated, Folkert, who loved distinctions and categories and sometimes just reveled in being difficult, insisted that he wasn't really Dutch. It wasn't that he didn't speak and read Dutch or that he didn't love the Dutch language and people. No, his point was that he came from a distinct ethnic group -- the Frisians. It was like the Scots distinguishing themselves from the English, even though they had capitulated in terms of using the English tongue in everyday discourse. Some of the Scots stemmed from speakers of Gaelic, but

there were precious few Scots left who could make themselves understood in that ancient tongue. And Fraser was not among them.

As for the Frisians, they were the people who lived along the North Sea in parts of Denmark, Germany, and especially the Netherlands. Folkert loved to explain all of this to people who were unaware that there was a linguistic minority in the Netherlands. The language spoken by the Frisians, Folkert would add, was the closest living language to English. A century or two before the Norman conquest of 1066, a Frisian who traveled to England would be recognized by the people there as speaking a kindred language: they would be able to make out what he was saying. Since then, English had been transformed by its encounter with French, but Frisian remained pure, Folkert insisted. Although he was not much given to joking, he did like to say, with a straight face, that Adam and Eve and spoken Frisian in the Garden of Eden.

But if Folkert was such an ethnic, what was he doing with a British last name -- Smith? Fraser had heard the explanation long before, when another Dutch acquaintance undertook to quiz Folkert on the subject. It seemed that Folkert's father, eager to fit in, had changed the family name from "Smid" to "Smith" shortly after coming to Canada, thereby preserving its meaning while making it sound more Canadian. The same father had changed his son's name from "Folkert" to "Frank," only to see the son, with growing ethnic pride, change it back again some time later.

The Dutch acquaintance had not been satisfied by the story about Folkert's last name. He proceeded to point out that "Smid" is a Dutch name -- not a Frisian one. Folkert then admitted that he was

Frisian only on his mother's side and had been named after his mother's father. His older brother, he added, had been named after his father's father, in accordance with an old-fashioned custom in the Netherlands. The family had lived in Friesland, which was a northern province where the people still spoke Frisian -- at least, in the smaller towns and villages. His parents came to Canada when Folkert was only eight and had raised him to speak both Frisian and Dutch. He admitted that he could not write Frisian, and could read it only with difficulty. But writing Dutch was no problem for him, although he stated modestly he would probably make grammatical errors. When he took up German during his college days, it came easily to him: much of the vocabulary was similar to Dutch. And so it seemed natural to choose German as his main field of studies. Indeed, Folkert loved all the Germanic languages and dabbled in the Scandinavian ones as well; he even talked about taking courses in Danish and Swedish when he got some free time.

As Fraser tried to make sense of the "creational revelation" business, he asked Folkert: "Is this more of your Dooyeweerd stuff?"

Folkert admitted that there was indeed such a notion in the thinking of Herman Dooyeweerd, a Dutch Calvinist philosopher whom he greatly admired. But he added that there were a number of Dutch thinkers in this vein, generally called neo-Calvinists, of whom Dooyeweerd was the best-known and most prominent. Some of the others made even more of "creational revelation" than Dooyeweerd himself had done.

Folkert had long urged Fraser to make a careful study of Dooyeweerd. Fraser obliged his friend by doing a bit of reading about

Dooyeweerd and even sampling some primary sources. But it had not sunk in. Even so, Folkert kept after his Presbyterian friend and liked to point out to him that Dooyeweerd's major work, his *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, had been sent out into the world in its English second edition by an outfit called the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company. The implication was that Fraser, as a Presbyterian, should be drawing philosophical sustenance from Dooyeweerd.

To Fraser, what he read in Dooyeweerd and heard from Folkert sounded like a variation on the natural law theory that many Roman Catholic thinkers loved, but Folkert insisted there were significant differences. Dooyeweerd, he assured Fraser, had criticized the natural law tradition. Perhaps so, thought Fraser, but there wasn't much in Western philosophy that Dooyeweerd had not criticized. Clearly he was hard to please.

Fraser did not want to open an argument on the Dooyeweerd front, which he felt he would probably lose. He decided to be direct, by changing the subject and asking Folkert: "What shall I tell them? What do you advise?"

Fraser was not surprised that Folkert had little by way of specific advice to offer. Folkert loved distinctions and categories, but he was not keen on the kinds of problems and situations that Fraser liked to call "existential." And so Folkert said simply: "Of course you have to get them to see that birth control is a valid creational possibility intended by God for our responsible use. The fact that we long opposed it in principle -- or thought we did, or could, or should -- does not mean that it's inherently wrong."

"But Sonya's hung up on infallibility," Fraser reminded Folkert. Indeed, that was where the whole discussion had started. But Folkert seemed to have no fresh ideas or insights to offer.

Fraser reflected that there was probably a good reason why Folkert did not try engaging in counseling himself but instead urged it on Fraser: Folkert was simply too dogmatic, too sure of himself, too inclined to think that introducing some new distinctions and categories would take care of any problem. That was the philosophical difference between the two of them: Fraser was suspicious of philosophical categories and liked the idea of dissolving them, as though he were Ludwig Wittgenstein or Gilbert Ryle, whereas Folkert was in love with them. In truth, thought Fraser, my dear friend Folkert is just too dogmatic. He loves to dish out answers -- sometimes even before his conversation partner had a chance to pose a question.

* * * * *

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

There was an awkward pause on the other end of the line. Then a familiar, soft, female voice responded. "Is that you, Fraser?"

Fraser considered carrying the joke further and addressing the voice on the line as "Father Angela," but she didn't seem receptive today. "Sure is," he responded cheerfully. He paused and asked: "Are you hearing confessions this morning?" It was his way of inquiring whether she was tied up. Did she have some time for him?

Fraser was at loose ends. He was not getting far with his "case." He had planned to play his cards close to his chest and not let his friends know what he was doing: later he could present a disguised version of the case to them as a triumph of sorts. But the triumph now seemed far away. He had already let a few people know what he was about, and so he thought he would check in with Angela as well.

She indicated that her schedule was open, and so he headed out. It was only a ten-minute drive to St. Capacia's Anglican Church, where Angela worked -- or served -- depending on how you look at such things. She was an "assistant curate," and a priest in her own right. She had been ordained twice by Fraser's count. He thought that once would have sufficed. But then, the Anglicans do love ceremonies.

The "rector" at St. Capacia's was a somewhat aloof man whom Fraser avoided. For one thing, he didn't know what to call him. Anglicanism seemed to bristle with special names and terms: if you were an outsider or a visitor, you were often fumbling for the right word.

Fraser thought of the "rector" as the church's senior pastor, but he was afraid the man would be insulted by such a term. He seemed to want to be a cut above the clergy in other denominations.

Angela was wearing clerical garb, as usual, but not the lovely vestments with which she and the other clergy and readers and servers adorned the sanctuary during the services. Angela certainly

knew how to look the part. Her pixie-like face and form radiated warmth.

Fraser sometimes wished that a bit of Angela could be mixed into Lucy's nature -- what a combination that would be! He had long admitted to himself -- but never to Lucy -- that he had been a little bit in love with Angela. Indeed, his feelings for her went back a long way to the days when they were students at the university. But he had never seen any sign of romantic interest on Angela's part -- not even in the days when Fraser was still free and eligible.

Angela was so holy and ethereal that she seemed beyond love and sex and attachment. He had never noticed anyone in her life who might qualify as a romantic partner. Perhaps she had married Jesus, like a Roman Catholic nun.

Fraser did not come directly to the point. He wanted to enjoy the encounter. He started with a bit of banter -- gentle kidding. "Now you Anglicans are practically Roman Catholics, and so you should be able to help me"

"Only in worship style," replied Angela. "Much of the aesthetic sensibility of Catholicism is Mediterranean -- too garish to suit me. Clashing colors, and all. Whereas we Anglicans are English."

She did not say "British." She left Fraser some room to resurrect a little argument they enjoyed having every now and then. Fraser responded as invited: "Right -- Church of England. Here in Canada you cheat and call yourselves `Anglicans.' Not everyone knows that `Anglican' basically means English."

"Well, you belong to the Church of Scotland," Angela shot back.

"Not here in Canada I don't," replied Fraser. "We call it `Presbyterian.' It's democratic. We don't have a hierarchy, like you guys. You should call your church `Episcopalian.' That's what they do in the States."

Angela shook her head. "That name highlights the whole business of hierarchy. That's the side of our tradition St. Capacia wouldn't approve of."

Now, Fraser had never heard of St. Capacia before he got to know the church where Angela wound up. Yet, in a way the name seemed typically Anglican, even if you considered only the sound and ignored the meaning. The sounds of the words and names were important to Anglicans. Sometimes it seemed to Fraser that the Anglicans were willing to surrender truth if only they could have poetry and beauty.

There was Angela's own name, for example: Angela Orso. It had a lovely rising and falling quality. Yet it wasn't her real name. She had been baptized under the name "Angelica." During her rebellious teenage years, when she drifted away from the church, she allowed "Angela" to supplant the full version: she wanted to seem "normal." But now she was back in the church, and on one occasion she had confessed to Fraser that she yearned to go back to "Angelica," but it would be hard to do. She could list it officially as her name, of course,

but people couldn't be bothered to make the switch in their heads. She would forever be Angela.

But then, in one of the sudden reversals that contributed to her charm, she announced that "Angelica" was, after all, a bit pretentious. Anglicans do like angels and talk about them often, but really, who do you think you are, anyway? Doesn't there have to be some sort of line between heaven and earth?

Fraser thought about it: a beautiful woman named Angelica serving as a priest? It was too much: it wouldn't go over.

Fraser then introduced his specific question, and Angela quickly pulled a face. "Oh, gosh, that's something you'd have to ask Marty about."

"I already have," replied Fraser. "He gave me some information, but no real conceptual insight. I think my question reminded him of his own deep ambivalence about his tradition. Sometimes I think he'd like to break through and become Martin Luther."

"Whatever for?" asked Angela. She gave Fraser a strange look: "Do you have any idea who Luther really was? What he said about women? Even worse, how he talked about the Jews? No, I think Marty knows better than that. Leave Luther in the past."

She paused. Leaving Marty behind, she looked straight at Fraser and demanded: "Why do you ask me? Surely you realize that we Anglicans have transcended such things. Infallibility belongs to

the infancy -- no, perhaps also the childhood -- of the Christian church. We've learned how to get along without it."

"Not so fast," countered Fraser. "I've read the Thirty-Nine Articles. Isn't that your official creed?"

"Big deal," replied Angela, not offended in the slightest. With just the hint of a grin on her face, and in a low, conspiratorial tone of voice, she told him: "We don't believe all that stuff anymore. And you should talk -- didn't you Presbyterians get rid of the Westminster Confession?"

"Not exactly," replied Fraser. "It's true that some Presbyterian denominations, including my own, have tiptoed away from it. And even in the stern denominations they allow wiggle room, so that you don't have to believe everything in there. In the States -- I believe they call it the Presbyterian Church in the USA -- they've sort of buried it under a bunch of confessions and documents, including some new stuff. You might say that they've watered it down."

"Well, we Anglicans don't throw old stuff away. We just enlarge the tent and make room for more -- that's the spirit of St. Capacia. A large woman in every sense -- physically, intellectually, spiritually. That's why I feel so much at home in Anglicanism."

Fraser wanted more of an answer, and so he pressed his query further. But Angela again proved herself to be an eclectic at heart. "Eclectic" was what Folkert called her, and coming from him it didn't exactly sound like a compliment. Angela knew that Folkert didn't approve of her, although he liked her well enough -- everyone did.

Angela now switched out of theological mode altogether and suddenly became practical and pastoral. "Of course your clients should use birth control. Good heavens, the world can't sustain the population it already has, never mind adding to it. What you have to do is empower her."

Fraser hesitated. He didn't like that word "empower." It was the sort of word that kept him out of theology and psychology. Philosophers don't go in for such squishy terms, he thought to himself.

Fraser yearned for a cleaner, more intellectual solution to Sonya's problem. But he knew he wouldn't be getting it from Angela.

"Will we see you in church on Sunday?" Angela inquired. Every couple of months or so, he took in a service at St. Capacia's -- always the 8:30, which was based on the Book of Common Prayer and featured its exquisite Elizabethan English. The priests leading the service spoke in ordinary, unaccented Canadian English, but their version of the language seemed a cut about what one heard from preachers in other denominations. Fraser was always drawn to it.

By attending St. Capacia's he could also hear his friend Angela preach -- or deliver a homily, as she preferred to say. It was always short, and Fraser did not often agree with her emphases, but it was usually fun to listen to.

Attending the 8:30 still left him plenty of time to get back home, rouse the family, and cart his two children off to St. Andrew's

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Presbyterian, where he was a member and one of the more faithful attenders. Once or twice a year, Lucy went with them -- just to see whether they had anything "practical" to offer, she would explain.

When she made such comments, Fraser sometimes thought he should get Angela to teach Lucy about the importance of symbolism in human life. Her many comments about being "practical" rubbed him the wrong way. But then he thought it was probably better to keep the two women apart as much as he could. They had met, of course, but it would be stretching things to say that they were friends.

Lucy, in any case, was convinced that religion had to be "practical"; otherwise you were better off doing without. As for symbolism, the dogs and cats she treated every day seemed to manage very nicely without it. Couldn't people do the same?

Angela appeared to be at loose ends, and so Fraser lingered over his goodbye. As he drove away, he thought to himself that he was getting nowhere. Only three days to go before his next meeting with Sonya and Greg. What would he tell them?

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It turned out that Fraser had nothing to worry about. First he got a reprieve on his next encounter with Sonya and Greg. Sonya phoned to tell him that a family emergency had come up and they would be away for a little while. They'd call when they returned.

Fraser heard nothing for three weeks. Then came another call from Sonya, with distressing news, although she was fairly collected as she passed it on. First of all, her mother had died in the Maritimes. In her earlier call Sonya had been rather vague as to what the problem was. But now, in addition, Greg had come to grief -- mysteriously so, it seemed. Fraser asked what had happened, but Sonya was abrupt -- almost rude, Fraser thought -- and replied that they wouldn't be needing his services anymore.

It was more than a disappointment to Fraser to hear that he was discharged from the "case," if, indeed, there still was a "case." He considered calling them again to see why they were miffed. Perhaps he could get Greg on the phone and talk man to man. Or maybe they weren't upset with him at all. It did not seem right to him that he should be shooed away without an explanation.

Sonya also sensed that an explanation was in order. She called again a week later to provide it. Fraser was now informed that she and Greg would not be having any more children, but not through any decision of their own. A "higher power" had intervened. Sonya, at any rate, took what had happened as a signal from on high. In secular terms, one might say that Greg had gotten into a freak accident: Sonya clearly did not wish to reveal details. But Fraser was given to understand that the accident eliminated him from any further paternity.

As Fraser listened to Sonya's words, he could sense that they had been rehearsed. Or perhaps she had written them down and was reading the operative phrases off a little card in her hand. Or it could

be that she had made basically the same little speech to a number of inquirers and well-wishers of late.

Fraser wondered whether Greg was now sterile or impotent. Perhaps both. But he could tell from Sonya's measured hesitance that she was not about to satisfy his curiosity on that score.

He tried to get her to come and see him again, with Greg, assuming that Greg was up to this sort of thing by now. Sonya declined, politely but firmly. Fraser responded that they needed to wrap things up, so to speak. Sonya seemed to think it had already been done.

Three days later he received a check in the mail from Sonya -- \$150. They hadn't gotten around to fees as yet. Fraser felt that it was not fair to charge them, since he hadn't really done anything for them.

He would gladly have traded that check for one more meaningful session with them. He didn't really need the money. Lucy's income easily covered their expenses, and she never made him feel small for earning so much less than she did.

Indeed, Fraser would have been pleased to consider the \$150 as an expenditure, an investment in his new business. He wanted to turn his time with Greg and Sonya into a story he could tell to others, as a way of establishing his legitimacy as a counselor.

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Folkert made a couple of inquiries as to how the "case" was coming along, but Fraser was able to keep him at bay with solemn assurances about "confidentiality." After all, he thought to himself, whatever happened to poor old Greg, it was rather personal in nature. He tried the same line with Lucy, but she was having none of it.

And so he leveled with her, after some prodding. She sat on a straight chair across from him, her elbows resting on her knees, as she listened. It was almost as though she were doing clinical observation at the same time. She made Fraser feel a bit uneasy.

Her reaction was not long in coming. "Well, that takes care of that," she pronounced, almost as though she were pleased.

Fraser knew what she was thinking. "You figured all along that Greg should be fixed," he said.

"Yes, I suppose I did," she admitted. "What's wrong with that? After all, it's no big deal. I do it all the time. And why shouldn't the male take some responsibility for these things?" She paused. Then a new thought came to her: "Maybe there is a God after all. Maybe he solved the problem neatly and saved you the trouble of dithering with it any longer." A practical God! The thought seemed to please her.

At last Fraser and his wife were standing on common ground, theologically speaking. Or was it a piece of moving ice that might break up and leave them drifting apart? More likely the latter, thought Fraser.

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"I still think they should have come in for a `wrap-up' session," he lamented. "They should have finished the job -- no, they should have let me finish the job. I feel ... I don't know -- sort of incomplete." Fraser was not normally so free in revealing his inner thoughts to Lucy's impatient gaze. "I feel as though, in some sense, it was my loss too. They should have let me share it with them."

Lucy gave him a blank stare. "Fraser," she intoned, "life isn't a job! Life is ..." she paused here, as if to gather strength for the unfamiliar task of philosophizing, "life is just being; it's breathing, existing, making love. Why must you make such a big deal of everything?"

"Because life is a big deal," Fraser insisted. "Without consciousness to accompany living and breathing and making love, it means nothing. Remember what Socrates said: the unexamined life is not worth living."

"Tell it to the animals," responded Lucy. "Why can't people give `consciousness' -- I'm not quite sure what you mean by that word, by the way -- a rest? Maybe thinking is a curse. Have you ever considered that possibility?"

Fraser sensed that this was one argument he was not about to win. His thoughts returned to Sonya and Greg. "They would never have come to me if Sonya hadn't really wanted more children," he mused. "I wonder how she feels now."

"There's always artificial insemination," Lucy offered.

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"I suppose the pope would nix that too," replied Fraser. But then he began to speculate. Perhaps there was some room for discussion here. He decided to bone up on the latest Roman Catholic thinking on the subject. If Sonya really wanted more children, she might be persuaded to break with authority and tradition. The pope could still be infallible on some things -- just not on this one. Fraser pondered the possibilities

Chapter 2

Ask Me Anything

"What am I doing here?" Fraser asked himself. He felt annoyed, but he didn't want to show it. He was at a meeting at the university, whereas he could have been at home reading a good book and immersing himself in some deep thoughts. The meeting was a matter of choice, and he had opted to be there. It was a mistake.

"Adjuncts," he read in the notice of meeting, "are free to attend." That simple sentence did not make it sound all that mandatory; in fact, the idea Fraser got was that adjunct professors should consider themselves privileged to attend. And so Fraser showed up, loyally. But it was no treat.

It was one of those meetings that administrators love to arrange for other people. They were always thinking of ways to boost productivity, or efficiency, or -- in the case of professors -- to improve teaching effectiveness.

Now, many professors prided themselves on the fact that they had never taken an education course. Some maintained: either you have it or you don't -- teaching is not a skill that can be taught. Their training was geared entirely to content, to what was to be taught.

It was an odd belief, really, when you considered what their occupation was. But the administrators, ever the chirpy optimists, blithely disregarded the prevailing opinion among the professors: the administrators were determined to teach the teachers to teach.

The guest speaker at the meeting was warning against the tendency to turn university classes into non-stop lectures. Students don't learn much from lectures, research shows. They soon tune you out. You need a mix of activities in the classroom. And if you have an overpowering desire to talk -- after all, you're the prof -- it's best to get the students involved in talking with you. Ask them questions -- or, better yet, get them to ask questions of you. Engage their minds and hearts.

Easier said than done, thought Fraser. And if he had felt inclined to plunge into the discussion that followed the presentation, he could have added an interesting angle, namely, that this sort of thing is easier to pull off in high school than in university. At least, that was his own experience.

But Fraser did not speak up after the "talk." He did wonder whether one could rightly give a lecture on the theme that lectures are a waste of time: the speaker seemed to have done just that.

As for the high school angle, Fraser was a little embarrassed to admit that in addition to his adjunct role at the university, he was also a supply teacher in a local high school. His embarrassment also extended to the fact that the school in question was what some would regard as a peculiar high school -- a Christian high school.

Fraser would not even have qualified for the lowly job of supply teacher in a public school: he didn't have the official education credentials. But things were a bit freer in the Christian school system, and so his lack of an education degree was not held against him. He had presented himself as a professional educator, and his Ph.D. did impress the people there. And Folkert played a role in the process, as a member of the school's Board of Directors. There had been an interview, with Folkert in attendance. Fraser impressed the questioners by his verbal fluency and his knowledge of Christian theology. He hinted that he would be able to intimidate any obstreperous students with his fancy vocabulary.

Folkert was also a friend of the school's principal -- a tall, ruddy man named Harris Wormser. As far as Fraser could make out, Mr. Wormser was also Dutch, but he had that pretentious first name. A few people addressed him as Harry, but Fraser noted that the man seemed to prefer "Harris." And of course the kids were all supposed to refer to him as "Mr. Wormser."

Whether Harry or Harris, the principal fancied himself a bit of a philosopher and claimed a minor in the subject. He had attended the same Christian college as Folkert, but some years earlier. The alumni connection had created a bond between the two of them: they remembered many of the same courses and professors.

Fraser once asked Folkert why he didn't try supply teaching too. Folkert was taken aback at the question and acted as though such a thing was beneath his dignity. What if the people at the university found out?

Fraser got the none-too-subtle hint: he did not reveal his other life to his "adjunct" colleagues. But if he had been braver in this regard, he could have made some interesting comments at the meeting, for Fraser had greater success in loosening tongues in his occasional stints in the high school than in his scheduled appearances as a philosophy professor at the university.

Oddly, it was when he had someone else's "kids" in front of him that he felt most free. He knew that he wasn't supposed to refer to students as "kids," but he couldn't help it. In the privacy of his own mind they were kids.

His own kids, the ones to whom he taught Introduction to Philosophy, were hard to shake up or awaken. He sometimes thought of Gurdjieff, who had this theory that ordinary people are asleep most of the time. Not that they were entirely to be blamed: it takes extraordinary efforts to remain awake in the full sense of the term. Gurdjieff devised curious exercises for his own students and demanded that they perform feats aimed at a deeper awakening. It was stuff no teacher could get away with nowadays.

When Fraser was in his supply teaching role, amazing things happened. Not all the time, of course, but his occasional successes, occasional flashes of light and energy and enthusiasm from the students he babysat, did much to bolster his confidence as a teacher.

It helped if the subject-matter was foreign to his own expertise. In a history class, for example, he was expected to more or less pick up where the regular teacher had left off. There would be

some sort of instruction in the form of a "lesson plan" (a term Fraser privately disdained) to be followed. But if the subject was chemistry, as had just happened a week ago, the principal would explain that he could simply ask the students (he never called them "kids") to work on homework assignments or projects. For the rest it was a matter of common sense. Don't let them start anything new, or they might blow the place up, he was cautioned (the class met in a lab). But if Fraser wanted to engage the students in discussion on some topic of his own choosing, that would be quite all right. "Give them some philosophy," said Wormser, with a twinkle in his eye.

Fraser rose to the occasion. The invitation fit right into his emerging professional self-image. As an existential counselor, he was prepared to take up any question with any person who sought him out and was willing to pay for his services. He didn't come right out and put it on his business card, but his approach was, in effect: "Ask me anything."

It was not that he expected to answer factual questions correctly, for existential counseling was not a silly television game show. No, he could help people clarify ambiguities and presuppositions in their questions. He hoped -- indeed, expected -- that in many cases he could help people see that what had loomed before them as a momentous or troublesome question really was not a question at all when considered carefully.

The students in the chemistry class Fraser was covering did not understand his lofty aims, nor did he treat them to an explanation of his objectives. Being perpetually bored in school, they regarded Fraser's "Ask me anything" approach to supply teaching as

having potential for some shock value -- and therefore some entertainment. It almost seemed to them that Fraser was a tough guy who was inviting anyone else who thought he was tough to step into the ring and put up his dukes and show his stuff. And so they looked around to see whether there was a David in the class willing to take on this Goliath-with-a-Ph.D.

Fraser's plan, of course, was first to turn the question back on the kids. After a bit of prodding, the first question came forth: "Why do we have so many dumb rules here?"

Fraser sanitized the question, taking out the "dumb," and turned it back on the boy who had asked it: "What do you think? How do the rules help make this school the kind of place it is?" When he got no response to that rejoinder, he asked: "Are the rules like the bricks in the walls? If you have changed the rules, have you changed the school? Are they really useless, or dumb?" By reinserting "dumb" into the discussion, he untied a few tongues. But before long the discussion petered out.

A shy-looking girl startled Fraser and woke up the class by asking him what was wrong with abortion. Fraser was ready for that one -- at least, to the extent of knowing that it was a hot potato and best avoided. He felt a bit ashamed of his response, but he quickly wiggled out of it with a couple of platitudes ("We all know that ..."). The girl seemed satisfied.

Fraser was aware that most of the kids were Christian Reformed. There were also a number who came from still more conservative churches with leanings toward fundamentalism. And he

knew enough of Christian Reformed lore (partly picked up by reading the novels of Peter De Vries) to be aware that there was a tradition of asking mischievous questions in which one demonstrated substantial knowledge of the Bible and thereby managed to remain "in," however naughty or irreverent the question might sound at first. With a couple of hints, he managed to coax such a question from one of the students: "Where did Cain get his wife?"

Fraser enjoyed this one, but he resisted the urge to deliver a lecture on the subject. He pointed out that the Bible's account of the beginning of our history is rather sparse. Adam and Eve indeed had two kids at the outset: Cain and Abel. Cain murdered his brother Abel. He got expelled, chased away. Yet his line "continued." Fraser then asked whether we were to take the first chapters of the book of Genesis as a complete record of what had happened back in the early days.

A few of the kids saw at once where he was headed. The answer was: obviously not. Well then, Fraser wanted to know, is there any indication in the Biblical record that the potential Mrs. Cain wasn't already around at the time of the first murder? Wouldn't Adam and Eve have had some daughters as well?

A young feminist-to-be put up her hand and complained that the women's stuff didn't get recorded in the Bible. Quite so, responded Fraser warmly, recognizing that her comment was grist for his mill. Anyway, the upshot was that Cain married his sister. Fraser could not altogether suppress the self-satisfied grin that came to his face.

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It took more doing on his part to elicit the question he hoped they would ask. After considerable prompting on his part, he got one of the boys to "sponsor" the question: can God make a rock so big that he can't lift it himself?

Once this question was on the table, Fraser had occasion to make some observations about Plato and the form of the Good. He went on to explain that there were many philosophers known as "Christian Platonists" who didn't seem to know how to spell "God." Did it have one "o" -- or two?

The stuff about God and the Good was Fraser's way of asking whether there might be something more ultimate than God himself, some sort of order of law or a set of limits by which even God is bound. He told the story of how George Bush the elder had refused to eat broccoli when he was president, thereby touching off a number of protests on the part of the broccoli-growers. Apparently the president thought that since he was now top dog, he could do as he pleased, at least in this department. The students liked the story and sided with the president.

Fraser went on to ask whether it wasn't a bit like that with God. Was he bound by rules? Or could he do whatever he pleased? Could he disregard any limit by which all creatures are bound? Did he have to obey the laws we study in chemistry classes?

He then applied his line of questioning to the business of creation. Did God have to contend with limits when he was busy making the world? Could he make whatever he wanted? And could he go about it in any way he wanted? By the way, how did he do it --

did he make the world in six days, or all in a single flash -- creatio ex nihilo?

Fraser paused. He sensed that he was getting onto thin ice. Some of the conservative supporters of the Christian high school were very touchy on the subject of creation. Folkert had explained it all to him one day. In particular, the business about the "six days" of creation seemed to be a big deal to them.

And so Fraser turned the questioning in another direction by asking whether anyone had a mother who insisted on baking cakes "from scratch." What did that mean anyway? A few girls admitted that their mothers made such claims; the boys didn't seem to know. Fraser instructed the girls to query their mothers on that score and report back if they got a chance. He hinted that a cake made "from scratch" would not need time in the oven. When God did his "creatio ex nihilo" thing, there was no process involved, after all. Or could that be where the "six days" came into the picture?

Just then the period came to an end. Fraser promised to say more on the subject the next day, for he knew the chemistry teacher would not be back yet.

He did not get far with his next discussion of God making excessively big rocks, for another of the girls started things off with a new question. It seems that the stuff about God and the Good had not taken hold of the students' imaginations as much as Fraser thought. Her question was quite direct, and Fraser could tell right away that it was existential, indeed, heartfelt: "What's the point of prayer?"

Fraser was tempted to verbalize some of his own impressions about the Christian school world and the Christian Reformed culture that surrounded it, namely, that there was a bit too much pro-forma praying going on. He recalled reading about how the great philosopher Kant had been too much prayed over in his childhood and youth and had rebelled against the intensely pietistic Christianity in which he was raised. Perhaps the excess of prayer contributed to the strong rationalist streak that came to dominate his later thinking.

But Fraser held his fire and began by turning the question back to the students: did anyone care to take a shot at answering? He promised that if no one had anything to say, he would talk about how the "doctrine" of prayer was understood in "our tradition," thereby associating himself with the rugged Calvinism that formed the school's backbone.

The responses turned into anecdotes without much philosophical or theological importance, and the class passed quickly. As it drew to a close, Fraser knew he had hold of a good thing. He had no idea when -- or even if -- he would stand before this group of students again, but he said that he might ask their regular teacher for a half-hour sometime in which he could present a few further thoughts on prayer and field some more questions. The students seemed to appreciate the promise.

* * * * *

It was not long before Fraser got an unexpected lesson in prayer. It came from Corky, who dropped in a day later, draped her

ample self over a smallish easy chair, and was soon stepping onto Fraser's turf, although she didn't know it at first.

It seemed that another friend in her church had a special concern. The friend's sister had suffered for most of her life from migraine headaches: they had begun when she was sixteen and had come with regularity ever since. Scarcely a month went by when she was without them. She had prayed about the problem, appealing to God to take them away altogether. And hadn't he promised to do so. Didn't it say plainly in Matthew 17 that we can move mountains if we have sufficient faith? She had put God to the test, Corky explained, and now she was complaining that the Almighty had failed the test.

At this juncture Corky heaved up from her chair and insisted that her friend was forgetting about the "importunate widow."

"What did you say?" asked Lucy. "Who's the `unfortunate widow?'"

"No, `importunate,'" replied Corky, and she gave her sister an annoyed look. "It's in Luke 18, the chapter about praying without ever losing heart. There's this widow who keeps bugging a judge to give her justice. The Bible doesn't even say what the case is about. The judge is a mean man, but she wears him down with her moaning and groaning, and he finally gives in and grants her what she wants. And that's how we have to deal with God: keep moaning and groaning until he relents."

Fraser knew the passage and had often puzzled over it. He had also heard a dreadful sermon based upon it, a sermon in which the

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minister seemed to get entangled in a sticky net of his own weaving, until, toward the end, he almost seemed to be looking for an exit near the pulpit, as though he was planning to flee instead of ending with an amen or a prayer.

"Don't you see?" asked Corky, looking this time toward Fraser, as if he was obliged to support her against her wayward sister. "Prayer is basically pestering God. Even though the judge is described as unrighteous, in the end he does what's right."

"Wait a minute," Lucy interrupted. "How do you know that his decision was right and just?"

Corky had no answer for that one. She replied with a question: "Why do you think God stuck that story in the Bible? Would it be there if the story ended in an injustice?"

Lucy did not respond. Instead her practical mind turned to another problem. By this point she was looking at the passage in a Bible Fraser had opened when the conversation began. "What if our kids began to act like the widow?" she asked. "What if they assumed that if you whine long enough and make a nuisance of yourself, mom and dad will cave in and give you just what you're demanding?"

"Isn't that pretty much what happens anyway?" Fraser asked, not quite sure whether he was siding with his wife.

Corky, having no children, was not impressed with this line of reasoning. "Call it groveling, if it suits you," she responded. "Whatever it takes, we should do it. When we approach the throne of

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grace, we should lay aside our pride. And so, I'm convinced that if my friend's sister would really plead with God, her migraines would disappear. I'm sure of it.

* * * * *

Fraser wasn't so sure, but he wanted to discuss the class and the question of prayer with Folkert. A couple of days later he dropped by his office and treated him to a rundown on the discussion. "Give me a little simon-pure Calvinistic guidance here," he asked, kidding Folkert about his usual assumption that his own Dutch Calvinism was even purer and more rugged than what Fraser had imbibed from his Church of Scotland ancestry.

Folkert was well aware that the Scots did not exactly lag behind the Dutch when it comes to Calvinist extremism. He knew about the many splits and squabbles in Scottish church history. Moreover, he had friends in some of the more quarrelsome American denominations that prided themselves on their fierce adherence to the Westminster standards.

During his days as a student in the USA, he had worshipped for some time in Orthodox Presbyterian Churches. He felt drawn to those churches for a while, but later he pulled back from them and decided he was more at home in the Christian Reformed world after all.

Sometimes he talked about the Orthodox Presbyterians as a way to chide Fraser for his adherence to a lax form of Calvinism -- at least, that was what Folkert considered it. He wondered whether St.

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Andrew's, Fraser's church, would have a copy of the Westminster Confession anywhere on the premises. He thought not.

But Fraser had also read up on the fierce little denominations that made up part of Presbyterianism in the USA. "Yes," he said to Folkert one day, "I know about the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It's the little church with the big mouth." Folkert smiled. He had heard that one before, and he knew there was some truth to it.

On the subject of prayer, Folkert took a Calvinistic tack. "Our Lord taught us how to pray -- the Lord's Prayer. That's what we call it." He paused, as if for effect, then added: "Thy will be done -- that's the purpose of prayer. It's not just a formal requirement. It's not just that God enjoys receiving our prayers, the way some people love getting Christmas cards. There's also a benefit in it for us -- a number of benefits, actually. But the main benefit, the main purpose, is for us to align ourselves with the will of God. We feel better when we do so"

Fraser decided to throw some of Corky's sand in Folkert's face. "What about the importunate widow?" he asked.

He drew a blank with that one. It gave him some satisfaction to catch Folkert out on a point of Bible knowledge. Without revealing his source, he explained: "You know what I mean -- that story about the widow in Luke 18 who keeps bugging the unrighteous judge until he finally caves in and gives her what she wants. Isn't that also a model for prayer? What's it doing in the Bible, otherwise?"

Folkert was caught short. He recovered, and then said, haltingly, "I've heard a few bad sermons on that text. It's an

interesting passage, I suppose, but ministers usually don't know what to do with it."

"Perhaps petitional prayer is over-rated," offered Fraser. "You know, this idea that how you have to ask for this and that and the other thing from God, and then you have to ask on behalf of all your friends too, and then you start begging for people on some prayer list that someone gave you. You go to God with a Christmas list. You turn him into Santa Claus."

Folkert was a bit uneasy as Fraser made fun of the way many Christians prayed. "We used to be more general in our churches -- I mean, in the way we prayed. I suppose of late we're being influenced by some of the other churches. What we're really supposed to do -- at least, that's how I was raised -- is ask God for stuff that's in line with his will. You see, I have to come back to it: 'Thy will be done' is the heart of prayer."

"Maybe you need to be influenced less by all those evangelicals and fundamentalists," replied Fraser. "I bet the Jews could teach you a thing or two. They could get you and your people back to your original Calvinism. The Jews don't go in for selfishness in prayer -- or even the business of whining and begging for other people to get special favors. If you're a Jew, you don't think of yourself when you pray. Instead you focus on Israel, your people."

"Perhaps you should talk with David before you go into that class again," suggested Folkert. Fraser was a bit surprised to hear him say it, for Folkert was not usually quite that ecumenical. But he recognized that it was a good idea. He decided he would do it.

* * * * *

Fraser was back in Starbucks, sipping coffee with David, who insisted on paying for both of them. He told Fraser that he, David, earned much more money and could easily afford it. David had some sort of computer job at the university library: Fraser did not know quite what it involved, but it was very technical. He thought to himself: if Jews are tight with their money, David is not much of a Jew.

The question about Jews and prayer did not seem to interest David very much. He answered it quickly and did not say anything that surprised Fraser. Yet he did not try to make the Jews out to be unselfish. Rather, he argued that it was a question of what you mean by "self."

"It's a bit like Hinduism," he explained. "We Jews have figured out that an expansive concept of self is needed. The Hindus want you to move from a small `s' self to the one all-embracing self with a capital `S.' As one Jew, as an individual, you don't amount to much. You always have to consider yourself part of the people -- part of Israel. And so you pray for Israel. The way a lot of Christians pray is rooted in their deep individualism. They think of their church as a collection of individuals. They have no conception of a covenant people."

Fraser disagreed. "The covenant notion is a big thing in Calvinism," he replied, feeling good about sticking up for his side.

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"`Covenant' has a different meaning for the Jews than it does for Calvinists," insisted David. "I'll explain it to you sometime." Then he paused and picked up another line of thought: "Consider the difference between Christians and Jews on immortality. Christians always want to know whether Jews believe in it. Do Jews expect to go to heaven when they die? There's an individualist presupposition built into their question. What they don't realize is that, as a Jew, you are a part of Israel, and you always will be. You'll be held in remembrance. And the people of Israel will never die. No Hitler will ever manage to drown us. And so we'll always be there. That's our immortality, our heaven. But you can just as well call it survival."

"How do you know some Hitler won't eventually kill every last one of you?" asked Fraser.

"I suppose, strictly speaking, we don't," replied David. "But that's where faith comes in. We believe we'll always be around."

Fraser had an opening to get into the difference between knowledge and belief, which was one of his favorite topics. He sensed that David was vague on the subject and needed some straightening out. But he decided to save that topic for another occasion. Instead he changed the subject by raising the question about the stone so big that God cannot lift it.

David was not impressed. From the look on his face, Fraser could tell that he thought it was a juvenile question.

"First of all," David began, slowly, as though talking down to Fraser, "that doctrine of perfection, including the claim that God can

do anything -- it stems from a Greek, metaphysical notion that has nothing to do with our tradition. In the Old Testament, as you call it, the emphasis is on God being up to any challenge that comes his way. Do you think my arm is too short? Are you afraid I won't be able to reach out to you and rescue you when the time comes? That's the kind of assurance the believer needs. But the Christian theologians have to generalize everything, and so they transform such passages into this high-sounding doctrine of 'omnipotence.' They give God all those 'attributes.' I ask you: what are attributes, anyway? Do you have them?"

As Fraser listened to his friend's words, he felt torn within. His rationalist side, which loved to clarify, wanted to take issue with David. But he also had an existentialist side, which he knew was rooted in his love of the Old Testament and its visceral understanding of our inner life.

"What can 'omnipotence' possibly mean in the light of the Holocaust?" asked David, clearly not ready to drop the subject, despite Fraser's silence. "No sensible Jewish thinker will deny that God had the power to interfere with Hitler and Eichmann. But he hid his face -- don't you see? It's a question of the character of God. Sometime we must discuss Elie Wiesel's play *The Trial of God*. Are you familiar with it?"

Fraser admitted that he wasn't and made a mental note to get hold of it. He had taken a course in Judaism and had also done quite some reading on his own, but he was not nearly as well informed about Judaism as David was about Christianity. But then, Christianity was a much larger tradition. It was a bit like the difference between

Canadians and Americans that Canadians loved to point out: many Canadians knew all about the USA, whereas most Americans knew very little about Canada. Yet it was somewhat understandable, thought Fraser, in view of the relative populations of the two countries. Canada was big geographically but small in terms of culture and influence and population. So, in a sense, David was a good Canadian: he knew a lot about his much larger neighbor.

Fraser decided to change the subject. "Have you ever thought of becoming a Christian theologian?" he asked.

"Of course not," David replied. "My wife would kill me."

Fraser realized that this mention of killing was not entirely a metaphor. Jews who converted to Christianity were considered dead by their relatives -- at least, if those relatives were strictly Orthodox. And Marcia, David's wife, was not only Orthodox: she was the daughter of a revered rabbi. She had little patience for David's fascination with Christian thought. Conversations between David and his Christian friends rarely took place at their home. It was almost as though David had a secret life, or perhaps a secret hobby.

"What if you were a professor of Christian theology?" mused Fraser. "Would you need to adhere to a church of some kind? I don't think so. Many theology professors nowadays are laymen -- not ordained in any church. Their private life, religiously speaking, would be their own business. Maybe not so in a Christian college or university, but there are also chairs of this or that sort of Christian theology in state institutions. I could see you filling one of them."

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David pointed out that he had no theology degree. He was an amateur as far as these matters went.

"I know," replied Fraser, "but if you did have a degree, you'd make a fine professor of Christian theology. Sometimes I think your detachment from Christianity -- after all, you don't believe the stuff -- is your secret. It gives you clarity. It's a little like a lover being blind to the faults of his beloved. Perhaps we haven't made enough of objectivity in Christian theology. If objectivity is a virtue in science, why not in theology too?"

David asked: "Are you trying to convert me?" Fraser sensed a note of reproach in the question. But then David added: "If you are, that's all right. I'm not offended. I'm not like those Jews who regard conversion efforts as an affront to one's human dignity. But it's not going to happen."

Fraser sensed an invitation. "Why not?" he asked. "Why couldn't you become a Christian? Never mind about Marcia, for the moment -- I'm just asking about you."

"I am what I am," David affirmed.

Fraser found it an unsettling response. It reminded him of God's declaration to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. It was basically the same wording. It had the ring of "Don't mess with me." It was one thing for God to say such a thing -- after all, he was God. But who did David think he was?

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The next evening Fraser was helping Lucy with the supper dishes. She had an uncanny way of figuring out what was going on in his mind. He often kept intellectual puzzles from her, but he thought it wouldn't hurt to let her in on this one. And so he told her about the discussion in the chemistry class. Then he braced himself to hear something dismissive from her.

But Lucy was not quite the materialist that Fraser took her to be -- at least, not on this occasion. She tried to turn the question around: "Well, maybe we should be asking: 'What's the harm in it?' I mean, the mere fact that so many people do pray means that it has a some sort of function in their lives. And if you combine it with the laying on of hands during healing -- or don't people sometimes hold one another's hand when they pray together ...?" Her voice trailed off. She added: "I think I read some research about this stuff just recently."

Fraser responded by reminding her that a "transcendent factor" (he tried to stick to innocuous terms) should be taken into account when considering instances of healing. At bottom, prayer is a kind of appeal to a power beyond human understanding. "That stuff you're interested in is secondary to prayer -- a kind of a by-product."

"What makes it secondary?" Lucy asked. "Not all people who pray would agree with you there. Aren't there lots of Jews who pray regularly but don't believe in God? I read that somewhere."

"Do animals pray?" Fraser wanted to know, leading Lucy back to her field of expertise.

"I imagine they do," she replied. "But not as often as people. I'll have to think about that." Then she added: "I suppose it depends on how broad your concept of prayer is. Are you willing to entertain the idea that animals pray to their human masters? Could it be that they'd like to talk with us but don't know how?"

Fraser could not think of a reason why this should not be permitted as a possibility. He filed the idea away for future reference.

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Fraser's two chief advisors were Folkert and David. He felt a little guilty relying on them as much as he did. After all, he was supposed to be the ideas man -- he was the one with a Ph.D. in philosophy.

Folkert had lots of conviction, and a solid grasp of his own tradition. And as for David, there was something uncanny about him. He seemed to know so much about philosophy and theology, although he had never taken more than a few courses in either and had no more to show for his university studies than a master's degree in computer science. Fraser had always intended to explore the business about computers and consciousness with David, but he'd never gotten around to it.

Folkert and David had been part of the same circle of friends at the university, although Folkert sometimes manifested a bit of annoyance with David, especially in the early days. Folkert and some of the others were part of a Christian students' fellowship which was

advertised widely on campus. Their meetings were coordinated and led by a "campus pastor" who fancied himself a bit of a philosopher and loved to get academic discussions going. Sometimes they would bring in a speaker, and sometimes they would discuss part of a book together. There was usually food, sometimes some singing and praying.

Of course it was supposed to be partly "evangelistic," whatever that might still mean in an age of pluralism. It wasn't a matter of asking people whether they had "found the Lord." No, the campus minister, who did not like to be called "Reverend" (he insisted on "Al" instead), liked to think of the evangelistic angle as largely a matter of people returning to their roots.

Al Gronk (he didn't like his last name and always introduced himself with his single-syllable first name instead) was a devotee of Christopher Dawson, the Roman Catholic historian who made so much of the Christian roots of Western civilization. "Whether you go to church and pray or not," Al used to tell his hearers, echoing Dawson, "you're working with Christian intellectual capital. So why not set aside this natural nervousness about what you 'believe' or what you're willing to commit to, and just explore some ideas? See where they've come from."

Eventually the posters put up around the campus had brought a Jew into their group -- David, then already involved with Marcia, but she never came to the meetings. At first Al and the others thought David was on the brink of becoming what was people generally called a "messianic Jew," one who accepted Jesus as the Messiah but continued to regard himself as Jewish and went on

upholding various of the Jewish traditions, such as the Passover celebration. There were entire congregations made up of such Jews.

But David soon made it clear that no conversion to "messianic" status was in the offing. He was a Jew -- period. Indeed, he was the real McCoy -- an Orthodox Jew. But yet, oddly, he knew a lot about the Christian tradition. It seemed to be some sort of hobby of his. And he liked Christians.

Fraser warmed up to him at once: most of the group did. Folkert respected him, but was uncomfortable with David's holding back and remaining a Jew, religiously speaking. He seemed to think that David should no longer attend the meetings if he was going to be stubborn about it.

But Al would have none of it. In an unnecessary effort to defend David, he began to cast him in the Franz Rosenzweig mold, explaining to others in the group who had never heard of Rosenzweig that he was a sort of pre-Holocaust Jew who had a warm and positive appreciation of Christianity, while continuing to maintain that Jews should remain Jews, and Christians Christians. Al also added, as if to give Rosenzweig some more stature in the eyes of the group, that he had collaborated with the famous and revered Martin Buber on a fine German translation of the Jewish version of the Bible (or Old Testament, in Christian terms).

David was familiar with Rosenzweig and respected him, but he resisted the label as applied to his own thinking. He felt he didn't need defending by Al, and he didn't care to be called a disciple of Rosenzweig. And so he planted himself right in the center of their

group, as if daring someone to try to move him out. They got used to him after a while.

The interaction with David had helped Fraser clarify his own understanding of the relationship between knowledge and belief. David had an amazing knowledge of Christian theology and practice, but he held back on a belief level. Yet you did not find in him the deep-level animosity toward Christianity that so many Jews who liked to style themselves "post-Holocaust" thinkers had oozing out of every pore. David was not one to go around telling people about that Hitler was a Catholic but the church never bothered to excommunicate him but went after smaller fish instead. No, David had a positive attitude toward Christians -- partly because of his warm relationship with Fraser.

While very different in appearance, they were more like brothers under the skin. David was short and swarthy, somewhat stocky, and definitely Jewish-looking, which may have been part of the reason why some people in the Christian study group in the old days felt uneasy about him. Fraser was of medium height but had a typically Scottish fair-to-ruddy complexion, with red hair shading off to blond, and striking blue-green eyes.

* * * * *

The next time he got together with David, Fraser decided he would try to blend the big rock discussion with the business of prayer. He sensed there was an important connection, but he did not know quite what it was. David might figure it out, he thought.

He thought he would ask David whether it might make sense to pray to God and ask him to make such a rock. That way he could work in the motif of God's arm being long enough to carry out what he has promised to do.

David did not attempt a direct answer to Fraser's line of inquiry. He seemed to think it was a juvenile question best ignored. Instead he launched into a discussion of God's nature and character. He started by explaining that Jews don't generally think in terms of ascribing a "character" to God -- that would amount to falling into anthropomorphism, ascribing human qualities to God, who is far above anything earthly. But Christians can't seem to resist the idea.

Fraser suggested that the interest in God having a nature or a character had something to do with the later middle ages and the time leading up to the Reformation. "Back in those days you had various thinkers that we now call voluntarists," he added. "They made will the central component in the make-up of God, and so you were left with the impression that God was an arbitrary being liable to do just about anything. Why do you think Luther was so terrified of God? It had a lot to do with the philosophical ideas rattling around in his head. The terrifying God of those days could do -- or not do -- as he pleased. Refusing to eat his broccoli would be small potatoes to him."

David caught the joke and chuckled, but he felt a bit guilty in doing so. Jews were supposed to be leery of talking about God while using ordinary adjectives drawn from everyday experience. Even the name of God was so holy that you did not dare pronounce it. When writing the name of God, you might leave out the "o," and in speaking of God you might substitute another name altogether.

Fraser then went on to argue that the rationalist tradition in the Enlightenment era insisted on making God predictable. It basically depicted him as a rationalist and clung to the old idea of an eternal order of logical necessity that was more ultimate than God himself and therefore imposed constraints on what he could do. The logical culmination of this approach to God -- or perhaps one should speak here of the "God concept" -- was deism. God is allowed to create the world and watch it from afar, but then he is asked to keep his distance, keep his hands off, so to speak.

"The deist God doesn't have much personality, does he?" David remarked. "Tell me, do you manage to get that distinction between deism and theism through the students' heads?"

"I sure try," said Fraser. "But theism is hard to flesh out philosophically. You can have God too much involved in the world -- perhaps even recreating it moment by moment. One wonders what the practical import of such a doctrine might be. After all, does anyone really believe -- in his gut -- that we are constantly popping in and out of existence, or that we're teetering on the brink of non-existence?" Fraser paused. Then he suggested that Sartre might like the non-existence idea.

"Well, this is where your Calvinistic understanding of the covenant comes into the picture," David offered. "It's different from the Jewish one. I mentioned that the other day. The point of the Calvinistic one, if I have understood you folks adequately, is to limit the arbitrary, terrifying God who is capable of just about anything at any time. On the one hand, you claim there is no limit to what he can

do. On the other hand, you say you can now breathe easily because he has promised not to do anything drastic. 'I will never again destroy the world with a flood.' That's the point of the flood story in Genesis 6-8. It's a matter of, 'On the one hand, yet on the other hand'"

"I sometimes wonder how it's possible to love such a God," said Fraser, opening his heart to David.

"Love is another overworked notion," responded David. "You Christians are always promising to love everything and everybody. Or you admit that it really can't be done, but you still insist that you should do it. We Jews are more realistic. We don't pretend to love our enemies. It takes almost all your energy just to love your family and friends. Why don't you revere God instead? And bring back the old notion of fearing him?"

He paused, but heard no response from Fraser. Then he ventured further with his critique: "You're much too familiar with God. It's as though you'd dare go up to him and slap him on the back. And so this question of yours -- could one pray to God and ask him to make a rock so big that he can't lift it? -- the question is not so much logically inappropriate as spiritually insensitive."

It sounded as though David had had his say on the topics Fraser had raised, but Fraser wanted to continue the conversation further. In David's presence he felt he could think aloud, using David as his sounding board. He ignored the stuff about loving God and said: "Isn't it a bit like romance? There are women who just can't love a tame, safe, reliable husband -- an accountant type. They need an

element of danger in their love life. They're drawn to the mysterious man who is liable to do almost anything. They flirt with danger, even with being beaten up. Unless a man is capable of beating you up -- even if he never raises a hand to you, but it's just in his eyes -- he's not a real man. Couldn't it be that way with God? Don't we need an element of danger -- no, sheer terror -- to make him worthy of worship?"

David decided he would walk down this road with Fraser. "Well, the God who terrified the people at Mount Sinai was surely like that. That's where the need for a mediator came from. Not only were the people terrified of God, they were also frightened of Moses when he came from God's presence -- his face was shining. So perhaps the law and the mediators and much of the rest of what we call religion is an effort to keep this terrifying God at bay -- the God whose menacing face makes him worthy of worship. We need tiny reminders of his presence because we can't look him in the face."

Now it was Fraser's turn to chime in. "Hinduism is quite open about the frightening features of God. You Jews don't dare make a picture or image of him, but the Hindus depict some of their gods as positively terrifying and bloodthirsty."

David then suggested that the story of Abraham and Isaac and Mount Moriah in Genesis 22 was an existential version of the big rock problem. "Here was Isaac, the son of the promise, through whom those countless descendants were supposed to come into the world, and Abraham was told to kill him. It made so sense whatsoever! What was Abraham supposed to think -- that God can both destroy Isaac and bring his people to birth through him?"

Theodore Plantinga

Abraham is the father of all believers because he accepts this possibility. He doesn't try to rationalize it. All he says when his son asks him anxious questions is: "The Lord will provide."

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All the talk about the Genesis 22 story had gotten Fraser musing about the Bible's claims about prayer. In Matthew 7, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Ask, and it shall be given you." Could that be taken literally? What if you didn't know what you were talking about when you asked? And then there was: "Knock, and the door will be opened"

Fraser began to think that he should be asking God for help with his intellectual problems. It was not the sort of thing he would do under normal circumstances. He thought of Corky -- she surely would dare do so, if she ever had problems she considered "intellectual."

Just then an invitation came his way. One evening, after dinner, Lucy handed him the phone: "It's Corky. She wants an evening out with you."

Fraser found out that Lucy had already declined the invitation and figured out that she had been eager to hand off the phone to get off the hook herself. Corky explained excitedly that a renowned preacher was coming from the USA to speak in her church on the power of prayer. Wouldn't he like to come and hear him?

Speaking Silence

It was indeed the kind of thing Fraser was known to enjoy. He thought of attending in the company of one of his intellectual friends -- perhaps Folkert, or David, or even Angela. He did not consider Marty who was unlikely to "lower himself" -- that was how Marty would think of it. But in the end he kept the invitation to himself. He was uncomfortable about his friends knowing that such a phenomenon as Corky was his sister-in-law. She could be downright embarrassing at times.

The American preacher drew a fine crowd -- indeed, it looked like a full house, and the church's worship area was sizable. Because it was semi-circular, Fraser could see a good part of the audience from his position in a pew near the wall.

In the audience was Greg, but no Sonya in sight. He caught his eye and smiled. Fraser would try and track him down later and find out what mysterious accident or circumstance had eliminated him from the ranks of possible fathers.

The preacher lived up to his billing. Both in his powerful preaching style and in the pithiness of his claims, Fraser had no reason to be disappointed. And he did not find it quite as easy to dismiss the message as he had expected.

"Do you sincerely want to be rich?" The preacher's gaze swept across the church, starting from where Fraser was seated. "I don't think you do, or you'd be there by now," he continued. "You'd have your first million in the bank, and you'd be working on your second."

Fraser had heard many of his terms and phrases before -- also the "name it and claim it" rhyme. The general idea was that you were supposed to be specific in prayer. God is not like a thoughtful gift-giver who knows his friend so well that he comes up with the perfect gift for him and yet manages to surprise the friend. No, God waits for us to ask, and he expects us to tell him exactly what it is that we want. We have to name it. And then we have to claim it. We have to act as though it's rightfully ours.

Fraser thought of St. Augustine and what he had said about the "treasures of the Egyptians." Basing his argument on a story related in the book of Exodus, Augustine maintained that the good things of this earth (the gold and silver and treasures of the Egyptians) belong to the people of God, provided they are used in the service of God. When the Israelites left the land of slavery and oppression in Egypt, they took the treasures of the Egyptians with them, and their doing so was God's express will.

That was also what the preacher seemed to be saying. But whereas Exodus says nothing about "name it and claim it" prayers on the part of the Israelites, such prayers now seemed to be a requirement for riches.

"You don't have it because you don't ask for it," thundered the preacher. "You think it's too good to be true -- like those fabulous come-ons you get in the mail or even in your e-mail nowadays. Well, I'm here to tell you tonight that God is as good as his word. And so it rests with you. Do you sincerely want to be rich? Or do you shrink from the responsibility that comes with holding money in trust for God? If God gave you five talents, would you bury them in the

ground?" Here the preacher stopped to review the famous parable in Matthew 25 about the servants with varying amounts of talents entrusted to them by their demanding master.

Fraser's attention started to wander. He gazed at Greg on the other side of the church: was Greg perhaps thinking of something specific that he would like to claim from God, or ask to have back? It would be awkward to ask him such a question after the meeting.

And then there was the business about the big rock. If this were a question-and-answer situation, the sort of thing that happens in a university classroom, Fraser would ask the preacher whether God would be able to create a rock too big for him to lift. Why not ask God to do it?

Fraser was somewhat startled at his own boldness. He, Fraser McNaught, had just put words to a specific request. Would God be willing to do it? Indeed, could he?

But Fraser also suspected that the preacher would be baffled by such a question. He would probably regard it as a sign that Fraser also wanted to evade the great responsibility that goes with wealth: many a man, he had complained, would rather be a couch potato than a steward acting in God's name.

The preacher sensed that there would be resistance to his bold claims. "Let yourself go," he pleaded. "Set aside your timidity." Then he shifted his rhetorical posture. It was as though he was donning the role of God: "Go ahead," he challenged them. "Ask me anything." He folded his arms over his chest and looked straight at

them, as if he were Goliath sneering at the army of King Saul. Would anyone dare to respond? It appeared that no one did.

The last part of his talk was more overtly theological. It was the familiar line Fraser had heard before about how Christians are supposed to have "dominion." Indeed, Fraser remembered that the ideas he was hearing were sometimes summed up under the rubric of "dominion theology." It sounded like another topic to take up with Folkert, from whom he heard the word "dominion" on occasion, but not often.

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He had expected Greg to hang around after the meeting so that the two could talk for a moment, but he was disappointed. Greg appeared to have slipped away. There was no one else Fraser wanted to talk with and it was getting late, so he headed off with Corky, back to his place, for she had volunteered to drive.

Dutifully he asked her in, hoping she would decline, but she accepted. Lucy was waiting for them. Soon she had Corky's version of the preacher's address to chew on.

"Let's see if I have this straight," she said. "You're supposed to name it and claim it. God says: ask me anything, but you don't dare. You're afraid to be rich. You want to sit on your duff instead of taking some responsibility for managing things here on earth."

Fraser allowed that her summary was reasonably accurate. He expected Lucy to make one of her usual applications to the lives and needs of animals, but she didn't.

Just then, to change the subject, Fraser brought up the big rock question. "If we can ask God anything, why not ask him to make a rock so big that even he can't lift it?"

"That's a dumb question," replied Lucy, casting diplomacy to the wind, as usual. Corky didn't think much of Fraser's question either. Neither one appeared to have a philosopher's soul.

Fraser then began to voice some of his feelings about the gospel of wealth he had heard that evening. But he was indirect about it. He mentioned the "cargo cults" and the familiar charge that Christian preachers of a certain stripe were in effect "cargo prophets." As he suspected, neither of the women knew what he was talking about, and so he explained.

The cargo cults, he told them, were the inadvertent creations of some Christian missionaries in New Guinea. The name "cargo cults" came from a twisting or misunderstanding of the gospel on the part of the people they were trying to convert to Christianity. The missionaries preached the usual gospel of otherworldly salvation -- or tried to do so -- but the people they were addressing undertook a shrewd reinterpretation of that gospel and turned the reward into "cargo," by which they meant the kinds of material goods that Westerners always seemed to have in abundance, even when they traipsed out to the "mission field." And those were just the sorts of goods that third-world people want. They called such goods "cargo"

because they observed that it came to their country by boat, and in later years by plane; the transportation angle seemed to interest them greatly. And so they concluded that Christianity was an enticing mixture of truths and lies. There was some sort of salvation, but it consisted of the possession of material goods. The stuff about heaven appeared to be a diversion.

Lucy was intrigued. "Practical people," she mused. The fact that they were manifestly practical gave them stature in her eyes.

Corky's reaction was different. She was quite happy mixing the two categories -- the "spiritual" benefits of salvation and the material or earthly ones. Didn't they belong together? Can't we ask God for both? Wouldn't that be "full-orbed"? She pronounced the hyphenated word haltingly, as though she had just learned it.

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Fraser's instinct was to reject the "materialistic" gospel he had heard -- at least, that was the term that he applied to it in his own mind. His tendency was toward asceticism, even a touch of Puritanism. Of course Nietzsche might be suspicious and regard Fraser's attitude as more sour-grapes Christianity. The Christians are losers who accomplish nothing in this life and therefore whine and pretend to disdain material things, claiming that their hearts are set on the life to come. In effect, Christianity was "Platonism for the masses." That was the gist of the account of Nietzsche he had recently presented to his introductory philosophy class.

But Fraser didn't really want to be an ascetic. He thought about Buddhism and its emphasis on the "middle way." The extremism of the most fanatical of the Hindus had put off the founder of this venerable religious and philosophical tradition. And it was telling that the Buddha was so often depicted as a man who carried a spare tire around his midriff.

And then there were the Jews: they also seemed to disdain asceticism. They did have some of the extremist tendencies found among the Hindus, but they seemed to know how to live out a famous text in Ecclesiastes 3, a text that always struck Fraser as an embodiment of good sense, the kind of sound thinking that Aristotle would approve of: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

The Jews, one could argue, do practice asceticism, but only for a while. For example, their Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement was rich in renunciation (a curious phrase thought Fraser, just as it was running through his mind). But they knew how to break the fast and indulge themselves again at the right time. Maybe that was the answer -- temporary asceticism.

Fraser's thoughts often turned toward Judaism, and it was not just because of his friendship with David. Fraser had spent six years of his boyhood in a heavily Jewish neighborhood, where he had lots of Jewish friends. He had read a great deal about Judaism and even taught the occasional course in Jewish philosophy, in which he usually began by apologizing for not looking Jewish. No, his friendship with David was more the result of his affinity for Jewish thinking than its cause.

He decided he would turn to Folkert once again to review the issues he was pondering. He often used Folkert as a rehearsal audience -- like a play traveling to Hartford and New Haven and Providence before opening on Broadway. And so he soon found himself telling Folkert that the Jews don't like the idea of pestering God with selfish requests. The Jews had long had a reputation for greediness, but in their prayer life they emphasized that one was first to think of others. You were supposed to pray for the people of Israel, and only secondarily would you yourself get the benefit that extends to all. The general idea was: what's good for the Jewish people is good for me too.

Folkert wanted to get his Calvinist licks in, and so he stated: "But 'Thy will be done' needs to stand at the heart of prayer."

"Perhaps so," said Fraser, "but doesn't that relentless emphasis take away much of the point of prayer? Aren't you saying to God, in effect: 'Go ahead and do what you want -- you never listen to us anyway'?"

Fraser wanted to bring up the notion of "dominion." He realized that it would be more grist for Folkert's Calvinist mill. God is in charge, and everything belongs to him, Folkert would surely say. Christ is king.

But Folkert did not rise to the occasion. His lower lip jutted out -- a sign that he was thinking. "You know, back in my college days," he started out, "we were always singing that hymn 'Christ shall have dominion, over land and sea.' It has the rhythm of a march. I

never hear that hymn anymore, and I'm glad. I got sick of it a long time ago."

Fraser did not see where Folkert was headed -- perhaps nowhere. It occurred to him to point out that Canada used to be a dominion, and July 1, the national holiday, used to be called "Dominion Day." Now it was simply "Canada Day."

"Dominion," it seemed, had become an unfashionable notion. It was rooted in "dominus," which is Latin for "lord." And "lord" was among the "patriarchal" and "authoritarian" terms that the progressive churches were trying to eliminate from their liturgies and sermons and teaching materials.

But he knew Folkert wasn't all that progressive. The Calvinists -- or neo-Calvinists, as Folkert liked to say -- had a thing about "kingship." Christ was king, and the entire earth was his domain. Indeed, Abraham Kuyper had written some huge, three-volume work called *Pro Rege*. The title was Latin and meant "For the King." Fraser had been exempted from reading it since it was in Dutch. Folkert thought it should be translated sometime and said he might even do it himself.

Fraser decided to press Folkert a bit on the kingship question. "This 'kingdom of God,'" he asked, "are we to expect it soon?" As he heard the words come from his lips, it seemed to him that he was playing the role of a skeptic in the New Testament era.

Back in those days, many of the Jews were preoccupied with hopes of a messiah who was to do great things before their eyes. In

his question, Fraser was hinting that the issue of the kingdom had a significant connection with the notion of the messiah.

Folkert repeated a stock answer: "The kingdom has come, it is among us, but it is not yet here, not fully, anyway. It's a both/and situation." He didn't sound very convinced.

"So it's like this with the Messiah, the Christ," said Fraser, feeling he was taking on the role of the unbelieving Jews. "He has already come, but now he has to come again? Will he be any more successful the second time than the first time?"

Irreverent thoughts sometimes came to mind when he engaged in his mock debates with Folkert. He made bold to speculate and invited Folkert to slap him down: "If God can't make a rock so big that he can't lift it himself, is it also impossible for him to send a messiah who can get the job done the first time out? Or is the messiah like one those repairmen who come out to your house to fix an appliance, but then you find you have to summon them a second or even a third time because they didn't do the job properly the first time around?"

"My kingdom is not of this world," replied Folkert, quoting Jesus in John 18. But he seemed out of gas. And so Fraser let the subject go.

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Time was drawing near for Fraser to present his lecture on prayer to the Christian high school students. But it wasn't exactly a

lecture he had in mind -- he wanted a discussion. Yet he knew that discussions can sometimes fall flat: you can't just order people to discuss. And so he wanted to have material ready -- in his head, and perhaps even an outline on paper that he could look at surreptitiously, if need be.

The chemistry teacher had been quite pleased to have Fraser back and promised him 40 minutes or so of a 70-minute period. But where to begin? Part of Fraser's educational creed was broad-mindedness: Christians, he maintained, should not only be familiar with the doctrines of Christian churches other than their own, they should also bone up on other monotheistic traditions where beliefs parallel to their own could be found.

But what about the faiths that did not fit under the umbrella of monotheism? Fraser had learned from his undergraduate days that Hinduism and Buddhism were both breathtaking in their range and in the depth of their ideas. While most of the terminology was different from the language Christians were used to, many of the ideas could be carried over and applied to Christian life and practice in some form. And so he resolved to be ready to say something about Hinduism and Buddhism.

Before he got around to the reading and reviewing he had in mind (he thought three hours of work would suffice), he found himself in the Old News Heath Food Store. He and Lucy had shopped there for three years, ever since it opened. It offered all sorts of obscure foodstuffs in "bulk," which meant that you had to scoop the stuff out of a closed bin or jar, put it in a little bag, put the bin number on a label (or memorize it, as Fraser preferred to do), and

then take it to the cashier. It was also wise to write on the label what the stuff was -- otherwise you wound up with all these little bags in your kitchen without knowing what was in them. And how long had they been in the house? That was something else you generally didn't know. You could taste the contents, of course, but a lot of the stuff you bought in such a store was not intended to be eaten by itself. And some of it already tasted stale on the day you brought it home.

The store was owned by Sergei Kowalski, a pleasant, short, stocky man who seemed to be a little younger than Fraser. Despite his distinctly eastern-European name (Fraser was not quite sure whether Sergei was Polish or Ukrainian or Russian -- perhaps a mixture), he was definitely a believer in all things stemming from the Far East. He seemed to be in love with both China and India and regularly denigrated Western ideas.

His store was a resource not just for people who enjoy alternative foods, the kind you don't find in the supermarkets, but also for those who are looking for new ideas to chew on. The store's name contained an important message -- what's new is really something old. Sergei liked the Aldous Huxley idea that there is a "perennial philosophy," which was open to ideas and phrases from all around the world -- except for certain Western strains of monotheism. And so Sergei happily mixed together Hinduism and Buddhism and mysticism from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions, sounding much like an old-fashioned theosophist. He liked to tell people that the Western idea that you had to belong to this or that church or group and then be loyal to it was foolishness. "Embrace truth gratefully, no matter where you find it," he beamed.

Speaking Silence

He offered his advice and insights for free. As he held forth, he would keep his eye on his young assistants scurrying around the store, refilling the bins and restocking the shelves and responding to inquiries from customers.

Fraser decided to ask Sergei about prayer, but he did not explain the circumstances: he just said something about a talk he was to give soon. He knew that Sergei had quite a bit of experience with prayer, for he had been raised Eastern Orthodox and therefore knew what it was to mumble prayers in a language he hardly understood. Sergei had left his boyhood world behind quite some time ago and made it known that he didn't think much of that kind of praying.

Before long Fraser was rehearsing for him some of the discussion he had been through of late, thereby letting Sergei in on more of the challenge he was just then facing. He also made mention of "petitional" prayer (there really should be a better term for it, thought Fraser to himself). Sergei shook his head and told Fraser that when you beg God or the Universe for this or that, you're moving precisely in the wrong direction: "The point of spirituality is to transcend yourself. If you're essentially a bundle of desires -- at least, on the level of everyday experience -- you're just feeding those desires when you take a Santa Claus approach to prayer. You've got to think in terms of the karma you're generating in that greedy little heart -- the endless quest for more. If you're really determined to pray" Here Sergei paused, pulled a face, and then continued: "... well, I'd call it something else. Let's say that if you want to get in touch with something greater that is all around you and within you, what you must first do is still all anxiety and all covetousness in your heart."

The way Sergei pronounced the word "covetousness" suggested that it should be enclosed in scare quotes.

"Do you really believe that stuff about shedding your selfhood?" asked Fraser. "Are you supposed to be nobody -- or a nobody? After all, don't you have to be someone in order to make the decision to undertake such a quest?"

"Sure, you have to be someone," replied Sergei, "but only on the level of illusion -- maya. If you remain forever in ignorance of the deeper reality ..." Here Sergei paused and explained that he preferred the "depth" idea: he avoided talking about something or someone "higher." He then elaborated further: "In your ignorance, you are always mired in anxiety. Western religion can't do anything for you then. Yet there were a few Western mystics who knew better."

Fraser was familiar with this line of thought, but he wasn't as much at home in it as Sergei. He might have felt he understood it in a profound way if he had believed it, but he didn't.

Soon Sergei was diverted into topics he liked even better, namely, nutrition and its effect on spirituality and peace of mind. Before long he was recommending a new brand of tofu to Fraser. Dutifully Fraser took some home, thinking he would cook it himself the next day for lunch, when Lucy was away. Lucy didn't think much of tofu: like her canine and feline customers, she liked meat in her diet -- every day.

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Speaking Silence

As Fraser worked out his remarks in his mind and put some notes into the computer, his thoughts turned to Spinoza and equanimity. Spinoza was a seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher with an elevated understanding of reality, which he regarded as curious union of God and nature -- two sides of the same coin, so to speak. He almost equated the two terms, for he maintained that in the final analysis they covered the same ground, but from opposite angles.

Spinoza was not an advocate of prayer in the ordinary Christian sense. Yet, although many Christians and Jews took strong exception to his thought, he was generally classified with the great religious philosophers. His attitude toward life, summed up in a forbidding book called *Ethics*, was regarded as an intellectual resource for thoughtful Christians. At least, Fraser thought it was.

The fact that Spinoza was Dutch (although of Portuguese ancestry) also made him a candidate for discussion in the Christian high school, which had its roots deep in Dutch cultural soil and therefore tended to be preoccupied with Dutch ideas and practices. Spinoza was considered the greatest of Dutch philosophers -- not that there had been all that many.

He was no admirer of the Calvinists. In his hour of need, after he was expelled from the synagogue and cursed by his fellow Jews, he sought refuge among the Mennonites. In later years he declined a philosophy professorship in Heidelberg, that Calvinist stronghold, preferring to make an honest living grinding lenses for eyeglasses and microscopes and telescopes. Still, his determinism, which left room

for freedom of a sort, had a lot in common with Calvinism, in which one also found a curious blend of determinism and freedom.

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On the appointed day, Fraser decided to drop from his talk all reference to ideas of the sort that Sergei approved of. He did not want to lose his reputation for orthodoxy, for he valued his opportunities to do some supply teaching. And it wasn't just the money that concerned him, for Lucy had that front adequately covered. No, he did not wish to lose the audience that the high school kids gave him for his ideas. He liked trying things out on them.

He opened his presentation by writing the word "equanimity" on the board. Did anyone know what it meant? He had no takers, and so he proceeded to explain.

He tried to introduce Spinoza in a way that would appeal to teenagers -- a misunderstood and rejected man who was finally cast out. But while the kids might enjoy the thought of Spinoza as rebel, Fraser's agenda was to show that Spinoza's philosophy reaches roughly the same conclusion on "prayer" (broadly understood) as the Calvinist tradition, namely, that it's a matter of getting reconciled to what God or the divine has in store for you. "Thy will be done," if you care to use the personal pronoun in application to God. Spinoza was at peace, and so should we be, Fraser assured the kids, who did not seem impressed. Clearly they had not banished the Santa Claus notion of prayer from their minds.

Speaking Silence

Fraser sensed that he wasn't exactly winning converts. Prayer, to the kids, although they didn't say it in as many words, was a bit like playing the lottery: you ask for all sorts of outrageous things, and, who knows, you might just get lucky.

Fraser brought up a familiar objection: "Be careful what you ask for, because you might get it." A few of the kids seemed baffled by this statement, and so he took time to make it more explicit. He reminded them of fables they would probably have studied in elementary school: someone is granted three wishes and asks for something foolish the first time out and quickly regrets it. Because he spoke carelessly, without stopping to think what he was really saying, he has to use up his second wish to undo the first one, and so forth. The kids began to understand.

One boy sensed where the discussion was going and seemed to have the answer. "Let's see," he said, "God is supposed to be smarter than we are. That means he knows that a lot of our prayer requests are stupid, and so he filters them and corrects them. That's the Holy Spirit's job -- he kind of improves on our prayers. Our minister says God gives you what you need even before you ask him."

"But then why bother asking?" The question came from the same girl who had introduced the topic of prayer during Fraser's previous appearance in the chemistry class. A good question, indeed, thought Fraser.

Another girl suddenly had an inspiration and began talking about the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, with which she was acquainted from a Walt Disney cartoon with a Mickey Mouse

character in it. "What if God chooses to teach you a lesson?" she demanded. "What if he lets you suffer the consequences of your own stupidity? What if he says, 'Okay -- have it your way?' You probably think he'll bail you out" Here she was making an obvious bow to the sorcerer's apprentice story. She paused, and smiled briefly. "But what if he chooses not to? He might use your own stupidity to punish you."

Fraser welcomed the input. He liked the sorcerer's apprentice story and briefly told it to the class. He informed the students that it was based on a famous poem by Goethe, who had in turn gotten the outline of the story from the Greek poet Lucian. "What the story brings out," declared Fraser, "is that you have to be really careful with prayer if you believe in it. If God says: 'Ask me anything,' watch out! He may be testing you. And you have no guarantee that he'll get you out of the mess you ask for in your thoughtlessness. After all, God is not a Jewish mother. It's not his job to make sure you never get into a scrape or do yourself great harm, through your own stupidity." He paused, and added: "I speak from experience, but I won't go into that now."

Fraser got to wrap up the session in a way that brought him credit in the eyes of the chemistry teacher, who, he suspected, would give Mr. Wormser an account of the session. "It all goes to show that our heavenly Father knows much better than we do what's good for us. That's why our Lord taught us to pray: 'Thy will be done.' And when we can pray those words and truly mean them, we'll have that peace in our hearts that Spinoza sought through philosophy. Then we'll be examples of equanimity." He pointed to the word on the blackboard.

Speaking Silence

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Lucy was waiting for a report on the session when he arrived at home later that afternoon. She had gone home early from work, and he found her making dinner. "I thought I was making supper," he protested, weakly, secretly thinking it was a wife's proper job, even if her husband had more spare time, as Fraser surely did.

Lucy ignored the comment. As he explained his talk, he found that she knew the sorcerer's apprentice story, but only courtesy of Walt Disney. Yet the implication was by no means lost on her.

"There's a warning in that story," she said to Fraser. "The story teaches us that we're not to mess with God: he's unpredictable."

"I thought you didn't believe in God," said Fraser, giving his wife a curious look.

"I never said that," she responded, "at least, not in so many words. I'm still waiting for you to tell me just who God is. And if we don't know who or what he is, we'd better keep our distance and try to look after ourselves and not count on him. If it turns out that there is no God -- well, then I suppose there's no harm done. But maybe, just maybe, God will turn out to be some lesser force. Isn't there something in the Bible about a still, small voice? Why does God have to be such an overpowering presence? Maybe he's only a witness to our deeds -- or she is.

Theodore Plantinga

Fraser was surprised. He thought he knew Lucy. If only she wasn't so insistent on being "practical," she might have made a philosopher of some note!

Chapter 3

Tongue-Tied

"The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him." And then it was still.

Fraser was impressed. He resisted the impulse to open his eyes and see whether the children were fidgeting. An order to keep quiet and sit still could be quite a burden on a child. He suspected that some of the kids were now intent on mischief, since their parents were supposed to have their eyes closed for the silent prayer.

Fraser kept his own eyes closed. He drank in the impressive silence, but it was all too brief. Soon the background noises of a worship service flooded his consciousness again -- here a cough, there a rustle of paper, and then the sound of a hymnal falling to the floor.

Fraser was in church, but not his own church. Lucy had taken the kids away for the weekend to visit her parents. Fraser thought he would try another church for a change, and so he was in unfamiliar territory. He thought of his visit as "exploring."

As his destination for this free Sunday, Fraser had chosen one of the old-fashioned, severe Dutch Reformed churches where the women still wear hats and everyone dresses up. The men looked like real men (no earrings), and the women were definitely women (no unisex outfits). Not that they were all attractive, but they were surely dressed up. The scene in the sanctuary had the feel of a movie set for a film set in the 1890s.

Fraser had gotten the name and address of the church from Folkert and had invited his friend to come along. Folkert professed to be interested in the little Dutch denominations, but he admitted to Fraser that he rarely took in a service. He felt uncomfortable in such places. He explained that although he was a conservative Christian by Fraser's standards, he was a flaming liberal in the eyes of the people who attended the little Dutch churches. And so Folkert got most of his knowledge of the small denominations and their people by reading; via the internet he even looked at some of the Dutch-language periodicals from the Netherlands. But he had little to do with the churches in person.

Folkert also managed some contact with the smaller denominations through certain of their young people who dared to enroll at the university. The tendency was to discourage higher education altogether as a source of dangerous ideas. Not even the Christian colleges could be trusted: the people in the smaller denominations generally preferred the secular universities over the Christian colleges. The colleges were too "liberal."

Some of the young people from the small churches repeated to Folkert what their parents had said to them on occasion, namely,

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that in those liberal Christian colleges you might encounter the devil in his stocking feet. The implication was that the devil wore jackboots when he stalked the halls of the secular university. At least that way you knew he was coming. But in the Christian college he might sneak up on you.

Fraser sensed some curious eyes focused upon him during the service, but he could not say that he was made to feel unwelcome. He had taken the trouble to clothe himself in old-fashioned garb -- a dark suit, a white shirt, a modest tie, and freshly shined shoes. He did not feel out of place.

When it came time for the sermon, Psalm 46 was read. The minister chose verse 10 for his text, making a point of using the King James Version of the Bible: "Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth."

Then came a long pause, as though the minister was trying to honor the spirit of his text. It was followed by a sigh and then a carefully crafted address, which slowly turned into a torrent of words as the minister warmed to his subject. "But what happened to silence?" Fraser thought to himself. "Aren't we supposed to be still and meditate on God's presence with his people?"

Despite this incongruity, which seemed to be lost on the earnest young minister in his formal black suit, Fraser was rather drawn to the service. He was pleased to note that it did not begin in the folksy manner that was becoming all too common in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The minister did not comment on the weather or current events as the service began. No, he ascended to

the pulpit solemnly, after shaking hands with a man who was probably an elder. And he seemed to enjoy having a height advantage over the congregation.

Fraser could not help but be struck by how the minister looked down over his flock. Speakers nowadays seemed to feel it is necessary to apologize for any height disparity between speaker and audience: you were all supposed to be on the same level, which often meant that the people in the back could not see you properly. Some speakers even apologized for "imposing" their ideas and words on the hearers: it seemed that the ideal speech situation would be a dialogue -- a conversation, rather than a speech. Fraser wondered how "speakers" were supposed to prepare for such a dialogue.

Fraser had visited quite a few churches in his day and knew that in old-fashioned Lutheran churches the pulpit is sometimes so elevated as to suggest that the minister is suspended between heaven and earth -- truly a mediator between man and God. In Presbyterian churches there were also some older pulpits that one would need to climb up into, using a winding staircase that might test the fitness of an elderly man. But in many of the more modern churches, the pulpit was no more than a lectern, a resting place for sermon notes, from which the minister could wander across what amounted to a stage, or even make forays into the congregation, as though he were a television talk-show host soliciting the opinions of the people. Every now and then he could drift back to the lectern and take a surreptitious peek at his notes.

The modern lectern-as-pulpit look also bespoke a spirit of democracy -- no more "Thus saith the Lord." God, it seemed, was

now one voice among others. The old idea that God was to do the talking (through his appointed spokesman, the minister), handing down the truth from on high, while the people were assigned to listen meekly, seemed to have vanished from most churches. But it was alive and well in this old-fashioned Dutch Reformed church.

Neither had there been anything in the way of a children's sermon or a special time for the younger ones to come forward and get a blessing or an approving smile from the minister before they toddled off to children's church or Sunday school or something of that sort. No, the children sat obediently next to their parents, perhaps with eyes darting this way and that, but they were not up to much in the way of mischief, as far as Fraser could tell.

The minister embarked on his sermon with a formal address to the congregation, unlike many up-to-date preachers, who seemed to slip bits of their sermon for the day into other parts of the liturgy, and then start delivering the "main course" without any fanfare or announcement, so that a visitor would need to watch the bulletin in order to be sure that this was indeed the sermon. Moreover, the up-to-date preachers didn't seem to believe in an "amen" at the end of the service either. Some just trailed off, and others suggested that it was time to pray, thereby signaling that the preaching was over.

Fraser liked the idea of the sermon leading up to a rousing conclusion and even a reaffirmation of faith or of some point of doctrine that the congregation could echo in its heart. A sermon needed to end with some strong and encouraging words that were so clear and definite that you could be sure that the "amen" was coming. If the preacher really knew what he was doing, you should be able to

tell from the tone of his voice that it was getting very close. In short, Fraser liked some structure in the service, and especially in a sermon.

But today, despite all the liturgical and preaching virtues exhibited by the minister, Fraser sensed that something was amiss. "Be still and know that I am God," the minister had intoned. "Let all the earth keep silence." Well then, when would silence break out? No, he thought, that isn't right -- "break out" doesn't make sense here. Perhaps silence has to sneak up on us. Perhaps it's not to be taken so literally. Maybe it just happens, maybe it steals into your heart in such an unobtrusive way that you don't even notice it at first.

But silence did not seem to be on the minister's agenda -- not that morning, anyway. He was an eloquent man who did not have to grope around for the next word, like a beggar with an all-too-meager sack of personal possessions. No, the words just rolled out of the young man's mouth -- a torrent of them. Silence, it appeared, was a great subject to talk about, but not something to practice -- not in church, anyway.

Maybe there will be a time of silent prayer after the sermon, Fraser thought to himself. That would be most appropriate. But no such prayer opportunity followed. And the minister seemed blissfully unaware of the incongruity between his theme in the sermon and the way the service was conducted.

As he pondered the incongruity, Fraser was reminded of a story Folkert once told him. Some years before he had belonged to a Christian Reformed congregation in which the sermon was always followed by a hymn, immediately and without announcement, rather

than a prayer, which is more common. One Sunday, during the sermon, Folkert looked up the song to follow the sermon and noted that it was "Stand up, stand up, for Jesus." Now, it happened that in this congregation, which was much given to custom and regularity, the congregation always remained seated for the hymn after the sermon.

Folkert enjoyed the thought of the incongruous situation that would be upon them in a matter of moments. He thought that perhaps the minister should instruct the congregation to change the words for this occasion to "Remain seated, remain seated, for Jesus."

But it turned out that Folkert was not the only one who was thinking ahead and had noticed the looming incongruity. One of the elders of the church, a man very short of stature, knew what to do. As soon as the organist began to play the hymn, he shot up. The suddenness of his rise from the pew evoked an automatic reaction in people around him: they stood up too. Others took the cue, and soon the whole congregation was on its feet. As for Folkert, he was a bit disappointed; yet he knew the elder had done the right thing.

Fraser was inclined to think that what he was witnessing this morning was a characteristic weakness of the Dutch Calvinists, who talk about all sorts of things in a grand manner but then leave it at talk. "Be still and know that I am God." Okay, let's talk about that. What does it mean? How many alternative formulations of this idea can we come up with? It seemed that everything got talked to death eventually. And yet those very same Dutch Calvinists liked to assure people that they were not just hearers of the word but doers.

Theodore Plantinga

As Fraser drove home after the service, his thoughts turned to the Quakers. He had never been to one of their services, but he did know that the Quakers were renowned for taking silence seriously. They gathered for worship and sat there in silence, sometimes for a long, long time. They did not seem to mind being tongue-tied. And so they quietly and patiently held their posture of spiritual humility -- until such time as the Spirit of God loosened someone's tongue. That person would then share what was in his heart. But if no one spoke, that was all right too. Church was not a place for chatter.

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Fraser did not tell Lucy about the service he had attended, and she made no inquiries about how he had spent his Sunday. But a few days later they were at home together, seated close together on the couch, while the kids were away in school. They were watching television -- one of the afternoon talk shows with an audience. It was just the sort of show that Fraser liked to mock.

Lucy usually took issue with him when he made fun of the talk shows. She agreed that many of the guests and ideas were inane, but she insisted that some of the things that were said were thought-provoking and "practical." Lucy always seemed intent on learning something new, and she did not have the scholar's natural disdain for sub-standard sources of information. Spending so much of her life in the company of dogs and cats, Lucy had nothing of the snob about her. She took people -- and animals -- as they came.

The show they were watching featured a psychologist, an expert on children, according to the host. The expert, a pretty young

thing who looked like she couldn't have had much parental experience as yet, was giving the usual line against spanking -- how it just produces a new generation of misfits and rebels. No, the age of abuse was over. "We now know," she declared, slowly and deliberately, "that spanking is counter-productive."

Fraser expected to hear an explanation about how you had to talk with kids and reason with them and appeal to their innate sense of right and wrong. He had heard it all before, and he didn't believe it -- not for a minute. He had gotten plenty of admonition via his hindquarters when he was a little boy, and he didn't object to using the same channel of communication with his kids -- not in public, of course, lest you find yourself charged under one of the new laws his father had never had to worry about.

But what Fraser now heard was a different line: it surprised him. It seemed that talking with your kids wasn't the answer either. Of course yelling at them was out of the question, but even talking in a calm tone of voice was essentially a waste of time.

Fraser frowned and shook his head: he thought there was an important distinction between yelling and just talking. Yet he wondered to himself what counted as yelling nowadays. Whenever he tried to reprove Kelly, their thirteen-year-old daughter, she responded by wanting to know why her dad was yelling at her. It made no difference if Fraser kept his voice down: any reproof, indeed, any statement of disagreement, was "yelling."

The pretty television psychologist went on to recommend a new remedy -- "silence." People have no idea what power there is in

silence, she assured the television audience. Indeed, using silence on your kids was a little like those martial arts situations when you use your opponent's energy and momentum against him and trip him up, seemingly without breaking a sweat yourself. "There's a power in stillness," she explained sweetly.

The host quickly broke in with some practical objections. Lucy leaned forward. But just then the phone rang: it was Lucy's mother. Lucy signaled to Fraser to turn down the sound. And so he never did get to hear how the psychologist would deal with the practical objections to her proposals.

The show was over by the time Lucy got off the phone. Fraser had thought of popping a tape into the VCR to catch the segment they were missing, but he noted that it was already recording. Then he remembered that Kelly usually left strict instructions that one of "her" shows, whose reruns were televised in the daytime when she was in school, was to be taped.

Lucy was in a mood to talk. After a few exchanges about her mother, they got back to the psychologist on the talk show. Lucy expressed her approval. Fraser took issue with the psychologist and argued that the old methods could still get the job done.

Lucy reminded her husband that her own daily work was also a world of silence. Or, if not silence in the strict sense, it was a world of no words. Her charges were also tongue-tied. Yet she managed to communicate with the dogs and cats in all sorts of subtle and indirect ways. The pets were used to picking up cues from their human masters. They could interpret the look on your face, and they

responded well to physical gestures. Fraser wondered whether they might not make good Quakers.

Then he brought up Elie Wiesel, who, he explained, was a great Jewish novelist and moralist and even a philosopher of sorts. Later on, when he thought about the conversation again, he was not sure why he had appealed to Wiesel, for on the surface of things Wiesel appeared to stand mainly on Lucy's side. Perhaps it was an ill-considered move on his part, motivated by the fear that he might lose an argument with Lucy: after all, he was the philosopher in the family.

Elie Wiesel was the man who loved and advocated silence, he told Lucy. Indeed, Wiesel had proclaimed that silence was the great theme in his work. The background to his insistence on silence was his interest in the Holocaust and his commitment to Holocaust remembrance.

Fraser then proceeded to tell Lucy how Wiesel, an authentic survivor of Hitler's death camps, had spent much of his time since the war reflecting on how one can communicate something of the horror of that time to a new generation for whom the Nazis are not much more than characters in the history books and the bad guys in many a movie and television show. On the one hand, Wiesel had decreed, it cannot be done: you cannot speak of the Holocaust. You have to take off your shoes when the subject comes up, for it is holy ground. But on the other hand, Wiesel was a great proponent of remembering. And how can you remember something outside your own immediate experience if no one tells you about it or makes it known to you in some more graphic way?

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"He sounds like a very sensitive man," Lucy offered.

"Indeed, he is," replied Fraser. You had to give him moral credit -- there was no getting away from it. And yet, Fraser did not have all that high an opinion of Wiesel. Even though the man held a graduate professorship of philosophy somewhere in the Boston area, he went around denigrating reason -- that was really what it amounted to, Fraser thought. What did that tell you about his moral integrity and intellectual honesty?

If there is nothing that can be said about the Holocaust, then the man should zip his lip. But clearly he didn't believe that: after all, he was a professional Holocaust proponent -- if that was not somehow an unkind term or notion. Think about it: if the Holocaust is really such an important topic for philosophy and theology, if its having happened somehow changes everything, as Wiesel clearly believed, we simply have to talk about it. And that means reasoning about it. Advocating silence gets you nowhere.

Then Fraser paused, fearful of voicing more of his inner thoughts to Lucy, who might pronounce him confused, even though she seemed to be listening respectfully to his riff. Fraser decided to save his thunder for his next philosophy lecture. After all, didn't the spirit of silence, of being in awe, of being overcome by the wonder (or perhaps the horror) of something unique, have a lot to do with the very birth of philosophy? And if not exactly with its birth in some definite historical sense, as though philosophy had started on a day you could mark on the calendar, was it not true that philosophy needs to be reborn in us regularly? How can philosophy flourish if we are so insensitive as to take life -- indeed, being itself -- for granted?

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The outline of a lecture began to come together in Fraser's mind. His current introduction to philosophy class was the sleepest bunch he could ever remember teaching. He would enliven them by encouraging them to be awe-struck by a sense of wonder.

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As Fraser worked on his lecture notes, he realized that it would not be as easy as he had thought in his first flush of enthusiasm. There was something paradoxical about the assignment he had set for himself. Or perhaps it was more in the nature of a double bind.

Some people made a great deal of spontaneity. You were supposed to be natural, not giving a thought to what you were doing. For example, in Asian thought, especially in Zen Buddhism, you had the notion that the most difficult things might turn out to be ridiculously easy. It was like the story of that German philosopher who learned archery in the course of getting the hang of Zen -- a roundabout road to truth, if you could call Zen "truth."

He had written a book about it in which he explained that you had to let "it" take over, so that, eventually, "it" held the bow taut and then released the arrow, and lo, "it" hit the target!

Or in Taoism you were supposed to be in harmony with the Tao. Somehow it flowed through you: the ancient Taoists seemed to love metaphors that had to do with water. And the result was that you could live a life of pure spontaneity.

And you weren't supposed to have goals: "intentionality" was forbidden. Yet Fraser always wondered: if you sought spontaneity, didn't that somehow take away the whole purpose? It was hard to formulate his objection in words.

So how could he impress the students with the profound satisfaction inherent in silence without seeming to force it upon them, thereby suppressing them? Wouldn't he thereby act against silence -- or the spirit of silence?

Different strategies came to mind, but he kept setting them aside: in his mind's eye he could see the students dismissing them as mere gimmicks. But finally he screwed up his courage and decided on one.

He would enter the room with tape over his mouth -- not an invisible tape, but a masking tape that could be clearly seen. He would gesture, write just a few words on the board by way of explanation, and give the students to understand that this would be a special period devoted to silent contemplation.

It occurred to Fraser that what he was planning for the students was parallel to being blind for a while. Trust was needed when you were blind: others had to lead you around, which was the very thing the apostle Peter had dreaded. Jesus warned him about it in advance in John 21: "When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." RSV

Fraser sometimes saw people being led through the halls of the university blindfolded, as they participated in a trust exercise. He wondered what it would be like, but he made no effort to find out by signing up for such a tour.

Fraser thought that perhaps his students would come to see the beauty of the monastic orders in which the rule of silence is kept. He had never visited such a religious community himself, but on occasion he had thought about doing so. The Trappists were well known for keeping silence. Perhaps, after he had made his main existential point, he could bring the Trappists into the discussion.

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Full of good intentions but apprehensive all the same, Fraser entered his classroom unobtrusively. Deep down, he felt he was making a mistake, but by now it was too late to turn back. He had nothing of the usual instructor's paraphernalia with him -- no lecture notes, no books to read from, not even a pen or a piece of chalk. Moreover, he was dressed in monk's garb which he had rented from a party store.

The students were chattering and seemed not to notice Fraser. A few gave him an odd look, but they quickly resumed their chatter. Fraser remembered that it often took some doing to get them quiet and ready for his lecture: usually he started to talk and within twenty seconds or so they all stopped. It was rarely necessary for him to drown them out by raising his voice. Sometimes he stared at persistent talkers. But all such behaviors seemed out of place in the

persona he had donned for the day; he did not feel like their instructor, ready to overwrite their fleeting thoughts with his own, which were presumably of greater value. And so he stood in silence, looking partly reproachful, partly mournful. And the students did not know what to do.

Finally he walked toward the blackboard. His vow of silence for the day seemed to require that he be a man of few words there too, and so he wrote, in neat, large letters: "Silence is golden." The students got the idea -- or thought they did. They fell still. They were waiting for the lecture to begin.

Now came the hard part -- showing them that silence was the lecture, or lesson, for the day. A few students kept silence with him. Some opened books and began to read. Only a few whispered to neighbors. And within a mere matter of minutes, students began to leave the room. They took their stuff with them and did not look as though they planned to return.

Fraser felt he had made about as much of a point as the occasion permitted. He wrote a wise saying on the board -- at least, he thought it was wise when he dreamed it up at home: "In the beginning, before silence, there was nothing." He wanted to connect silence with creation itself -- the genesis of being.

Most of the students dutifully copied down what Fraser wrote on the board. A few smiled as they left. Some looked disgruntled.

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It wasn't a complete disaster, Fraser thought to himself as he took stock and made plans for the next class. Clearly he would have to explain himself to some extent. He would both admonish the students for their lack of response and call them to a higher plane of being and thinking.

The next lecture would be about the birth of philosophy out of "wonder." Over the years Fraser had heard a number of versions of such a lecture. Various philosophers had made a point of talking about "wonder," but some of the more recent thinkers seemed to believe instead that philosophy is born of despair. Such thinkers were usually characterized as existentialists, although certain critics dubbed them nihilists. Fraser did not care to be numbered among them: he placed more value on reason understood in the strict sense than they did.

He made sure to look his usual self for the next class. "I suppose you're all wondering what I was up to last class," he began. No one said anything. "Philosophy is born of wonder," he continued, "but wonder often escapes us because we are too busy thinking trivial thoughts and pursuing petty aims. And so, in a sense, philosophy is only possible when we first pull away from our everyday selves and concerns. What might this mean, in practice? How are we to go about it? Ponder this, if you will: there is no real wonder that is not born out of silence."

From the vacant looks on the students' faces, Fraser could tell that he was not making much of an impression. Only a few seemed receptive, and they were all female. They're too polite to let me see

what they're really thinking, Fraser said to himself, with his heart sinking.

What next? Fraser did not have the dramatic flair to turn a dismal scene into a triumph. He knew from past classes that when a session started badly, it rarely recovered. He would wind up looking at the clock repeatedly, calculating how many minutes were left. Of course he could leave early if he chose, but he had done that the last time. And so he resolved to give them their money's worth.

He recalled some stuff of Heidegger's about the etymological connection in German between thinking and giving thanks -- or "denken" and "danken." At the same time he could make the students aware that he knew some German. But then, those were not the hardest German words to pronounce by any means.

He went on in this Heideggerian vein for a while, and then talked about Aristotle and Aquinas as two representatives of a sunny philosophical tradition that is open to the goodness of the world, as opposed to various world-flight philosophers, in whose ranks Plato was prominent. If there was an element of wonder in Plato, it had more to do with forms and mathematical essences and proportions and harmonies: those were the sorts of entities Plato seemed to regard as the proper objects of our contemplation. Trying to look a little sad, Fraser explained that Plato lacked a genuine reverence for what is right around us. The changing world of everyday experience held little interest for him.

Before the lecture was done, Fraser also got around to Cratylus, of whom we don't know much: he is famous mainly because

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Aristotle mentions him. Cratylus, Fraser explained, was a skeptic who seemed to think that since we know nothing, we should just wiggle our little finger. Thereby we do acknowledge the other, but we waste no time trying to say what cannot be said. Ask me no questions, and I will tell you no lies.

He saved Ludwig Wittgenstein for his finale: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." And Fraser promised that he would indeed be silent -- for the next couple of days, anyway. He meant it as a joke, but no one laughed.

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Fraser was telling David about his unsuccessful experiment in profundity. He expected some sympathy. Perhaps David would say that those ungrateful students weren't worthy of so original a teacher as Fraser.

But he got no such expression of solidarity. David seemed genuinely puzzled by what Fraser had done. What was the point of it? What was Fraser trying to get across?

David sensed that Fraser had gotten it into his head that Jews are lovers of silence. "My soul in silence waits for God." Isn't that in the Psalms somewhere?

They looked it up and found it in Psalm 62. Twice the psalmist said: "For God alone my soul waits in silence."

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"Okay, you've got me there, Fraser," said David. "But what you probably don't know is that there's not much silence in the synagogue. Many of us take pride in being noisy and showy when we pray. Some of us even think you're supposed to screw up your face as though you're in pain when you're praying. We sway back and forth. No, it's not exactly 'Keep still and know that I am God.' Perhaps stillness is not in our psyche." David paused, and then added: "Maybe people would like us more if we were more reserved by nature."

Fraser then told David about the worship service in which stillness was praised but not practiced. He assumed from what David had just said that he would not be overly taken with the text and the theme.

David raised a question about the text. He told Fraser: "If you'll check some other translation, such as the New English Bible, you'll see that the silence in that verse is not so much a matter of the absence of noise: it's more like a gentle, existential posture in which the idea is letting things be, or recognizing that God is the master of the universe -- not you. No, I don't see any great merit in silence."

Fraser kept many Bible translations around the house. He located a copy of the New English Bible and looked up the passage: "Let be then: learn that I am God, high over the nations, high above the earth."

He granted David his point as regards Psalm 46, but then he proceeded to argue with him further by bringing up Maimonides, who is regarded by many scholars as the greatest of all Jewish

philosophers. "Maimonides advocated silence in prayer," said Fraser. "He conceived of prayer largely as meditation."

"There was a reason for him to go against the Jewish grain here," replied David. "Maimonides worked with a conception of the knowledge of God that cut off any possibility of saying things about God -- in the positive sense, I mean. He did so in the name of avoiding idolatry, by the way. Idolatry was the key sin for Maimonides, and for many Jewish thinkers. But what is meant by idolatry? That's where things get interesting."

Fraser was listening patiently, for his knowledge of Maimonides was not sufficient for him to want to show it off to David just then. Fraser was supposed to be the professional, and David the amateur, but in this interchange it seemed just the other way around. Yet Fraser was used to being corrected by David, and David never acted arrogant or high-handed toward him.

"Whatever you say about God, it turns out to be inadequate," explained David. "So maybe it's best to keep silent. An interesting notion, but you almost have to be a philosopher to appreciate it properly. Anyway, as you know, Maimonides didn't carry the day in the Jewish community. He was more respected than he was followed. Much of the interest in him over the centuries was in the Gentile world. And he's especially relevant now because of what he understood about Jews and Muslims living together. He spent most of his life among Muslims -- he was part of a minority surrounded by a Muslim majority. He started out in Spain -- did you know that? Back in his day, there was a large Muslim presence in Spain."

Fraser ignored the query. He admitted that Maimonides was probably too rarefied for ordinary Jews in a modest Orthodox shul. But he sounded just a bit disdainful as he talked about "ordinary Jews." David therefore stepped forward to defend the little man, even though, in Fraser's eyes, he was anything but a little man.

"Many Gentiles think Jews are loud, pushy, even obnoxious. Perhaps we are, many of us. But what you have to realize, Fraser, is that people are words -- people are talk and gesture and expression. They're not figurines on a mantelpiece -- just there to be looked at and admired once in a while, when those who are in a position to do some looking get around to it."

He paused, waiting for Fraser to respond. Hearing nothing, he continued: "It's often said that we are the 'people of the book,' but before there was the book, before people learned how to read in silence, there was talk."

Fraser braced himself for another discussion of Walter Ong, that great apostle of orality. But David did not mention Ong. Instead he brought up Descartes. "Take Descartes," he intoned. "He was more a man of e-mail and seclusion. And he was anything but Jewish. He was certainly capable of debating, but he preferred to do it by correspondence. And you philosophers are all his sons and grandsons, or perhaps granddaughters, however much you may claim to disagree with him and criticize him in your classes. You claim to reject Descartes. Some of you are very vehement about it. 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.' You philosophers live too much in interior silence: you're locked up inside your own skulls."

"The Cartesian personality defines philosophy?" Fraser was not so much contradicting David as thinking aloud. "Is that your position?"

Fraser began to wonder whether there might be something to it. Yet it was not the sort of thing he would have heard in graduate school. He recalled that he had first become aware of Walter Ong shortly after completing his Ph.D. studies. But then, Ong was not a member of the philosophers' guild: he was an English professor, and a Roman Catholic one at that -- even a Jesuit.

David responded by appealing to Descartes' most famous claim -- his cogito. "'I think, therefore I am.' What an isolating way to characterize yourself! And that was supposed to be his starting point in reconstructing human knowledge? I read a book about Jewish old people once in which one of them said: 'We fight to keep warm.' And then there was another one who must have known Descartes, for she said: 'I yell, therefore I exist.' As for that first old guy, the one who liked to fight, I don't know whether he had any idea who Descartes was, but I'm convinced that in a very deep sense he knew better than Descartes. He knew that it's assertion -- sometimes counterassertion, opposing the other guy -- that keeps you going."

"So your line is that Jews are never tongue-tied," said Fraser. "Well, I didn't expect that you would be at a loss for words tonight. You never are." Then Fraser thought he would try one more gambit. He brought up Elie Wiesel as a proponent of silence.

But David had an answer for that one too. "Remember the innkeeper in *The Trial of God* -- the one whose daughter was raped,

and his community was wiped out in a pogrom? Where was God through all of that horror? Anyway, you may recall that toward the end of the play he's got this telling line about how he'll yell for truth. Don't you see? The innkeeper has that same Jewish spirit. Jews are the real `pro-testants.'" David emphasized the second syllable to bring out the notion of protest. "No, you Protestants got out of the protest business a long time ago. You became the establishment. You got cozy with God, and now you don't know what to say to him."

Fraser thought of Max Weber and his famous thesis about the correlation between Protestant attitudes (it was especially Calvinism that he had in mind) and material prosperity. It was when you knew you were one of God's elect that you prospered. But which came first -- knowing you were chosen by God, or prospering? Probably prospering, Fraser thought to himself. Then you could become complacent and take God for granted. A few minutes of silence might suffice for you as far as prayer is concerned.

Fraser shifted his attention to the Jews, who sometimes prospered materially but always seemed to attract hostility and persecution. He began to see that it wasn't so strange for them to become feisty, even ungrateful.

By this point in their discussion, Fraser and David seemed to be on the same wave-length again. David picked up the thread by saying something that Fraser was just beginning to think might be true: "It's better to shake your fist at God than to sit before him in silence, not quite sure whether you're alive or dead. For my money, this glorification of silence is a sign of the attitude that Nietzsche so roundly condemned. And note, by the way, that it was Christianity

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that he was attacking rather than Judaism. And yet the Nazis had the gall to try and make him into an anti-Semite. What a travesty!"

Fraser felt more and more as though he was being won over to David's side. Perhaps silence was not golden after all.

As for David, he sensed what Fraser was feeling. He wondered whether he had pushed a bit too hard in their debate, and so he took his friend by the arm and steered him to the kitchen -- Fraser's kitchen, for they had been in his living room. Lucy was conveniently out of earshot the whole time.

"What have you got in the fridge?" asked David. He wanted to break bread with Fraser. It was another of his seemingly Christian practices, for Jews, with their strict kosher limitations, often avoided eating with people outside their own faith community. But David wanted to share something with Fraser so that the evening would not be remembered as one long argument.

* * * * *

Lucy and Fraser were enjoying an evening at home, seated close together on the couch. They sipped tea and kept an eye on the television set and talked, until one or the other fell silent. Their attention would drift elsewhere, as their thoughts became disentangled.

Fraser tried to amuse Lucy by telling her about an approach to psychotherapy he had read about in a humor book: the idea was that the psychotherapist responded to your outpouring of woe with a

"Yep," and perhaps a sigh. Eventually you were supposed to catch on and say "yep" as well. You slowed down emotionally and mentally, and whatever your problems were, you came to understand that they didn't amount to all that much. Contentment sort of snuck up on you.

Lucy didn't find it all that amusing. Being in the therapy business herself, she wanted treatment to be more decisive.

Fraser tried to point out that sometimes what matters is not what you say but how you say it. And so there could be value in a therapy of few words -- although the "yep" approach might be carrying a good thing too far -- or perhaps not far enough, depending on how you look at it. Of course you had to say something now and then: even Rogerian therapists admitted as much. But many people need nothing more than a sensitive listener.

"Don't shrinks sometimes fall asleep during therapy?" Lucy asked, still seeming to dismiss the tradition Fraser was defending.

"Yes," admitted Fraser, "there are some famous stories about that sort of thing. But they don't intend to nod off."

Then a new thought entered his mind. He should tell Lucy more of what had happened that time two years ago when he appeared -- no, wrong word -- was heard on a radio talk show. The occasion had been quite a disappointment. Lucy listened once to a tape of the show and pronounced that there was nothing wrong with his performance, but Fraser felt humiliated: he should have given a better account of himself. He decided to tell Lucy a bit more about it.

"Do you remember that time I went on the radio?" he asked. Lucy nodded.

"Well, it wasn't exactly counseling I was doing," Fraser explained. "Still, I did feel I was talking to people on a fairly basic level. The idea was that the folks calling in were free to ask me anything -- about the Christian faith, I mean. And I was to present some sort of reasoned response -- what Christians have believed about such-and-such. And could one still affirm such things today? That was the agreement. But as for my own objective, I was determined to be sensitive, to show by my manner of speaking that I don't take the big questions lightly. But it fell flat."

"I didn't think so," said Lucy. "I listened to the tape -- remember? Although it did seem to me that you could have spoken up more."

"But that's just it -- I hardly had a chance. The problem was that the host of the show didn't have much confidence in me to keep the conversational ball bouncing, so to speak, and so he lined up another guest to appear alongside me -- a math prof from some Christian college in the States. Now, I don't know where this guy got his qualifications -- I mean, for subjects other than math -- but he had a ready mouth. It was as though he had all the answers memorized. Is there maybe a catechism listing all the big philosophical questions Christians have to deal with and offering a quickie answer to each one? If so, this guy must have memorized it."

"If his answers were no good, why didn't you criticize him?" asked Lucy.

"One Christian dismembering another one right on live radio? That wasn't quite the idea. But I could tell that the host was getting a bit annoyed. He seemed to appreciate the few answers I did manage to get out. But the math guy was a bit rude: he was awfully quick out of the chute. We'd get a tough question -- let's say someone wanted to know where God was during the Holocaust. I'd look concerned and try to project an atmosphere of thoughtfulness -- I didn't want people thinking I was dogmatic or took these matters lightly"

Lucy cut him off. "But you were on the radio -- not TV. All that posturing would have done you no good. They couldn't see you."

"True," admitted Fraser, "but you still have to do something to convince the person you're talking with that you respect his question. It's not exactly that you have to be tongue-tied. But sometimes you need to lay your hand over your mouth, as Job did in the Bible when he began to realize that many of the things he had said were way out of line. I believe it's in chapter 40 of the book of Job."

"Maybe you should have gone into acting," suggested Lucy.

"Maybe teaching is acting," countered Fraser. "Did you know that in the old days, when many Calvinist churches were officially opposed to theater and so forth, young men with acting ability often became ministers and played their roles in the pulpit? They hammed it up. That's not what I had in mind, of course, but on the other hand it's not a bad thing to project an air of thoughtfulness. Even if you have a ready answer for every big question, you shouldn't just spit it out like a game-show contestant."

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Fraser knew his "appearance" on the radio had not been a big success. The host professed to be happy with it and had made some vague statement about perhaps having him back sometime, but nothing came of it.

As for the math prof, Fraser avoided him after the show. He could not hide his annoyance. But he suspected the man had little sense of what he had done.

* * * * *

The next evening Fraser was at the university without Lucy. A well-known speaker from France was to address the theme "The Silence of God During the Holocaust." The same old irony, thought Fraser. More silence to be discussed in many, many words. It was getting to be a tired theme to him, but he attended the lecture anyway.

The speaker took quite a theological risk, thought Fraser. He made connections which were definitely frowned on in the world of Jewish-Christian relations. Putting his Christian convictions right up front, he suggested that God's silence during the Holocaust was paralleled by his silence during the agony and crucifixion of Christ. Sure, he could have sent a host of angels to earth to break up the travesty of Christ's conviction and execution, but he didn't. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend." A little later Fraser heard him say: "Just as Christ asked the Father why he had forsaken him, so it was during the Holocaust. But it all served a purpose. Actually, it was a privilege for those Jews to suffer and die

when God was so ominously silent." And so God's silence had a meaning. Jewish suffering -- the Jewish sacrifice of the six million -- had a significance that had been foreshadowed in the suffering of Christ. The man beamed as he spoke. Fraser found it bizarre.

Such an unusual talk got lively responses, most of them negative. Fraser did not stick around once it was over: he had no desire to meet the speaker or shake his hand. He had spotted Angela Orso in the audience, and so he asked her to join him for a cup of coffee afterwards.

Before long Fraser was telling her some of his own recent "discoveries" regarding silence. He also revealed what had happened in his two classes on silence and wonder. He rambled on about how the kids nowadays are too young and immature to understand. He thought that in Angela's presence he could get away with using the word "kids."

Angela was sympathetic to his frustration, but she wanted to give the younger set more credit than Fraser thought they deserved -- at least, that sleepy bunch enrolled in his philosophy class. Angela touched on some of the themes that David had mentioned as well, but she also covered some new territory. She talked about how "logos" in the Bible, which is the "word" mentioned so prominently in John 1, has an expansive meaning, somewhat parallel to "davar" in the Old Testament. In the Bible, speech is treasured, and being tongue-tied is a curse. She added: "When silence is forced upon a person, when it's not a choice, it can be positively tormenting."

"You mean like a prisoner in solitary confinement?" It was the only example that immediately came to mind for Fraser.

"Yes, I suppose," said Angela. "But just now I'm thinking of a woman I call on sometimes, a woman who can't speak. Perhaps you should meet her. I could bring you with me when I next see her."

"How often do you visit her?" Fraser asked.

"Every three weeks or so," Angela replied. "I'd like to go more often -- I mean, I should. I know I should. But she's so hard to visit. And I have so many other people to see. Plus, she's not a member of St. Capacia's. I started seeing her as a favor to the priest in her home parish, a small town about an hour away."

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Fraser accepted Angela's offer to come along on the next visit to this poor woman, who, it turned out, was in a nursing home with which he was familiar. At least, he had driven by it often and knew roughly what it was. He could not suppress a feeling of uneasiness as he entered and saw so many old people seemingly disconnected from the others around them, as though each inhabited a world of his own.

He found out that the woman had suffered unusual and extensive brain damage resulting from oxygen deprivation in a unique medical mishap. Angela didn't know all the details, but it had something to do with CPR being used to bring her back from death. Not only could she not talk, she had also lost the use of her legs, and her memory was greatly affected. Much of its content was gone, with

the result that she remembered only disconnected snippets of her own history; moreover, the capacity to remember new experiences was with her only sporadically. Often she did not recall what had happened earlier in the day, or even as little as half an hour before.

Yet she retained her knowledge of the English language and a fair amount of the non-personal stuff one picks up in school. Her knowledge-base differed from day to day, Angela explained. Fraser tried to make a little joke of it and said he felt he was basically in the same position, but Angela wasn't amused. "Wait until you meet her," she said firmly.

And now the occasion had come. The woman, named Heather Pruitt, was sitting in her wheelchair by a window, looking out, but she did not appear to be focusing on anything. She greeted them with a smile but did not know who Angela was. Yet she responded to the clerical collar. As a lifelong Anglican, she seemed to like the idea of having a priest in her room.

It turned out that the woman was tongue-tied in a way that was painful for visitors to observe. With great effort she could make a few sounds, but they were hard to interpret. The brain damage had left her without enough control over the muscles around her vocal cords for comprehensible speech to come forth. Yet she didn't seem to remember that she couldn't speak: she kept trying. Fraser found it hard to look directly at her, and he wished she would stop trying to talk.

Yet she could communicate by pointing to the letters of the alphabet. On a white board encased in lamination, someone had

arranged the letters of the alphabet in the order in which they appear on a keyboard. Heather would point to them one by one, sometimes breaking the string of letters into words by touching what looked like a space bar labeled "new word." She made few spelling mistakes and was fairly proficient, even though her hand often trembled. (Another result of the brain damage, Fraser was later told.) And she sometimes skipped the "new word" indicator, making her string of letters hard to shape into a message.

Heather had some pictures of loved ones by her bed, but she no longer recognized their faces. Angela had made notes on their identity some time before and reviewed them with Heather, trying to sound cheerful. Heather did not seem interested. But she did have a few questions, the same ones she asked on almost every visit, Fraser later learned. She wanted to know: Why? The context was unmistakable. Also: What happened to me? And: Will I get better?

Angela could have begged off and refused to answer such questions, but she had talked to the general practitioner responsible for Heather's immediate care and knew the heartbreaking answers to the medical questions. Heather had been told the answers repeatedly, but she kept forgetting them. Or perhaps they were too horrible to bear remembering. Angela suspected that she just flushed the answers from her system, only to get curious again. There was no way of knowing.

About halfway through the visit Heather began to cry. She asked why no one ever visited her. Angela tried to explain that there were probably a number of visitors that came by, but because of the

memory problem, Heather could not recall their visits. It was all Fraser could do to hold back his tears.

He did not say much to Heather. And he had to suppress the urge to look at his watch and see how long they had been there. When he finally took a look after they left the room, he was surprised: he thought they had been in the room for at least an hour, but the watch said it was only 25 minutes.

In parting, they both gave Heather a hug and a kiss. Angela had told Fraser in advance that this was a very important part of any visit to Heather. She clung to Angela, almost as though she feared she might never get another hug. It was haunting moment. Then it was Fraser's turn.

After the visit, Angela and Fraser had coffee together. They both sensed that they needed to talk.

"So, did that encounter change your feelings about silence?" Angela asked gently.

Fraser admitted to being deeply moved -- also upset at what he had encountered. "Will she always be like that?" he asked.

"The doctors see no prospect of improvement -- only decline," replied Angela. Then she added: "But there's something Biblical about the situation. The theme of being voiceless, having nothing to say, being struck dumb -- it's a significant thread running through the Bible. One image of redemption is God giving us our voice back. Perhaps, in our unbelief, we lose it for a while.

"Like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist," suggested Fraser.

"Right," said Angela. "And why was he struck dumb? For a sign. In Luke 1 there's a hint of an unbelieving attitude on his part, like Sarah's response when Isaac's birth was foretold. But you can't really say that Zechariah had done wrong. And so his speechlessness was a token of what was to break through in this special time -- first of all in the child to be born to Elizabeth, and then in the Christ child."

"So silence can have a redemptive significance?" Fraser asked.

"That's probably putting it too strongly," said Angela. "It points ahead to redemption. 'My soul in silence waits for God ...' That sort of thing. In your romanticism about silence, there is indeed something commendable. But silence is not what we are to long for -- it's more like the darkness before the dawn."

Fraser nodded. But then silence could also be a prelude to wonder, he thought to himself. He did not want to go over the two failed philosophy classes again. He had told Angela about them only in bare outline. She had listened sympathetically. That was one thing you could always count on with Angela -- a sympathetic ear. This quality was part of the reason why she was such an excellent priest.

"Fraser, do you know a Charles Wesley hymn that begins with the words 'O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise'?"

Fraser nodded. They still sang that one in his church from time to time.

"That lovely hymn contains some wonderful elements," said Angela. "Especially the last stanza. `Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb, / Your loosened tongues employ; / Ye blind, behold your Savior come; / And leap, ye lame, for joy.' That hymn reminds us so beautifully that what we're saved from is not just guilt or pollution conceived of along legalistic lines but a whole series of frailties that rob us of our full humanity. Think about it -- what Heather wouldn't give for a loosened tongue! But she would also love to walk again -- she told me so on my previous visit. She used to be quite a hiker."

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On Sunday Corky came over unannounced, and Lucy invited her to stay for dinner. Fraser decided to make a good impression on her by reciting some of what Angela had told him. But he was not entirely honest about it: he talked as though these were his own insights, which, he reasoned to himself, they were now. Angela hadn't exactly lent them to him: worthy ideas were not property.

Corky nodded enthusiastically, and even Lucy seemed sympathetic. "You're turning Pentecostal, Fraser," Corky beamed.

Fraser was taken aback. "How so?" he asked.

"Don't you see? What you're really talking about is the gift of tongues, which the Holy Spirit poured out on the church on

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Pentecost. It's not just poor folks like Heather Pruitt who need their tongues loosened -- we're all tongue-tied. But at Pentecost we get untied and set on fire by the Lord and for the Lord. Our church embraces the gift -- yes, we celebrate it. Your friend Angela may have read about Pentecost in some theology textbook, but the Anglicans are afraid of it."

Fraser felt the need to defend Angela's honor. "Don't be too sure," he said. "There are charismatics in almost every tradition. The Anglicans have them too. My guess is that there's so much control in their liturgy that the situation cries out for some innovation. And so some of them turn charismatic."

That's the trouble with the Anglicans -- and lots of the other churches too, I think," said Corky. "They're hung up on control. They don't know how to let go and let the Spirit take over. Speaking in tongues scares them, even if they now claim to be a wee bit charismatic."

Lucy spoke up: "What's the point of speaking in tongues if no one knows what's you're saying?"

"What's the point of breathing?" Corky countered. "Or smiling? Maybe God likes our prayer and worship even better if we just let go. A cat purrs when it's contented. Why shouldn't people purr and speak to God in a language beyond human understanding?"

There might be something to this after all, thought Fraser. His mind wandered to the arts and the vain attempts made by thinkers to nail down how meaning is expressed and communicated through art

Theodore Plantinga

works. Maybe much artistic expression and performance is like that speaking in tongues business that Corky and her Pentecostal friends seem to love. A thought for another day, he mused to himself, or perhaps a theme for an aesthetics class.

Chapter 4

Just Say No

"This place needs some personal touches," Fraser muttered to himself. He had rented a room for a counseling appointment, but now that he was about to use it, he found it depressingly bare. His clients would be along in twenty minutes or so, and he wanted it to look somewhat professional.

Of course he planned to treat them to a small explanation of why the room was bare. It had to do with this new theory in the business world that people didn't need offices and desks anymore. Nowadays your laptop computer was your desk, and via your built-in modem you were connected to work whenever you wanted to be. You could even take your laptop on vacation and keep checking your e-mail and reading drafts of reports that were being written in your absence.

Some people called it freedom, and in a sense it was. You were free of having to show up at the office every day. But there was a price

to be paid: you lost the freedom you used to have at home. Your cell phone could even accompany you into the washroom.

One consequence of the new thinking about computers and desks and offices is that many companies no longer assigned their employees an office in the sense of a workspace for them alone, which they could then decorate and personalize. If you were coming in on a given day, you made it known in advance and asked for space for that day. When you arrived, you were told what cubicle or room you could use. It was sort of like going to a motel. You might wish to stay at a certain motel because you had been there on your honeymoon, but you would probably not wind up in the same room. You would take whatever room the guy at the desk gave you.

The room Fraser had rented was at least part of a sort of medical establishment. Various kinds of practitioners used the facilities, but during certain parts of the business week there were rooms to spare, some of them equipped with examination tables. Such a room was offered to Fraser, but he declined it. A desk and a few chairs would suffice for him.

On the desk he placed his laptop computer. He even turned it on: why bring it if it was not running? But then, he didn't plan to actually use it during the session. So what program should he be running? After a short while the screen saver came on and saved him making that decision.

The people he was expecting were Herb and Bonnie Grassley. They had been referred to him by some sort of social worker. Fraser's

efforts in getting professional people to recognize and support his work as an "existential counselor" were starting to pay off.

All Fraser was told about the case in advance is that it had to do with a teenage son. After awkward introductions (Fraser was not good at small talk), they got down to business. "So, tell me about your son," Fraser began. "What sort of boy is he?"

Herb looked at Bonnie, as though getting permission to talk. "Well, he's difficult -- that's for sure."

Fraser thought to himself that he might have to do some prying. He sensed that the husband and wife before him were not quite in agreement as to what the problem was.

"So he's rebelling? Doing the usual teenage thing?"

"No, I wouldn't put it that way," Herb replied. "He's so darn negative! He's always contradicting me. It's like he talks down to me. He seems to think I'm stupid."

Then Bonnie broke in: "Part of the problem, Dr. McNaught," she began, "is that Roy is really too smart for his own good. I don't look at this problem in quite the same way as my husband. I'm a teacher -- lower elementary. I've seen this sort of thing more often: kids with more intellectual ability than they know what to do with. It's like giving people fancy equipment that they're not trained to use properly. Roy has a fantastic brain and is way ahead of many, many other kids, in certain areas -- not in all, mind you. But he doesn't have the wisdom and maturity to use his gifts constructively."

To Fraser it sounded as though Bonnie should be able to cope with her wayward son. She came across as a good mother. He asked cautiously: "How did you think, specifically, that someone like me would be able to help you?"

"It's because you're a philosopher," Herb said. "And that's what Roy says he is. He's always reading weird stuff that he calls philosophy. He knows I don't have much schooling, and so he does it to put me down."

"That's not quite fair, Herb," Bonnie broke in. "Roy does read philosophy books, but he started out with other stuff. He loves math, and he's very good at it. He also likes computers -- not that he spends endless time tinkering with them. I guess you could say that he likes the idea of computers -- what they might be able to do, what they might become some day. He talks about how they might become persons. And so he also reads science fiction."

"He doesn't sound like a bad kid to me," Fraser offered.

"And he isn't a bad kid -- not really," replied Bonnie. "You see, the trouble is, he's so contrary -- always contradicting us. It's like he's playing with us. It really gets to Herb; it doesn't bother me quite so much, I suppose."

"Do you mean he argues with you all the time?" Fraser didn't know what to make of it. "Or does he disobey you, or tune you out when you tell him to do something?"

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"He doesn't tune us out," said Bonnie, "but with his endless arguing and contradicting he does wiggle out of doing as he's told. He loves the word 'negation.'"

"It's a perfectly good word," Fraser offered.

"It's not a word I would use," Herb interjected. "It's sounds hostile -- and condescending. I often get the feeling the kid is laughing at me."

"Maybe he thinks he's outsmarting you," suggested Fraser. "Have you considered using some reverse psychology on him? If you want him to affirm proposition A, then assert its opposite. He'd then have to contradict you by asserting A, and that's just what you want."

"That might work a few times," said Bonnie, "but he'd soon be wise to us. He can't be manipulated -- not that I'd want to manipulate him, anyway."

Fraser leaned back and thought. Then he said, slowly, "If he likes logic and philosophy so much, maybe you could try some Jainist logic on him and make him more agreeable that way. Now, you've probably never heard of Jainism, and that's okay. Just hear me out. Jainism is a religious and philosophical tradition of ancient India, parallel to Hinduism and Buddhism, but much smaller and not as well known. What's important about Jainism for our purposes is that it takes a unique approach to logic. Instead of the two-valued logic we use in the Western world, it advocates a seven-valued logic."

Herb didn't seem to be following the mini-lecture. Fraser decided to make his pitch directly to Bonnie. "The two values in Western logic are true and false -- roughly speaking, yes and no. In other words, a statement has to be either true or false. That makes it easy for someone who wishes to be contrary: if the person you're talking with says A, you say not-A. That's what Roy is doing, in logical terms."

"So where does the seven-valued business come into it?" asked Bonnie.

"Jainism has a very unusual theory here," said Fraser. "What it comes down to is that the Jains believe there's a whole lot more agreement in the world than people realize. Or maybe I should say that there's less disagreement. The Hindus, by the way, tend in this direction too, but they haven't worked it out so neatly in logical terms. Anyway, the Jains believe that there are seven truth-values that could in principle be applied to a statement or proposition. And so they don't agree that any atomic statement must be either true or false. There are degrees of credibility or likelihood. But what's important for you and Roy is that if you accept this theory, it becomes difficult to contradict people. It's not so easy for two statements to be in direct opposition to one another: on a Jainist analysis they usually turn out to be logically compatible."

"Let's see if I understand this properly," said Bonnie. "If I take a Jainist approach, I'm sort of deflecting Roy by not accepting his contradictions as contradictions. I'm sort of agreeing with him?"

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"You're getting the hang of it," replied Fraser. "And not only are you agreeing with him, he's also agreeing with you, whether he likes it or not. Wouldn't that take the wind out of his sails?"

"But what good would that do?" asked Herb, looking annoyed. "You'd just be playing along with him."

"It's better than punishing him the way you sometimes do," declared Bonnie.

"Let's not get into that here," muttered Herb. Fraser decided to leave the punishment issue alone. Instead he picked up the threads of his impromptu lecture. "The Jain theory of knowledge and logic is sometimes called 'perhaps-ism' or 'could-be-ism.' Almost anything that gets asserted has a degree of worth or plausibility. The Jains are therefore of interest in philosophy of religion -- let's say, in discussions between people from different religious traditions -- because they open up possibilities of minimizing disagreement. And so strife is kept to a minimum. They're about as far removed from a steel-fisted fundamentalism as you can get. I suppose they'd be very hard for Christians to evangelize."

Bonnie looked puzzled, and so Fraser explained: "Christians usually want you to agree that you're all wet. You're supposed to throw your beliefs away and accept a whole new set -- theirs." Fraser paused, and then added: "I think you should know that I'm a Christian, but I'm by no means a fundamentalist."

"So what we are we supposed to do with this idea of yours?" Bonnie asked.

"If you're willing to do a little reading on the subject, you could come back and I could give you some further ideas about handling Roy."

"Count me out," said Herb.

Bonnie ignored him and responded: "It's a deal. So what do I read?"

Fraser promised to contact her soon with some suggestions. He took down her e-mail address and also asked for some information about the family.

He resisted the impulse to type into his computer while Bonnie talked: that would be too impersonal. And so he wrote on lined sheets of paper. "I'll process this stuff later," he told her. And they set a tentative date for their next meeting.

* * * * *

That evening, with both kids out of the house, Fraser gave Lucy a rundown on his session with the Grassleys. As he guessed, she showed little interest in what he had to say about Jainism: it was far too theoretical for her usual practical focus. But she seemed quite interested in the case.

"I don't think it's so unhealthy for the boy to have a contrary streak," she said. "You find it in animals too. A dog tugs at the leash

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when you take it for a walk. It's part of the life impulse -- it's tied up with being alive. That way people know you aren't dead yet."

"Is that why you give me a hard time?" Fraser asked, patting her leg to show he was kidding.

"Do I?" she responded. Then she thought for a moment and added: "I suppose it's good for you. Aren't you supposed to be a lover of argument -- as a philosopher, I mean?"

"If you say so," said Fraser, feeling a bit uneasy. Lucy had a solidity about her that he had always feared just a bit. She was sweet and gentle most of the time, but on the other hand she was not one to take dictation. When they got married, there was no thought of her "obeying" him. She was willing to be married in a church, but she scrutinized the marriage vows well in advance to make sure she would not wind up making a promise she had no intention of keeping.

"You know, Fraser," Lucy intoned, "a certain amount of contrarianism can be a natural part of a marriage relationship. Often people don't even know they're doing it. Do you remember Hank and Maureen? You met them a couple of times. Being just a bit contrary is second nature to them: it's like dancing and always knowing what your partner is going to do next."

"I'm not sure it would work for us," replied Fraser.

"Perhaps not," said Lucy. "Your pride would be a problem. You always have to be right. Anyway, Maureen told me this interesting story about contrary attitudes. She and Hank were in New

Brunswick on vacation. About the time they were leaving she felt an impulse to say that although she had enjoyed the trip, she wouldn't want to live there. And she thought that as soon as she said it, Hank would say the opposite -- that's how it always goes with them. So she performed a little experiment: she said the opposite of what she really felt. She told Hank how lovely New Brunswick was, and how she could easily settle down there for the rest of her life. And what did Hank do? He came right back with: 'I could never live here.' Maureen told me that she believes Hank doesn't think when he says such things. Being contrary is second nature to him -- he might do it just to give himself some breathing room. But Maureen admits that she does it too. I suppose it's harmless. Maybe you and I will drift into it eventually."

Fraser didn't like that idea, for he feared that a drift in that direction was already beginning. Moreover, he wanted people to be conscious of what they were saying. You should mean what you say, and say what you mean. And so he voiced his objection.

"Come off it, Fraser," said Lucy. "So much of what people say doesn't really mean anything at all. It's not all that different from the sounds animals make. Don't sociologists have some studies to prove it?"

Fraser thought of the Spanish philosopher Ortega and what he had written about people simply saying what is said, saying whatever one is supposed to say in such-and-such a situation. Fraser generally agreed with Ortega, but not on this point, unless Ortega intended this thesis simply as a generalization about human behavior. One should not be so conventional. To declare one's opinion -- or

better, conviction -- on an issue was not something to take lightly. "Let your yea be yea," it said in the Bible.

"People open their mouths too easily," Fraser argued. "Remember Nancy Reagan and that campaign against drugs she had going some years ago? 'Just say no.' That was her slogan - really, her whole approach. There's so much more to it. Talk is cheap."

Now Lucy began to feel contrary. "Give the lady some credit," she argued. "If kids nowadays could get into the spirit of saying no, we wouldn't have half as much trouble in our laps. Take all these girls under pressure from their boyfriends. Don't you think Nancy's advice is useful for them as well? Wouldn't you like to see Kelly absorbing it as well? 'Just say no.' It applies in many areas of life."

"Aren't you changing your tune tonight?" Fraser inquired. "You're usually opposed to talk and reasoning. You think they're over-rated. I thought you'd be more likely to say that girls should go back to wearing girdles. In the old days, a girdle saved many a young woman's honor. That's what my mother told me. She said it was easier for women back in those days."

"Well, there's certainly something to that," admitted Lucy. The thought of Kelly, their daughter, who was just then getting into the time of teenage woes, led her to soften her stand somewhat. Kelly's welfare and future and "honor" meant more to Lucy than showing she knew all about being contrary.

Fraser then moved the discussion back onto his own turf -- philosophy. "There's a dialectical aspect to this case," he said solemnly. He did not expect Lucy to understand the word "dialectic."

"Okay, I bite," she replied. "What exactly is `dialectic'? Does it have something to do with being difficult."

"Yes, you could say that," replied Fraser. "For Hegel and a few other philosophers, dialectic is present in both our thought and our action. It's like a driving force. It never allows us -- or things or processes, for that matter -- to stand still. There's always a new twist."

"Is it like bringing something good out of a bad situation?" asked Lucy.

"Yes, I suppose," said Fraser, "except that for Hegel, terms like good and bad cannot be used quite so simply. Much of the conflict, struggle, pain, and unhappiness that dominate human life are to be understood as part of a process driven by a dialectic -- a clash of opposite poles every bit as painful as the struggle between a confused teenager and her frightened parents. But there's good news: the opposites do not forever remain opposed. They are reconciled in time. And so you could say that on the whole, Hegel had a very optimistic philosophy -- he sees something better and higher coming out of a bitter struggle, even if it does not emerge right away."

"Did he get the idea from studying nature?" asked Lucy.

"No, in some sense he got it from earlier philosophers, although he did point out the workings of dialectic in natural

processes. But the study of nature wasn't his big thing." Fraser paused, then decided that he needed to "go back to the Greeks." When he was an undergraduate student, he had a professor who was always insisting that you have to go back to the Greeks to understand this or that. The students had made a joke of it. But Fraser eventually came to see that the man was right.

"In terms of Roy and his love of contradiction, it's interesting to note that dialectic goes back to the notion of conversation -- also dialogue. Indeed, the two words -- "dialectic" and "dialogue" -- are etymologically connected with an ordinary Greek word for talking. And so scholars will tell you that Plato -- or I guess I should say Socrates, for he generally leads the discussions in Plato's dialogues -- used a dialectical method. By question and answers and argumentation, following many twists and turns, the truth comes to birth. But in and through it all you get a positive picture of contradiction. Philosophers find contradiction to be fruitful."

"Doesn't it also have something to do with the class struggle?" asked Lucy.

"Indeed, it does," answered Fraser. "Marx took over the idea of dialectic from Hegel, but he changed it somewhat. In Hegel it was a fruitful notion. Opposed parties in a struggle or an argument always got together somehow in the end: there was some sort of a synthesis or a reconciliation. But in Marx you have a destructive dialectic. There are two poles or two principles at war with one another, but the one triumphs completely and destroys the other."

"Communism destroys capitalism -- right?"

"You've got it," said Fraser. "And that's what makes Communism and Marxism so insufferable. They're right -- one hundred percent -- and all their opponents are wrong. Now they're getting a taste of their own medicine." Fraser paused, as if to switch gears. "Yet I think there are some valuable insights in Marxism. Still, for most people Marxism is discredited. We've thrown all that stuff out the window, and we're back to unbridled capitalism. That's what globalization is all about, if you ask me."

But Lucy wasn't asking him. She wanted to learn more, and so she said: "Doesn't dialectic have something to do with psychology as well?"

"It sure does," said Fraser, "Freud had a keen eye for dialectical developments and transformations. He saw them at work in character development. He warned that a young man in love with his young lady may abhor her mother and be so thankful that his beloved is nothing like her mother. And the young lady may even despise her mother and swear that she will never be like her. But what do you suppose happens over time? She becomes more and more like the mother she used to despise. And so the moral of story is: fellows, take a good look at your girlfriend's mother, because that's just what she will become in some twenty or thirty years. We turn into the very thing we reject and despise."

Lucy chuckled. "So your secret fear is that I'll turn into my mother? Maybe I'm already doing it."

Speaking Silence

Fraser thought it best not to reply to that one. "Goethe was a case in point," he said. "He had a difficult relationship with his father, and in his youth he wanted to be his father's opposite in almost every way. But what do you suppose he turned into when he got older?"

"Tell me, Fraser, do you want Kelly to turn out to be just like me?"

Fraser knew just what to say: "Of course I do -- I love you." He wrapped his arms around her and stifled their conversation with a kiss.

* * * * *

Fraser was holding one of his office hours at the university. No one had come, and he got some quiet reading done. There were only fifteen minutes left before he could leave and feel he had done his duty for the day, but just then a young man entered tentatively. Fraser waved him in and came from behind his desk and sat near him.

The small-talk part of dealing with students in the office was difficult for Fraser -- some of the time, at least. And he made it harder on himself by inviting the students to discuss virtually anything with him. Thus they expected him to be a master of small talk.

Fraser believed that the teacher-student relationship was not just academic. As a Christian, he felt he had to be ready to deal with the whole person. And so, somewhat shyly, he invited the students to take up any sort of issue with him -- not just academic or

philosophical ones. "Ask me anything," he said. "Bring up any problem you may be having. I don't guarantee that you'll find me helpful. But in some cases I'll know where you could get the kind of specialized help you need. And I do promise you a sympathetic ear."

The young man was named Chip. Fraser remembered his name right off the bat, for he was one of the few who put up his hand and contributed something once in a while in a discussion. And he did not wear the one-size fits-all baseball cap that annoyed Fraser. It used to be that kids wore such caps, but nowadays all sorts of people, including elderly duffers, put them on their heads as well. Some of the female students even had pony-tails sprouting from the back of such caps. But he never saw Chip in such a cap, which counted in the young man's favor.

Fraser complained to Lucy about the ugly caps from time to time, and she told him to ban them in the class. But Fraser wouldn't dare do such a thing.

Chip had come by to talk about relationships, it seemed. But he had not taken Fraser's in-class invitation at face value, for he appeared to be under the impression that he had to bring up some course stuff first. Fraser waved his tentative class-related question away and invited him to get right to what was bothering him.

"It's my girlfriend," he explained. "We've been dating on and off for five months, and I'd like to see us make some sort of commitment, but she won't. It's clear to me that I'm much more in love with her than she is with me -- if, indeed, she loves me at all. I'm not sure. I guess that's really the problem. But she does enjoy my

company. She has fun when she's with me. Otherwise we wouldn't be dating anymore."

"Do I know her?" Fraser asked, trying to sound friendly.

"You should," said Chip. "She's in our class. But we don't always sit together."

Fraser did not recall any particular young woman sitting near Chip on a regular basis. "What's her name?" he asked.

"Amanda Barker."

The name, at least, rang a bell for Fraser. He remembered marking her work, and he had a line for an Amanda in his grade book. "What does she look like?" he inquired.

Chip proceeded to describe her. She sounded attractive, but there was not much in the description to set her off from a number of other young women in the class, some of whom Fraser did know personally because they had spoken to him after a lecture or had come to the office.

Fraser then made an admission that got him into Chips' bad books -- he could tell at once from the young man's face that he should have been more guarded, or perhaps respectful. "She sounds like several of the young women in our class. I'm afraid I just can't put a face with your description. You know, I sometimes think that good-looking young women have a way of resembling one another -- whereas older women, if they're still beautiful, are more distinctive in

their appearance. One doesn't mix them up with each other quite so easily."

Chip was not able to hide the look of annoyance on his face, but he tried to remain polite. "Amanda is unique," he said, with determination in his voice. "There's no one else like her."

"Of course she is," replied Fraser. "Yet, in a sense, everyone is unique, but at the same time everyone has characteristics in common with other people. Language as we know it would be impossible if we didn't have characteristics in common."

Chip didn't seem to get it. Fraser therefore had an opening to steer the conversation to philosophy, where the young man's personal annoyance at the suggestion that his beloved Amanda was just like some other girls was less likely to flare up again. So Fraser asked Chip whether he remembered a lecture on language and concepts from a week before.

"Yeah, sort of," he replied. "What does it have to do with Amanda?"

"Philosophy always relates to everyday life," replied Fraser, making one of his favorite points. "Do you remember what I said about the nominalist impulse -- how there aren't many philosophers who are pure nominalists, but lots of people, including non-philosophers, who have leanings in that direction? Now, the people who emphasize uniqueness are the ones who turn out to be nominalists -- even if they've never heard the term. I believe I even

went on to say that the lover is a nominalist. Do you recall me making such a statement?"

Chip nodded hesitantly, not sure what he was committing himself to by agreeing. Fraser could see that he was in need of review and decided to provide it. He knew he would not be heading home as soon as his scheduled office hour was over. But he didn't mind -- he liked the topic.

He first reminded Chip about the importance of Plato and his emphasis on the universal dimension present in human experience. We so often experience two or more things as the same because the forms or ideas constitute a kind of substrate in our experience and help to make it what it is. In human experience we are constantly recognizing something as an instance of such-and-such. Or we compare two instances of the same kind -- a pair of horses, for example -- and decide that one is a much better specimen of the type in question than the other. In all of this intellectual activity we are geared to universals. But the big philosophical question was: what, exactly, are universals?

Fraser then reminded Chip that various philosophers felt an impulse to get rid of universals in Plato's sense: there could be no separate world of forms or essences or universals to which the things of everyday experience were mysteriously linked. And so universals were essentially creatures of the understanding or the mind, according to some philosophers, or perhaps they were nothing at all. Some thinkers assumed that they were no more than arbitrary groupings of the particular things we encounter in experience. And if this was indeed so, any use of a universal term could be challenged.

Fraser could tell from the look on Chip's face that the lecture was starting to come back to him. Indeed, learning is recollection, he thought to himself.

"The nominalist," Fraser went on, "is the one who has a yearning to believe that there are only particulars -- nothing else. Every entity we encounter in experience is unique. We tend to group things into classes, but we need to be reminded constantly that the classes are arbitrary and always open to challenge."

Chip nodded. "And now we come to the lover," said Fraser. "He wants to say that his beloved is unique. Whenever someone else tries to characterize her, he shakes his head. He rejects any statement made about her as inadequate -- he becomes a nay-sayer. Others see her and think she's ordinary -- or maybe even that she's beautiful in basically the same way that lots of women are beautiful. But the lover denies it all: he's always put off when he hears such talk. To him -- to you, in this case -- there's no one like Amanda. Which is to say, basically, that she's beyond description."

Fraser then asked: "Do you remember what I said about Platonic love?"

"Refresh my memory," replied Chip.

"In a strictly Platonic way of thinking, love does not focus on persons or on particulars but on the forms, for they are the highest and best of all that exists. Only the forms are worthy of our adoration. And all genuine knowledge is knowledge of the forms. Hence

Platonic love, in the original sense, is not a matter of a boy and girl, or a man and a woman, having a friendship in which sex or romance plays no part. Nor is it a matter of one's love object being of the same sex, although there was quite some acceptance of homosexuality in the circles in which Plato moved. No, what it really comes down to is that when you truly love someone, you're not focusing on what is unique or particular about that person; rather, you're loving the forms in and through your beloved. And so, in a sense -- although I have some trouble with this myself -- you could say that your beloved is a fungible good. In other words, your beloved is replaceable. It's what quite a number of things and persons have in common that makes them lovable."

By this point Chip was a bit confused. It was clear to Fraser that he had not really understood Plato's doctrine of forms or ideas. Fraser decided to switch gears and ask what might seem a simpler question: "Is there a connection between love and poetry?"

"What do you mean?" replied Chip, a bit defensively "Are you asking me whether women like poetry? Am I supposed to be writing cute little poems for Amanda?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," said Fraser. "After all, if you're indeed a non-Platonic lover, a thoroughly modern man who stresses the individuality and distinctness and uniqueness of his love-object, you would almost need a private language to describe her. And isn't that what poetry amounts to -- the beginning of a private language? After all, according to you, the usual qualities one speaks of in praising women are all inadequate in her case: she's incomparable --

different from any woman you've ever known. Isn't that basically what you've told me?"

"She's different -- that's for sure," declared Chip. "But I still don't see why I have to start writing poetry. I'm in the engineering program. I never liked taking English classes. That's why I'm taking a philosophy elective instead."

"Relax, I'll let you off the hook," said Fraser. "You don't have to write any poetry for me or for Amanda: you just have to understand something, if you can. And that's this: the clear implication of what you're saying is that the language we use to describe other things is not adequate in Amanda's case. We need a separate vocabulary for her, because she's so special and unique. Now, suppose we allowed every woman to be unique -- at least, in the eyes of the man who loves her. If every woman needed a separate vocabulary to name her utterly unique qualities, and let's say there are a billion such woman around, we'd soon have a language composed of billions of words. Can you handle that? Have you got enough intellectual horsepower up there to remember that many words? I know I don't."

"Okay, I suppose not," admitted Chip. "So what can we do?"

"That's just it," said Fraser. "We make do. Language has to remain finite; it has to accommodate itself to our finite minds. The lover needs to swallow his pride and admit that his beloved is, in some sense, comparable to other women and able to be described in terms applicable to other women. Otherwise we run stuck -- and we fall back on poetry. Remember: you just told me that you don't want that."

Chip looked pensive. His face seemed to say that he had not bargained for such an intellectual conundrum.

"This is perhaps where metaphor enters the picture," offered Fraser. "Metaphor is a way of breaking out of the confines of ordinary language. 'My love is like a red, red rose.' The lover, whether he calls himself a poet or not, can at least use metaphors and try to say something unique about his beloved. And women groove on it."

"The trouble with poetry and metaphors," said Chip, now seeming to collect his thoughts, "is that all too often I just don't understand what's being said. But usually I don't admit it, for example, in an English class. The teacher would think I was stupid, or something."

"Well, you'd be in good company," responded Fraser. "There are lots of people who have trouble following poetry and metaphors. Count me in. That's why so many people insist on sticking to what they call literal language -- say exactly what you mean. But some thinkers -- Owen Barfield comes to mind -- will tell you that literal language is just a collection of dead metaphors -- metaphors that have been around for so long that no one realizes anymore than once they were metaphors. They've had one and the same meaning connected to them for centuries. The idea is that all speech is metaphorical in principle, and the line between the literal and the metaphorical is the line between what's novel and what's well-established."

With this disquisition Fraser felt talked out. And he could tell that Chip had taken in about as much as he could handle in one session. He thanked him for coming and encouraged him to listen to the remaining lectures in the course with the problems and concerns of everyday life in his mind. Philosophy, after all, is intended to be lived out.

* * * * *

Three days later Fraser was in church, with his son Matthew fidgeting next to him, and Kelly as far removed as the small pew allowed. They were listening to a sermon delivered by a visiting minister, an elderly man whom Fraser had never encountered before. It wasn't the kind of sermon they were used to at St. Andrew's. Nowadays sermons started with stories and often did not progress beyond them, but this elderly minister seemed to be a throwback to the old days, for he wanted to talk about "doctrine." Indeed, so intent was he on getting into "doctrine" that he seemed to ignore his Bible text altogether. Instead he dusted off the second chapter of the Westminster Confession, which was a document that was rarely mentioned at St. Andrews.

Fraser wondered if the preacher had not been influenced by the Dutch Reformed ministers who liked preaching directly from the creeds -- at least, they almost all seemed to do it often. From Folkert he had learned that they were instructed to preach one sermon each Sunday from the Heidelberg Catechism. Some of them chose to base entire series of sermons on the Belgic Confession, and it even happened on occasion that a very doctrinally minded preacher would tackle the themes laid out in the famous Canons of Dort.

Going directly to the creeds seemed a short-cut in preaching. If "doctrine" (what the church says) and "theology" (what it says specifically about God) is really no more than a summary of what Scripture teaches, why bother with the sources, the raw material? Why not cut to the chase, as it were? That was what the elderly minister seemed intent on doing.

In any event, the preacher in the St. Andrew's pulpit seemed bound and determined to tell the congregation all about the "attributes" of God, which he recited from the second chapter of the Westminster. It was nothing new to Fraser, who had made a careful study of the Westminster, and it did not seem to be holding the attention of the two children.

But as a philosopher, Fraser felt he should probably take exception to the sermon. After all, there was a well-known problem when it came to ascribing predicates or qualities to God. Fraser's mind drifted back to the conversation with Chip. The young man was convinced that Amanda, the girl he loved, was special to the point that any description applicable to some other girls would do Amanda an injustice. Well then, thought Fraser, if Amanda was so special and unique, what about God? After all, was this not an old theme of the philosophical theologians -- that God is so special and unique that he exceeds our conceptual and linguistic grasp?

But if God is indeed beyond human comprehension, how could we ever love him? Platonic love in the proper sense -- love conceived of as focusing on the universal dimension in our experience -- would be completely out of place here. In a Platonic

theology, God would be understood largely in terms of the form of the Good. And the Good is also reflected in entities on earth. And so there was a link between earth and heaven, so to speak, or between God and the creature.

But there was also a tradition in theology that Fraser considered essentially nominalistic, and thus very far removed from Plato. According to this tradition, God is so unique that we have no way whatsoever to describe him. The old duffer in the pulpit seemed completely oblivious to this tradition as he droned on about God's attributes, even taking the time to distinguish between those that he called "communicable" and those which he declared to be "incommunicable." The latter were of such a nature that no human being could share them. Would the "incommunicable" attributes be even more problematic? Fraser gently shook his head as he pondered the issue, not wishing to draw attention to himself.

* * * * *

That evening Fraser had an opportunity to pursue these ruminations further. He had arranged some days before to have David Hasselfreud spend the evening at his home. He had envisioned a session in which the two explored philosophical ideas, and Fraser could now discuss the philosophical problem inherent in that morning's sermon.

Lucy was planning to be away that evening, but in the course of the afternoon there had been a change in her plans, and so she announced that she would be home after all. She rather liked David and looked forward to the visit.

Fraser secretly wished that he could have David to himself; it was partly that Lucy had a way of upsetting the theoretical applecart just when things were getting interesting. Her direct, abrupt manner and her insistence on practicality might deflect a deep thinker like David from the furrow he was trying to plough. But he would have to make the best of it.

It did not take Fraser long to induct David into the discussion that was underway. And the first part of David's response to the unsatisfactory sermon came as no surprise to Fraser. Since he taught Jewish philosophy, he was very familiar with the main outlines of Jewish thought.

"It may sound strange to say it," David mused, "but we Jews really don't have a theology. Once in a while you'll see the word 'theology' in the title of a Jewish book, but it really doesn't belong there. Actually, it's a goyisch idea."

Then he stopped and looked at Lucy, as though becoming aware of her suddenly. "Do you know what 'goyisch' means, Lucy?" he asked. Lucy nodded.

David seemed to have gotten the authority he needed to sail into deep waters. He made free use of his permission and proceeded to open up the subject of Maimonides, whom he introduced as the greatest of all Jewish philosophers. He explained that Maimonides had been very concerned about idolatry, which he understood in a much broader sense than most Jewish and Christian thinkers. His concern to root out idolatry was the motive behind his curious

approach to the question of describing God or attributing predicates to him. In effect Maimonides' approach was: "Just say no." Whatever the quality someone wants to attribute to of God, we are to shake our heads and say no. Is God tall? Is he even-tempered? Is he round? Is he benevolent? Whatever the adjective or predicate in such questions may be, the response is always the same. Just say no.

Lucy looked puzzled "But how could you worship such a God?" she asked. "Doesn't such a doctrine add up to agnosticism, which, if I remember rightly, is the idea that we can't know there is a God, or perhaps that we can't know anything about God?" Then she turned to Fraser as if looking for support. "That's the right word, isn't it? Agnosticism? Which is different from atheism -- right?"

Fraser nodded in encouragement. David responded to Lucy's question: "You're right, Lucy. It is a problem. There are some who think that Maimonides leaves us without a God to worship. Or you could argue that he has a very purist approach to God. But he's not the only one who thinks along such lines. This kind of approach -- basically, it's the argument that only negations, not affirmations, are valid when it comes to God -- is generally known as negative theology. It's predication about God that limits itself to denial, to saying no."

David paused, as if anticipating questions, and then continued when he heard nothing: "But Christians have such a notion too -- not all of them, of course. Even so positive a thinker as Thomas Aquinas understood the issue very well, even though he didn't follow Maimonides. And if we jump ahead to the twentieth century -- well, you have Karl Barth and his notion of God as the 'Ganz Andere' -- God as wholly other. What could one possibly say about such a God?"

Fraser then chimed in by telling a story he had heard from Folkert Smith -- a story that had to do with the agnosticism issue. It happened when Folkert was an undergraduate in a Christian college in the USA. A number of the students, including Folkert, were fans and adherents of the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, a Dutch Calvinist thinker who borrowed something of his approach from the Kantian tradition. Apparently one of the young professors, a critic of Dooyeweerd, developed a line of criticism in one of his courses to the effect that Dooyeweerd was an agnostic.

"How so?" inquired David.

"The argument went roughly as follows," responded Fraser. He then explained how, for Dooyeweerd, the "horizon of our temporal experience" -- here Fraser pulled a face, as though put out by the philosophical terminology -- does not include God. In other words, God is transcendent. What Dooyeweerd called "the law" is somehow the "boundary" between the divine and the creaturely. Our experience and knowledge are limited to all that is creaturely. And so we sense the law -- we're aware of it and find ourselves responding to it. But we have no direct experience of the author of the law. Hence many philosophers misconstrue it.

By this point Lucy's attention seemed to have drifted off, but David was still on board. Fraser then brought the point of the story into focus: "The young instructor who was critical of Dooyeweerd used to say that Dooyeweerd was an agnostic, even if he didn't admit it. There was no way Dooyeweerd could say anything specific about God. Of course, since Dooyeweerd was a prominent Christian

philosopher, this did not sit well with his fans, including Folkert. Indeed, the students used to get quite incensed, and it led to some hard feeling against the instructor. But when Folkert told me all about this some years afterward, he seemed to adopt a different perspective on it. He admitted that was something to the instructor's critique. The more remote you make God, the more you sound like an agnostic."

The Folkert story seemed to embolden David, and he resumed his line of argument. Lucy's attention revived when David took the floor again. What he now presented seemed to both Lucy and Fraser like an attack on Christianity, which was a little out of keeping for their usually mild-mannered friend.

Theology, explained David, was essentially made necessary when the apostles introduced their strange ideas about Jesus of Nazareth, whom they made into "the Christ." The doctrine of Christ, he went on to argue, was basically the abandonment of monotheism - - the Muslims said so too. In effect, what Christians called "Christology" mixed up all sorts of things and thereby created many new headaches.

Then David asked for a Bible. He wanted to make some points about Acts 17, the chapter in which the apostle Paul visits Athens. Instead of making his usual visit to the synagogue and appealing to the Jews, Paul spoke to the intellectuals in the city square. At the end of the chapter we even find a reference to a Dionysius the Areopagite, whose name also occurs in the history of the concept of negative theology. But earlier in the chapter, argued David, Paul makes the

decisive shift that introduces all the headaches and complications that go with what Christians call "theology."

David paused to study the text. "Yes, here it is," he said excitedly. "It's in verse 23: `For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'"

"There you have the birth of theology!" beamed David. "The Greeks had the right idea: there is something that we might call God, if we are so inclined, but it remains essentially unknown. Once Paul promises to make it known, he is also making another promise -- to write a `theology.' And a `theology,' in the strict sense, etymologically speaking, would be a `logos' about God." As an aside to Lucy he added: "'Logos' is Greek for word or reasoning." David made a point of not looking at Fraser when adding this bit of information: he did not want to create the impression that he suspected Fraser of not knowing that "logos" meant.

Fraser nodded obligingly -- this was nothing new to him. David then continued: "And the promised `theology' must be comprehensible to the Greeks, which is to say that it must also make philosophical sense. Well, Paul made a start in his epistles, but strictly speaking, it took the church some centuries and quite a number of meetings of the church councils to complete the project Paul had started -- a `theology' for Greeks."

David then turned to relations between the three great Western faiths: "That same `theology' -- it's made up mainly of

arcane discussions about 'the Christ' -- is responsible for the huge gulf between the Christians and the Jews that persists to this day. Just look at the Athanasian Creed -- tell me, why is it so rarely used in worship services?"

Getting no answer, David drove his point home: "And so, Fraser, I would say that the minister in your pulpit this morning was entirely within his rights to be going on and on about attributes -- both the 'communicable' and the 'incommunicable' kind. That's your tradition: you claim to be making known the unknown God. You're describing him, pulling him into the domain of human language and conceptual systems. That's why 'theology' is essentially a goyisch enterprise. So when we Jews claim to offer a 'theology,' we're departing from our tradition."

Fraser felt he should argue back, but he did know quite what to say. Before he could gird up his loins in terms of offering a fresh argument, Lucy spoke up. Very simply she said: "But I don't get it. If the Jews have thinned out God to the point that he has vaporized, why worship him? Why continue this long tradition of synagogue services and dozens of commandments -- I forget just how many there are? Why feel guilty all the time? Why don't the Jews conclude 'There is no God, and therefore everything is permitted'?"

"Well," said David, seemingly impressed, "that's exactly what some of the Jews do say. The Jewish community has contributed its share of rebels against monotheism. Early in the twentieth century, many of the most resolute logical positivists, who dismissed all talk about God as literal nonsense, were Jews."

"But what about my question?" asked Lucy. "Why continue with worship and service?"

David saw that he would have a hard time answering to Lucy's satisfaction. He decided not to answer her question; instead he began to characterize Judaism in the hope that she would accept the picture he painted as an indirect answer. "Christianity is very rationalistic because it got bogged down in theology when Paul visited Athens. Judaism is different. It's colorful and full of action. There's lots to do. The festivals that make up a liturgical year give us immense variety. Maybe I could sum it up this way: Jews talk about law, while Christians talk about God."

"But what if there is no God?" asked Lucy. "I believe I once read that even some Jewish rabbis don't believe in God."

"Strictly speaking, Lucy, that's true," responded David. "Let's say that a rabbi does draw such a conclusion, it's not necessarily quite so drastic as it would be for a Christian minister. If Christianity is basically babbling on about God, and then it turns out that there is no God, clearly we have a huge problem. But with Judaism it's different. If Judaism is essentially what people do, if it's essentially law -- no better, good deeds or mizvot, as the Jews like to call them -- then it's not as much of a problem if belief in God fades away. Even if belief in God cannot be defended or rationally explained, there's no question that the law exists in some concrete sense. What Jews call law or Torah or halakha has been around for many centuries, and in all that time it has been a blessing in the life of the Jews. So perhaps the Jews believe in the law first of all, and only secondarily in God."

"Is it like that Santa Claus business with kids?" asked Lucy. "At a certain point kids come to realize that Santa might not be real, but it still helps to act as though he is. You get more presents that way."

Fraser was impressed. "That's a very interesting analogy, Milady," he said. "I'll write that one down. Perhaps I can work it into a lecture some time. You're onto something there."

Lucy smiled to acknowledge the compliment. But then she resumed her pursuit of David: "I still don't get it. If we know so little about God, how can we be so specific about just how he wishes to be served?"

"I don't think I can satisfy you on that score," David sighed. "What you have to get through your head -- here Judaism is so different from Christianity -- is that law or Scripture or revelation is something living and breathing. It's not cut-and-dried, as for so many Christians. And so, even if you don't want to believe in God in the way Christians understand belief in God, you still have to have enormous respect for the tradition -- those rabbis of yesteryear who worked together painstakingly over many generations and centuries to construct the Torah and the Talmud and all that goes with them. And so it's just not so black-and-white whether God exists. But how he is to be served -- well, that's quite concrete and down-to-earth."

By this time it was getting on, and David saw that it was time to excuse himself. He bade them a pleasant good-night and particularly expressed appreciation to Lucy for her participation in the discussion. "I wish I could get Marcia interested in ideas," he said. "Fraser, you're a lucky fellow to have such a wife."

Speaking Silence

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It seemed that Lucy was on a roll, and Fraser was not ready to turn in as yet. And so he decided to talk with her again about Roy Grassley and the peculiar challenge he represented. Once before he had told her the bare outline of the situation; this time he decided to lay before her his tentative analysis and solution. And so he began to explain about Jainism and the seven-valued approach to truth and logic.

He did not get a warm reception. At first she seemed puzzled, and then she waved it all away, announcing that it was "bafflegab." She told Fraser that the boy needed to get out of his negative cycle by affirming something. And the proper way to affirm is through doing.

Fraser was inclined to agree. He had also read analyses of the problem of youth in which the main point was that young people nowadays have nothing to do. It used to be the case of that mom and dad both had a lot of work to do in or around the house. Most people lived on farms, and there was an endless supply of work to be done. And then you had the satisfaction of working alongside your mother or father. For the girls there was plenty to do in the house. But nowadays, with all our labor-saving devices, there's less in the house. Plus, Mom is away much of the time -- perhaps she's doing her feminist number and pursuing a career. And so the kids are at loose ends. There's nothing to do, and they turn negative. And their negation manifests itself first of all as negative talk. And so Roy might just be an extreme version of what was a general problem.

But Fraser insisted that the boy's impulse toward negation had to be respected. It was simply a matter of commanding him to stop. And so, was it possible to somehow combine negation and doing? At this point he was thinking aloud.

Lucy saw where he was going. "Isn't that essentially what revolution amounts to?" she asked." Then she mused: "Perhaps Roy needs to become a revolutionary for a while."

"Those days are long gone, my dear," mused Fraser. He had no revolutionary impulses in himself -- Lucy knew that and was well aware that he was much quite cautious by nature. Still, he had read a good deal about the 1960s, when young people dared to challenge what they called "the establishment." But since that time, the ideology and outlook that supported revolution had gone by the board. Marxism had been discredited; the collapse of Communism in country after country in Eastern Europe, with the subsequent revelations as to what had really been going on in those countries, had dealt it a body blow from which it did not look as though it would recover. And so the old idea of revolution was dead.

But then a new thought came to him. It was not that protest as such was dead -- indeed, protest was being revived in our time. As Fraser thought the situation over, it began to occur to him that Karl Marx might well like the stories that were on the television news nowadays. He thought of the so-called anti-globalization protests that seemed to break out in whatever country the high and mighty, the movers and shakers of this world, assembled to plot the next stage in the development of global capitalism. While the protesters had no Marxist agenda in the sense of establishing a socialist or

Communist order, they certainly had the kind of energy that had fed protests in previous decades. So maybe this could be something for Roy.

Lucy tried to interpret his remarks in more down-to-earth terms. "Does it ever occur to you that a lot of what you call revolutionary activity is basically play?" she asked. "And play is by no means restricted to human beings. Animals play too. In fact, in vet school, I can remember having to read a selection by some Dutch historian named Huizinga -- apparently it was taken from an entire book he had written on the concept of play -- in which he made the point that animals play in roughly the same way and in the same spirit as human beings. Of course 'revolution' is a bit of a nasty word. Maybe that word needs to be removed. Maybe what the boy needs is to learn how to play. To negate and affirm at the same time -- isn't that in good measure what play is about? What is a mock fight anyway? When you have a mock fight with Matthew, as the two of you wrestle on the carpet in the living room, is that a kind of playing at revolution?"

Fraser was surprised at his wife. Although she had undergone no formal education in philosophy or theology, she seemed to have a sense for the existential ramifications of many ideas.

And now it occurred to him that the Marxist analysis he had been considering could also be spun off in a Freudian direction. The boy loved to negate, and he made his father squirm. Fraser remembered that Herb, Roy's father, was much more uncomfortable with what was going on than Bonnie. Perhaps part of the solution would be to instruct Herb in some of the Marxist and Freudian

mysteries and get him to see that he had a role to play in all of this. The boy needed to become a man, a life-affirming human being, by rebelling. Wasn't there some sense in which the son has to overthrow his father?

Then Fraser's attention turned to Jainism again. He had made much of that mysterious business of the seven-valued logic. He now began to change his mind and recognize that the Jainist tack he had taken was simply too rationalistic to help Herb and Bonnie. Indeed, what they needed to do was to lure the boy off the rationalist turf, where he was clearly their master. Get him to run in the park and roll in the green grass as though he were a puppy. Get him to engage in a play-fight with his father, which, in Freudian terms, would be more than simply a play-fight.

Lucy suggested that it was time to turn in. Fraser gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek and promised to join her in about fifteen or twenty minutes. But first he wanted to repair to his study to make some notes for his next session with Herb and Bonnie. He had figured out what he wanted to do in terms of tackling their problem. Perhaps, for his next case, he should bring in Lucy as his associate in counseling!

Chapter 5

Speech Acts

"It really is time you did something about Kelly."

"Why me?" countered Lucy. "She's your daughter too."

"True, but I don't understand her. Fathers understand sons, and mothers understand daughters. I've never been a girl. And so I just thought that if you would talk with her in private -- well, a little like the way you sometimes talk with me You know what I mean -- being practical and down-to-earth"

"But Fraser, you're an adult. I really think we should talk with her together -- that is, if you're intent on doing some kind of Dutch uncle number."

"Dutch uncle? Why don't we try being Dutch parents?"

"But we're not Dutch," countered Lucy.

Fraser gave in: he would be there for the big talk with Kelly. But he still insisted that his wife carry the ball. He would jump in when needed.

The dreaded encounter with the rebellious daughter turned out to be a little easier than Fraser had expected. No fireworks. Sometimes, mused Fraser, parents are just too frightened of their own kids.

Lucy seemed to beat around the bush and avoid being her usual abrupt self. Fraser got impatient and felt he should insert himself into the conversation and explain what it was that what he and Lucy were looking for. Kelly had indignantly wanted to know just what she had now done wrong, and her mother did not seem to have much to say in response. And so Fraser declared that it was not so much a change in behavior that they were looking for -- actually, he could not point to all that much in the way of behavior to which he took strong exception. Rather, they wanted to see a change in attitude.

But what are attitudes? Kelly seemed to take her father's carefully worded indictment as a personal rejection. She was hurt by the thought that her parents were regarding her as a creature from another planet. But then she rallied. Her mood shifted, and she began to defend the alleged bad attitude she'd been manifesting. She pursed her lips and looked intently at Fraser as she said: "But you guys never do anything. Weren't you ever young?"

Speaking Silence

Lucy seemed a mite offended: "What do you mean -- I never do anything? I work -- I want you to know that I work hard to support you and the family."

"But Dad doesn't work," Kelly shot back.

She had touched a tender spot. It was true that Fraser did not bring in nearly as much household income as his wife, and the children knew it. But he did regard himself as a working man in the broad sense. Part of the problem with his daughter, it now seemed to him, was that he had not made it sufficiently clear to her what it is to be a man of letters, a laborer in the vineyard of the mind. And so he began to explain the nature of his work, but Kelly was not at all impressed.

Then the girl surprised her father. She began to talk about Theodore Roosevelt, of all people. Fraser was amazed that she even knew who he was. Admittedly, her knowledge of the robust and energetic US president was somewhat sketchy -- for example, she placed him in the nineteenth century -- but she did make a valid application to the argument underway.

"We learned about him in school," she explained. "He was the one who said you have to get down into the arena and get dusty and get knocked down and then pick yourself back up. I don't mean to say that he never read a book -- I believe he even wrote a few. But he had some life in him. You didn't feel you needed to take his pulse to make sure he was still with us." Then Kelly broke off her disquisition, sensing that she might have hurt her father's feelings.

Fraser was indeed somewhat upset, but he decided to respond positively. He was impressed by his daughter's knowledge of the robust young president whose early twentieth-century career in office seemed more like part of the nineteenth century. Fraser then proceeded to connect Roosevelt with the pragmatist philosopher William James, who had articulated some of the same ideas. They were both eloquent representatives of the spirit of the age, he explained, realizing that he was sounding condescending.

Kelly cut him off: "Really, Dad, do you have to bring in one of your beloved philosophers again?"

Fraser decided to defend himself by bringing a new notion into the discussion -- that of speech acts. He did not want his daughter to think that words and ideas have nothing to do with states of affairs in the real world. He explained the idea briefly and made a passing reference to an American philosopher named John Searle, who, he told her, had written on the subject.

But to Kelly it seemed as though not much explanation was needed. She understood the concept of a speech act at once. She even demonstrated her understanding of it in a way that threw Fraser for a loop. "Let's see if I have this right -- a speech act is when your words actually do something in the world, and even make a physical difference. Is that right?"

Fraser nodded approvingly.

Is it sort of like saying "F--- off?"

Speaking Silence

Lucy could not suppress a chuckle. Fraser pretended to look stern. He paused and then responded that yes, indeed, we sometimes use language to push people's buttons, so to speak. That would be an example of a speech act. But then he offered the more conventional example of the "I do" in a wedding service. When you say "I do," you are not just reporting an opinion or articulating a thought -- you are committing yourself to your marriage partner. Your words have legal implications. Likewise, you have to be very careful what you say when attending an auction.

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Fraser was not sure whether his discussion with Kelly had done any good. A little later in the day he was alone with Lucy, and they reviewed the encounter with their wayward daughter. Lucy was concerned, indeed, but she did not see as much of a problem as Fraser did. She took her usual slant on things, tending to appeal to categories from her work and training as a veterinarian. She told Fraser that she rather liked Kelly's animal vitality and her emphasis on "doing." She even ventured to say that Fraser could learn a thing or two from Kelly. Fraser did not dissent.

They also got into the subject of "negative theology," which had been on Fraser's mind off and on of late. Lucy explained gently that the household talk about this curious concept had probably helped Kelly reach the conclusion that her father was hopelessly out of touch with real life and never did anything. And so she again gently chided her husband for being too rationalistic -- for trying to live his life mainly in his mind by thinking about the world rather than acting in it. Again she appealed to her beloved animals by way of

illustration, for sounds and signals and other means of communication are fully integrated into deeds and life and practical matters as far as animals are concerned.

Fraser had heard it before. Lucy sensed his impatience and suddenly switched over to a different tack. She began to talk about her sister Corky, who was an advocate of speaking in tongues. She was well aware that Fraser did not think much of speaking in tongues and found the phenomenon both forbidding and disquieting. "What is it about it that spooks you?" she asked her husband.

"You're a fine one to ask such a question!" he responded. "You don't believe in that stuff!"

"No, I don't pretend to," said Lucy. "But I don't see any harm in it either. It's a lot like what the animals do -- a kind of union of self-expression and action. Why, I was reading in a magazine not long ago about this vineyard church or airport church or whatever they call it -- you know what I mean. It's the one where Christians of that persuasion not only speak in tongues but also bark and roar and generally carry on like animals. All of this behavior is on a continuum. It's nothing to be frightened of. No one bites you at those church meetings. People are letting themselves go."

Lucy had given Fraser something to think about. Perhaps there was a false or artificial dualism in his tendency to separate speech and thinking, on the one hand, from physical action, on the other. Maybe he needed to be more unrestrained, unrehearsed. William James would probably say so. Harvey Cox, a Harvard theologian he enjoyed reading, would surely side with Lucy.

Speaking Silence

Fraser began to wonder whether he could not put Lucy's emphasis to work in a lecture. He was always looking for fresh approaches to his Introduction to Philosophy class.

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Within a week Fraser was in his university classroom offering his students his own souped-up version of Lucy's philosophy, buttressed by a good deal of reading. He understood that Lucy was not so much an original thinker as someone who knew just how to prod him when he needed a jolt. She knew him so well.

He was in a section of the course in which he was trying to expound the concept of God. In a secular society this is far from easy -- there was not much in the experience of the young people to which he could appeal to help them develop a sense of what the great thinkers were focusing on when they used the term "God."

Fraser's new idea was to make God the supreme speech actor -- the being and person who was so utterly integrated in all facets that for him to speak and to act were one and the same. For us as human beings, there's often a time when we appear to talk into the wind: no one pays the slightest attention, and the world is left utterly unchanged by what we say. But let God speak, and it is there -- such, at least, was the traditional Christian conception Fraser was trying to get across.

The students were bored and did not seem at all impressed. Fraser found himself wishing that he were living in an earlier era,

when people had fixed opinions, a time when just about everyone thought along the same lines. In such an era it would be possible to make an audience angry or upset. One could then use the emotion that had been generated to buttress a point and build motivation for some careful thinking.

But what was there to be mad about nowadays? People might be mad in the sense of peevish, but an anger that ran through the population and thereby served to unite a community as one, or perhaps a whole nation -- well, you no longer saw that sort of thing. It seemed that there was no longer a common enemy. The Communist bogeyman was gone. And as for terrorism, it seemed far away -- hardly a likely successor to Communism.

Fraser thought back to some past conversations with Folkert Smith. He and Folkert had mused about church history -- both the Dutch and the Scottish varieties. In both nations, the sturdy Calvinists were quick to disagree with one another, and the result had been many church splits. Christians in later eras shook their head when they looked back at those nasty quarrels that had led to schism time and again, but there were some old-timers around who managed to find something good in the willingness to "split." Folkert had mentioned a familiar saying: "You can't split rotten wood." He also threw in, almost with a degree of pride: "Two Dutchmen and you have a church; three Dutchmen and you have a schism on your hands."

In his exasperation with his students, Fraser came to think more and more that there was something to the idea that the willingness to "split" was in some important sense a sign of life and

health. Perhaps it was a little bit like the willingness of people to fight in defense of their own nation. Fraser did not really approve of strict pacifists. If you really believe in something, you should be willing to put your life on the line for it. But nowadays, sadly, it appeared that there was a great deal of rotten wood around.

Fraser was not about to give up, and so in the very next Introduction to Philosophy class he was back at it. He was explaining to the students that there is something utterly divine about the unity of the inward and the outward that we see only in God. Borrowing a phrase from Gerardus van der Leeuw, Fraser began to talk about "the holy in art" and promised to come back to this theme in a later lecture. He also invoked Spinoza and assured the students that Spinoza would concur wholeheartedly with the idea of the union of the inward and outward in God. But who was Spinoza anyway? That was the question Fraser read on the faces of his students -- at least, those who were paying attention. He then proceeded to explain that Spinoza was one of those philosophers who was always trying to overcome dualisms, trying to interpret each perceived duality to be at most a matter of our separate experience of two aspects of one and the same thing.

Continuing in this vein, Fraser asked: "Why do we need a distinction between creating and being?" The students apparently regarded it as a rhetorical question. Fraser paused, looked around the class for signs of life, and found little. "Or why do we need a distinction between creating and doing?" He threw out another possibility: maybe God is a continuous, walking work of art. The students looked utterly baffled.

Fraser gave it one more try in the very next class. He decided to approach the topic of the unity of speaking and doing in terms of work. Surely the students could identify with work -- everyone knew what it was, even if many of them despised it, never having had a good job as yet. So what was work anyway?

In posing this question, Fraser was inspired in part by his need to respond to his own daughter Kelly, who had claimed that her father did not work. Kelly seemed able to understand that her mother worked -- indeed, that she worked hard -- but that her father also worked was an utterly foreign notion to her. Fraser now wanted to make it clear that work was not just a matter of sweating, or finding unpleasant things that need to be attended to. Something of the unity of speaking and doing, of creating and being, which he had explained in connection with Spinoza's understanding of God, was also possible for us as human beings, at least, when we are at our very best.

He then assured them that you cannot understand what art is if you do not have this insight. Artists do not like to be asked whether they are "working." They resent the suggestion that what they do is a form of recreation. And so, to bring his point home further, he began to tell about the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, who also had very interesting ideas on how the Christian life is to be lived and what art is. The reference to Tolstoy seemed to bring the students to life somewhat, and so Fraser ended his class period by telling some stories about the colorful Russian writer and nobleman who identified with the common people and worked alongside them out in the field.

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Fraser figured it was time to turn to one of his friends for some support and additional insight, and perhaps some sympathy. His mind turned to Angela Orso, whom he had not seen in some weeks. He connected with her on the telephone, and they decided to get together the next day in a coffee shop for some lively discussion.

Fraser started out by telling her something about his woes with Kelly. As usual, Angela was soothing -- she was anything but a confrontational person. Fraser figured she would probably make a fine mother. But he saw no signs that motherhood was on Angela's life's agenda.

Fraser then proceeded to explain his understanding of the unity of speech and action. He knew enough about the Biblical languages and about theology to realize that the original languages in which the Bible was written were quite expansive in this regard. He had learned somewhere along the way that language and meaning have largely been narrowed down over history. The really important words in the Bible were therefore hard to define.

Angela picked up the cue and recited some of what she had learned in seminary about these matters. "It's true," she said. "Take that famous word `logos,' which figures so prominently in chapter 1 of John's Gospel. In the beginning was the Logos. How would you translate that? A number of separate English terms are suggested, and sometimes we're told that you have to combine all those meanings into one notion. The important thing for us, I suppose, is that there is indeed a unity of thinking and saying and doing. The word or logos of which John speaks here is a wonderful union of

word and act or deed -- no question about it. If Kelly could be brought to see this, she might revise her picture of her father and of lots of older folks -- I suppose especially Christians -- as people who never do anything, as she seems to like to put it."

"Can't the same be said of the Hebrew counterpart of `logos'?" responded Fraser. "I believe I've heard the same sort of thing said about the Hebrew word `davar.' Wasn't the German writer Goethe also preoccupied with this idea? Didn't he have something about `In the beginning there was the deed?'" Fraser then recited the German, always pleased to have an opportunity to impress someone with his language skills.

Angela waved him away and said: "No need to try out your German on me, Fraser. I never studied the language. But as for what you say about `davar,' I think you're on the right track."

Then she paused, as if thinking intently. When she spoke again, it was clear that Kelly was very much on her mind: "But here we are theologizing again. We have to make these matters more concrete for kids. Tell you what -- try to get Kelly to come with you to St. Capacia's a week from Sunday. I'll be preaching at both services. And it happens that the text has a bearing on just what we're talking about. I'll slant my sermon to some of these issues and see if I can't help her along. I think you'll find it stimulating too."

It was an offer Fraser could not refuse. He promised he would be there, with or without Kelly.

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Getting Kelly to come along turned out not to be as hard as Fraser had expected. She was used to going to church pretty well every Sunday -- to St. Andrews. Fraser would like to have gone to the 8:30 service at St. Capacia's along with Kelly, and he even told her that she would be welcome to skip the later service at St. Andrews. But she pulled a face at the notion of being in church at 8:30 on Sunday morning. And so they struck a compromise: they would attend the later service at St. Capacia's, which meant that Fraser would not be in his own church at all that Sunday. He considered it worth absenting himself from his own pew for a Sunday in order to hear Angela and perhaps stimulate Kelly. Although Kelly had never met Angela, he had a feeling that Angela would be able to connect with his daughter.

Angela appeared to have taken the assignment seriously. Normally she did not allow much theological vocabulary -- to say nothing of philosophical terminology -- into her sermons or "homilies," as the Anglicans like to call them. But in the sermon for Kelly she quickly brought up the notion of negative theology. She referred to the rationalistic tendency in the Christian tradition and explained simply that it left many people with an empty feeling about God. And the empty feeling was entirely understandable: if our discourse about God consists almost exclusively of saying what he is not, one reaches a point when there is very little left of him -- or it -- and then how are we supposed to worship?

Fraser knew there was something of a Jewish answer to Angela's question, but Angela did not offer it. Instead she went right to the heart of the gospel by bringing Christ into the picture. God,

she explained, goes far beyond speaking. God is no rationalist. He takes on flesh in the form of the Christ, whose whole life is a series of speech acts. On the one hand, the Christ taught -- in the synagogues and in many other places. On the other hand, what he did, and also the way he did it, was a continuing message and revelation to the people. It was clear that in the figure of the Christ, God wished to break through any kind of separation between speaking and acting. He wanted his love and grace to be as concrete and tangible as possible. And so Christ was like us in all things, except for sin. He was among us in all humility.

Even then, Angela was not finished. She was well aware that Fraser had come from a rather rationalistic, Calvinistic background, and so she assumed that the limitations of this background would also have had some effect on Kelly. She proceeded to hone in on one of the Anglican emphases, namely, the centrality and importance of communion or "eucharist," as she called it, in the Christian life. The story of Christ is not complete unless we come to the point of hearing and understanding that he has literally given himself for us.

As he listened to the sermon, Fraser wondered whether Kelly would take communion later in the service. He had discussed the idea with her on the way down in the car. At Lucy's suggestion, he had allowed Matthew to stay home that Sunday morning in order to make more of this special occasion -- it was to be just Fraser and his daughter. Matthew would probably have chosen not to take communion, for he would feel a bit uncomfortable with the Anglican rites, which fell outside his own youthful experience.

Speaking Silence

Fraser wanted to be alone with Kelly that morning. He wanted her to manifest a solidarity with him, and communion would give her that opportunity. And so he explained the Anglican understanding of communion and the nature of the invitation, which would include her. It was up to her to decide whether to partake. Fraser avoided telling her to take it, but he was also careful not to say the opposite.

When the time came, she did not take communion, but she did go forward for a blessing. At first Fraser was a bit disappointed, but when he and Kelly rode home in the car and talked some more, he could tell that she had been so deeply affected by the service and that her not taking communion was probably a good sign, spiritually speaking. It would have been all too easy for her to decide that she should go through this little Christian ritual just to please her father, but that was not what she had done. It seemed that Angela's sermon -- indeed, the whole service -- had given her a good deal to think about. Fraser was pleased.

And so, in the car on the way home, he tried to reinforce something of what Angela had brought across in the sermon. He emphasized the "This do" character of communion. He pointed out that communion could be just a doctrine -- indeed, that it is in effect just a doctrine for some Christians. Some make it into a memorial reminder of Christ's death. Others claim to be so much in awe of all that it represents that they find themselves always unworthy, and so communion is never really celebrated: it is perhaps observed from a distance. Folkert had even told him about Dutch Reformed churches in which most of the congregation leaves before communion is celebrated -- almost as though they were standing dangerously close to Mount Sinai.

It had occurred to Fraser that the attitude many Christians take toward communion was a bit like the attitude many Jews take toward the sacrifices that are supposed to be offered each day in the Temple but are not offered because the Temple has been in ruins for so many centuries. The Jews who are fixated on the Temple love to think about the sacrifices and study the detailed regulations specifying how they are supposed to be carried out, but in fact no sacrificing is being done. Well then, there were also Christians who revered communion but did not bother to take communion. Fraser found such an attitude unhealthy: in the church in which he had grown up, the people were encouraged to come to the Lord's table. And so he set aside his usual philosopher's fastidiousness and explained that communion could also be compared to an embrace. "Just as I need a hug from Lucy in the morning, as a reminder that she loves me and will always love me, so I need communion as a kind of embrace from God. It helps me keep feeling connected to God. And so there's wisdom in the ancient command -- 'This do in remembrance of me.'"

Kelly was listening respectfully. Fraser would love to have been able to divine just what she was thinking, but she was not about to let it out. Still, he felt the morning had been a success, and he began to wonder how we could bring Angela more fully into his daughter's life as a spiritual presence.

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However good Fraser felt about his discussion with Kelly, his success in communicating with the younger set did not seem to be

carrying over to the kids at the Christian high school. He found himself substituting again -- this time in a so-called Bible class. Harris Wormser, the principal, had confided in him that Mr. Voortsema, the Bible teacher whose class he would be covering, was a bit dull. Via the grapevine the principal had heard that there was no discussion in the class. The students had come to think of Bible class as an endless exercise in memorization, and so Harris encouraged Fraser to liven things up a bit. "Throw them a curve ball," he suggested.

It was easier said than done. Fraser found a note from Voortsema telling him that the class was currently dealing with the notion of justification by faith. His initial attempt to get a definition out of the kids did not meet with much success. One girl piped up: "Does it mean always proving that you're right, like what my dad does all the time? I can tell from the look on my mom's face that it bugs her. You just can't win an argument with my dad."

"No, that's not really the idea," responded Fraser, somewhat lamely. He went on to tell them that justification by faith was a doctrine. He wrote the word on the board. And then, under it, he wrote the word "theory." He explained that the two words have something in common, namely, that they both presuppose the possibility of disagreement. While he was explaining all of this, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey came to mind for him. Dewey had made this point especially in relation to the notion of theory. We have theories where there's more than one opinion on a given topic. And so it is with doctrines: when churches and traditions disagree, their learned leaders know that on certain points of "doctrine" other groups believe otherwise.

Fraser knew he wasn't getting far, and so he decided to give the kids a hint: "It has something to do with the Reformation."

"You mean that stuff about being saved by grace and not works?" offered a girl with a bright smile on her face. Fraser was encouraged: here was something he could work with.

But then one of the boys put up his hand and objected: "Come off it -- we don't really believe in grace around here! Just look at how this place operates. You have to earn everything. No one ever gives you a break. It's like you're guilty when you walk in the door in the morning. The teachers here have never heard of grace."

Fraser was caught off guard by this response. But since Harris had encouraged him to throw the kids a curve ball, he thought he would fan the flames of this small doctrinal rebellion.

He began to talk about "random acts of kindness." Some of the students understood. He now asked them whether this notion could be applied in a Christian high school. Why not hand out grades on the basis of grace? Why not take pity on a kid who never seems to get anywhere and give him all A grades -- completely unmerited, out of sheer grace? Wouldn't that be the sort of kind-hearted that our tradition attributes to God? And if God is abounding in grace, shouldn't we do the same?

The kids picked up on the idea and were quite enthusiastic, but Fraser quickly realized that he had taken the wrong tack. They all began to talk eagerly at once, and the class threatened to turn into a shambles. No enlightenment regarding justification by faith would be

achieved. And so Fraser arbitrarily cut off the discussion and tried to get the kids back on track. He returned to the notion of doctrine -- doesn't it mean that we disagree with somebody, that we're against somebody? "Well then," he put it directly to the students, "who are we against? Who is the enemy in the Reformation -- or was?"

A shy-looking girl put up her hand. Fraser nodded and instructed her to speak. "Secular humanism?" she asked.

Fraser had to suppress a smile. Was there secular humanism around back in those days? He recalled that some Protestants loved to rail against Erasmus as a wicked "humanist," but Erasmus could hardly be called secular. Fraser then asked whether anyone else had a suggestion.

Finally he got the answer he was looking for. We were against "Rome" back in those days. Well then, Fraser wanted to know, what was it that Rome stood for? The same boy who had come up with the name "Rome" seemed to think it had something to do with "works." We are not saved by works but by faith.

Fraser felt he had pulled enough out of the kids to maintain his image of himself as a teacher who interacts actively with the students, and now he could proceed to lecture a bit. He talked about Martin Luther -- what Luther had discovered in the epistles of Paul. He also mentioned -- and here he knew he might be skating on rather thin ice -- that Luther was very suspicious of the book of James and had even call it a "straw epistle," meaning that it was worth little. Somehow Luther thought it didn't belong in the Bible. The trouble

with the book of James is that it seemed to create the impression that we're justified by our works rather than by our faith.

The thought that the larger-than-life Martin Luther, whom they had been taught to revere, had actually questioned something in the Bible caught the students' attention: their ears perked up. Fraser was encouraged to carry on and put some tough questions to the kids. He asked them what the difference was between salvation and justification. A few of them seemed to sense that there ought to be a difference of some sort, but no one could tell quite what it was. And so Fraser proceeded to ask whether being saved by faith and justified by faith were one and the same thing. He did not provide the answer himself. And then he thought he would mix them up a bit more by asking whether there was not a third possibility. Some say that we are saved by faith, some by works, and some by grace. So which one was it? No one seemed to know.

Fraser was not sure whether the principal would be pleased that he had carried his Socratic interrogation so far, but he plunged ahead anyway. He put it directly to the students: "So what do we have to do to be saved?"

One of the students suggested that one would have to be baptized, like the jailer in Philippi. Of course this was a correct answer in Biblical terms, but the other students were not much impressed by it. And so one of the boys, with a trace of cynicism in his voice, explained that it was a matter of what you believed. If you believed the right stuff, then you went to heaven; otherwise you would wind up in the other place.

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"Okay, let's think about that," responded Fraser. "What's the `right stuff' that we're supposed to believe? Is it all the doctrines, or only some of them?" He looked directly at the boy who had responded.

"Not all of them, clearly," said the boy, slowly, not very sure of himself. "Sometimes we talk about `salvation issues.' The idea seems to be that God doesn't care what you think about some topics, but if you have the wrong view on the really important topics, he won't let you into heaven -- no way. But just off hand, I couldn't give you an example of a salvation issue -- or I suppose I should say an example of something that's not a salvation issue."

One of the girls then piped up with an answer: "How about ordaining women as ministers? My dad is against it, but he sometimes adds that it's not a `salvation issue.' He seems to mean that someone who holds the wrong view about women as ministers could still go to heaven, even though he should never be voted in as an elder."

Fraser pretended to be very perplexed. He scratched his head. Then he formulated a question: "Is it a sin to hold some doctrine that turns out to be mistaken?"

It seemed as though the kids had never faced that question before. After a while one of them admitted: "I suppose so."

Fraser asked: "Can any sins whatsoever be forgiven?"

One of the kids from a small conservative church knew the answer: "Certainly -- except for the sin against the Holy Spirit." Fraser resisted the impulse to ask for a definition of that mysterious sin.

"What about Billy Graham?" asked Fraser. "He's got the wrong theology -- he's an Arminian, whereas he should be a Calvinist, like us. Is he guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit? Can he go to heaven?"

The class was definitely of the opinion that Billy Graham had a seat reserved in heaven. Perhaps it was not such a big deal to cling to some mistaken doctrines.

Fraser pressed his point further: "Think about it carefully -- should you have to believe certain things in order to be saved? Remember, not everyone is even capable of believing. Some people have mental infirmities. And what about babies who die before they have any opportunity to think about doctrines? Can they be saved? Do they have to believe this and that and the other thing to be saved?"

Fraser could tell that many of the students had grasped his point. But then the cynical boy spoke up once again. He seemed to be much encouraged by the open attitude demonstrated by his teacher, and so he suggested: "Look, salvation is basically a matter of saying uncle. God is kind of like a bully -- he can't stand disagreement. So whatever he says, you have to agree with him, even if you don't have a clue what he's talking about. You just have to say uncle -- and then he lets you into heaven. But he gives you a little bit of leeway on some smaller issues. Those are the ones, I suppose, that you could call non-

salvation issues." His train of thought trailed off, as if he was not sure whether to believe the stuff himself.

Then a girl piped up from the back of a class: "That's just what my dad is like. He can't stand disagreement either. If I try to find out from my mother what she really thinks about this or that, I have to make sure that my dad isn't around. And even then, she's very cautious and gets me to promise that I won't tell Dad."

The period was about over and Fraser knew it was time to wrap things up. "So how are we saved?" he asked. "Here's an assignment for you to think about: Is it by faith or by works or by what you believe?"

As the students were filing out, it occurred to him that he had left them empty-handed, so to speak. He should have explained the union of saying and acting in the concept of speech acts. If the students understood about speech acts and *logos* and *davar* and so forth, they would not fall into cynical, say-uncle conceptions of what it takes to get into God's good graces. He could well imagine that his friend Folkert Smith would like such a solution. Folkert was always attacking what he called "false dualisms."

But it was too late. Fraser had told the students he hoped and expected to see them again soon so that he could discuss these issues with them further. As he watched them depart, he wondered what the regular teacher, Mr. Voortsema, would think when he came back the next day and asked the kids what they had discussed in his absence. Fraser did not particularly care for Mr. Voortsema, but he did want to stay on good enough terms with all the teachers to be

welcomed regularly into their classrooms. He enjoyed his role as a substitute teacher.

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Fraser was sufficiently intrigued by the class he had just taught that he thought it was time to do further research and reflection. He wondered what Marty O'Toole would make of these questions. So it was on to Marty's office at the university.

He gave Marty a brief rundown on the class. His Roman Catholic friend, faintly cynical as usual, quickly brought up the notion of social control. It seemed that "salvation" was not to be taken at face value -- it was more a matter of scaring the ordinary people by pointing to its opposite.

Marty seemed to like being back in the Middle Ages, where he could look down on people from his modern -- perhaps even postmodern -- standpoint. It seemed that in the Middle Ages you had all those masses of people who were deeply committed to some faith or other -- or at least could not think outside the structures which their faith community provided for understanding the world. Now, the common people were also to be feared, as though they represented a time bomb that could go off at any moment. It was a little bit like those unruly Arabs you have in the Middle East -- one is always afraid that somebody will cry "Jihad!" and they all erupt into an orgy of terrorism and violence. Well, back in the Middle Ages, various thinkers, especially in the Islamic tradition, where they seemed to understand the problem well, took quite an interest in these matters and developed theories of what they called "prophecy."

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When they talked about prophecy, they were really exploring mob psychology -- or crowd psychology, if you will. They recognized that the ordinary people are not philosophers -- far from it. They are not moved rational argumentation. And so if you wanted people to do certain things, or perhaps to refrain from certain kinds of conduct, you had to scare them by making appeals and threats in the manner of a prophet. You didn't defend your position, you simply stated it. After all, you had gotten it from God. God was the source of doctrines in those days.

Fraser felt he should make a mild objection to the cynicism that seemed to run through Marty's words. "On the one hand," he said, "you seem to be talking mainly about the Islamic tradition, but I know there was quite a bit of interchange throughout the Middle Ages between Christians and Muslims, and so there were Christians -- I suppose you could say Catholics -- who thought of the common people in roughly the same way. In Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher, you also have an interesting take on this business."

Marty professed not to know much about Maimonides. He admitted that the Roman Catholic tradition left much to be desired in this regard: it also patronized the ordinary people and terrorized them with details of punishments to be expected in the life to come. Even Christians would have to serve their time in purgatory.

Marty then went on to talk about the doctrine of double-truth, which was to be found in both Christianity and Islam. He brought up the name of Averroes. Fraser had heard, of him, even though he did not know very much about him. It seemed that Averroes had been a proponent of such a doctrine. Some of the medieval Christians also

liked the idea. Apparently there was a simplified version of the truth for the ordinary people, and then a more sophisticated version of it expressed, as it were, in a different language for the intellectuals. And there, in a nutshell, you had the difference between theology and philosophy. Philosophy is beyond the comprehension of ordinary people.

Hegel also held to a version of this kind of thinking, explained Marty. That's why he did not come across as an Enlightenment philosopher laughing at the foibles of the ordinary folks; rather, he professed to believe just what was taught in church -- in his case, the Lutheran Church -- Sunday by Sunday. But during the week, in his university classroom, Hegel taught philosophical doctrines that were sometimes hard to recognize as the equivalent of the Lutheran doctrine taught by the simple-minded pastor each Sunday.

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Fraser had not gotten as much useful material from Marty as he had hoped. The next time he was in Mr. Voortsema's class, only a week later, he had a new theory to put before the students, and it had nothing to do with his encounter with Marty.

Now, he knew it was not really a new theory: it was really just Calvinism. One of the old-fashioned Calvinistic doctrines is that there is nothing in us that God foresees -- or is drawn to -- on the basis of which he chooses us for salvation. It's almost as though we get the luck of the draw. And so, if you want to be a simon-pure Calvinist, you shouldn't say that we are saved because of what we believe or because of what we do. It's purely by grace -- it's arbitrary,

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almost a matter of chance. Yet, if you're a Calvinist, you shouldn't be talking about chance either because God has all things in his hand.

It was heady stuff, and the students did not seem to follow it altogether. The cynical boy -- Fraser did not yet know his name, and he made a mental note to find it out soon -- then spoke up and asked a seemingly simple question: "What is salvation?"

Fraser did not know quite how to respond to him, and so he tossed the question over to the class. Another boy, perhaps a friend of the boy who had asked a question, for they were sitting next to one another, finally ventured an answer: "It's getting off the hook. You've done all this bad stuff and you should be punished but then you're told that you're innocent -- or maybe that someone else has taken the rap for you -- I'm not sure which one of those to its supposed to be. By you do need a personal Savior -- that's what we get told all the time."

Fraser then asked: "What does salvation have to do with love?"

One of the girls offered an answer: "God saves us because he loves us."

It seemed a safe answer until another student asked: "Does God love everybody?"

Fraser looked around the room. The students seemed hesitant. It looked as though they wanted to say yes, but the words did not come from their mouths.

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Then, without a hand being raised, a hesitant voice came from the corner of the room: "Esau have I hated."

Fraser understood it at once. The boy who had spoken from the corner had quoted Scripture -- Malachi 1 and Romans 9. It also said in those passages that God loved Jacob.

Some of the kids seemed surprised to hear that such a text was in the Bible. One of them raised a simple objection: "If we're supposed to love everybody, how come God doesn't have to?"

"Because he's God!" a classmate responded. She crossed her arms over her chest as if to say: "So there!"

Fraser was excited by the discussion he had stirred up. He decided to push the students further and so he asked: "Do you have to love God in order to be loved by him?" In the back of his mind he was thinking of the old Calvinist affirmation that God loves unconditionally. It was not because of something in us which he foresaw when he elected us to salvation.

Fraser then thought he should get back to the business of defining salvation, but the allotted time was almost over. In his mind he made a note to discuss the issue with David Hasselfreud, who always seemed to be able to shed light on difficult questions of this sort. And so, as he dismissed the class, he told them that he expected to be with them again some time, and then they would talk further about just what salvation is and is not.

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Fraser met David in Starbucks and found his old friend in one of his usual good moods. He explained what had been discussed in the high school class and then asked for some Jewish theological advice.

David pulled a face at the mention of the word "theology." Fraser asked why. David explained that the notion of theology is really a Christian intrusion into Judaism. Judaism had gotten along just fine for a long, long time without any such thing as theology. It was really because you folks mixed things up by having this strange doctrine about who Jesus Christ was that the church began defining all these curious terms and building up what the theologians call systematic theology. Judaism did just fine without it.

Fraser feared that he would not get much help with the concept of salvation. But he was in for a pleasant surprise. David immediately became concrete. He said: "Let's take a look at the psalms. Both of our traditions love the psalms. Aren't there a number of Calvinistic churches in which the psalms are sung exclusively -- no hymns?"

Fraser nodded. There were such churches in both the Dutch and Scottish traditions.

Then David launched into his discourse: "Salvation is basically deliverance. You're in a tight corner. You don't know where to turn, and you cry out to God -- Help me! Save me! Deliver me! And he comes through for you. Therefore you praise him. He's there for you again and again. It's all over the Psalms."

Fraser had never quite dared think of it in that way. It was as though David was making it too simple. Yet, on the basis of what the Bible itself said, it was hard to argue with him.

Getting no argument out of Fraser, David picked up his discourse and added: "So who gets saved anyway? That's another point on which you Christians get mixed up. You're so individualistic that you can only understand salvation in individual terms. The proper answer, of course, is that God's people are saved. That means his covenant people as a whole. It doesn't exclude the possibility that an individual comes to grief -- experience teaches us that this happens all too often. But his people -- my people -- lives on and is always in covenant with him. Or maybe we should broaden it. Maybe it's time for us as Jews to think of not just the Jews -- in the racial sense, as God's people -- but all of us. If we don't -- and I don't know that I'm quite ready for this yet myself -- it's because we can't seem to get any kind of unity in the human race. But it does seem to me, deep down, that there should be one people as the recipient of salvation. Somehow we have to get back to the idea of the religious unity of the human race. In that sense the Jews should be transcending their ethnicity. Now, I know not all Jewish thinkers hold to that -- they regard it as misguided Christian thinking -- but it's what lives in my heart."

Fraser was familiar with this line of thought, and briefly he considered pointing out that there was a parallel to it within Calvinistic thinking. But then, David probably knew that. It was not often that Fraser got to tell him something he didn't already know.

David was already on to another aspect of salvation. He got right to the point by asking: "And if you get saved, do you ever need to get saved again?"

Fraser acknowledged that this was a classic issue in theology. The Calvinists liked to reproach the Arminians on this score. It seemed that you could be saved, and then lose your salvation and somehow fall out of God's favor, then realize your plight and quickly get saved once again, then fall away again, and so forth. There was almost no end to it. One of the "selling points" of Calvinism was that you could put such uncertainty behind you. There was a doctrine to the effect that once saved, always saved. The Calvinists called it "the perseverance of the saints."

David looked at Fraser inquisitively. "So you Calvinists believe in tenure. Is that what it's all about -- you're in for life, for good, for eternity?"

Fraser nodded. "Something like that," he admitted, recognizing that he really should challenge the tenure analogy.

David then pointed out that some colleges have what amounts to phony tenure. "On the one hand they claim they offer tenure to their professors as a guarantee of academic freedom. Of course they need to do so in order to be considered respectable colleges and be eligible for accreditation. Then they can talk about tenure-track appointments and so forth. But in such colleges you find out, if you look carefully at what goes on, that the professors still have to get reappointed. Once they have 'tenure,' the time between appointments may run longer -- perhaps six years as opposed to two

or three -- but the reappointment process still goes ahead. And so you don't really have tenure and you're not really in for life. Is that how it is with Calvinistic salvation?"

Fraser knew the orthodox answer. He assured David that it wasn't that way at all. Once you were saved, you were saved -- period. The trick was to realize or make sure you were one of the elect. But then, how could you ever be sure? Wasn't that where Max Weber and that thesis about Calvinism and material prosperity came into the picture? Still, your salvation was guaranteed. You were in like the Rock of Gibraltar.

David wanted to know what the Calvinist discussion about "covenant-breaking" had to do with the guarantee of one's salvation. Didn't the Calvinist understanding of the covenant mean that you could be one of God's chosen ones but later fall away by rejecting the covenant?

Fraser admitted that this is indeed a very difficult point. He was not knowledgeable enough on Calvinist theology to comment on that one. He rather suspected that some of the simon-pure Calvinists, perhaps the ones who were sometimes called hyper-Calvinists, would reject the notion of covenant-breaking. It did not seem in keeping with their presuppositions: it seemed to violate their neat scheme.

David put another line of questioning to him. He asked Fraser why salvation has to be considered in such exclusive terms. "Why does it have to be a black-and-white or yes-or-no question? Couldn't you be saved some of the time, or partly? Does it not happen

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sometimes when you get into trouble that your deliverance or rescue is only a partial deliverance? Nonetheless, you're grateful for it."

David also wondered about the preoccupation many Christians have with those who are not saved. Could it be that salvation is only meaningful if it is limited to a select circle? In other words, could there be no heaven without a hell?

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Fraser was somewhat shaken up by his discussion with David. He sought refuge in the arms of Lucy. She was not normally a discussion partner for him in matters of theology and philosophy, but he was in a pensive mood and she seemed receptive. It was late in the evening: Matthew was in bed, and Kelly was away overnight, staying at the home of a friend.

Fraser was thinking aloud, linking the notion of the love of God with the kind of love his wife showed him, especially on such an evening as this. As she caressed his arm gently, he felt an impulse to ask her why she loved him, but he could not bring himself to express the words directly.

Lucy seem to discern his thoughts and gently asked if he was minded to doubt her love. "Fraser, are you wondering why I love you? I don't mind when you ask me such questions."

Fraser nodded. Lucy smiled, kissed him on the cheek, and said simply: "I just do. There's no need to make a mystery of it. Why does the sun shine?"

Fraser then said: "I suppose I want some sort of guarantee that our love will always continue. But there are no guarantees. Someday one of us will be gone."

"Tell you what, Fraser," said Lucy. "If I die first, I promise to keep loving you even after I'm gone."

"Lucy, that sounds nice, thank you, but what does it really mean?"

"I don't know what it really means -- at least, not in your strict sense of the term. But I know that in some mysterious way I will still be with you if I'm gone first."

Fraser did not know what to make of it. But then he began to reflect again on the parallel between things human and things divine. God's love was also something for which we have no guarantees -- we simply have to accept it in faith. A clever line from the Peter De Vries novel *The Mackerel Plaza* he had read some time ago came to mind: "It is the final proof of God's omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us." He thought of quoting this line to Lucy but did not do so; she probably would not understand. And he was deeply touched by what she had just said to him.

He decided not to spoil the wonderful moment between them. Instead he drifted away in his own thoughts, while Lucy rested at his side. Maybe salvation was like love after all. Maybe it's the same thing as love. And maybe God doesn't need to be in order to save us -- no

better, he doesn't need to be what we imagine him to be. If we ever find out what he is or who he is, we may be in for a big surprise.

Then he began to think about the recipient of love. He wondered whether he -- or anyone, for that matter -- needed to be a person of a certain sort in order to be lovable. The gospel calls upon us to love everyone, even our enemies, even people we find disgusting. If we are told to do it, it must be possible to do it. Doesn't ought imply can? Perhaps, then, love is not a response to certain qualities in the one on whom you bestow your love. But we are so insecure about being loved that we keep looking for good qualities within ourselves that will guarantee our eligibility for love. Maybe that was the secret to what the Christian tradition called grace -- you didn't have to qualify for it. God just loved you, the way Lucy loved him.

And then he thought of women who are very insecure about receiving love. They almost seem to push the man away. They're always afraid that their lover or partner or husband does not love them for who or what they are deep in themselves, but for some external quality or attribute -- perhaps a fine figure or a pretty face. They want to be loved for themselves, they insist. But does the man in their life have any idea what this would mean?

The young have it better in this regard, thought Fraser. Lucy was stirring beside him and was not asleep -- or not anymore -- and so he said: "I wish I were young again -- then I could be pure potential. You remember those times, when any one of us was capable of just about anything? The smartest kid in school, as we figured it, was the one who bought home failing grades and couldn't be bothered to do the dumb assignments, but if a kid studied hard in

school and did his very best, he would be bumping up against his limits, and then he would know what he was capable of. He was no longer pure potential. When we get older and become parents, we recognize something silly in this kind of reasoning, but it has quite a hold on the young."

"Oh sure," said Lucy. "I remember that mentality. I could have been a wonderful pianist, but I never took a single lesson. Just think what would have happened if I had taken lessons and even had become quite good. I would have known what my limits were. Sometimes you still run in into this nonsense in older people." Lucy was being practical, as usual.

"You'll also find it in certain artistically inclined folks," said Fraser. "Oscar Wilde had a keen insight into these matters. Do you remember that book about Dorian Gray -- the beautiful young man who never grew old, although his portrait in the attic aged? Perhaps you never read it. Doesn't matter. Anyway, late in the book, as I recall, there's this passage where Dorian Gray, with whom so many people, especially in the younger set, are fascinated, is being hailed for never having done anything. He's never carved a statue or painted a picture or produced anything outside of himself. His whole life has been art - - but then art understood as potential, art that you can read into, indeterminate art. He has somehow remained young and pure potential all of his life. And so, in a way, art has youth built into it: you can see so many different things in a work of art and even in an artist. You can see what it can become, what he can become, what she might become. But when you get old, you have to face up to what you are and say to yourself: well, I guess this is it."

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Fraser turned to his wife and admitted: "I guess I'm afraid of growing old. I'm afraid of the day when I go to some kind of a class reunion and people look at me in pity. They'll think: And we had such hopes for him. Maybe I should go to a class reunion soon, before I get much older. Then people can still look at me in hope and expect me to do great things -- someday."

"Fraser, you will do great things -- no, you are doing great things. What you can't seem to understand is that the great things people do are not written out in public for all to see. You have nothing to apologize for -- you've made me very happy. And you're a wonderful father to the kids. You shouldn't fear the future the way you do."

Fraser was touched. "I guess that means you really do love me, Lucy," he said gently, drawing her into his arms.

"What do I have to do to convince you?" responded Lucy. "Can't you just take me on faith?"

"Indeed I can, and I do -- I promise," said Fraser. "I know that's the key, but I just can't stop thinking about things -- I analyze everything to death. I hope you can forgive me."

"I do forgive you. Now it's time for bed."

A little later Fraser was thinking over the day and the discussion with Lucy, who had already dropped off to sleep. His mind went back to Elie Wiesel and that play *The Trial of God*. The play had apparently been based on a real episode in the concentration

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camps. Some Jews had literally put God on trial and found him guilty. What despair that verdict must have produced in their hearts! What spiritual courage it must have taken to reject God! And then what did they do? According to the story as Fraser had heard it, one of them said it was time for evening prayers. And they proceeded to recite the customary evening prayers -- just as always.

Chapter 6

Not What My Hands Have Done

"There's a lot more adultery going in our society than most people realize." Corky looked intently at Fraser, and then at Lucy, as if expecting a challenge.

"I suppose it depends on what you mean by adultery," said Fraser, sounding a little bit academic. "I mean, some scholars will tell you that sex between people who are not married doesn't count as adultery. It's all a matter of what certain Greek terms mean."

Corky looked as though she might well challenge this theological weaseling, for that's what it was, in her eyes. Yet she knew that she was not exactly a match for Fraser when it came to the details of argument. And so she said instead: "Adultery is not just a matter of what you do -- it even extends to what you think."

Fraser knew what she was talking about: there's a famous verse in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus seems to set impossibly high standards when it comes to marital faithfulness. Indeed, much that's in the Sermon on the Mount was almost impossible to live by. That was why Calvinists, who liked to consider

themselves among the righteous, were so ingenious in finding ways around it. The Mennonites and Anabaptists, claiming to embrace the Sermon on the Mount as the rule for our Christian life, pledged themselves to pacifism and turning the other cheek. Calvinists talked instead about a doctrine of the "just war," as though Jesus left us room to go around slugging people.

Now, Fraser reckoned himself among the Calvinists in that he was not a pacifist. And he also thought that Jesus' most famous discourse -- or, at least, what people often made of it -- was unrealistic. Deep in his heart, Fraser believed it is better to give people rules that they can actually live by.

He decided to challenge his sister-in-law, and so he said: "Even if certain lustful thoughts are sinful -- and I'm not denying that they are, at least, to some degree -- that doesn't mean that having such a thought is on the same level, morally speaking, as actually performing the sinful deed."

Corky shook her head emphatically. "It's a sin either way, even if the consequences, practically speaking, are less severe in the one case than in the other."

Lucy then jumped in on her husband's side. "You know, Corky, that kind reasoning is what puts many people off Christianity. You can't win. Even if you manage to exercise self-control, you're still condemned because of your thoughts. A moral code ought to be about actions, and not about thoughts or ideas."

"So you wouldn't mind if Fraser had lustful thoughts toward some woman in his heart?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose I would mind," replied Lucy. "But don't you see that these things are a matter of degree? We can't get everything we want in this life. In marriage, too, there are degrees of fidelity. I don't try to fool myself into supposing that Fraser never has his head turned by a shapely woman walking by."

"Why not have it all?" Corky shot back. "Why not demand strict fidelity?"

"That's all-or-nothing thinking," answered Lucy. "It's what often gets Christians into trouble. There's no pleasing them -- they're never satisfied."

Fraser did not know quite where he stood in this debate. On the one hand, as a male who occasionally had what Corky would consider "lustful" thoughts, as when a gorgeous woman caught his eye, he favored a relatively lax interpretation of Jesus' words -- perhaps along the lines that if you don't actually go through with it, it's not a really big deal, even if it is wrong, strictly speaking. But when he reflected on the unity of speaking and acting and then carried that holistic line of thought further to encompass the life of the mind and heart as well, he had to admit that there was something to what Corky maintained.

And the case she was making would be even be even stronger if you extended it to murder. In the very same chapter of Matthew that Corky appealed to was some stuff about how anger is the root of

murder. When you allow anger against your brother to live in your heart, you're really breaking the sixth commandment -- it's as though you had already killed him. And so you must get rid of that anger as quickly as you can.

But on the other hand, Lucy was right in maintaining that we have to construct a moral code that people can actually live by. Fraser thought back to conversations with people in the natural health movement. Sometimes, in jest, he asked them: "What must I do to be saved?" They had no end of commandments to dish out, and all those commandments had to be followed punctiliously. There was no limit to what you should be doing, and then there were so many restrictions -- there were all those things you were not allowed to do, foods you could not eat, situations you had to avoid. Life couldn't be any fun if you lived by all those commandments, for you would constantly be preoccupied with the regulations and worrying about having broken some, as though you were a believing Jew keeping track of all 613 of the commandments. And so part of Fraser's argument against the natural health movement -- even though he considered himself to be an adherent on a mild scale -- was that it was too strict. Fraser was convinced that you had to devise an approach to health that made it fun to be fit. People had to get some motivation day by day -- they needed rewards. And the same applied to the moral life.

Fraser's attention wandered to a character in a story by Peter De Vries who had an opportunity to cheat on his wife but turned the woman down. What happens further in the story is that this character thinks he needs moral credit for what he has not done. From Corky he would get no such credit, for the thought was clearly

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in his heart. The fact that he resisted the wayward woman seemed to make no difference: he had thought about it, if only for an instant. As soon as the thought arose, your goose was already cooked, morally speaking. That can't be right, thought Fraser to himself. But he did not see himself winning Corky over to his cautious point of view, and so he steered the conversation in a different direction.

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Over the next couple of days, as he continued to consider the issue, Fraser did not get far with it. He wondered what his friends would make of it. He knew that David, as a Jew, would take to quite a different approach to questions of sexual ethics and would probably dismiss Corky out of hand. As for Folkert, he tended to be somewhat doctrinaire and even self-righteous: he might well wind up siding with Corky. And then his thoughts turned to Angela, who seemed to inhabit a plane of existence above the fleshly and the material. It was hard to imagine Angela having carnal desires. Still, as a priest, she had to open to the discussion of sexual issues in her private contacts with parishioners, if only once in a while. What would she make of it? Perhaps Angela could give him a degree of absolution, reassuring him that his occasional admiration of a shapely woman who was not his wife did not mean that he had run afoul of the seventh commandment.

And so Fraser persuaded himself that it was time to pay another call on his favorite Anglican. He telephoned her, and she promptly invited him to attend a service at St. Capacia's. She told him that they have a small 7:30 A.M. service each Friday -- just morning prayer, no eucharist. Perhaps Fraser would like to come. The service

was usually attended by just a small handful of people. Afterward they would have a chance to talk.

Without telling Lucy where he was headed, Fraser made his way over to the church early on Friday morning. Even with his exposure to Anglicanism, he was surprised at what a low-key and simple service it was. In fact, he could not help wondering whether it was in some sense "worthwhile" from a priest's point of view -- why go through the fuss of preparing for a service if hardly anyone attended? But then, there was a touch of the monastic about Angela. He could well imagine her going through essentially the same cycle of readings and prayers all by herself. It did not seem to matter to her how many people were present.

He outlined the Sunday discussion, and Angela nodded knowingly. She informed Fraser that the Sermon on the Mount had been the main focus of a fascinating New Testament course she had taken in seminary. But when it came to the question Fraser had come to ask, she did not take the practical line that Fraser favored. Although she generally was not one to make much of philosophical categories when she analyzed moral and theological issues, she did seem to believe in the unity of thought and word and deed on which Fraser had been reflecting of late. And then she proceeded to offer an interesting slant on the view she held.

"Fraser, do you remember Heather Pruitt?" she asked.

Fraser shook his head. Angela then explained that Heather was the woman who could not talk: they had visited her together in a nursing home. Then it all came back to Fraser, for indeed, he

remembered her well. "Okay," he said, "what does she have to do with all of this?"

"You and I were going to go back and see her again, weren't we?" Angela reminded him gently.

Fraser nodded, feeling a little guilty that nothing had ever come of it. "I suppose you've continued to visit her," he said hesitantly.

"Yes, I have, but not as often as I'd like to. But that's neither here nor there. She came to mind just now because well-meaning people who visit her try to get her involved in various kinds of activities, and she doesn't take to it. The question we need to reflect on for a moment is: Why not? The people who try to get her involved in crafts just don't understand it. So often she says to me -- and probably to others as well -- that she can't 'do anything.' But you've met her. Is it true that she can't do anything?"

Fraser sensed that Angela was asking a deep question. He had no answer to offer.

Angela then continued: "Although she feels clumsy, she has enough control over her hands to be able to engage in certain crafts. And people like it when she joins in such activities. But she keeps insisting that she can't do anything. At bottom, she recognizes the unity of saying and doing and thinking, although she could never say or think she does. You do recall, I trust, that she can't speak. Of course there are more people who can't talk, but they don't all claim that they can do anything. Still, the fact that she doesn't have enough control over her mental processes to concentrate on what her hands

are doing -- her manual acts are not paired with thoughts, and so she can't plan and project -- leaves her thinking that she can't 'do anything,' as she puts it. Now, the fact is that with some prompting she can engage in crafts and produce something once in a while. But, sadly, it seems to give her no satisfaction. Do you understand why that would be?"

Fraser waited for Angela to continue. "Unless you know what you're doing and somehow 'intend' it, unless you think as you are working with your hands, it doesn't count as human action. Tell me, Fraser, why don't we regard a machine as 'doing' things in some human sense? It's true that machines make lovely things. Why don't we regard them as agents, as doers?"

Fraser was intrigued by the mixture of the practical and theoretical that ran through Angela's line of reasoning. As he pondered her ideas, he saw once again why he valued her so much as a friend: you simply could not anticipate or predict where she would come out on a given issue. She had a wonderful freshness and originality to her.

Fraser then steered the discussion back to the issue raised by Corky. He said: "If I may get us back to the domain of sex, I suppose your line would be that sexual activity without prior thought, without feeling, without love, is essentially mechanical. That's basically what a man does with a prostitute, and we consider it contemptible. It's not real action -- it superficial. It's not worthy of us as human beings."

"I fully agree," Angela chimed in. "And if you think about it carefully, you'll also realize why it is that people don't like to perform

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actions in response to a series of commands. They like having some leeway; they much prefer to think their own way through an action or a set of actions. The more frequent and specific the commands are, the more you feel like a machine. And so there's a wonderful unity of thought and action in human life when it's lived the way God intended. That's what lies behind our Savior's stern line about adultery. You can't get away from it, Fraser: there's a significant sense in which the deed is already contained in the thought. There's much more to sex than what we do with our bodies. That's why we speak of the brain as a sex organ."

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Fraser was thinking about Angela a few days later when he was in his university classroom lecturing on the modern philosophers. In philosophical circles, "modern" does not mean the very latest. The "modern" period, sometimes referred to as the early modern period, is the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

That was a long time ago, and the philosophical preoccupations of those days are not, by and large, the questions we ask today. And so the modern period was hard to lecture on. Nevertheless, Fraser's introduction to philosophy course needed some treatment of it.

Now, most anyone with a good schooling in philosophy would enjoy the issues that were raised by the modern philosophers. They were fun to lecture on, even if only a few of the students would see the point and become intrigued by the unusual solutions that were offered to the problems of that time.

Take this business of the distinction between body and mind, or body and soul. It was Descartes, more than any other philosopher, who had hammered that distinction home. And once it was set in stone and had sunk to the level of a presupposition, it generated some unique problems of its own, including problems that have to do with causality.

A natural question to raise is this: if body and mind are so distinct, as Descartes thought, if, indeed, they need to be defined in contradistinction to one another, how can there be any causality that originates in the domain of the mind and then makes its influence felt in the domain of the body or the material realm? This was a question that could not be avoided once the thinking of Descartes became firmly entrenched. His so-called successors among the continental rationalists offered a number of answers to it. Particularly interesting were the answers that were given by Malebranche and Leibniz. As for Spinoza, he had in effect defined the problem out of existence by daring to attack the Cartesian presuppositions at the root. In Spinoza's philosophy, everything hinges on the definitions presented at the outset. But then there was Malebranche.

Fraser did not know whether Malebranche had ever commented on the text about adultery in the Sermon on the Mount. But if he had, he would probably have been willing to let the man off the hook, so to speak. His understanding of body and mind was of such a nature that mental acts or wishes or desires can have no direct influence on the world of material reality, the world that we perceive with the senses.

Now, Malebranche was not meaning to deny that there are striking correlations between what we think and what our bodies do. He did not find it strange that people believed they could spot causal connections between mind and body. But since body and mind are so distinct as Descartes had defined them to be, there could be no such causal connections. Whence, then, those correlations?

Here Malebranche offered a theory that always seemed fantastic and even absurd to the secular undergraduates of our day. He pointed to a third factor in the picture, namely, God. Wanting to make God the ultimate -- indeed, the only -- causal agent, he assigned sole causal power in both the mental and physical domains to God. Therefore God is the cause of all my thoughts and at the same time the cause of all my physical actions. And even though everyday experience may leave me with the impression that when I raise my hand it is because I have decided to do so, it is only because God has deliberately created this parallel that it would occur to me to draw such a conclusion. And so the thought may, in some temporal sense, coincide with the action, or barely precede it, but in principle the thought and the action are not related. It is God who orders all these things and creates the illusion of causality.

Malebranche was a step on the way toward the ingenious philosophy of Leibniz, which was so curious and neat -- and, in some respects, simple -- that one wonders whether anyone ever believed it. Did Leibniz actually believe the things he taught? Some scholars aren't sure? Moreover, Leibniz was easy to lampoon. Voltaire had made fun of him in *Candide*, the novella in which he invented the character of Dr. Pangloss, the ever-optimistic philosophy professor who maintained that this is "the best of all possible worlds."

Leibniz defended the doctrine that is usually named by the striking phrase "pre-established harmony." This doctrine was basically a generalization of the theory of Malebranche. In the ontology of Leibniz, reality is made up of "monads" or unitary entities that essentially have no effect on one another -- physically speaking. Leibniz called them "windowless" -- each is a little world unto itself. Yet everyday experience leaves us with the impression that there are all kinds of interactions between the components of reality. The reason for this amazing symmetry and harmony, which reminds one somewhat of synchronized swimming, is the action of the Supreme Monad, which was one of Leibniz's characterizations of God.

It is God who ultimately arranges the pre-established harmony: he writes the script, so to speak, for each monad to act out. The result is a world in which there appears to be causality. But there is no real causality.

Fraser knew that these things were hard for undergraduates to grasp. They had a little easier time when it came to the British empiricists, who seemed to be more down-to-earth and less speculative. But even there one confronted puzzles that seemed to stand outside everyday experience. David Hume, the greatest of the empiricists, was hard to fathom in this regard.

Hume, Fraser explained to the students, was widely thought to have rendered causality subjective or psychological. He did not invent an elaborate theory about how God organizes and arranges all things in both the physical and mental domains. Neither did he try to give an account of the curious coincidences and correlations we find

in human experience. The question he tried to answer instead is why we have the idea of causality.

He came up with a startling suggestion: perhaps what we call causality is really a misinterpretation of a subjective feeling of expectation. Whenever two items are constantly conjoined in our experience, the appearance of the one leads us to expect the appearance of the other. And so was born the idea of "necessary connection." But in principle there is no necessary connection, for any sequence of events in our experience is possible. We have no basis for declaring otherwise.

When Fraser thought of Hume's approach to causality, he was reminded of a certain church he used to attend from time to time. In that church the liturgy and order of worship were very rigid. The people know exactly what to do. They knew just when to stand up and when to sit down. The routine never varied from Sunday to Sunday. But certain guest ministers who led an occasional service in that church seemed to enjoy giving orders to the congregation about standing and sitting. Of course the orders were superfluous: the people knew just when to sit down and stand up. One minister, in particular, liked to give a silent order with his right hand: once it was time for the congregation to sit down because the hymn was finished or the creed had been recited, he would extend his right hand to about eye level and then bring it down slowly, as if he were putting it on someone's head and forcing that person down into his seat. And all the people sank to their pews, leaving the minister looking satisfied with himself.

A student then put up her hand and said she was reminded of the choir in which she sang: their choir director seemed to sweep the choir members to their feet with by extending her hands outwardly and then bringing them together in a gentle motion in which she also raised them to chest level. The well-trained choir members rose as one.

Fraser nodded approvingly and explained that whenever he beheld such spectacles, he thought of Hume: in such cases you had the illusion of causality. It looked as though the minister was forcing people down through his action, but if you watched carefully you had to concede that many of the people were not paying the slightest attention to the minister but were simply doing what they were used to doing every Sunday: at that particular point in the service, they sat down. And so there was no causality, and if Hume were present in church, he would probably say that there is no causality at all in any physical sense. What he really maintained, of course, is that any succession of events in our experience is possible in principle, and so, what we ordinarily take to be causality is only a feeling in us, a feeling to the effect that a certain sequence of events to which we have grown accustomed is a necessary sequence. In other words it simply not the case that the events in question have to take place in that order. There is no necessity.

Fraser did not share his own criticisms of Hume's philosophy with the students. He tried to indicate to them that Hume was truly a radical thinker and was recognized as such in his own day. He did tell them a little bit about the critique of Hume offered in his own day by Thomas Reid, a Presbyterian minister whose ideas seemed rather commonplace and pedestrian by contrast.

The trouble with Hume was that he left you a universe in which everything seemed upside-down. Many things you would take for granted could now be cast into doubt. Hume himself had led a fairly ordered life, but when you thought carefully about his philosophy you could not help but conclude that he was a radical. He bequeathed us a universe in which anything can happen, and thereby he set the stage for much modern uncertainty.

Fraser knew most people are not ready for a high degree of uncertainty and indeterminacy. And so he thought to himself that it was useful to work through Hume's challenge human to try to get a sense of how Christians should think philosophically. Hume was in a way a precursor of what people nowadays call postmodernism. In postmodernism, on the level of language and text and meaning, anything is possible. There are lots of connections, but they are essentially arbitrary. Selves dissolved, and it was as though man had no soul -- perhaps not even a face.

Fraser could not take such possibilities seriously -- at least, not on the level of life as lived every day. And so, the more he thought about Hume, the more he felt he had to cling to the unity of thought and word and deed. A deed is not complete -- perhaps it is not fully a deed -- unless it is accompanied by a thought. And a full-orbed deed should probably include the word as well.

Worship, when conducted at its best, could serve as an example. In worship you need to do something physical -- here the Catholics and Anglicans were right. There also needed to be words uttered. You could make up your own, but in the presence of the

Holy you might well find yourself tongue-tied. And so the familiar prayer book supplied you with words. But you should not sit there in church -- or even fall to your knees -- in a mindless or mechanical routine of repetition. You needed to accompany all of this with your thoughts. In this regard, worship was hard work: it demanded concentration.

Still, there was something wonderfully refreshing and recreational in the old-fashioned sense about worship. Hume had not understood these things, having reacted so strongly against the stern Presbyterianism of his youth. But Heather Pruitt, even with her mental faculties severely impaired, had some sense of it. Angela was right -- Fraser had to give her that.

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Fraser was in his counseling room, getting ready to receive a new client. He was a little nervous since this client, whom he had not yet met, was in a wheelchair -- a quadriplegic, he had been told. The man's name was Roger Horowitz, and he was some sort of acquaintance of David's. They had met at his synagogue.

Mr. Horowitz would be accompanied by his wife. This fact left Fraser feeling a bit relieved. He did not like the idea of being responsible for someone with special needs. Who knew what might happen in the course of an hour. To push a wheelchair was one thing, but

When the man was wheeled into the room, Fraser could tell at once that he was dealing with an unusual individual. Roger Horowitz

was a curious combination of physical weakness and inner determination. Fraser guessed at once -- correctly, as it later turned out -- that he had been disabled for only part of his life. He looked as though he had once been quite active and a man of considerable accomplishment.

It seemed logical to start with the medical aspects, and so Fraser made polite inquiries. He was told that the paralysis stemmed from a surfing accident six years earlier. Roger had been a very active man physically -- both energetic and committed to fitness. He was a businessman from a very wealthy background, and so money had never been allowed to stand in the way of his personal self-development. Business had been for him a game: he did not need to earn a living.

And then had come his accident, with which he had never quite come to terms. David Hasselfreud had persuaded him to see Fraser on the grounds that the difficulty he now faced was not essentially medical. To get his life back on track, thought David, Roger needed to look at things from a new angle. And who better to help him in this endeavor than a philosopher with experience in counseling?

Roger had agreed, somewhat reluctantly, largely because of the urging of Jeannette, his wife. After all, what did they have to lose? Whatever the counselor charged, money was never an issue for the Horowitzes.

It was not hard for Fraser to divine what the general problem was. His thoughts went back to Heather Pruitt and her lament:

"What can I do?" But whereas Heather was severely limited in terms of mental functioning and could not remember from hour to hour what it was that she was up to, there was nothing whatsoever wrong with the mind of Roger Horowitz. And so that active mind, that fierce intelligence, would have to be a resource in this situation.

It soon emerged that Roger was a great lover of all things having to do with water. Naturally, his love extended to fish, and he had been a tropical fish enthusiast and hobbyist for most of his life. In his very spacious home, he had two rooms exclusively devoted to a series of aquaria, which he had lovingly tended. Many of the fish he had caught himself in exotic locales. He had also bred fish, but with inconsistent success, he admitted.

The two aquarium rooms were a source of great pride and joy, and they were inevitably shown to anyone who visited the home. But now Roger could no longer care for them. Jeannette, his patient and loving wife, tried to fill in for him, but Roger insisted that it was just not the same. They were no longer his aquaria, because he did nothing to maintain or clean them or look after the fish.

Fraser could tell that Roger and Jeannette were rehashing a familiar argument. Jeannette protested that she did not know much about aquaria and assured Fraser that Roger was really the brains behind the aquarium operation. She also admitted that the aquarium set-up had gone downhill in the years since Roger had been in a wheelchair -- it was just too much for her, along with their three children and a large house to maintain. She had help with the house, and she also wanted to use the help with the aquaria, but Roger drew the line there. He wouldn't have it. Having her look after what had

been his aquaria was bad enough: it made him feel like a spectator in what was supposed to be his own home.

Jeannette went on to explain that Roger had always been very intent on doing things for himself. Even before he could properly tie his shoelaces, he used to insist on doing it himself, which meant that he walked around untied much of the time. His Jewish mother -- Jeannette even dared to refer to her as "overbearing" -- wanted to make a more cooperative boy out of Roger, and so she used to intrude on some of his projects, sometimes finishing something for him when she saw him struggling with it. It used to infuriate him. Unless he did everything himself, he got no satisfaction from it. And so his new situation in his wheelchair was a torment to him. Fraser was reminded of the apostle Peter, who was told by Jesus that when he was old, he would be led around by others. Impetuous Peter would not like that one bit.

Roger wanted to give up his aquaria altogether and get them out of the house. To him they were a painful reminder of what he had once been. Jeannette, who had developed a genuine love of fish during her marriage to Roger, lamented the prospect. She said she wanted to keep them going, or perhaps only some of them, for her own enjoyment. But Roger insisted that she was only doing it for him, and he didn't want any favors.

Fraser asked whether they also had a garden. He expected that they did, since they seemed to live in a very expensive house. The answer was that they did have a garden and quite a yard. It had been Roger's responsibility to tend it, and he made it a point of pride, although he professed to no great skill in this area.

Then Jeannette jumped in and explained that it was not so much that he loved gardens but that he had to be good at everything he did. Since his accident, they had engaged a gardener, who had the garden in somewhat better shape than anything Roger had ever managed. Even Roger nodded at this point. Very delicately, Jeannette explained that the new gardener's success also made Roger uneasy. Fraser responded that this did not surprise him in the least.

But what was to be done? It was not like the situation of the aquaria, where one could imagine doing away with them altogether and hanging paintings on the wall instead. How would one do away with the garden and yard on a large property? Could the flowers and shrubs be replaced with paintings? Somehow the place would have to be cared for, and anyone could figure out that Roger was not the one who was tending the plants and flowers and trees.

Fraser had already figured out an approach to the problem he was faced with, and he was just waiting for the appropriate opening to unfold it. When there was a lull in the explanation coming from the couple, he began: "You remember President Roosevelt -- the second one, who led the USA through both the Depression and the World War II? I'm sure you're well aware that he was in a wheelchair the whole time he was president. Now, he didn't get there the same way that you did, Roger, and he wasn't a quadriplegic. But he was a disabled person all the same. Still, he led a very active and fulfilled life. Let's consider his situation for a moment."

Roger did not look interested, but Jeannette did. "What are you driving at, Dr. McNaught?"

"Basically this, that President Roosevelt accomplished an enormous amount, but he did so through his voice and his mind and his personality. It seems to me that what we need to do here is to think a little differently about what it is to be active, what it means to make things, to accomplish things. In much of human life, we do things through others or with the help of others."

"Or the help of money," interjected Roger. "Money talks -- that's what you're getting at, isn't it? You think I don't have all that much of a problem because I'm rich -- right? I can but whatever I want"

"He didn't win the war spending his own money," answered Fraser, sensing some hostility. Then he returned to his line of thought and explained: "I can well understand that the U.S. president sits behind a desk too much and gets restless. I once read in a biography that Ronald Reagan loved to go to his ranch in California and chop wood. You might wonder whether the president wouldn't be too busy and important to chop wood: surely he could have gotten someone else to do it. But I can believe that the physical activity on his ranch was very therapeutic for the president. Even so, for the rest, President Reagan had to carry out his work as president through an endless chain of subordinates. And he was happy to do so -- more so than his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, who tried too much to run everything himself. Now, as you know, the second Roosevelt is considered one of the greatest presidents of all time, and it was partly because he was so effective at delegating. And I'm convinced that the reason why he was good at delegating was his disability. I'm sure he took great satisfaction in what he accomplished, even if it was

through others. After all, it was basically Roosevelt who won the war. Churchill held Hitler at bay for a couple of years until Roosevelt got ready to get into the ring. Then Roosevelt finished the job. Isn't that basically what happened?"

By this point Fraser could tell that he was having some effect on Roger. He decided not to press his point. Often a strong and proud man, such a man as Roger had been, and perhaps still was, would have difficulty yielding a point. Better to let him think it over on his own.

And so Fraser decided to go move into a different area in which he thought there might also be a problem. He blushed a bit and then said: "I've been wondering about your sex life."

"We didn't come here to talk about that," snapped Roger.

But the look on Jeannette's face indicated that there was an issue here. Fraser decided he would not be put off quite yet and continued: "I'm not looking for any kind of clinical details. All I really want to do in this area is to encourage you. It's clear that there are some things, sexually speaking, that you can no longer do. But I'm happy to note that the two of you have three children -- that, at least, is behind you. And for the rest, I have the feeling that there's a lot of loving that takes place between you. Just what that means in physical terms I don't know -- it's not my place to ask. But I do want to assure you that the experts on sexuality -- psychologists, doctors, and the like -- emphasize that loving a woman is not just something you do with your hands and your sex organ."

"Is that the end of your lecture?" Roger was plainly somewhat annoyed.

Fraser smiled in an effort to hide his embarrassment. He suggested that they meet again, and Roger agreed, but with no enthusiasm. Jeannette seemed happy at the prospect.

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Four days later, Fraser and Lucy were in their living room with Folkert. Since Folkert had been quite encouraging and helpful in terms of getting Fraser going in his counseling career, he liked to hear a bit now and then about the cases. Fraser decided that he would tell Folkert a little bit about Roger Horowitz, while very carefully disguising his identity.

Folkert agreed with the line Fraser had taken, and he added that in Calvinistic theology God is also thought to be a President Roosevelt figure: he acts through us -- not exclusively, but much of the time.

Because of her work as a veterinarian, Lucy was quite used to frank talk about bodily functions and sexuality and was not easily embarrassed. But Fraser and Folkert hardly ever touched on such matters when they talked as a twosome. Still, it was clear that Folkert found the Horowitz case interesting. Fraser indicated that it had been an awkward area for him to get into, however professional and nonchalant he tried to act. He told Folkert that his quadriplegic client seemed to want to stay away from sex during their discussion.

"There's some embarrassment to get over at first," said Lucy. "I'm not surprised that he tried to put you off the topic. You may need a number of sessions before he's willing to discuss such things with you frankly. Just be patient, Fraser. You need to earn his trust."

Meanwhile, Folkert had come to the conclusion that it was perhaps time for him to say something to Fraser about Greg Ross, who had come into Fraser's practice at the very beginning through Folkert. Greg had withdrawn from counseling with very little explanation. Folkert now proceeded to tell Fraser that he had gotten some of the story behind the abrupt withdrawal from the horse's mouth. He specifically stressed that he understood the story only in part. Nevertheless, it was probably time to pass some of it on.

But he was a little hesitant. Lucy's presence embarrassed him, for it was another sexual matter, and there was also the question whether it would be a violation of confidentiality to have Lucy hear the new revelations.

Fraser assured Folkert that Lucy was a kind of partner to him in the counseling process. While he avoided the disclosure of names, he did give Lucy something of a rundown on the cases. And so she had heard about this case too.

Thus far neither Folkert nor Fraser had spoken Greg's name aloud. And so now Fraser said: "OK, tell me what happened to" He paused and then said "George," thereby making it clear that he intended the name "George" to serve as a pseudonym.

Folkert caught on and proceeded with a skeletal explanation: "What it comes down to is that when `George' was out in the Maritimes, he was involved in some sort of a freak boating accident. And it impaired him in terms of, of -- well, we might say, his duties as a husband."

Lucy nodded knowingly but refrained from saying anything. Folkert then continued: "There's an element of shame connected with this matter -- at least, in `George's' mind. I think he's wrong to feel ashamed, but the feeling is a reality that has to be acknowledged. Anyway, the problem is that `George' reads the Bible differently than I do. He's preoccupied by a passage in Deuteronomy that seems to bar him from the Lord's favor -- at least, that's how he thinks of it. Do you have a Bible handy?"

Fraser handed him a copy of the Revised Standard Version. Folkert hunted around until he found Deuteronomy 23. "Here it is," he said. "Listen to the first three verses: `He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD. No bastard shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD. No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD' Maybe that's far enough."

"Let's not be too mysterious about it," said Lucy. "So what's the problem here: is it the first clause in this passage or the second one?"

"The first one," said Folkert. "It's not that his testicles were crushed, strictly speaking. But they were seriously damaged in the

accident, and so he had to have a minor surgical procedure which guarantees that he's now sterile."

Fraser hunted for words to put his question delicately: "So, can he still `do it'?"

"My understanding is that he can. And so it's not a question of their sex life coming to an end. And they already have children. But he feels this deep shame over it all, as though it were some kind of divine judgment on his sin, and so he doesn't wish to talk about it. I suppose that's what you need to know Fraser, so that you won't feel he has something against you. Now, it's not that he asked me to convey this to you, but I do think it's appropriate for you to know it. Of course we'll all hold this in strictest confidence."

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So now Fraser had two cases in his repertoire that involved some degree of sexual dysfunction. Perhaps it would be possible to get Greg back for more counseling with Sonya. Fraser would like that, for he took pride in them as his first real case.

But then, what did Fraser really have to offer them? He thought it might be worth his while to get some further enlightenment himself from an accredited sexpert, as some people called them nowadays. And there was a well-known sexpert on the staff of the university hospital, although it was hard to get in to see him -- at least, that was what Fraser had heard. But when he made inquiries, he found out that it was not so difficult to get in for academic purposes. The long line-up was mainly for people who

needed their sexual dysfunction treated. And so, before long, Fraser found himself seated in the office of the sexpert, who was named Dr. Horst Flaggelong.

The discussion proved a disappointment to Fraser. Dr. Flaggelong was more clinical than he expected. Fraser thought that dealing with sexual issues had a lot to do with psychology, and secondarily with issues of biology or even what some people refer to irreverently as "plumbing." Urologists were famous for talking about sexual problems in plumbing terms, which was why many people felt the need to see a sexual counselor with a different orientation and training. But to Fraser, Dr. Flaggelong was basically just another plumber.

Nevertheless, Fraser was happy for an opportunity to try out some of his lines on a sexpert. In the case of "George," Dr. Flaggelong did not see what the problem was. "George" could still function and he had a loving wife and he had children -- really he did need anything more, so why couldn't "George" just get on with his life?

Although the subject of religion had not yet come up, it was clear that Dr. Flaggelong did not have the kind of reverence for the Scriptures that had thrown "George" into such perplexity. Yet, Fraser mused to himself, what ailed Greg Ross was probably more of a spiritual problem. He wondered whether Greg would ever seek out a pastor to discuss it.

The situation of the quadriplegic client did not seem to interest Dr. Flaggelong very much. Evidently he had many opportunities to deal with such situations. He said it was a simple

matter of fact that the sex organ would not function in such a case as there was no sensation below the waist. Fraser responded by observing that the brain is the most important sex organ. Dr. Flaggelong granted that some such thesis was to be found in the literature nowadays, but he tended to discount it himself. The brain by itself can be a seat of pleasure, and a certain amount of pleasure can be generated through imagination, but whether such pleasure can be regarded as sexual pleasure is another matter.

"What's the criterion here?" asked Fraser. "What counts as 'sexual' and what doesn't?"

"That sounds like a question for the philosophers," responded Dr. Flaggelong, who clearly was bored by the discussion. He made a point of glancing at his watch. Fraser felt that he was being dismissed.

"One last question: what, then, is phone sex? I've never tried it myself. But doesn't its existence indicate that something can be going on sexually without any involvement of the body? After all, the two persons involved are separated from one another by quite some distance."

"There's distance, all right," replied the sexpert, "but the two parties are still sexually normal and are capable of the usual physiological responses that accompany sexual arousal." He paused for a moment and then added: "But phone sex, or sex via the internet in the case of quadriplegics -- I suppose that's something to think about."

Speaking Silence

Fraser felt good about having scored a point, as it were, with the sexpert. He thanked Dr. Flaggelong and took his leave. He did not expect to be back.

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Fraser was slumming -- at least, that's how he thought of it. He was flipping through the channels to see what might be of interest on television. Lucy was out for the evening, and so he had a chance to tune in on the preachers from the Deep South, whose broadcasts he was able to pick up with his satellite dish. He stayed away from those preachers while Lucy was around. Even if she didn't say anything, the look on her face -- partly amused, partly reproachful -- made him uneasy.

And now he found what he was looking for. An elderly man in a rather imposing suit, with beads of sweat to be seen on his face, was bursting with a message about "depravity." That was a word you didn't hear much nowadays. The earnest preacher with his Southern accent was saying: "And you think you're better than Hitler? Well, maybe you are, just a bit. No, I mean that. If we were to set up a continuum with Hitler on the one end and Jesus Christ, the only perfect man, on the other, and you had to place yourself on that continuum, where would you belong? You probably think you'd be somewhere in between, perhaps halfway. No, my brother, my sister, I'll tell you where you'd be -- and where I am -- at least, if the only real Judge were making the placement." Then he drew an imaginary continuum with his hands in the air. Pointing dramatically, he placed himself and his television viewers right next to Hitler, as far removed from Jesus Christ as the continuum would allow.

"And if you think you can save yourself with the works of your hands -- maybe you think you've done a few good deeds of late, humanly speaking, -- well, I tell you, just forget it. Remember the old hymn -- and we'll be singing it in just a few minutes. 'Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul.' So don't even try. Just let the Spirit fill you. Let the Savior wash you in the Blood of the Lamb. 'Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me' There's no other way to be saved."

Fraser had the uneasy feeling that someone was watching him. He looked over his left shoulder and saw Kelly standing in the opening to the living room. He had thought that she was also out for the evening with some friends.

Apparently she was thinking about what she had just heard, for she said to her father: "So what was it you were saying to me the other day -- that you wanted to see a new attitude on my part? What good would a new attitude do? You heard the preacher -- don't even try! If we're all so bad, why pretend to be good? Why should we knock ourselves out?"

"I think the preacher was overstating his point," replied Fraser. "You see, preaching is basically exaggeration. You make a point that has some validity, but like any other point it has to be placed in a larger context, but you lose sight of the context as you get worked up, just like the man on TV, and so you blow it up out of all proportion. That's basically what he was doing. There's something to what he says about our depravity -- I know it's an old-fashioned word that you kids don't like to hear nowadays -- but I agree he shouldn't create the

impression that most ordinary people are bloodthirsty monsters on the same level as Hitler. There are degrees of evil-doing."

"And so where do I stand on the continuum?" Kelly asked. "I can tell that you're not comfortable right next to Hitler. How about me -- do I get to move over a bit, or am I right next to him?"

"Honey, I wish you wouldn't always drive things to extremes. Can you be patient with me, just as I sometimes have to be patient with you? Yelling at your kids is a bit like preaching -- you exaggerate. I suppose I came on too strong. So let me reiterate what I said: being a good person, living a Christian life, is more a matter of the attitude you take toward others than a matter of following all kinds rules. If you could just smile a little more, your mother and I would both be very pleased."

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Fraser stopped by Sergei Kowalski's Old News Health Food Store to pick up his friend. They had agreed to meet Folkert at the university for coffee and some discussion. But before coffee, they planned to take in one of Folkert's lectures. Although Folkert mainly taught courses in German literature, he did like to focus on the ideas embodied in the writings he had the students read, for he fancied himself something of a philosopher. And such a lecture he had scheduled for today. And so, when Fraser proposed that they get together, Folkert suggested that Fraser and Sergei also attend the lecture he would be giving that day. Then they would have something to talk about. Fraser sensed that Folkert would like to debate Sergei's far-out philosophy of life.

The lecture was indeed interesting. Folkert was talking about Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. He read a passage to the class and then projected it on the screen: "There is nothing that fills me with more quiet, genuine emotion than those features of patriarchal life which I can, thank God, weave without affectation into my own way of living. How happy I am that my heart is open to the simple, innocent delight of the man who brings a head of cabbage to his table which he himself has grown, enjoying not only the cabbage but all the fine days, the lovely morning when he planted it, the pleasant evenings when he watered it, so that, after having experienced pleasure in its growth he may, at the end, again enjoy in one single moment all that has gone before."

Folkert went on to explain that in many of the great writers of a couple of centuries ago we read an early protest against the world that was to be, the world that we now live in, the world in which specialization is king. He acknowledged that the word "patriarchal" might put some people off today, and so he asked the students to suspend their judgment as to where Goethe would stand on this or that issue of our time. Goethe, too, great as he was, had to be considered a creature of his time. Of course there were some patriarchal elements in his thinking. Still, what he was saying in this passage could be appropriated by women as well as by men.

And the point was essentially that the fragmentation or chopping up of life that we now take for granted means that we have lost something precious. The notion that the food on your table was grown in your own garden, which was lovingly tended by your own hands, and that you remember all those lovely mornings and pleasant

evenings when you worked in the garden and got dirt under your fingernails -- all of this contributed in an essential way to your enjoyment of the cabbage when it finally wound up on your table. "Put some feeling into your eating," Folkert told the students.

Fraser was impressed at how well Folkert held the attention of the students. He was a good lecturer -- no doubt about it. But then, it was an upper-level course, and so the students were there as a matter of choice. Presumably all the students were interested in Goethe and his times. And it helped that the class was much smaller than the kind of class Fraser was used to teaching.

Folkert then went on to substitute child-raising for the cabbage. He asked why, in our mechanized era, we have not yet mechanized the raising of children. It was not that no one had ever suggested such a thing or taken a step in such a direction. But the wisdom of the "creation order" kept intruding into our experiments. We kept discovering, or perhaps re-discovering, that there needs to be a very deep bond of love and trust between the child and the adult that supervises it and is primarily responsible for its nurture. And so there is also an enormous patriarchal and matriarchal pleasure that comes with watching a child grow and mature. Bound up with that pleasure are so many mornings and evenings and other occasions when the child has been lovingly tended. We need to recover the unity of experience that the modern world with all its fragmentation takes away.

Folkert went on to explain that Christian thinkers, by and large, have understood this point, which is part of the reason why they often seem so suspicious of new things. But Christian thinkers

were not the only ones who had come to such a conclusion. There was also John Dewey, whose relentless opposition to dualisms was fueled by the same kind of insight that came to expression in this passage from Goethe.

A little later, when the three of them were drinking coffee and talking, Fraser sensed that Folkert had deliberately tried to provoke Sergei with his lecture. It seemed that he wanted to debate Sergei, of whom he did not approve entirely.

After a few pleasantries, Sergei rose to the occasion and launched his critique: "You put it well, Folkert, but as for what you're talking about, I would say it's all an illusion. This striving, this 'I did it myself' mentality, is indeed an important part of Christianity and of the Western tradition. But it's also the reason for the bankruptcy of the Western world. I call it egoism, plain and simple, and such egoism is the central fault of Christianity. It claims to be focused so much on God and tries to create the impression that Christians are supposed to 'humble themselves,' but in practice not much comes of it. That's why Christianity has such a hard time disentangling itself from the modern mind or what some of you like to call 'Humanism.' The moderns are obsessed with the self, but so are you Christians."

Fraser could think of a line or two to throw back at Sergei, but he decided to let Folkert conduct his own defense. Folkert started out cautiously, with generalities: "Everything has its place in the way that God has structured creation. It's when we lose that balance, that perspective of the whole, that our thought goes off the rails. We then absolutize some aspect or some dimension of reality, and are so desperate in our quest for ultimate certainty that we wind up deifying

something that is only creaturely. And so a kind of false religion of the self has sprung up in the Western world. Now, I can see why some forms of Christianity get identified with this religion of the self -- and some of the preachers on TV fit right into this category, by the way -- but that's not Christianity in heart or in essence."

Sergei shot back: "Why does Christianity carry egoism right into the life to come? In the Christian concept of salvation, I can go right on insisting, 'I just gotta be me.' Tell me, do you plan to retain your personal identity through all eternity?"

Folkert nodded. Fraser followed his lead.

"Tell me, fellows," Sergei ventured. "Would what you call salvation be worthwhile if it didn't have egoism built into it?"

"I have to object to the term you insist on sticking in there," answered Folkert. "Terms with 'ism' built into them are to be avoided: they're always a sign that something is being absolutized -- materialism, historicism, vitalism, psychologism."

"How about 'catechism'?" asked Fraser, who could not suppress a smirk.

"There's an exception to every rule," answered Folkert. Then, facing Sergei, he continued: "And so it's not a question of egoism. But selfhood? Yes, selfhood is presupposed in the Christian understanding of salvation. We are saved as a corporate, covenant body of Christ but also as individuals. And we will recognize one another in the life to come."

"If that's really what you believe," replied Sergei, "I think you can see why Christianity gets excluded from what so many of us have come to call the 'perennial philosophy.' The religious traditions of the Orient are so much more broad-minded than the Western ones. Various movements like Theosophy have stressed the effort to draw out what is best in those traditions and bring it all together in a single package -- something along the lines of a cookbook with recipes from all over the world. Still, when you look carefully into the cookbook, you can hardly find a trace of Christianity."

"Eating is hardly a fair analogy for what happens in the Christian life," protested Folkert.

"The body of Christ, given for you," intoned Fraser. "Take, eat"

"Thanks," said Sergei. "Let's just call it an anthrology and not argue about cooking. Sometimes people will include certain mystical writings and will tell you that some medieval mystics had basically the same ideas as the Hindus and Buddhists. I'm not sure that's a fair characterization, but for the sake of debate, let's say that it is. Even so, it's clear that such mystics were already drifting outside their own tradition."

"Who gets to define the tradition?" asked Fraser.

"Isn't that why Christians have popes and church councils?" responded Sergei. "Okay, I'll try not to be too dogmatic about it. My own view is that there is no reconciling the gulf between Christianity

and the great religions of India. Egoism -- or selfhood, if you insist on a weaker word -- is the downfall of Christianity. Only if you learn to transcend it can you find a salvation that I would aspire to. Read the Gospels: You have to lose your life in order to find it."

"But what does it mean to lose your life?" ventured Fraser. "Isn't it to put others ahead of yourself and not be greedy, and to cultivate a noble and generous spirit? Those are all fine things, but they do not demand the surrender of selfhood and personal identity and an -- yes, let me use that ugly word -- an ego on an ultimate ontological level. So I agree with you on one point, Sergei: the great gulf cannot be bridged. But we need to talk about these things anyway. And if we differ, I hope we can do so as friends."

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The debate between Sergei and Folkert had given Fraser something to think about. He wanted to sharpen up the points he tried to make to Sergei, for he sensed he needed to be somewhat more articulate in his teaching and his efforts at writing fragments of what might add up to a Christian philosophy.

And then he got a little bit of help and inspiration from an unexpected quarter. The next time he was in church, St. Andrew's own pastor, Rev. Kurt McCrow, was in the pulpit as usual. Now, Fraser was not particularly enamored of Rev. McCrow. The man claimed to have some Scottish ancestry and there was a trace of a Scottish accent to be heard, at least in his sermons, but Fraser had some doubts whether it was genuine. Perhaps it was put-on: the minister might feel that a dash of the Scottish fit the image of the

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Presbyterian minister. He claimed to have been born in Scotland and to have left it in his youth.

And then there was the question of his first name. Some people around the church joked about it, for the minister was anything but curt or brief. In fact, he tended not know what his sermon was about. He seemed to have gone to a seminary where they stressed that one needs a lengthy introduction to a sermon. One cannot simply dunk the people in doctrine. And so he left it somewhat mysterious what the theme of his sermon was going to be. Normally, the Bible text would give you a hint, but was no sermon title printed in the bulletin. Fraser had noticed, when visiting Dutch Reformed churches, that sermon titles did get printed in the bulletin, and some of the ministers even printed what amounted to a sermon outline. He had even heard of churches where the text of the sermon was distributed to the congregation as soon as the service was over. Talk about organization! Nowadays it could also be done by e-mail. But the Rev. Kurt did not go in for that kind of organization.

For some in the congregation, the meandering character of the minister's sermons contributed to their charm, as long as they did not go on too long. (Twenty minutes was considered long.) But people had different ideas as to how long a sermon should be.

On this particular Sunday, Fraser had gotten sidetracked, as usual, by the introduction. But just a few minutes later his attention was drawn back to the discourse from the pulpit. It seemed that the sermon had something to do with growing old, and with the grace that was needed in growing old, and where you could get that grace. The minister wanted to say something about how we need to identify

with others and with their deeds and stop being so fixated on being in control. This was part of what it meant to deny oneself. It seemed that deeds were overrated. The minister identified them with the impetuosity of youth and made a reference to the apostle Peter, who was told by our Lord in that he would have a hard time of it when he grew older and found that others were leading him around.

Then the minister proceeded to speculate in a vein that seemed genuinely philosophical to Fraser. He asked the congregation what it really meant to "do." Could it be that to do is to oppose? He even dared to mention the word "dialectic." Didn't doing presuppose an opponent and thus generate a dialectic of sorts?

But this point Fraser's thoughts wandered off again, but not to Folkert and Sergei. The minister had steered him toward the great German philosophers of the early nineteenth century. He thought especially of Fichte, who had this strange disquisition about how there had to be a "thesis," and for the thesis to be what it was, there also needed to be an "antithesis" opposing it. It was a little bit like Toynbee and that business of challenge and response in history. One always pictured Fichte as a vigorous young man trying to rally the German nation.

Hegel also came into the picture, for he made good use of the notion of thesis and antithesis as he developed a dynamic ontology. Clearly those German idealists were no Buddhists trying to transcend the self. The "anatta" doctrine (there is no self) could hardly be a starting point for Fichte and Hegel. Instead the theme of their thought was that there could only be only one self -- the self who turns out to be what the Christians call God.

Now, was that self-denial? If we all get absorbed into God and become episodes in the story that is his life, would Sergei then be satisfied? Fraser wondered whether he dared to trot out these ruminations in his introduction to philosophy class.

Chapter 7

To God Be the Glory

"And if that doesn't prove there's a God, I don't know what it would take!" Corky leaned back in her chair and looked at Matthew, Lucy and Fraser one by one, as if daring them to challenge her account. She had just told a story about a woman in her church who had collapsed near St. Bridget's Hospital because of some rare condition whose name she had forgotten. Of course it was no accident that there was a hospital nearby -- God was in the picture! The condition from which the woman suffered almost always led to death within a matter of hours, but there was one very difficult and risky surgical intervention that might save a person. However, only one doctor in this part of the country knows how to perform that surgery. And guess what? That very doctor was just leaving the hospital as the woman was being treated in the emergency room. A quick-thinking nurse, making the connection between her patient's condition and the doctor's special skills, had dashed out to the parking lot and dragged him back into the hospital. Golf would have to wait. The doctor then performed the surgery, and the woman was now stable and out of danger. Praise be to God!

Ten-year-old Matthew seemed taken with the story, and he began to imagine an even better version of it. "If God wanted to prove he exists, why didn't he bring in the doctor from Switzerland -- let's say he was on vacation there -- and sort of beam him over here just in time for the operation?" To his young imagination, a touch of science-fiction magic would be an even stronger proof of God's reality and power.

Fraser then spoke up diplomatically: "Let's just be thankful that God decided to spare Aunt Corky's friend's life. Just how he managed it doesn't really matter."

Then Lucy spoke up: "Of course a skeptic would say that Corky's story turns on a coincidence -- nothing more."

"Precisely," said Fraser. "Skepticism is always a logical possibility, but I prefer to live by faith and give God the glory for such deeds, whether the doctor just happened to be in the parking lot or was rushed to the scene in a spaceship."

Matthew seemed to be enjoying the idea that he could participate in a theological discussion. It helped that his big sister was not there to put him down and make him feel small. Looking genuinely perplexed, he asked: "But does God only do some stuff? If he's so powerful, why doesn't he take care of everything and just do whatever needs to be done?"

"That's an excellent philosophical question, Matthew," said Fraser approvingly. "Perhaps you'll follow in my footsteps one day."

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Corky spoke up: "Sometimes, when God doesn't act, it's because we haven't asked him to intervene. We neglect the power of prayer."

Matthew, encouraged by his father's praise, now made another foray. "Can you also ask him to do bad stuff, like get the people you don't like? Don't we read about that in the some of the psalms, where he asks God to fix the people who have been pestering him?"

Fraser mused: "That's why we need the devil -- to do the nasty stuff." The words were hardly out of Fraser's mouth when he regretted them. He noted that Lucy gave him a stern look.

Later that day when Lucy and Fraser were alone, they returned to the subject. Lucy had said very little about Corky's story and theological lesson because she did not want to interfere with the religious upbringing that Fraser was trying to give the children. And so, if Fraser wanted to make some theological points to his son, Lucy would not undermine his efforts. But she wanted Fraser to know her opinion of Corky's story about her friend's brush with death.

But she also wanted to take issue with Fraser and his Calvinism. And so she asked him: "When people like you parcel out all the good deeds to God and give the devil the credit for all the bad things, don't you think you're overlooking an awful lot of stuff in between?"

Fraser didn't quite understand her point. "Well, if something is in between, as you put it, if it's neither something to rejoice about nor something to lament, we still give the credit to God."

"You don't get it," replied Lucy. "Let me explain. Many events are good for some people and bad for others. Take the weather: the weatherman seems to presuppose that we're all yuppies and that we want sunshine and warm weather so that we can go golfing and vacationing and so forth. He forgets about farmers who need rain. And so, it's not so clear whether such-and-such weather conditions on a given day are a good thing or a bad thing. When it comes to economic news, you find the same thing. The prime rate just went down, let's say, and other interest rates are expected to follow. That's the simple fact. But is it good or bad? Well, it's good for some people and bad for others. We often overlook senior citizens, whose retirement incomes suffer during a period of low interest rates, and there you have it again: good for some people and bad for others. You philosophers -- and especially the ones who call themselves Calvinists -- insist on thinking in black-and-white terms, and so you wind up overlooking this in-between zone in which many things are both good and bad at the same time. That's why your dualism of God and the devil doesn't really work. I don't mind that you encourage Matthew to consider such ideas -- I do respect the tradition, after all -- but I want you to know privately what I think. It might be easier if Corky would leave us alone and not tell us her weird stories."

Fraser conceded there was something to her criticism, but he quickly responded that black-and-white thinking is not so deeply ingrained among the Calvinists as she supposed. There were indeed Calvinists who had a very strict set of rule for the moral life in which

any type of activity you could come up with was either permitted (and thus good) or forbidden (and thus bad), with no in-between zone. But that was not John Calvin himself.

He then asked Lucy whether she recognized the term "adiaphora." As he expected, she did not. He proceeded to explain to her that Calvin, basing his thinking especially on Romans 14, which discusses food that has been offered to idols, defended the idea that there is a zone of action in the Christian life in which Christians may well disagree with one another as to whether certain deeds are permissible or not. Because there is no specific Biblical teaching on the matter, they fall into a kind of neutral zone that Calvin characterized as "adiaphora," borrowing a term from Greek. It was an important part of his doctrine of Christian freedom.

Fraser made a point of explaining to Lucy that he himself accepted this doctrine of Calvin's and tried to live in accord with it. That's why he was not so quick to give other Christians a hard time if they did things he himself refrained from. Each adult Christian must live by his own conscience. But the main point Fraser wanted to make in all of this was that the doctrine of the "adiaphora" is proof that Calvinists are not so stuck on black-and-white thinking as Lucy seemed to suppose.

As for the business of who gets credit for the in-between events, that was indeed a good question. It had something to do with the difference between deism and theism, on which Fraser was to be lecturing the next day at the university. "Perhaps you'd like to come," he suggested.

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Lucy declined. Once in a while she did come to hear Fraser lecture or speak somewhere, but she was scheduled to work that day.

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It proved a more difficult topic than Fraser had anticipated, even though he had covered the material before. He started off by pointing out that the two terms, deism and theism, are logically equivalent. Both mean God-ism, with the former deriving from the Latin word for God and the latter from the Greek word for God. He then went on to explain why it is that philosophers and scientists lean toward deism, even if they profess to be theists, for deism in effect asks God to leave the world alone. Therefore their theories can hold unrestricted sway and not be interrupted by interventions on God's part, which might well make a mockery of their projections and retrodictions. The deist God makes the world and establishes a wonderful order and then steps back and watches benevolently from a distance. He does not interfere in the system he has established.

The God of the theists has an additional job -- providence. He has to maintain his creation in existence and take a hand, so to speak, in its further unfolding. Fraser explained how providence has the notion of vision built into it ("video" means I see). God is always surveying the horizon, so to speak, to see where some intervention might be needed. He stands watch and neither slumbers nor sleeps.

But the emphasis does not fall so much on intervention here and there. According to theism, he has to hold the very world in existence. It is so utterly dependent upon him that it could not continue to exist for a moment apart from his will and perpetual

activity as Creator. Some thinkers were therefore inclined to suppose that reality teeters on the edge of non-being to such an extent that it is constantly popping out of existence only to be restored to its status as real by a never-ending stream of special creative acts of God. It was not that this process of reality ceasing to exist and then being restored could be observed, but from certain premises we knew that something of this sort had to be underway constantly. Fraser made it clear that he did not hold such a view himself, but he certainly did find it interesting. Perhaps it was another instance of theory or doctrine as exaggeration.

It seemed strange stuff to the students, but Fraser could see that a few were genuinely thinking along with him. One of the interested students put up his hand and asked: "Isn't the real question creation? What does it really mean anyway? In a loose sense we speak of ourselves as engaged in creation, for example, when we produce a modest work of art, but in the strong sense isn't it a completely baffling notion? And isn't that the difference between the deists and the theists? Doesn't it come down to this, that the deists try to keep creation to a bare minimum? To the deists, creation is a perplexing, almost embarrassing notion, and so they want to get it over with quickly -- in the beginning he created everything, and that was the end of that."

Fraser was caught flatfooted by this interesting question, or perhaps it could better be regarded as a comment. He did not know quite what to say. And so he wound up changing the subject. "The doctrine of creation doesn't function much in Christian spirituality," he announced. "Christian spirituality is geared very much to devotion to Christ, and in more recent generations somewhat more to the

Holy Spirit as well." But then he wondered whether this statement was correct. He thought of the Christian environmentalists, who were always going on about creation and what they called a "creation spirituality."

And so, off the top of his head, Fraser shifted gears once again and tried another tack. He told the student who had asked the question that the business about giving God all the glory, which was a major theme in some forms of Christianity in particular, such as Calvinism, was in effect a substitute for the doctrine of creation. It seemed a simple notion, and the ordinary believer could readily assent to it. Of course! All glory to God!

But when the ordinary believer thought hard about creation, he was baffled. Fraser had had some such line of thought in his head for quite some time and had been waiting for a chance to make this little speech. And the speech had its effect. The students seemed suitably impressed, and the class continued. Fraser's honor was saved, and he decided he would have to think more about deism and theism and creation.

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One way for Fraser to brush up on the concept of creation would be to seek out David Hasselfreud, who loved such discussions. What David said at first was not a surprise to Fraser: "Creation is really not such a big deal for the Jews. We don't have the fascination with the book of Genesis that you Christians have. For us the action, religiously speaking, begins in the book of Exodus. And so we're more

at ease with the notion of mythological elements in the first book of Moses than you folks are."

Fraser then brought up the notion of an environmental spirituality that is rooted in the doctrine of creation. David had heard it before and responded: "Yes, that's fine, but we root our environmental ethics in the Torah. There are interesting verses and stipulations about how you were to conduct yourself in a time of warfare. You were not to pillage the earth or damage its capacity to produce food, for the earth is the basis for our existence. Now, you Christians could use those texts in the same way, and probably some of you do. But the reason why so many Christians feel the need wrap their arms around what you call creation spirituality is that most of you are too otherworldly. You're basically still Platonists. And so, in opposition to that Platonist otherworldliness, you blow up the doctrine of creation into something that was never intended by the writers of the Bible."

"Not so fast," responded Fraser. "If your religious community makes so much of its history, that history needs to have a beginning. Genesis is the backdrop to human history and to God's dealings with his people."

"I suppose there's something to that," replied David, "but it's a matter of emphasis and degree. Look, there is quite a bit of discontinuity in the Biblical record. The line does not go straight from Adam and Eve and Noah on to Abram. There's this huge gap. At a certain point in history -- at least, according to the Biblical account -- God calls Abram and makes a covenant with him and

leads him into the promised land. That's the beginning of our religion. Abram is the first Jew -- not Adam."

"I'm not necessarily disagreeing with you," said Fraser. "But I find it interesting that many Calvinist thinkers trace the beginning of the church -- understood in the broad sense -- right to the Garden of Eden. In the church we have a community of faith of which Adam and Eve were the first members. And then Abraham fits into the picture in due course."

"You Calvinists make the Biblical record a bit too neat," countered David. "You forget that there are those gaps in the Bible. It's like God forgets about us for long stretches of time -- he's not always watching over us. There's also such a text in the New Testament."

Fraser handed him a Bible and he soon found it. "Here we go - - Acts 14:16" "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" The text was not one that Fraser was familiar with: he assumed he must have read over it a number of times without seeing its significance.

David then continued: "That's why God's people are always trying to get his attention, like a little kid demanding that his mother watch him while he is playing. Check the Old Testament on this. God seems to go off duty every now and then. Is that what happened during the Holocaust -- that God went off duty, and so horrible things transpired while he hid his face or went into eclipse? Buber wrote about the eclipse of God."

Speaking Silence

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Fraser thought he would try out some of his new ideas at the Christian high school again. By this point he was quite popular with both the principal and the students, which was no mean achievement. He seemed to be trusted. He suspected that Folkert had something to do with his standing. And so, one day, he found himself before a class made up mainly of students he had not encountered before, as far as he could tell. The faces did not look familiar. But his reputation seemed to have preceded him, for it was obvious that the students were expecting a lively discussion. He decided he would give it to them.

And so he announced that the topic scheduled for that day would be set aside. He would ignore the lesson plan left behind by their regular teacher, who was away at a conference. Instead they would have a discussion about what might well be the most important topic of all, namely, the character of God.

Fraser paused, letting the notion sink in. When the students were good and ready, he began: "You've heard it said many a time that God is a person. He's not some kind of abstract force. And if he's a person, he must have something in the line of character, just as you and I do. Or maybe we could call it personality. So tell me, what's he like? Is he a glory hound?"

A bit of a gasp came up from the room. Clearly a few the students were shocked by the very idea. But Fraser persisted: "You've probably heard about some of those backward countries where they have a horrible dictator, usually a military man, who controls

everything and insists on having his picture plastered all over the place and has to be given credit for absolutely everything that happens. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was like that before his overthrow. And when such a dictator is overthrown, the people, however much they may hate and resent him, regard him as almost a God, and so they can't really believe he's gone. Or perhaps they expect him to zoom back into their lives in some magical way. After all, for years and years he was supposed to be behind everything that happened in their land. Now, what's the difference between God and such a dictator?"

Fraser let the kids stew in silence for a while. Finally a boy put up his hand and suggested that there's a huge difference, namely, that God is good, whereas the dictator in the example is evil.

"That's fine," replied Fraser. "But consider this question: is it good to be modest? Is God modest, or does he want to take all the credit? Is he humble? And so I repeat my question: is God a glory hound?"

By this point a few of the students had pulled out Bibles and were paging in them. A couple of them came up with texts that had the word glory in them.

Fraser nodded approvingly. "That's right," he said. "Glory is indeed a theme in the Bible. Through the things that happen on earth, God is glorified. He's supposed to get the credit. In the same vein, there's also the stuff about God's name. And you know from the fourth commandment that you're not to take God's name in vain. Can someone read it for us?"

A student obliged: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."

"Okay," said Fraser. "Now we can add a new dimension to the discussion. So tell me: is God vain?"

Again the students were hesitant to bite. It was as though they expected a thunderbolt from heaven to bring their strange discussion to an end.

Fraser said: "So let's try an entirely different question: Is God humble? Is he the quiet, grandfatherly type who says that he's had his own day in the sun and now takes pleasure and pride in the accomplishments of a new generation, including his children and grandchildren? Does he sit in his rocker and simply watch things from afar?"

Briefly he thought about introducing the distinction between deism and theism, but he decided not to. If he had not gotten far with that distinction among the university students, the high school students would probably not get it either.

"So let's have an answer," demanded Fraser, egging them on. Then he decided to provoke them a bit more: "Or could it be that God is more like a grandmother? Why does such a thought upset so many people?"

Fraser paused and invited commentary, but he got no takers. He then went on to talk about all the fuss in some of the churches nowadays over whether God can still be called "Father" or thought of as such. Some theologians seemed to think that God was to be neither father nor mother -- to say nothing of grandfather or grandmother. Any hint of gender-based characteristics was to be eliminated from our picture of God.

Fraser asked: "Could it be that God is more like the boss at work? Does he insist on running everything himself, or can he delegate some things to us here on earth? So what about it -- is God bossy? Or does he leave us to our own devices, as long as we give him a report every now and then?"

Fraser could tell from the faces of the students that they were eager for some answers. And so he shifted into lecture mode and gave them some of his university material. He told them: "There are some different possibilities here. I won't give you an exhaustive or complete list. But one way to understand God's relation to the world is in terms of the doctrine of 'first causes.' According to this doctrine, which originated with the Aristotelian tradition in ancient philosophy, there is an ultimate cause of all things which is to be distinguished from the immediate causes, sometimes also called second causes. According to such an analysis, you and I and all sorts of forces and agents that we encounter in everyday experiences are the second causes. Science deals with second causes. But behind all of this is an ultimate or first cause that is beyond the grasp of science. And that first cause is God. According to this way of thinking, God gets the credit for absolutely everything. But there's an obvious problem with it. Do you see it?"

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It was not long before one of the students, this time a girl, put up her hand and pointed to the difficulty: it would make God responsible for wicked and horrible things that happen here on earth.

"Right you are," responded Fraser. "Let me outline one more view that has the advantage that it gets around this problem. Now, I want to stress that there are more than just these two views, but if we can get some understanding of these views today, we will have spent our class time well. This other view you might call the good-guys view. It's roughly the view that God works through -- and takes credit for -- whatever the good guys here on earth do. And so God is behind only some of the stuff that happens -- not all of it."

A few the students nodded approvingly. This good-guys view seemed to fit in with what they had been taught before. Fraser then asked: "So tell me, who are the good guys?"

One of the girls had her hand up. Fraser nodded for her to speak and she said: "Well, I suppose it's us, the church. God does what the church is doing -- right?"

"That's a plausible answer," said Fraser encouragingly. "God works through your church. But let's say that I don't go to your church. Let's say I'm in a different denomination altogether. So then, God does not work through me and the good things my church does -- right?"

The girl thought for a moment and then said generously: "No, he works through all the churches."

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"It's kind of you to say so," said Fraser with a smile. "Let's move on. I suppose the big question is whether God limits himself to the church. Does God work only through those who believe in him and give him the glory for what they're doing?"

He had no takers for this question, and so he answered it himself, conscious that the class was almost over: "Many of the great thinkers in the history of the Christian church have taken up this question in one way or another and wound up saying no. In other words, God does work through persons and forces that do not acknowledge him -- at least some of the time. Certain thinkers point to Isaiah 45: maybe you could look it up later today when you have a quiet moment. That's the chapter where Cyrus, the king of the Persians, who was certainly not a believer, is depicted as a tool in God's hand to bring about this and that. But the important point is that when something good comes about through Cyrus, God still gets the credit for it. And so, you might have an expanded conception of who the good guys are. It doesn't need to be limited to those who acknowledge God and give him the glory."

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By this point Fraser had a feeling that he was drifting away from the views that his friend Folkert would approve of. Folkert was fond of saying that God works through the creation order. It sounded simple when he explained it. Fraser sometimes wondered how Folkert's view was different from deism. Part of his reason for being dubious on this score is that Folkert did not seem to be a fan of the notion of miracles. In fact, he sometimes appealed to a Dutch Reformed thinker named Diemer who apparently maintained that

there are no miracles (although that might be a secular way to understand his theory) or else that everything is a miracle. The kind of miracle that fundamentalist Christians liked to appeal to seemed to be ruled out in this way of thinking. Or if something did look like a miracle of that description, it may well be that we do not sufficiently understand the creation order to realize how it could have come about by natural means.

As Fraser and Folkert talked, the subject of the sacraments was raised. Fraser had long sensed that Folkert had a somewhat unusual view of the sacraments, and especially of communion. So he pressed Folkert on the subject.

"Well, I'm no theologian, but I have thought for many years that Zwingli was basically on the right track when it comes to the Lord's supper. I know it's not a popular view in our circles, and so I don't run around promoting Zwingli on this point, but it does seem to me that Zwingli was a real reformer. We celebrate the Lord's supper regularly because our Lord asked us to do so -- in remembrance of him.

"It's right on the communion table," offered Fraser.

"But the communion table is off to one side in a traditional Reformed church," continued Folkert. "The pulpit is central. But the sacramental aura in which we have enveloped the Lord's supper -- even in many Reformed churches -- is basically a matter falling back into Roman Catholicism. Now, that's not to say that there isn't something special and glorious about this memorial feast. But it's special in the same way that all kinds of ordinary events are special --

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the blooming of the flowers in spring is special but it must also be understood as a signpost pointing to God's grace."

"So you're critical of Calvin on the question of the Lord's supper?"

Folkert nodded. "When Calvin and some other reformers went partway back to Rome on this issue, they stuck us with this dualism of special grace and common grace, a dualism of God's sacramental operations in the Lord's supper and baptism, on the one hand, and his general providence over our affairs, on the other. And I could mention more such categories. What we need to do is develop an all-embracing Christian philosophy in which these dualisms are exposed for what they are. Then we can get our theology straightened out."

"I suppose special revelation and general revelation is another one of those dualisms," offered Fraser.

"That's basically what I think," responded Folkert, "but I can't quite find the words to formulate accurately what I want to say on the subject. Of course I'm by no means an original thinker on this topic. But what we have to see is that the Bible, the word of God in Scripture, is not something separate and apart from the word of God in creation. God's revelation as all-encompassing was lost from view, and so God decided to issue his revelation once again in a more concentrated form in the Bible. When we start to think in terms of two 'parts' which we call special revelation and general revelation, we're creating new problems that really don't need to exist."

"It sounds to me as though you're really a deist," observed Fraser. "You remember some of those writings that were issued back in the eighteenth century, along the lines of John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious*."

No, that's not really the same thing at all," answered Folkert. "Those deists had no real sense of what the creation order is. They were caught up in mechanistic categories and did not recognize the many dimensions of the way God relates to this world through his law-word."

"I don't see the difference," ventured Fraser cautiously.

Folkert did not seem to take offense. "And I don't how to explain it to you any more clearly."

"Now, deism basically doesn't know what to do with the fall into sin -- right?" continued Fraser. "It seems to minimize the fall. So what's your philosophical understanding of the fall? Did it disrupt the creation order? Did it perhaps turn the vegetarian lion into the terrifying carnivore that the whole animal kingdom now fears? May we look forward to the day when the lion and the lamb will lie down together in friendship?"

"Well, there's that picture in Scripture, but we're not quite sure what it means."

"So tell me," Fraser pressed his friend further. "Where does redemption fit into your philosophical framework? Isn't it your

tendency to stay away from both fall and redemption? It seems to me that deism is basically a monotheistic philosophy in which the figure of Christ plays no role. So what's Christian about Christian philosophy as you understand it? What does Christ have to do with it?"

"Well," ventured Folkert, "I suppose to call it Christian is to say that it's inspired and driven by the word of God."

"But let's be trinitarian about this for a moment," responded Fraser. "Where does the second person of the Trinity specifically come into philosophy? What would a Christocentric way of thinking look like in philosophy?"

"But why would you want to be Christocentric in philosophy, or any other area, for that matter? You would then be unbalanced in your doctrine of the Trinity."

"Take Karl Barth," suggested Fraser. "He's surely a Christocentric thinker. What would a Barthian Christian philosophy look like?"

"I haven't read a whole lot of Barth," said Folkert, "but it's my understanding that he's not much of a proponent of Christian philosophy at all."

"That's my point," Fraser answered, perhaps a bit too quickly. "Strictly speaking, we should not have to choose between an emphasis on Christ and an emphasis on creation. Still, couldn't this be the key to the difference between deism and theism? And could it

be that the scientists and philosophers keep trying to tiptoe out of the theist pasture into the deist one, where the grass seems greener?"

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Fraser turned to enter the kitchen and came upon a curious sight: it was Lucy's hindquarters seemingly magnified out of proportion. She was on her hands and knees on the kitchen floor, intent on giving it a good scrubbing. Because she was facing away from him, she was not aware of his presence at first. Something of the illusion one sometimes sees on television when hands get too close to the camera and appear enormous in comparison to the rest of the body now seemed to be playing tricks on Fraser's eyes, for suddenly Lucy seemed larger than ever in the rear end department. Over the years she had spread out a bit in that regard, but Fraser had never seen her looking so broad before.

Moreover, she was dressed in clothes that almost seemed to protest the necessity of cleaning. It was as if her clothes were a reproach to Fraser for not doing his fair share of the housework. And when she turned to face him, he could see that her hair was a mess.

"I wish you'd do something about your appearance," he said cautiously.

"On a Saturday -- when I'm supposed to clean the house? I'll tell you what: I'll nip over to the beauty salon while you take over washing the kitchen floor."

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"No, I don't mean the way you look right now," he said, realizing that he was telling a white lie to spare her feelings. "I just mean, in general. You have nice hair, and I think you could do more with it."

"You mean I should cut it shorter?" She almost seemed to put the question to him as a challenge, for she knew that Fraser liked long hair on women.

Fraser squirmed for a way to extricate himself. "I guess there's something to that old term 'Sunday best,'" he said gently. "And when it's cleaning time on Saturday, well, you wear something else. I understand that."

Fraser's gambit was not as successful as he hoped, for he and Lucy were still engaged in their version of a fight -- or perhaps only a tiff. Before long she was accusing him of sexism. Now that she had some wind in her sails, she started to talk about the power vs. beauty dichotomy and complained that women just can't win. The cards are stacked against them from the beginning.

Then she threw an earlier theme into the discussion: she went back to the notion of God taking all the glory or credit. "Let me explain something to you, Fraser," she said condescendingly. "Your so-called Christian theology is shot through with sexism and paternalism! That's really what's wrong with the notion of the glory of God: it's a reflection of what's wrong with the typical marriage relationship. The woman is supposed to be what you call beautiful, but she doesn't get the time and opportunity to do much about her looks. Meanwhile, the man is the brains of the operation and takes

the credit for everything. He's the one who's supposed to get all the glory."

"Is that really how you see me?" asked Fraser, feeling aggrieved.

"Well, you're not the worst one. So try not to take this too personally. But this is how works between men and women: if the wives are to get their way, they usually have to do it by manipulating their husbands. Some are taught by their mothers to plant an idea in their husband's mind and then wait for the day when he comes up with it himself just as though he thought of it in the first place. That little game probably goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. That's why Christianity is having such a problem with feminism and the women's movement. It can't accommodate women anymore. Many women just won't stand for this sort of thing, and so they're leaving the churches."

"You should visit a few services and count heads some time," responded Fraser. "I think you'll find that there are more females than males in the typical church service. The church is hardly a men's club."

"Even if that's true," she shot back, "take a look and see who's running the show. Don't the worship leaders -- or most of them, nowadays -- still have to be men? The old paternalistic theology and understanding of God is woven into the very fabric of the churches. God gets all the glory, just as men are preoccupied with getting the glory. After all, God is one of the guys."

Fraser could not decide whether Lucy had been reading feminist theology or had reached these vehement conclusions through her own reflections. He decided it made no difference: she had to be taken seriously either way.

And she was far from done. She continued: "Take this business of men's childish preoccupation with paternity -- they're always asking: Is it really my child that you're carrying? Who gets the glory when a new life enters this world? It used to be that a woman's egg was considered no more than nourishment for the developing baby, which had somehow entered life fully formed from the father. The mother provided the womb, and the genetic information came from the father. I learned about it in a university class years ago. Of course that's utter biological nonsense, but the attitude that accompanied such thinking is still with us. Men have the big muscles; men do the planning; men make the decisions. And if the men are Christians, they like to assure each other that God is getting all the glory."

"Are you about done?" asked Fraser?

"As a matter of fact, I'm not. While I'm mad enough to get these things off my chest, I might as well tell you that part of the reason for the trouble we're having with Kelly is exactly this problem. I know I agreed to allow you to raise the children in the church, and I still don't think it's basically a bad idea -- it gives them something to rebel against -- but it works better for Matthew than for Kelly. The church is not a good place for females."

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"Would it help if we called God beautiful and got away from the preoccupation with credit and accomplishment and changing and making things?" asked Fraser. "It may interest you to know that there's a lovely old hymn that opens with the words `Beautiful Savior, King of creation.'"

"Come off it, Fraser. You don't really believe that! If God was considered beautiful in the Christian tradition, there wouldn't be that commandment against making an image of him. So you may demand that the woman in your life be beautiful, but even if she succeeds, she's not imaging God. Only you get to be God's image, because you get to do all the manly things that God also likes doing." Noting the look of incomprehension on her husband's face, Lucy added: "I sometimes wonder why I'm in this marriage at all."

"Am I really as bad as all that?" asked Fraser. Then he withdrew to lick his wounds.

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In his mind Fraser was thinking dark thoughts about how women are impossible to talk to. He wondered whether Angela would be at all sympathetic to what Lucy was trying to say. Of course Angela had never been married, and it was hard for Fraser to imagine her in grubby clothes washing the kitchen floor. Nevertheless, he thought it might be worth his while to discuss the issues and see if he could get some insight and perhaps even some consolation.

It turned out to be a few days before he could get in to see her. When he telephoned her, he indicated he did want this to be a

private encounter -- a coffee shop would not do. And so he wound up in her office at St. Capacia's.

Angela was indeed sympathetic to Lucy and seemed to think that her task was to give a more theologically informed version of what Lucy was articulating. "Fraser, those voices cannot be stilled," she said gently. "I know there are men in the church who want to hear nothing of that: it's as though they're sitting there with their hands over their ears. They think that all the issues were settled centuries ago, and all we have to do is keep on mumbling the same prayers. Well, it won't work. We can't avoid the issue of God as mother. Of course it sounds ridiculous in the ears of many of the men, but that's in part because they never saw their mothers getting any of the credit. So our traditional theology in which God gets all the credit and has all the power and muscle and planning attributed to him needs to be replaced. No, I shouldn't say that, let's say instead that it needs to be supplemented by a feminine -- not necessarily feminist -- theology of love. We need to recognize that God is not just in the business of demonstrating his power by planning and building dams and forcing people into line. God is not an engineer. Sometimes he's a still, small voice, as Elijah found out in I Kings 19."

"I can live with most of that," responded Fraser, "even though it doesn't arise out of my own experience as a male."

Then they drifted off into a discussion of women's ordination. If Lucy was demanding the kind of recognition of women that comes with women's ordination, why didn't she ease up in her attitude now that it had been done -- in many churches, at least? Fraser began to think aloud, saying things that he would like to have said to Lucy if

only he had thought of them earlier. Having Angela as his conversation partner seemed less threatening, and so he was not thinking defensively.

He talked about his impressions of the clerical garb worn by Anglican priests during their services. He also commented on all the "housekeeping" that seems to take place during Eucharist, or Mass, as the Roman Catholics like to call it. "It all looks so womanly," he observed, "so why do the Roman Catholics not ordain women?"

Angela had no fresh wisdom on this age-old question and simply suggested that it would inevitably come about. Fraser had heard that one before. She went on to observe that within Anglicanism there were still a lot of holdouts against women's ordination, especially in England. But she agreed that it seems perfectly natural to see a woman in the priest's role, especially when you consider what the priest does during the celebration of the Eucharist.

Then Fraser asked Angela whether she considered herself a feminist. She shook her head gently. "As a priest, I have to be here for all of the people, including the men. I would never want to create the impression that Christianity is some kind of 'for women only' movement, or that it's mainly for women. I'm encouraged by what I see in my ministry. It's possible for men to recover their softer side, what some of the psychologists, like Jung, called the feminine side of their nature. As they participate in rituals like the Eucharist and see a male priest up there performing an essentially feminine role and dressed like a woman, the feminine side cannot help but come to the fore somewhat. This is all to the good. One of the glorious things

about the sacraments is that they allow us to see again how the church is our mother."

You know," responded Fraser, "the business of the church being our mother is also found among the Calvinists, including some of the rather strict and conservative ones. The theme that the church is the bride of Christ leads naturally to the image of the church as our mother."

Fraser paused and then ventured into more personal territory. "But what about you, Angela? Does the logic of your understanding of the priesthood suggest -- I know I'm treading on sensitive territory here -- that you should be a mother in the earthly sense? You have no children. Does that bother you?"

"Because I'm a priest, they're all my children. Now, I don't say that I would never marry, but it's not on my mind at all. And marriage is definitely not something I look toward in order to fulfill myself as a priest. "

Fraser then changed the subject and decided to ask Angela about the doctrine of creation, which he also been discussing of late. Angela's first response seemed fairly familiar and predictable to Fraser. She maintained that what we call creation is an "ongoing affair."

To Fraser, "ongoing affair" sounded like a rather weak or tame doctrine of creation, and so he pressed her on the point. Angela responded: "The reason that you -- maybe not so much you in person, Fraser, but others in your churches -- are so nervous about the

doctrine of creation is that you're afraid of leaving the door open to Darwin and his version of evolution. I think that at bottom, what you're afraid of is that you'll wind up in the animal kingdom."

"What about the image of God?" countered Fraser.

"Maybe it's just that human beings possess it in greater measure," responded Angela. When Fraser offered no comeback, she continued: "Because so much Christianity was shaped by Platonism, by the deep split between the higher and the lower, between matter and spirit, and so forth, you -- maybe I should say 'we,' but I really don't feel this way myself -- became estranged from the animals. You developed this idea that Platonic souls are somehow the recipients of salvation and God's blessing. And so you left the animals on the outside, looking in, so to speak. That's why St. Francis comes across to you as little more than a kook."

Fraser admitted to himself that he had never given Francis of Assisi much thought.

"But what is an animal, etymologically speaking?" asked Angela. "'Anima' basically just means living thing. Indeed, the term is sometimes translated soul -- it's something alive. It should not bother us to be called animals. If we were not animals and did not have a great deal in common physiologically and anatomically with certain of the animals, how in the world would it be possible for animal body parts to be transplanted into human beings? "

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"So you'd bring animals into the sphere of religion? You'd want them to be saved? Little kids sometimes ask whether their dog will accompany them to heaven someday."

"Well, it's a good question. Tell me the answer, Fraser."

"I think I know the answer -- at least, for you as an Anglican. I'm familiar with the ritual of the blessing of the animals in your churches and also among the Roman Catholics. In fact, you invited me to attend such a service once. Now I wish I had done so. Maybe the next time. But what does the service really prove? So you haul some animals into church and thereby show that you're great animal lovers. Did Christ somehow die for the animals?"

"What happened your Calvinistic theology of cosmic redemption, Fraser? Isn't that the kind of talk I often hear from you, or actually, even more from Folkert? If dogs and cats and creation, as you like to call it, and the environment all come under that cosmic redemption, why shouldn't the animals be blessed in church?"

"So what's next?" asked Fraser. "Communion for dogs and cats?"

"That might not be a bad idea," said Angela.

"Okay, I'll put it to you directly, Angela: are you an animal?"

"I know who I am."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"The realization that I'm part of the animal kingdom does not upset me," she explained. "But of course, I'm also much more than an animal. Why is this so mysterious for you, Fraser?"

Fraser went back to his line of questioning about creation. He asked Angela about the relationship between creation and providence.

"Why should there be some kind of a clear line of distinction between them?" she responded. "I see no such need. Why would it matter? The important point we need to get across is that this world, however it originated, stands in relationship to God. Now, whether God made it, or whether he's renewing it or recreating it or providing for its needs or redeeming it, as you Calvinists like to say, doesn't make a great deal of difference to me. Running through all those categories and possibilities I see a relationship of love -- God's love for this world. And that love calls for a response from us."

Fraser nodded, encouraging Angela to continue. "In my own theology -- well, maybe I shouldn't apply this term to my own ideas. I suppose it's presumptuous on my part. Anyway, the way I see it is that we should regard God as both father and mother, as the source of our being in terms of the kind of paternity that you men are so keen on as well as the one who envelops me in a warm and loving embrace. But what I don't get is why these facets or dimensions of God's relationship to us and to this beautiful world we live in would need to be chopped up. Why do we need all those separate categories that you philosophically minded thinkers can enumerate so neatly?"

Couldn't we try to do away with those labels and think more in poetic and metaphorical terms?"

* * * * *

Fraser was back at the Christian high school, visiting the chemistry class where he had started quite some discussion about prayer a while back. He had returned to that class since then and had promised to try and come back again.

The chemistry teacher, seemed to have lots of time to kill that term, and so he was more than happy to oblige Fraser. He encouraged him to forget all about chemistry and just speak to the students about whatever might be in his heart. He also asked Fraser if he would be offended if he left the class in his sole custody, for he had some important lab preparations to make for another class.

What Fraser presented was a combination of homily and lecture. Something about his tone of voice and manner seemed to signal to the students that it would not be appropriate to interrupt with questions. And so it was not the kind of lively class for which Fraser had developed a reputation around the school.

Part of Fraser's agenda was to change his image slightly in the direction of a safe teacher who knew the tradition and affirmed it. He did not want his reputation for conducting lively classes as a substitute to get out of hand. And so he began with what many people would regard as truisms.

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He assured the students the God accepts us as we are. If this is truly so, we should feel free to pray just as we are. Surely this was also the message of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: there should be no thought of putting on airs when we pray.

He then told the students about a pair of men who had separately submitted to the pope what looked like the same question, but wound up with different answers. The one had written to the pope and asked whether it is permitted to smoke while one is praying. The pope thought not: it would hardly be respectful. But the other man, more committed to smoking, cleverly asked whether it is permitted to pray while smoking. The answer was yes -- one should always feel free to pray. The upshot seemed to be that prayer needs to be inserted into everyday life.

But what is it that we should be praying for? Our tradition encourages us to be "childlike" in our prayers. Well, what would it mean to be childlike? Little kids pull on their mother's sleeve and demand this and that when they're in the supermarket with her. There's an enthusiasm in their demands, and bystanders may well chuckle at the sight. May we pull on God's sleeve, so to speak, and ask for the stuff that we would really like to have? Fraser answered his own question with a yes: God accepts us as we are, and so he also accepts our small-mindedness. In his eyes we are lovable children.

Fraser then pointed out that there are people who are rather restrained in prayer because they think all prayers somehow have to fit in with one another. Therefore they feel they may never pray in opposition to what someone else is praying. When championship time comes, they may have an impulse to pray for victory for their

favorite team, but then they are held back by the thought that the supporters of the other team in the championship game may be doing the same thing. Just as Christians should not meet on the battlefield and kill one another, so Christians should not clash in terms of what they ask of God in prayer -- at least, that's what many people think.

Fraser now told the students that these were needless scruples. We are allowed -- indeed encouraged -- to be childlike. Therefore we may even say and ask stupid things in prayer. God does not give us just whatever we want. He does not respond to our requests like the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Fraser drew the attention of the class back to the earlier discussion and asked them whether they remembered the pointed question asked by one of the students: what's the point of praying? He told them that there were a number of answers that can be offered to this valid question. One important answer is that prayer elevates us and ennobles us. It encourages us to set our pettiness aside.

Fraser told the students that they have something to look forward to. These things gradually become easier as time goes on. When we age, we become a bit less demanding and less self-centered. We slowly come to the realization that this world will one day continue on its course without us in it. And in our last days -- at least, if we live to a ripe old age -- we will not be at the center of things but will largely be watching from the sidelines. It takes a special grace to accept such a role. And that grace can be communicated to us as a response to prayer.

A student then made an astute observation: "When you give us all these rules about praying, we're afraid to get started for fear that we're leaving something out or not doing it properly."

"Then I'm doing a bad job of explaining prayer to you," said Fraser. "I want to encourage you to pray very simply and not make a big deal of it. But remember that our Lord taught us how to pray -- that's where we get the Lord's Prayer from. And ever since then we've used it as a kind of model for the life of prayer. And so, for those who find the prospect of prayer daunting, especially when you have to lead in prayer before others, I advise you to reflect on the fact that our tradition has long recommended the use of formal prayers or prayers composed for certain kinds of occasions. It's not that we're to use such prayers exclusively, for extemporaneous prayers also have their place in our life." Fraser paused for a moment to explain the term "extemporaneous." Then he continued: "Some churches have a marvelous way of blending the formal or written-out prayer with the extemporaneous prayer."

Next Fraser turned his attention to the corporate element in prayer. "One of the great benefits of prayer," he declaimed, "is that it links us with a wider world. Not only do we pray for others, we pray with others. We are to think in terms of the worldwide church of God. That was also what Jesus had in mind when he taught us to address God in prayer as 'our Father.' And then there's the business about the coming of his kingdom: we pray 'thy kingdom come.' Thereby we're putting God first. But in uttering such a prayer, we don't mean to be seeking the sidelines ourselves. What we call God's kingdom is also our kingdom. Each of us, individually, has a place in

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that kingdom and should identify with that kingdom. In all that we do, we should seek the welfare of Jerusalem."

Fraser then switched over to talking about the notion of God's glory. "Some people go on and on in prayer about God's glory. They express the wish that he may be 'glorified' in this and that and the other thing. That's all right to do, and it has warrant in the Bible, but we need to realize that we deserve some credit too. And here's the really important thing for you to realize -- I want you to think carefully about this, also later today, when you have some time to yourselves."

"They give us too much homework," one of the students offered, without raising his hand.

Fraser ignored the interruption and continued: "When we take credit for good deeds and accomplishments, it's not a question of taking the credit away from God." The students looked puzzled, and so he explained: "It may help to think in terms of politeness here. If you're involved in a group project together and somebody compliments you on it, you're inclined to say that your partner or partners in the project did most of the work -- at least, if you're a polite person. You want to step back modestly. And your partners will perhaps do the same. In that same spirit, it's a beautiful thing when we offer God the credit. But remember that God turns around and says to us: 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.' That text, you may recall, comes from the parable about the servants who were given various amounts of talents to work with. So, in one sense everything good that happens here on earth is God's doing and is to God's credit. But the farthest thing from God's mind is to want to hog

all of that credit. He wants us to be his faithful servants -- no, more than that, he wants us to be fellow-laborers. Look at that passage in the third chapter of First Corinthians."

A student asked: "Does God draft us into service and use us whether we like it or not?"

"That's what some of the great thinkers have maintained," Fraser offered. "It's surely within his power to do so. But I want to stress again that what pleases God the most is whole-hearted service, by which I mean service in which we consciously seek to please him and to carry out his aims here on earth. And when we work with God in that spirit, we know ourselves to be part of a universal brotherhood of people all over the world. Ultimately, what we call the church is the worldwide body of Christ. It's not some little fellowship. In a way, I always admire the Roman Catholic tradition for being a worldwide body in a deeper organizational sense. The cause of Christ should not be limited geographically or tied up with a single church in the sense of a denomination. That's part of the point of what we call ecumenism."

Then Fraser turned for a moment to the life-situation of people as they become old and infirm. He explained to the students that many organizations and networks connect with one another in such a way that they wind up borrowing a little bit of glory or credit from what some of the organizations with which they are connected are doing. "We might speak here of affiliated glory," he said. "Now, there are some who don't like this notion and can only take pleasure in what they have accomplished with their own hands, but I think you can see that such an attitude is not worthy of us. When we get

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older, we need to take pleasure in whatever is worthy and useful and pleasing to God, even though we might not be in a position to take credit for it in the strictest sense of the term. And so, in prayer, we give the glory to God, and he, in turn, in his radiance, reflects glory back upon us."

Chapter 8

Here I Stand

"This one's for you," said Lucy, handing Fraser an envelope. He put it down absent-mindedly on the end table next to his reading chair. As usual, Fraser was not easily distracted from his book. But a few minutes later, when Lucy began talking on the telephone, thereby interfering with his concentration, Fraser put his book down and opened the envelope. To his surprise, it turned out to be an invitation to address some sort regional meeting of women's societies. And it had a Christian Reformed connection. The meeting was to be held in the Lumley Christian Reformed Church.

Where's Lumley?" asked Lucy.

"About forty miles east of here."

"I wonder why they asked you?" Lucy said, and then wished she could take back her words.

"Surprised?"

"I suppose so -- a little," Lucy said, almost apologetically.

Fraser mused: "I wonder whether Folkert had something to do with this." His hunch turned out to be correct. When he got hold of Folkert on the telephone, his friend admitted to having planted the idea. "You're getting quite a reputation in our community as a provocative speaker," said Folkert. "What happens at the Christian high school when you make those guest appearances as a supply teacher seems to get back out to the community. The kids are often bored -- you remember what high school was like -- but I hear you really stir them up. Now you'll have to stir up some ladies as well -- some of their mothers, indeed -- and also inspire them."

"You think I should accept?" asked Fraser, hoping for some encouragement and further praise.

"Of course you should! It would be a fine opportunity for you to try out some of your ideas. But make sure you don't talk over their heads. Perhaps you and I should discuss your speech before you give it. How much time are they allowing you?"

"Ninety minutes, but the letter says that includes a bit of discussion."

"Ninety minutes? You could get a lot said in that time. So send them an e-mail or something, and get working on your speech."

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The talk with Folkert had elevated the invitation in Fraser's mind. Of course, whenever an audience asks to hear from you, you should consider yourself complimented. Even at the university,

where he regularly addressed his somewhat sullen class of undergraduates, he still had to pinch himself at times when he considered the fact that here were all these people willing to listen as he held forth on grand metaphysical topics. And to think that he got paid for it too!

But what could he say to these Christian Reformed women? He had been invited to choose a topic himself, provided that he could soon send in a title for his speech, so that they could use the title in advertising the event. They also wanted some more information about him. Fraser wondered whether he should allow them to put down that he was a professor at the university. Whether he could properly be called a professor was a debatable point.

Folkert seemed to be telling him to lay out the basic ideas of his own philosophy, although the term "philosophy" should probably not appear in the speech. But just what was his philosophy? It was easy enough to talk around all kinds of issues in a university classroom where you had many, many hours to address the students, but if you had to sum up your philosophy, what did it come to?

Just then he thought of a little story Lucy had told him. She had been watching television one day during an election campaign. A leading politician was asked what should be done to get the sluggish economy moving again. The politician responded gravely: "I wouldn't be able to explain my plan to you in a mere thirty seconds." The interviewer responded by saying: "Okay, you have four minutes." At that point the politician's face fell. He turned pale. He started to stammer. Plainly he had no plan, but he had used the excuse that it was not possible to sum up all the complexities of his program in a

mere thirty seconds. Well, thought Fraser, philosophy is a bit like economics. It's hard to sum up, whether in thirty seconds or four minutes or ninety minutes.

And Fraser wasn't the only philosopher with difficulty in this department. He thought back to his graduate school days when one of his friends, Jeff Murray, was writing a doctoral dissertation on Wilhelm Dilthey. The two of them were enrolled together in a seminar in nineteenth-century German philosophy. The students took turns making presentations. Jeff, of course, was assigned to let the class in on Dilthey. The professor told the other students that Dilthey's philosophy was rather elusive but then promised that Jeff would make everything clear for them. Now, Dilthey was well known as a great proponent of hermeneutics or interpretation theory and as a lover of the historical approach to all things (what some scholars call historicism), but he tended to talk around systematic issues. Commentators complained that it was hard to get hold of Dilthey's own ideas.

And so, when the day came for Jeff to make his presentation in which all was to be made clear, he informed the seminar that Dilthey had been pressed from time to time to sum up his own philosophy. Perhaps he would be invited to write a short essay about his fundamental ideas for thus and such a publication. And so he would proceed to outline something on paper with some such title as "The Fundamental Idea of My Philosophy." But it would turn out to be an incomplete work. In the collected German writings of Dilthey - - Jeff had undertaken to learn German so that he would not base his dissertation simply on the finished works of Dilthey that had made it into English translation -- there were a number of these incomplete,

inconclusive pieces. And so Jeff speculated -- inconclusively, thought Fraser -- on why Dilthey had found it so difficult to sum up his own philosophy.

Fraser mused that perhaps Dilthey should have had such an invitation as addressing a group of ladies. It might have helped him clarify his ideas. But he was also sympathetic to Dilthey's plight. Philosophers are also writers, after all, and every writer knows the terror of the blank sheet of paper that is just waiting to be filled up with your words. And so Dilthey, as Jeff explained it, seemed to be easily distracted. He could go on at great length about Schleiermacher or Hegel or some other great thinker, but he did not like to be pinned down as to just what he himself thought. But on the other hand, part of the reason for his considerable reputation was the abiding mystery about what he actually believed.

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It occurred to Fraser that he could try out the talk he was working up for the women on his introduction to philosophy students. The end of the term was not far away, and he felt the course needed some sort of review or wrap-up. Early in the course he had made some high-sounding comments about the relationship between believing and knowing in our time. He had told the students about Kant and how he had seemingly sundered these two epistemological concepts. So what had become of knowing since the days of Kant? Its domain seemed to have shrunk, while the domain of belief expanded. But this left us with a dualism in our epistemology, and that dualism had undermined our cognitive confidence. One result of this loss of confidence was that we were no longer so bold about taking action

when it was needed. Kant had opened up room for religion (that was generally what scholars made of his domain of believing), but it now appeared that religious folk did not know anything. Or perhaps it should be said that what they did know had no bearing on their religious life. And so religion had become a thing apart -- private, subjective, arbitrary.

And that was where William James came into the picture. Fraser had long been intrigued by James' philosophy. It seemed to him that in principle there was something of a recovery of our cognitive confidence in the thinking of James. And then he thought to himself: "That's it! I should call the talk 'The Recovery of Our Cognitive Confidence.'" It had a nice ring to it.

By appealing to James, he could also deal with something in the bank of his mind that had been bothering him for a while. It stemmed from the talk that he and Lucy had had with Kelly, when she had thrown some stinging words his way: "You don't do anything." The indictment had originally included Lucy, but Lucy had managed to wiggle out of it. And with justification, thought Fraser to himself. But he still felt stung, and so he thought he would discuss the issue again with Kelly, with an eye to what he might say to the women, but he did not take Kelly into his confidence by telling her what sort of speech he was preparing.

As Kelly responded to her father, she seemed to be reading from a script written for teenagers: "Dad, you are so out of it! You have no idea what goes on in the world. You live in a dream world, a world defined by the limits of those dreary books you read all the time! And you claim to love philosophy? Tell me, does your

philosophy have anything to say about how people should live nowadays, in a changing world?"

It was a sobering challenge, and Fraser listened to it quietly. If he had flared up, he could easily have gotten into a row with Kelly -- it had happened before. But he decided that he should not be too proud to learn from a thirteen-year-old. And so he resolved to use his speech to present his own -- perhaps slightly original -- philosophy of living the Christian life. And in his own mind, at least, the speech would function as an answer to Kelly. Of course Kelly would not hear the speech, but once he was done with it, he would have the assurance that her charge was not warranted.

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Lucy asked him now and then how the speech was coming along. After he had done some work, he told her bit about it, including the stuff about Kant and William James. Cautiously Lucy suggested that he would wind up talking over the heads of the women. She then advised: "Try to be more concrete about the assignment. I'm afraid that when you get to looking out over the audience of women, you'll have a sinking feeling that your speech is not right for them. So use your imagination and try to get an idea of what kind of women they might be."

Then an idea came to her: "Consider Corky for a moment -- I know she's not Christian Reformed, but there are women who think like her in all kinds of churches nowadays. They can't understand philosophy -- you can be sure of that. What you need to do is give them something more practical, something more down-to-earth."

"Well, that's easy for you to say," responded Fraser, "but it hardly counts as constructive criticism. It's like telling someone: 'You're doing it the wrong way!' So what is the right way?"

Then Lucy, trying to be constructive, dredged up a phrase -- "philosophy of life." She started out slowly and asked Fraser: "Didn't you once tell me that philosophy is supposed to be philosophy of life? Don't you claim that the ideas of all the great philosophers have profound implications for everyday activities? Well, running is an everyday activity. Isn't there some kind of philosopher of running call George Sheehan -- or something like that? Now, I know that running isn't sufficiently highbrow for you to take seriously. You probably have trouble connecting the concept of running with the concept of philosophy. But I have a friend who's always talking about this Sheehan guy. She calls him the 'philosopher of running.'"

Fraser thought it was worth a try and promised to look up this George Sheehan. He asked her how to spell the man's last name, but she didn't know. Fraser assured her he could soon find out on the internet. He figured the Sheehan lead would come to nothing, and he was still determined to stick with William James.

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It did not take Fraser long to track down a couple of books by George Sheehan. And when he began to read them, he was in for a pleasant surprise. The man did have a wonderful way of intertwining running and philosophy. And he didn't use the term "philosophy" in the superficial way of salesmen and all kinds of other people who

haven't the slightest idea what philosophy is really about. Sheehan had read a number of the great philosophers, and he worked their ideas effortlessly into his discourses on running. But he was especially enamored of certain streams among the philosophers -- the pragmatists and those who advocated what he had once told Lucy about, namely, "philosophy of life." Scholars usually reckoned Dilthey among the philosophers of life.

Since Sheehan liked the pragmatists and William James, Fraser could stick to his original intention and still make grateful use of Lucy's suggestion. And so he reconsidered his theme and thought of addressing the women on "Learning to Walk Again." He knew that even in conservative Christian Reformed circles there were a number of women who had gone through some crisis in their life, such as a marriage breakup, and were trying to start a new life. To some degree, that new start was like learning to walk again. Moreover, the notion of learning to walk would appeal to the mothers among them, since they would have lived through that very process with their children.

In the background of his talk, Fraser could draw on the pragmatist's idea of cognition passing over into action. William James maintained: "Cognition ... is but a fleeting moment, a cross-section at a certain point, of what in its totality is a motor phenomenon. ... Cognition, in short, is incomplete until discharged in the act" And then, in the spirit of William James and even Theodore Roosevelt, he could include a pep talk about how we have to overcome our fears, our paralysis. After he was done and had returned -- in triumph, he hoped -- he could tell Kelly that he had worked Theodore Roosevelt into his talk and thank her for bringing him up in family conversation. For that matter he could also mention the other Roosevelt -- Franklin,

who had served as president a little later -- for the second Roosevelt had proclaimed that we have nothing to fear but fear itself.

He wondered whether he should put in his favorite passage from William James: "“We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we may get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do?” He was aware that the passage had a kind of masculine flavor to it. But then there was a possibility that these women, most of them rather liking men, he suspected, would be drawn to this muscular rhetoric. And Fraser was no feminist or lover of the feminists. He believed very much in the male/female polarity.

Then his thoughts returned to his original intention, which was to pick up the aftermath of the philosophy of Kant and the great separation between believing and knowing. Perhaps he could work in some of the aftermath-of-Kant material as a secondary theme. He could tell the women that if we are stuck with the uncertainty that clings to believing, if there is no longer any knowing in the strict sense of the term, or if perhaps knowing in the strict sense is restricted to a very small province of human knowledge, as the logical positivists seemed to believe, we are left with a world in which we can never grow up and become adults. We remain forever gawky teenagers not knowing which way to turn.

He could then work in a reference to Robert Bly and that stimulating book *The Sibling Society*, which he had read some time ago. Bly was talking about how difficult it is nowadays for males to

grow up. They seem to remain perpetual adolescents. Even when they are in their thirties, they are still not ready to settle down and become husbands and fathers; instead they continue carrying on like teenagers.

Maybe, mused Fraser, they need a father to overthrow. Would that be a characterization of the modern era -- the overthrow of God the Father, which is made more real by beginning with one's own earthly father? Hasn't much of the history of the last couple of centuries had rebellion and revolution as its undercurrent?

But then Fraser paused to ask himself whether the path of patricide -- whether real or symbolic -- really works. Could it be that you still remain kids if you actually manage to get rid of your father? He thought of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky had sounded a somber warning.

Perhaps, to give all of these ruminations a more positive spin, Fraser thought he could appeal to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian who had been murdered by the Nazis just before the end of the war and had thereby become a martyr and a hero to Christians all over the world. Bonhoeffer's heroic resistance to evil had won him quite an audience for his theological ideas about a "world come of age," a world without traditional religion. Bonhoeffer seemed to think that we might have to make do with a "religionless Christianity" for a while, before something else emerged. Fraser was reminded of the later Heidegger and some of his speculations in more mythological direction.

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As Fraser thought, he typed some of the ideas running through his head into his computer. But as he looked over his notes, he pulled up short and reminded himself again that his audience would include women like Corky -- or so Lucy seemed to think. High-sounding talk about Bonhoeffer and Heidegger would leave the women to conclude that they had invited the wrong speaker. They would cross Fraser off their list, and perhaps the word would spread to others that he was to be avoided. No, it was time to look for a bit of help from someone who knew the Christian Reformed world and the intended audience much better than he did -- Folkert.

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Fraser knew it was about time he ran some of his ideas past Folkert. As he drove over to his office at the university, he expected to be reproved. And indeed, Folkert began to shake his head after listening for about ten minutes. "Listen, Fraser," he said, "you need to be more positive and affirm something. That's what our people are looking for. You know that our people admire Luther -- the business of 'Here I stand.' By the way, I suspect that Luther is also in rather good odor in Presbyterian circles. After all, he's the one who got the Reformation going."

"Sure," replied Fraser, "that's a famous phrase -- 'Here I stand.' But what does it mean? As I recall, it was followed by some words to the effect: I can do no other. But by itself doesn't really mean or say anything, doctrinally speaking."

"Yes," responded Folkert, "there's something to what you say, but at the same time his most famous saying embodies commitment

and firmness. Christians need to know what it is they believe and stand for. By the way, did you know that John Shelby Spong, that Anglican bishop in the States who's always stirring people by denying the fundamentals of our faith, has published an autobiography in which he has the gall to use 'Here I Stand' as his title? I saw it in a bookstore the other day. I couldn't believe it! What gall! He's about as far from Luther as they come!"

"Surely you don't want to identify Christianity with stubbornness!" said Fraser, who hardly knew who Spong was. "Is Christianity a matter of always refusing to give an inch?"

"Well, no, there's more to it, of course. But what is it that Paul says at the end of I Corinthians 15 -- something along the lines of 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable ...' Of course that's not the whole Bible, but those words are in the Bible. And it's a sound our people like to hear."

"It's a sound you Frisians like to hear," said Fraser.

"That's what people are always saying about the Frisians," Folkert replied. "They're supposed to be so stubborn. I can understand why people say that, but stubbornness isn't quite the word for what they're pointing to. What was it Abraham Kuyper said -- or was it Groen van Prinsterer? 'In our isolation lies our strength.' That so-called stubbornness is more a matter of being willing to stand alone. It means firmness of principle. A Frisian always admires someone who sticks to what he believes. You're supposed to choose principle over opportunism."

"But the big question is: what counts as a principle? Do the Frisians have as many principles as the Jews have commandments?"

"Of course not," said Folkert. "But I should add that it's not only the Frisians who are known for this kind of firmness: it's characteristic of many of the Dutch, especially the ones who have been Calvinists for generations. And it even carries over in the Dutch character when they turn liberal. The Dutch are not wish-washy liberals: they can be very firm about their liberal principles, if that's possible. It's like that business of being an atheist. You can't be an atheist in general. You have to tell people which God it is that you're denying. What it really amounts to is revealing your religious background. And so there are Calvinist atheists who are in rebellion against the stern, predestinarian God they were introduced to in childhood."

Fraser mused: "I suppose this firmness you speak of contributes to the psychology behind church splits. Still, some people put a little different spin on it. They think it has to do with the desire to win an argument at all costs. What was that long Dutch word you told me about a while back -- it begins with a `g'?"

"You mean `gelijkhebbij,'" answered Folkert. "Taking great pleasure in having been right all along, and wanting desperately to be shown to have been right -- that sort of thing. It's in my bones too -- I'll admit it."

"Isn't it the reason why Dutch churches tend to split?" asked Fraser.

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"It certainly had something to do with the devastating church split of 1944, the one in which Klaas Schilder played a central role. If you try to explain that struggle simply in terms of the doctrinal issues, if you treat it as an honest disagreement about doctrine, it doesn't add up. You have to bring in the psychology of the Dutch. You have to get into their personal characteristics, and of course the historical setting -- the fact that the Netherlands was under Nazi tyranny at the time."

"Couldn't the two sides unite in the face of their common enemy?" asked Fraser.

"That's what they should have done, of course." Folkert paused, and then added: "I probably shouldn't say it, but what happened in the course of that strange struggle is grist for your mill -- at least, insofar as you like to criticize the Dutch Reformed world. You see, a mere fifteen years after the split took place, the big church that had expelled Schilder and many of his followers took back its doctrinal pronouncements. It was trying to heal the split and pave the way for a reunion. But it was rebuffed. And now the question is: why did the Schilder group -- of course Schilder himself was dead by this point, as were some of the other 1944 leaders -- not respond more positively to what the big church was trying to do? On a purely doctrinal level, the Schilder group took satisfaction at seeing the doctrinal declarations of 1943 and 1944, which they had resisted so fiercely, retracted. In this regard they were vindicated. But then there were psychological factors and issues of character that came into the picture. As principal Frisians and Dutchmen, the people in the Schilder group admired 'steadfastness.' You should stick to what you said. So here came this group that was wanting to unite, or perhaps

re-unite, with them. That was good -- no getting around them. But what was the basis for uniting? They said sheepishly: 'We just changed our mind.' Would you want to associate with people like that?"

Fraser nodded. That was so often the problem, the barrier -- "gelijkhebbelij." It was too bad we had no such word in English.

He then asked: "But isn't there also a kind of love of battle for its own sake that plays a role in those nasty episodes in church history? Lucy has me reading George Sheehan. Have you heard of him? Anyway, in this wonderful book about running and cancer and all sorts of things he explains how Thoreau had what he calls an 'adversarial view of life.' He says that Thoreau was 'energized' by causes. But I think a lot of Christians are like that -- especially in the Calvinistic world."

"Yes, there's something to that," responded Folkert. "We need to strive for balance in these matters. That's what made Herman Bavinck such a great theologian -- his sense of balance. Abraham Kuyper, whom some would consider an even greater thinker and probably had more ability than Bavinck, was too much a man of causes and polemics and one-sidedness. He was probably closer to Thoreau in personal make-up than Bavinck was."

Fraser then explained that hold-your-ground Christianity made him uneasy. When he heard endless talk about heritage and inheritance and so forth, he got suspicious. The people who loved such terms were surely 'Here I stand' people. They had staked out a little piece of turf and were not about to be budged from it. "But is

that the Christian faith? Doesn't our faith have the character of a journey? Shouldn't we be going somewhere? There's that wonderful old saying: keep moving -- that way they can't bury you. It sounds a bit irreverent, and it's not from the Bible, but it does speak for me."

Folkert then said: "But if you're so concerned to keep moving, why do the folks in your churches -- by the way, I think this is true of the Anglicans as well as the Presbyterians -- sit down once the worship service is over? You get dismissed with some sort of a commission to go out into the world and do the things you've been talking and praying about. And you respond to the 'Go forth' by sitting down! Well, that's not how it is in our churches. We're commissioned to go out, and we actually do it -- we exit the sanctuary. Now, we don't all dash out in a mad rush, and we may take time to drink coffee before heading home -- there's order to it. But the idea is that the service is over and now it's time to depart. The Christian life has a rhythm. We leave worship and turn to the world."

Fraser had nothing to say in response to Folkert's point. He, too, had been struck by this difference between their respective traditions. But in his mind he was still focused on the notion of holding one's ground. And so he suggested to Folkert: "Have you ever considered the possibility that the Dutch are hung up about holding their ground because they had to wrestle so much of the ground on which they live from the sea? A major proportion of the land on which the Dutch actually live is below sea level -- that's where the country gets its name, although many people over here don't realize this. And so the Dutch know that they have to tend the dikes very faithfully and never given an inch. Maybe they learned their theological stubbornness from tending those dikes. Maybe they have

the tendency to become closed-minded and feel threatened because they know that the sea is always around them to overwhelm them. The sea is the world."

"That's an interesting idea," responded Folkert. "I never thought of that. But when it comes to being stubborn and liking a fight, aren't the Scots just as bad?"

"There's no denying that they tend to be cantankerous," admitted Fraser. "But again, we need to ask whether there's a reason for the attitude they take. Why all those wars with the English? It had nothing to do with dikes and the threat of the sea, of course. And the way those wars were conducted leaves me feeling ashamed as a Scot who also dares to call himself a Christian. But still, there was some reason behind it: the resistance to Anglicanism is understandable. For example, those Scots made a big deal of refusing to bow the knee in church. Of course one might wonder what could possibly be wrong with bowing before God. But in the way the Anglican authorities and the English rulers in the south conceived of things, bowing before God in effect meant that you were bowing before the bishop and the king -- all that hierarchical stuff that Scotland was trying to get away from. Could it be that the king and the bishop and the altar were all rolled up into one ball of wax for the Scots? Anyway, I've read that many Scots think of their resistance to Anglican forms of worship and church governance as part of the struggle to preserve their liberties and to foster the democratic spirit. Surely that's worth something."

"I think you're largely right about that," said Folkert. "You're a Scot -- you'd know these things better than I would. In the Dutch

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Reformed tradition there's also an awareness that our system of church government, which is essentially the same as yours, contributes to democratic attitudes and helps to shape the freedoms we enjoy in this world."

Fraser was still uneasy about the "Here I stand" theme and wanted to get back to it. It seemed to him too static. And so he mused: "Isn't there also something martial about Christianity? Or shouldn't there be? We used to sing 'Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.' And if you go back a little ways in history, you come upon the Crusades. We were going to liberate the Holy Land from the infidel. Tell me -- who talks about 'the infidel' nowadays? Of course I don't mean to defend everything that happened in the name of Christ during the Crusades, but sometimes we go overboard in terms of scorning the ideals that motivated some of the Christians back in those days. Nowadays it's more like we're singing 'Onward Christian peaceniks'"

Fraser paused, but Folkert didn't say anything. To drive home his point still further, he added: "Here I stand, or stand your ground - - that sort of thing just doesn't fit in with 'Onward Christian soldiers' and the 'Go forth' emphasis."

"As a literary man, Fraser, I need to advise you not to take those metaphors so seriously. Metaphors have their place, but they're not exhaustive. And so, if a metaphor or an image, for example, to the effect that the Christian life is a matter of standing on a carefully chosen spot is taken too far, it leads to distortions and misconceptions. So I'd be quite content to combine 'Here I stand' with 'Here I march,' if that would make you happy."

* * * * *

Fraser's next stop was Angela's office at St. Capacia's. He did not lay out his stuff about Kant and William James on believing and knowing; instead, he started with his discussion with Folkert on the "Here I stand" theme. Angela's initial response was in line with what Folkert had said: there's more to the Christian life. "Luther was certainly a great leader in the church, and we have a great deal to thank him for, but in some respects the continental reformers went to far."

"So I suppose you're going to add another image," said Fraser. "You're going to throw in 'Here I kneel' -- right?"

"Yes, of course kneeling is an important part of the Christian life and of our worship. But we don't kneel all day. If you want to make a list of these 'here I ...' statements, you can also add 'Here I walk.' You've attended enough Anglican services to know that we make a point of moving around during worship. And when I attend a service in a traditional Protestant church, it always seems odd that the people have to stay in that one spot in which they have chosen to sit for the whole service. It's like they're not released until the service is over. Moving around in the service of God, moving while worshipping him, seems perfectly natural to me. So, in that sense, I guess I can understand your reluctance about 'Here I stand.'"

Fraser then turned to the subject of marching and Christian soldiers and the Crusades and so forth. Angela pulled a face at the mention of the Crusades. She then observed: "We should remember

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that during the Middle Ages you also encounter the notion of pilgrimage, which has roots in Scripture. Just as believers come to the front to take communion and so go up to meet the Lord, there was an element of pilgrimage in the Old Testament. You went up to the temple in Jerusalem. Many people nowadays, knowing that the Jews worship in synagogues just as we worship in churches, project the synagogue system into the Old Testament era and suppose that the Jews trotted off each sabbath to the synagogue. That wasn't the case. They made a pilgrimage every now and then to Jerusalem, which for most of them was quite a long journey. And if you read the Psalms of Ascent -- Psalms 121 through 134, as I recall -- you get some sense of the rhythm of taking step after step, while steadily climbing higher. Something of that pilgrimage mentality carried over to the Middle Ages. Think of Chaucer and his 'Canterbury Tales.' There are also people in our time, Anglicans and others, who are recovering the pilgrimage character of the Christian life. So perhaps pilgrimage would be a theme for you to work into that talk you have to give."

Fraser didn't know how to respond to this suggestion, but because he was so comfortable with Angela he simply began to express his thoughts aloud, without quite knowing where he was going with them. He said: "Christians who wander around make me somewhat uneasy. Take those charismatics who are always talking about their 'walk with the Lord.' They make it sound so holy. But I ask myself: where are they going?"

"Is it fair to apply literal categories to images and metaphors?"
Angela asked gently.

"It's what philosophers do all the time," replied Fraser. "The British philosophers, in particular, think much of the confusion in the intellectual world comes through these metaphors and images that fall apart when they're examined carefully. Another one in this vein that bothers me is the business of how we have to grow and grow and grow spiritually. In the Dutch Reformed churches, the elders, or perhaps the minister with an elder, come around once a year to each home in the congregation. They're very systematic about visiting the people. Of course, that's a fine practice in and of itself. But what happens during those visits? Well, they come to check up on you somehow, spiritually speaking. And so they ask you whether you are 'growing' in your faith. Now, what's being presupposed here? Are we supposed to get bigger and bigger, spiritually speaking, or could it be that there is such a thing as trimming down, or losing weight in the spiritual domain?"

"The Bible does recommend fasting," Angela pointed out. "And so the idea behind fasting would seem to be that we need to get rid of superfluous things, both physically and spiritually. Think also of what St. Paul says at beginning of Hebrews 12: something about how we are to 'lay aside every weight' and so forth."

"To me there's something acquisitive and materialistic and perhaps even greedy in this business of growing and growing and growing. When I think about these issues, I go back to what John the Baptist said about Jesus in John 3. John emphasized that he was not the Christ but had only been sent to prepare the way for the Christ. Then he told the people that the Christ must increase, whereas he, John, must decrease. Does that sound like 'grow and grow and grow'? I sometimes use that passage as a way to make a joke about losing

weight. But there's something significant about the contrast between increasing and decreasing. Must we be forever puffed up? I think the Roman Catholics would be able to teach us something about humility."

"Those are some interesting ideas, Fraser, and you might think about including them in that talk of yours."

Encouraged by these words of praise, Fraser ventured some more ideas. "So let's say that we're supposed to walk with God. Do we journey forever without arriving anywhere? Abraham walked with God a piece -- it's in Genesis 18 -- and you might say that the last part of his life was a sustained journey with God. So if anybody could talk about his 'walk with the Lord,' it was Abraham. But note that God brought him somewhere -- to the promised land. So maybe, we as Christians need to become more concrete in our thinking and recover something of the notion of the promised land. I'm not saying that we have to make it physical and localizable, as the Jews do. But we need to do something with the notion that God wishes to bring us somewhere."

"Sure," responded Angela, "to some degree every new challenge or crisis has to be accepted as a time of opportunity. But men and women of the cloth sometimes get tired of making that point over and over in so many different situations. It starts to sound cheap when you hear yourself saying it."

Fraser then suggested that a little humor might make Christian platitudes easier to swallow. He asked Angela whether she was acquainted with Peter De Vries, a comic novelist who had sprung

from the Christian Reformed world. She replied that she had read a few of his novels and enjoyed them. "Anyway, Peter De Vries has this character -- by the way, he's always mocking these ponderous types he invents -- who says something to the effect of: whatever your lot in life, build something on it (bad pun!). I was thinking of that statement the other day in a serious vein. Lucy has me reading a couple of books by George Sheehan, who's supposed to be a 'philosopher of running.' Anyway, he's a very athletic and vigorous and positive man. But what makes his life story so interesting is that he comes down with prostate cancer, and the cancer eventually kills him."

"Does he come to accept the cancer?" asked Angela.

"I can't answer that with a straight yes or no," replied Fraser. "He certainly doesn't become a model patient in any traditional sense. In his book he tells us what it's like to be in the last stage of life, struggling with an unforgiving cancer. Yet there's a positive note that comes through. His daughter Sarah was once asked how her father was doing, now that he was facing a terminal cancer. Her response was: 'He just loves it! He writes about it in all his columns and talks about it endlessly.' Isn't that an interesting response?"

"It reminds me a bit of May Sarton," offered Angela. "What was that book she wrote about a woman who was dying? I think it was called *A Reckoning*."

Fraser vaguely remembered the book. He then continued: "Many people in his shoes -- running shoes, I guess -- would be devastated. Some would be ashamed to be struck with a deadly illness. They would consider their cancer a reason to keep silent and pull

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back from the world. But Sheehan embraces it as an opportunity. I'd call that an example of building something on your lot in life. So maybe God takes you to such and such a point, and then the journey ends -- at least, as far as you and this life are concerned. I suppose that's part of what we used to mean by 'calling.' I don't hear much about the concept of calling anymore."

* * * * *

Fraser was in a rush to get his new ideas down on paper -- or into the computer. Even if they were somewhat jumbled, he could always eliminate the confused parts later on. The important thing was to have a text to work with. The thought of having a distinct number of words already written that the computer could count for him made him feel good.

But then his computer froze up. He had been saving his file regularly as he worked, and so he was confident that his work was not lost -- provided he got the computer running again. He tried turning the machine off, but then it would not boot properly. He seems stymied for the night.

Fraser did not know a lot about computers, and neither did anyone else in the house. He generally looked to David Hasselfreud for advice on these matters. It was too late to phone David, and so he decided he would try to catch his friend the next morning before he left for work. But when David came to the phone, he explained that he had a busy day and was also tied up that evening and would not be able to come over and take a look at Fraser's computer. He did have some time open at lunch, but Fraser's home was too far from David's

office at the university for an on-site inspection. Perhaps they could talk about the problem over lunch: David could then suggest a few remedies. "Let's meet at Herpolsheimer's Cafeteria. I can select some of the vegetarian stuff there -- that way I won't have to worry about keeping kosher. Do you know where it is? Right on the corner of University and Porter."

Once they sat down with lunch before them, David gave Fraser a few strategies that were likely to get the computer going again. He promised to come over the next day if none of them worked. "That might be too late," replied Fraser nervously, knowing that his speech still needed plenty of work.

David then began to press Fraser for details of the address that he was to give. As usual, he started offering feedback. On most occasions Fraser welcomed David's comments, but now he feared that David would wind up adding to the confusion that was already in his mind.

"You Calvinists are basically a bunch of Cartesians in your theology," argued David. "Almost everything you talk about in that theology of yours happens in some strange sort of `space' -- I really need to put the word in quotation marks -- that is utterly separate from the real world. It can well be compared to Descartes' mysterious mental space which has no connection with the real space of the physical world. Tell me, where does what you call `regeneration' take place -- this `mysterious operation' of the Holy Spirit? That's why these postures -- here I stand, here I kneel, and so forth -- are confusing to you. You've lost all concreteness in your relationship to

God. You don't know how to integrate the body into your theology. You need to think in more earthy terms."

"Is 'earthy' the same as 'earthly'?" asked Fraser. "I think there's a difference. Our theology may not be as clear as it should be, but it certainly is earthly -- it's about this world. We're orderly in our thinking, and we start with creation. Well, that's the world that you and I walk around in everyday."

"Yes," countered David, "but you're so utterly rationalistic about it. Have you ever heard of postmodernism? You Calvinists seem to think you have to have 'foundations' for everything. Your theology has to start with 'prolegomena,' as though the things of God can somehow be deduced from first principles of some sort. You're so preoccupied with images drawn from the domain of houses and buildings that you neglect to think in terms of the human body that you actually inhabit. And so you wind up forgetting that before you can stake out your turf and dig in your heels so that you won't give an inch, as so many of you seem determined to do in theology, you need a leg to stand on."

"Are you guys talking about Oliver Sacks?"

Someone had stopped at the table and had overheard the last words David spoke. Fraser looked up and saw that it was Sergei Kowalski. Sergei was carrying a tray with his lunch, and so Fraser invited him to sit down. Sergei and David also knew each other but had not met for some time. They exchanged pleasantries.

It turned out that the very words David had used, 'a leg to stand on,' served as the title of a book by Oliver Sacks which Sergei was just then reading. Indeed, he had a copy of the book with him. It was a fascinating book and clearly served to reinforce some of the points that David was trying to make to Fraser.

It was not long before Sergei caught on to the drift of the discussion and jumped in. He went further than David in terms of undermining Fraser's customary way of thinking. Sergei started to explain how even the body -- for many of us the fortress we inhabit -- should not have privileged ontological status. The body is simply part of the world -- it is something, it is there. Sounding a bit like Heidegger, Sergei went on to explain that such a realization hits you only in a time of emergency, a time when something goes awry. And that was what happened to Oliver Sacks when he had a check nasty climbing accident and broke his leg. And it was no routine fracture. The result was that the leg no longer seemed part of him. "Just listen to this," said Sergei, pulling the book from his backpack. He started to read:

... the leg suddenly assumed an eerie character -- or, more precisely, if less evocatively, lost all its character -- and became a foreign, inconceivable thing, which I looked at, and touched, without any sense whatever of recognition or relation. It was only then that I gazed at it, and felt I don't know you, you're not a part of me, and, further, I don't know this "thing," it's not part of anything. I had lost my leg.

Sergei skipped a bit of the text and then read further:

... I had lost my leg. It had vanished; it had gone; it had been cut off at the top. I was now an amputee. And yet not an ordinary amputee. For the leg, objectively, externally, was still there; it had disappeared subjectively, internally.

"That sounds like an intriguing book," observed David. "I must read it soon. But I also ran into a case like that. Marcia's cousin, Sally Sloper, broke her leg a few years ago in a strange, unaccountable way. There was no climbing accident involved. The leg just sort of gave way under her, and it turned out to be a very severe break. She was immobilized for months, and it took her a good year to get back the use of that leg. And for her it was a profoundly disorienting experience. She seemed to become a different woman during her time of therapy and reorientation. Although she's not philosophically minded, she began to talk about a whole new relation to the world now that she was conscious of what it meant not to have a leg to stand on. I should get Sally to read the book too."

David wanted to get back to the line of argument he had been pursuing before Sergei came along, and so he looked directly at Fraser and declared: "Before you look for ground to hold, you need a leg to stand on -- or preferably two of them. In general, more bodily emphasis is needed in your thinking. Remember that you're talking to women. They're more earthy. The feminist philosophers just hate Descartes and his disembodied consciousness."

"I suppose you'll lecture me next on the Song of Songs," countered Fraser.

"Now that you mention it, that wouldn't be a bad idea," said David with a twinkle in his eye. "You Christians largely ignore it, even though it's right there in your Bible -- comes after Proverbs for you, doesn't it?"

"No, it follows Ecclesiastes," said Fraser, happy for a chance to correct David for once.

"That makes it even more tucked away, so to speak," replied David. "At least most of you appreciate Proverbs, but Ecclesiastes is another story altogether. Anyway, many of you defend a very strange interpretation of the Song of Songs -- you allegorize it. You pretend it has nothing to do with sex, which is preposterous. I don't know how you can defend such an interpretation with a straight face."

By this point Sergei seemed to be done with as much of the food on his plate as he cared to eat, and he now took control of the conversation. David, meanwhile, picked up the book and began to browse through it. Fraser watched the eager interest on his face. As Sergei gently undermined any notion of structural foundations, whether in the form of basements or legs, David began to wonder whether the book supported Sergei's thinking as much as he had assumed. Before long, he could not resist breaking into the conversation. He asked if he might also be permitted to read an interesting passage.

"Here's something of interest about 50 pages farther into the book -- he gets the leg back. And so, this business of being without a leg to stand on is not the end of the matter. It's not somehow the

human condition, as though matter and the body were simply illusory -- maya, as the Hindus like to call it."

"I never said he was a Hindu," countered Sergei. "In fact, he's Jewish."

"All the better," said David. "That means he has his feet planted firmly on the good earth -- or wants them there. Anyway, listen to what he says here:

... the leg was utterly transformed, transfigured. It still looked profoundly strange and unreal. It still looked profoundly unalive. But where it had previously brought to mind a corpse, it now made me think of a fetus, not yet born. The flesh seemed somehow translucent and innocent, like flesh not yet given the breath of life. ... It lay there patient, radiant, not yet real, but almost ready to be born.

Fraser returned to the Cartesian theme. Like a great many philosophy instructors, he was accustomed to attacking Descartes in his lectures, and he did not like being told that he was a Cartesian. And so he asked David: "If we Christians are such Cartesians, wouldn't we lie down to pray? Didn't Descartes like to sleep late?"

He assumed that David would have heard the stories about Descartes and his untimely, premature death in Sweden, which was, in some sense, the result of getting up too early. Descartes was one who liked to lie in bed; more specifically, he enjoyed the unusual states of consciousness that lie (clever pun intended) between sleep and the waking state.

David asked: "Don't many of you fall asleep during prayer? I understand that in your church, they used to have these long prayers during which a good part of the congregation would drift off. In many of our yeshivas and synagogues, prayer is very lively: people sway back and forth and makes faces and generally carry on. It would be hard to imagine someone drifting off."

"So what's so bad about drifting off while you're praying?" asked Sergei. "Why couldn't prayer and worship be an occasion to drift off into a different state of consciousness?"

Fraser asked: "But when you guys do your form of praying -- or whatever you call it -- isn't it usually in some sort of sitting position, something like the lotus posture? I've never heard that you're supposed to drift off to sleep when you're meditating."

"What is sleep?" asked Sergei, rhetorically. "Some of the gurus maintain that when we meditate we're intensely aware of everything, but in my own experience I become disconnected from my immediate surroundings and get the sense of being immersed in a wider self. The whole process is the most refreshing and invigorating thing there is in my life. It's what worship should do for you -- otherwise get rid of it. Don't worship if it's not doing you any good."

By this point Sergei was also aware of Fraser's planned speech two days hence. So David felt free to ask him: "How about it, Fraser? Are you going to work meditation into this disquisition of yours?"

"Not likely," said Fraser. "The speech is supposed to be given to a bunch of Dutch Reformed women, and they're of a somewhat

more activist persuasion. Besides, I suspect that most of the people in those churches are rather suspicious of anything having to do with meditation. They're quick to dismiss this or that as 'New Age.' Those Dutch Calvinists are go-getters. They're more like the Jews in that regard."

The reference to the Jews gave David an opening. "Yes, there are some interesting parallels between the Jews and the Calvinists. But there's also a difference to be pondered here. We Jews are more honest -- I mean, about what's involved in serving and pleasing God. We don't pretend that our life in the business world, for example, has any deep religious significance. Take this business of computers, my own line of work -- there's absolutely nothing Jewish about it. Computers simply are what they are. So whatever we do out there in the business world or as technicians, we try not to break the commandments while we're about it, which is why I eat vegetarian whenever I come to this restaurant. Otherwise we don't make a great big deal out of what we're doing, the way the Calvinists do. It's no wonder that they talk about the danger of triumphalism -- they're forever congratulating themselves. We don't make great claims for ourselves -- we're just happy if we can avoid wrong-doing and catastrophe. And so we don't claim to be serving God when we're in effect serving ourselves."

"Don't you have to love God above all?" asked Fraser. "It's in your Bible too -- look at the book of Deuteronomy, especially the sixth chapter."

"Of course God comes first -- above everyone and everything else. But we try to stay away from messianic pretensions. In fact,

we've been so successful in that regard that many of us hardly believe in the coming of the messiah any more."

"Isn't Israel supposed to be the messiah?" asked Sergei.

"Many of us are utterly opposed to that idea -- it's a new idolatry." Now David turned his attention to Fraser again: "But you Calvinists are different. You feel you have to be activists all the time and so you wind up confusing the kingdom of God with your own property holdings. Some financial advisor I was reading the other day said something to the effect that Calvinism is capitalism in action. Of course he was echoing Max Weber, who developed this classic thesis about Calvinism and capitalism and pointed out that the most successful countries in terms of dynamic business development are the Calvinist countries. And so, when it comes to church matters, the Calvinists may wish to insist on holding their ground and never giving an inch. But when they get out of church, they don't let the grass grow under their feet. They're going places. On the one hand they want to stay standing right where they are, but on the other hand they want to be everywhere."

Fraser did not try to argue with David. His observation about the differences between the Jews and the Calvinists was nothing new. Instead he steered the conversation toward politics. "Some of the Calvinists, especially in the Netherlands, are quite taken with politics and government. They get involved. They run for office."

"Not in Britain they don't," replied David. "In Britain you stand for parliament. It's here in North America that you run for the Legislature or Parliament or Congress or whatever. I think running

suits the Calvinists better. Aren't they forever worrying about their salvation and trying to prove that they really are saved by getting rich? They want people to see that God is blessing them so that they can believe it themselves. Isn't Calvinism, in the end, another obsession with certainty, and so a cousin to Cartesianism?"

"But in India religion is more of a withdrawal from life," said Sergei. "Except that you can't really call it religion -- that's a Western term that's been foisted onto Asian attitudes and practices. As for the business of having a 'foundation' for everything and being preoccupied with where you are -- definitely very Western. The spiritual communities of India take a different approach. And they don't feel so attached to this earth. It's not 'Here I stand' or 'Here I kneel' or 'Here I run'"

"How about 'Here I levitate'?" asked Fraser.

"Do you really believe some of those yogis can levitate -- just rise up in the air and hover there for a while?" asked David, addressing himself to Sergei.

"I suppose the strictly physical side doesn't really matter," replied Sergei. "What counts is that people think they levitate. Isn't that basically the story with the resurrection of Christ in Christian theology? What really happened that day is almost beside the point. It's the magic that counts. And so, for a little while, Jesus allegedly appeared to all kinds of people and then conveniently drifted up into heaven. I suppose you could say that he levitated. So what really happened there? There's no way to know. But the belief is a powerful reality -- you can't get away from that."

* * * * *

Fraser went home that afternoon with the feeling that he was moving backwards in terms of summing up his fundamental ideas. More and more, he understood why Wilhelm Dilthey, who read widely in all kinds of literature and philosophy and religious thought and was sympathetic to almost everything he read, found it so difficult to formulate the fundamental idea or ideas in his philosophy.

But Fraser still had computer woes to worry about. David had outlined a couple of possible fixes for his problem, and the second one worked. And so, that afternoon, he was back at it, trying to organize his woolly thoughts into a framework that a bunch of philosophically unschooled women would be able to understand. He took time to send David an e-mail message informing him that he was back in business and thanking him for his help.

But as he worked on the speech, he began to feel distinctly ill. He sensed a fever coming on, and before long he was in the washroom, where it seemed that everything he had eaten in the last two days ran out of him in liquid form. And just when he thought he had expelled it all, he felt another urgent call of nature, and then another. It was a first-class intestinal disorder. And the speech was less than two days away!

When Lucy came home, she observed that his sudden illness had a good side: it would force him to stop tinkering with the text. "Just give them what you've already got, Fraser, and I'm sure it will be much more than they bargained for." Fraser was not sure whether she

was expressing confidence in him or not. He had not yet thrown up, but he already saw himself worrying before the women about what would now come out of his mouth.

Lucy, playing both doctor and nurse, advised him to limit his food intake very sharply and stick mainly to fruit juices. He would just have to wait out the illness, whatever it was.

She also prevailed upon him to take to his bed. Indeed, by early evening, he was so weak that he was happy to be in bed. Fever and an upset stomach and diarrhea were nothing new to him, but he could not recall a previous illness that had come on so rapidly and left him so weak.

The next morning there was no improvement, and by now he was feverish to the point that he was having trouble thinking clearly. He was still determined to work on his speech, and even asked Lucy to stay home from work to take some dictation, but she dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand and breezed out the door.

She promised to try to quit early so she could come home and tend to him in the afternoon. But when she returned at about four o'clock, Fraser was still no better. And the speech was to be given the next morning!

Now, Fraser was not one to stay home from lectures at the university just because he had a touch of the flu or an upset stomach. He had often lectured when he was feeling far from well. He considered himself to be tough. And so he would have to be tough in the face of this challenge as well. He told Lucy he was going to get up

for a while to show that he was in charge -- and not the illness. Thereby he would demonstrate the power of mind over matter.

With her support, he managed to get his legs over the edge of the bed. Slowly he stretched out to his full height, with her strong right arm supporting him. "Ready?" she asked. He nodded. Then he took a step or two, but his legs gave way under him. Lucy was right there but did not catch him. She saw that he would fall harmlessly. And once he did fall, he finally realized that he would not be giving that speech the next day. He was simply too weak.

It was Folkert who had helped get him the speaking engagement, and so the only thing he could think of to do was to inform Folkert of his plight and ask whether he would be willing to fill in at the last moment. Of course he got Lucy to do the telephoning. Lucy was quite matter-of-fact about it: she phoned from the bedroom, and so Fraser got to hear her end of the conversation.

Folkert proved willing: as it happened, he had nothing on his schedule the next morning. Fraser piped up from his bed: "Ask Folkert to come by this evening, and I'll print up the speech, and he can read it for me."

Lucy related Fraser's offer to Folkert, and then chuckled when she heard his response. She turned to Fraser and informed him that Folkert had flatly refused to use Fraser's material. "He said not to worry: he would pluck something from his own files."

Fraser felt relieved, and then was surprised at his own feeling of relief. Deep in his heart he knew that the speech was not ready.

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And he began to wonder whether the sudden illness might not be his own body's way of telling him he was not ready to give that speech in which he intended to sum up the fundamental ideas in his philosophy.

In a moment of weakness, he admitted his suspicion about himself to Lucy. She suggested -- Fraser was not sure whether she was joking or not -- that a higher power might have intervened, knowing that the speech was not yet ready for delivery. "Or maybe it was something you had for lunch with David yesterday at the cafeteria."

"Neither of us ate meat," said Fraser.

"Even if you stuck to the vegetarian entrees," responded Lucy, "well, you might be surprised at how dirty some of that produce they bring in from Mexico is -- even a leaf of lettuce. You can never be sure when it comes to these things."

* * * * *

The next evening Fraser was only marginally better. He was well enough to telephone Folkert and ask for a report on the meeting. Of course the women had been disappointed that their invited speaker had fallen out, but Folkert gave Fraser to understand that the pinch-hitter had proven satisfactory. Fraser was both relieved and a little jealous. "Do you think they'll ask me back some other time?" he inquired.

"Do you think you'll ever get done polishing and refining your philosophy?" his friend replied. "You really are a lot like Dilthey --

you reflect other people's ideas and even explain them well, but you come across -- I'm speaking here as your friend -- as somewhat lacking in conviction."

"I'm still young," replied Fraser, somewhat lamely. "I still have many years ahead of me to become dogmatic and closed-minded."

"And that's what you think I am?"

"Let's just say that you're firmly rooted in your tradition," said Fraser, choosing his words carefully. "As for me, I'm still afloat."

Fraser did not dare repeat this conversation to Lucy. Despite her matter-of-fact attitude toward illness, he felt somewhat ashamed and rejected -- and perhaps even reproved by this episode.

Lucy sensed what he was feeling. She tried to cheer him up. "Did it ever occur to you that I didn't like you going off to be with all those women?" she asked, as she laid a hand on his knee. "Maybe God was saving you for me."

"You know I'm all yours -- always."

"It's getting late -- especially for a guy who couldn't even stand on his own two feet yesterday." Lucy took Fraser's hand and said firmly: "It's time for bed."

Epilogue

Stories for children often end with an assurance that the main characters lived happily ever after, having survived their perils and adventures. And so I suppose it falls to me, as the author, to assure the readers that Fraser and Lucy, together with their family and friends and discussion partners, did exactly that -- lived happily ever after. But it will be apparent to any careful reader that Fraser has a long way to go and a good deal to learn. He's a work in progress.

Where did he come from? He's a fictional character, but most characters in fiction carry within them some aspects of their creator's fears and aspirations and personality and thinking. And so Fraser has some of my traits -- and also my limitations. However, in writing this book and developing its set of characters, I parceled out bits of myself to a number of them. Likewise, I looked around the circle of my acquaintances and adopted features and dimensions of some of the people I know, which I then transplanted into my characters. But no character in this book is intended to be identified with anyone in real life. And so I am not Fraser. Those who are curious as to what I think in real life are welcome to consult my other publications.

But if the characters are fictional, the ideas discussed in this book are not. There are some ideas voiced by characters that may be relatively original -- one never knows for sure whether one's own ideas may have been anticipated by some other writer in some book

one has not read -- but the main ideas discussed are drawn from well-known philosophical and religious sources and traditions. Part of my purpose in writing was to help people understand difficult ideas in their bearing on the religious life.

I have taught philosophy in various institutions, including a couple of Christian colleges, for many years. My entire teaching career has been dominated by my interest in the interplay between religion, considered as a set of ideas, attitudes, practices and rituals, on the one hand, and the philosophical tradition, on the other. From the time I began my undergraduate studies, I was convinced that one cannot understand religion without some knowledge of philosophy. In four of the courses which I teach regularly, I have tried to make these connections for students.

Philosophy of religion is one such course: the title already indicates that the connections made in this book are central to the subject-matter. Jewish philosophy is another such course. It is philosophy for Jews and by Jews, and it is developed with an eye to the lively tradition we call Judaism. Many believing Jews are oblivious to philosophy and consider the practice of Judaism to be possible without ever developing and philosophical insight into what they are doing -- just keep the commandments, and you'll be all right. Perhaps it works for them, but the study of Jewish philosophy has proven stimulating for many Christians, including my students.

Another such courses is Asian philosophy. Not all the philosophers of Asia root themselves in what the West calls religious traditions, but most of the Indian thinkers do. The two most important religious traditions whose philosophical ideas get

discussed in the course are Hinduism and Buddhism. Christian students who take the trouble to think deeply about Hindu and Buddhist texts and terms usually find that their understanding of their own faith is thereby enriched.

The final course in the set of four is introduction to philosophy, which has a number of purposes, one of which is simply introducing students to the discipline. But when this course is taught in a Christian setting, the kinds of ideas that surface in this book and then get explored further in the other three courses I mentioned all come up for discussion.

I enjoyed writing this book, and I hope many readers will be entertained by it. But I had educational purposes in mind throughout. I was thinking especially of courses in philosophy, theology and religious studies.

At various points in the book the characters refer to the Bible and make comments about this or that text. Sometimes I made sure that a Bible was at hand so that they could quote from it accurately. But even when the characters were talking about the Bible off the top of their heads, I made sure that their references were accurate. I even stretched the usual conventions of fiction just a bit to have them mention not only the Bible book but in most cases also the chapter in which the passage in question can be found. And I made sure that all the Bible references are accurate.

And so the book is also intended as a reminder of the value and relevance of the Bible for our life as Christians. I often tell students that any appeal to the Bible will be respected in such an

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institution as the one in which I teach. And so it should be a valued resource in religious dialogue. The partners to such dialogue will have different understandings of how the Bible came to be and what sort of authority we should ascribe to it today, but a great many of them -- I wish I could say: all -- will look to it with respect as humankind's primary religious resource. And so it is my hope that this book, too, will encourage people to study the Bible with some new questions in their minds so that their philosophical ideas may ultimately come to fruition in what we call religion, which is simply the service of the living God.