

Education in Precarious Times: Postmodernity and a Christian Worldview

by Brian J. Walsh

Peter McLaren opens his hard hitting critique of contemporary culture and educational practice with these words:

I will not mince my words. We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering, dispossession and contempt for human dignity and the sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain ubiquitous features of our time.¹

This emotional dislocation and sense of helplessness, says McLaren, is the result of late modernity's "dehydrated imagination that has lost its capacity to dream otherwise."² And with this loss of imaginative creativity a "funky nihilism has set in; an aroma of cultural disquiet."³

McLaren is right. We *do* live in precarious times and as educators passionately concerned about the next generation we must not mince our words. Something is happening in Western culture. We can feel it in our bones when we walk through a mall or turn on the television. Something is different, both "out there" and maybe even deep within ourselves. There is indeed a sense of cultural disquiet. We have a sinking feeling that we don't really understand what is going on, but we know that the changes taking place around us affect both what we believe and the way in which we believe it. And since belief is foundational to all educational endeavours, we have a growing suspicion that these changes will require us to rethink and revision what it means to be educators. The term "postmodern" keeps being bandied about as a possible explanation for our present confusion and malaise. But what does it mean?

The attempt to find an answer to this question can be frustrating. Since the postmodern outlook is characteristically suspicious of definitions, what follows is necessarily more descriptive than an attempt at definition.⁴ And since our concern in this book is education, many of the illustrations I use come from

¹ Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Age*, London and N.Y., Routledge, 1995, p. 1.

² Ibid, p. 2

³ Ibid, p. 4.

⁴ Robin Usher and Richard Edwards note that the term "postmodern" is not a fixed description but a "loose umbrella term under whose broad cover can be encompassed at one and the same time a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse and a mode of analysis." *Postmodernism and Education: Different Voices, Different Worlds*, London and N.Y., Routledge, 1994, p. 7.

the music and culture of the younger generation, for whom a postmodern sense of emotional dislocation and precariousness is part of daily experience.

This chapter is not intended to be an “everything you wanted to know about postmodernity but were too embarrassed (or un-sophisticated) to ask” kind of piece. In fact, by postmodern standards any such attempt to get a final handle on postmodernity would be dismissed (rightly, I think) as a hopelessly modernist enterprise. No, my goals are more modest. I offer you a list of ten things that you might find helpful in understanding our present postmodern cultural context and some beginning ideas about the implications of this cultural situation for Christian education.⁵

1. **A postmodern culture is a culture of betrayal.**

This, it seems to me, is at the heart of our cultural crisis. Long before we begin trying to listen to what postmodern thinkers might be saying we need to note that the experience on the street, and especially the experience of young people is suffused with a sense of betrayal. In their song “bullet with butterfly wings” on the album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, The Smashing Pumpkins sing:

the world is a vampire, sent to drain
secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames
and what do i get, for my pain
betrayed desires, and a piece of the game⁶

As members of the first generation of this century that cannot expect a standard of living that exceeds or is equivalent to that of their parents, members of Generation X (and those younger) frequently give voice to a deep sense of betrayal. Someone has told them a story, spun them a line, about the good life and it has proven to be a lie. And when the lie runs as deep as this, it is not surprising that they experience the world not as a place of safety and opportunity, but as a “vampire” that sucks the very lifeblood out of them. The world is decidedly malignant and dangerous. The best that one can expect in this world of betrayal is to simply get a piece of the game; but even this cannot be guaranteed.

There are few human experiences more painful and more despiriting than betrayal. Betrayal breeds either a cynical resignation or rage. Either responses are disastrous in an educational environment. Therefore, in a cultural context of broken promises and loss of trust, the Christian school must be a community of

⁵ An earlier version of this list appeared in my article “The Church in a Postmodern Age: Ten Things You Need to Know,” *Good Idea! A Resource Sheet on Evangelism and Church Growth*, vol. 3, #4 (Winter 1996), pp. 1-5. This journal is published by the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism in Toronto.

⁶ The Smashing Pumpkins, “bullet with butterfly wings,” from the album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, © 1995 Virgin Records America.

covenant keeping and trust. That means that we need to provide the emotional space for students to work through their sense of betrayal, give uncensored voice to their confusion and disappointment. And since betrayed people can only be healed through experiences of trust the school needs to be a site of such experiences.

2. A postmodern culture is a place of numbness and boredom.

In the teen film “Pump Up the Volume” the young protagonist says, “There’s nothing left to do anymore. Everything decent’s been done, all the great themes have been used up and turned into theme parks.” And The Smashing Pumpkins echo this sentiment when they sing,

there’s nothing left to do
there’s nothing left to feel⁷

In another song on the album they sing,

i lie just to be real, and i’d die just to feel
why do the same old things keep on happening?
because beyond my hopes there are no feelings⁸

This sense of “been there, done that, got the teeshirt” breeds not just boredom but also numbness. We feel most passionately when we have a sense of newness to our lives, projects to complete, dreams to fulfill. If there is nothing left to do, then there is nothing left to feel either.

Boredom has always been a problem experienced in mass education, especially during the teenage years. When that boredom is combined with an overall sense of numbness, the pedagogical task becomes all that more difficult and yet also more crucial. In a context of dehydrated imagination we need to foster a creative and exciting pedagogy that is suffused with a sense of newness. Our problem isn’t simply a matter of entertaining a media-saturated generation of students who “have seen it all before.” No, the pedagogical task in a numbed-out culture is to break through that numbness with the passion of a radical vision of life that necessarily animates praxis.

Numbness breeds dispirited paralysis – there is nothing to do and no energy to do it with. Such numbness makes life even more precarious because we become malleable in the hands of the principalities and powers that rule our world. Christian education in precarious times needs to be prophetic in character, criticizing the forces that render us numb and energizing young people to an alternative way of living in this world, subject to an alternative

⁷ Ibid, from the song “jelly belly”. This song also includes the words, “living makes me sick/so sick i wish i’d die/down in the belly of the beast”. “Infinite Sadness” seem to be appropriate words in the title of this album.

⁸ Ibid, from the song “tales of a scorched earth”.

sovereignty.⁹ This is nowhere more powerfully communicated than in the lives of exciting and imaginative teachers who are passionate about their students and their subject because they are passionate about their Lord and the world he has come to save.

There needs to be a vibrant sense of newness to our education. Not novelty for novelty's sake, but something much more profound, more along the lines of Revelation 21.5 ("Behold I am making all things new"). A pedagogy animated by this vision of life brings newness in the midst of deadening sameness and breaks through the numbness of our times with an invitation to passionate, cross-bearing discipleship.

3. A postmodern culture has no fixed anchors and is characterized by profound moral instability.

In his apocalyptic song, "The Future," Leonard Cohen sings,
 Things are going to slide in all directions
 Won't be nothing you can measure anymore.¹⁰

Usher and Edwards recognize this inability to measure things to be a decidedly postmodern trait:

Postmodernity, then, describes a world where people have to make their way without fixed referents and traditional anchoring points. It is a world of rapid change, of bewildering instability, where knowledge is constantly changing and meaning 'floats'¹¹

Postmodernity insists that all moral codes, all normative frameworks, are particular inventions of people in history. This means that the old idea that there are moral absolutes to which we all have access and to which we all, in principle, are subject has evaporated in the heat of a postmodern culture. And the result is a sense of sea-sickness as we are tossed about by wave after wave.¹² And since there are no universally recognizable measures for human life, it is not

⁹ I have addressed the themes of numbness and prophetic vision further in *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time*, Seattle, Alta Vista College Press, 1994. See also Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1978.

¹⁰ Leonard Cohen, "The Future" from the album *The Future* © 1992 Sony Music Entertainment Corp.

¹¹ Usher and Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education*, p. 10. L. Grossberg describes postmodernity as "a dissolution of what we might call the 'anchoring affect' that articulates meaning and affect." Cited by McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy*, p. 18.

¹² John Dominic Crossan puts it this way: "There is no lighthouse keeper. There is no lighthouse. There is no dry land. There are only people living on rafts made from their own imaginations. And there is the sea." *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story*, Niles, Illinois, Argus, 1975, p. 44.

surprising that Cohen confesses that “when they said Repent/I wondered what they meant.”¹³

How do Christian educators respond to this loss of normativity, this loss of a moral centre to our culture? It isn't enough to simply shout all the louder that there are moral absolutes in the universe and that the Bible gives us access to these absolutes. Rather, we need to reflect deeply upon and begin to demonstrate the wisdom of creational and biblical normativity, acknowledgment of which brings the fruit of shalom – God's covenantal peace – for all of life. The problem with so much talk about moral absolutes is that it seems that these moral laws are extrinsically imposed upon life with little, if any, sense of a relationship to the contingencies and hurts of real life. Biblical ethics, by contrast, are always set within the context of our covenantal relationship to God, as they express the commitment and faithfulness of a God who is always in the fray with us, always setting out for us the paths of healing, restoration, and reconciliation. And “path” is the right metaphor because a biblical ethic is rooted in the redemptive story that the Scriptures tell.

Christian education is committed to telling this story in such a way that students indwell this story, thereby forming the virtues of the Kingdom and take on the character of Christ. Moreover, this normativity is not simply imposed upon us from the outside, rather it is intrinsic to life, integral to our very creatureliness. Forging such an ethic is at the heart of the teaching ministry of the Christian school. To leave young people swimming in the sea of moral instability would be the height of pedagogical irresponsibility and would betray the calling of the school.¹⁴

4. Postmodern culture is deeply suspicious of all grand stories.

If a biblical ethic is ultimately rooted in the redemptive story of the Scriptures then the postmodern suspicion of all such grand stories only compounds our cultural and educational crisis.¹⁵ Again, *The Smashing Pumpkins* prove to be insightful. In their infinitely sad song, “tales of a scorched earth,” they sing,

¹³ Cohen, “The Future”.

¹⁴ Critical pedagogist Henry Giroux says: “I think that schools should be about ways of life. They are not simply instruction sites. They are cultures which legitimize certain forms of knowledge and disclaim others.” In *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, London and N.Y., Routledge, 1992, p. 14. This legitimization and disclaiming requires educators to make ethical choices in a postmodern context that is characterized by moral undecidability.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard's summary of postmodernity is to the point: “Simplifying in the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xxiv.

and we're all dead yeah we're all dead
inside the future of a shattered past¹⁶

We live inside the future of a shattered past because that past told grand stories that have proven to be destructive lies. The grand story of a Marxist utopia collapsed along with the Berlin Wall. The heroic tale of technological progress blew up with the Challenger explosion. The progress myth of democratic capitalism that promised economic prosperity and social harmony strains under the weight of economic contraction, ecological threat and a never-ending and ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor both domestically and internationally. The postmodernist ethos insists that stories such as these – stories that have so shaped our lives – are not stories of emancipation and progress after all, but stories of enslavement, oppression and violence. And on such a view, any story, any worldview, that makes grand claims about the real course and destiny of history will make common cause with such violence and oppression.

This characteristic of the postmodern shift is profoundly challenging both to modern educational practice and to Christian faith. First, consider the role of the Western story of progress in education. Again, Usher and Edwards are helpful: “Historically, education can be seen as the vehicle by which modernity’s ‘grand narratives’, the Enlightenment ideals of critical reason, individual freedom, progress and benevolent change, are substantiated and realized.”¹⁷ Take away this story of civilizational progress and modern mass education loses a central dimension of its *raison d’être*. Can there be education that does not necessarily engage in cultural story-telling, inculcating that story in the imaginations of the young?¹⁸ Or is the issue not *whether* education is rooted in a grand story, but *which* grand story it shall be rooted in? If the tale of capitalist progress is beginning to fray at the edges then perhaps this is an evangelistically opportune time for Christian education to offer another story – one that replaces the self-salvation of economic progress with the tale of a coming Kingdom of redemption.

But here we meet a road block. Postmodernity is critical of all grand stories, and that undoubtedly must include the cosmic tale of creation, fall, redemption and consummation that the Scriptures tell. Yet it is precisely this story that we must tell in a postmodern culture. In the face of the dissolution of all grand stories, Christians have the audacity to proclaim the liberating story of God’s redemption of all of creation. But this means that we must tell and live

¹⁶ “tales of a scorched earth” from the album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*.

¹⁷ Usher and Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education*, p. 2.

¹⁸ See Harry Fernhout’s essay on “Christian Schooling: Telling a Worldview Story” in chapter six of this volume.

that story in such a way that it puts the lie to the postmodern critique of all metanarratives as inherently violent.¹⁹

What does this mean in a history class? How do you teach history in a postmodern context? Certainly the modernist tale of progress is no longer viable once we begin to listen to other stories of colonization that are told by the aboriginal peoples of the Americas, Australia, Asia and Africa. Nor is it possible any more to impose one interpretation on the events of the past. But does the deconstruction of certain ideological tellings of the past leave us in a state of historical amnesia, or perhaps lost in a sea of narratives, none of which have any claim to validity over any other? The Christian history teacher walks a fine line here. Confessing that God is the Lord of history, yet recognizing that no interpretation of historical events is final, the teacher must open up the reading of history to a multiplicity of voices (especially those multiculturally represented in her classroom) and foster a biblically attuned perspective that interprets (and judges!) history in terms of the virtues of the Kingdom. This should result in a richly nuanced historical imagination that counters both the closed hegemony of modernity and the multinarrative amnesia of postmodernity.²⁰

5. Postmodern culture is a post-rationalist culture.

Simply stated, while the modernist penchant for seeking rational justification for all beliefs and actions still lives in some segments of our culture, it is all but dead in the street and in the real lives of people as they make economic, political, cultural and religious choices. Notice that few products are sold on television these days because they are “scientifically proven.” That doesn’t impress the postmodern consumer. On the contrary we are all too aware that science can prove whatever we want it to, and that rational argumentation can be used for all kinds of terrible causes.

In some circles this death of rationalism poses a significant threat to Christian faith and to Christian education. By contrast I think that it actually opens up wonderful opportunities to rethink the processes of knowing and the nature of pedagogy in new and exciting ways. Parker Palmer’s ground breaking

¹⁹ On such a telling see J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith for a Postmodern Age*, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1995, chapter 5. On such a living, see chapter 8. For a view of the authority of the biblical narrative in a postmodern context see my article, “Reimagining Biblical Authority,” *Christian Scholars Review*, vol. 26 #2, Winter 1997.

²⁰ Interestingly, Henry Giroux’s postmodern critical pedagogy wants to insist on teaching no “master narratives” that are “monolithic” and “timeless” precisely to affirm a multiplicity of narratives because such a multiplicity creates “more democratic forms of public life.” *Border Crossings*, p. 76. Yet his own affirmation of radical democracy functions in his thought as nothing less than a “master narrative” that would appear to carry a “timeless” authority.

book *To Know as We are Known* addresses our post-rationalist situation well. Describing the rationalist tradition of modernity Palmer notes:

In our quest to free knowledge from the tangles of subjectivity, we have broken the knower loose from the web of life itself. The modern divorce of the knower and the known has led to the collapse of community and accountability between the knowing self and the known world.²¹

In such an objectivist epistemology, truth “consists of propositions or reports that conform to the canons of evidence and reason, reports that can be reproduced by other knowers operating by the same rules.”²² The problem with this view of truth is that it is too thin and lacks any ethical relationship with the world. Palmer’s alternative is refreshing:

To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder. To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one’s whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will.²³

If this is what knowing truth is all about then “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.”²⁴ Children are then taught that scientifically investigating the world is a matter of epistemological love, a deepening of our relationship to this wonderfully complex and good creation precisely for the sake of stewardly service. Knowing requires listening to the eloquence of this creation as it sings its praise or groans its painful cries to the Creator.²⁵

6. Postmodernity breeds a carnivalesque culture.

Lacking any unifying story, rational justifications, and normative anchors, postmodern culture fills the boredom of our time with a carnival of worldview options and consumer-directed faiths. An all-encompassing plurality of beliefs and perspectives are all available for our tasting and consumption. Or perhaps we could say that we live in a mall culture in which the carnival has simply moved indoors. And just as we mix and match our wardrobes and our culinary

²¹ Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983, p. 26.

²² *Ibid*, p. 27.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 69.

²⁵ On listening to creation see Brian J. Walsh, Marianne Karsh and Nik Ansell, “Trees, Forestry and the Responsiveness of Creation”, in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, London and N.Y., Routledge, 1996, pp. 423-435. For further discussion of epistemological stewardship see Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, pp. 165-171. For a critique of evangelical capitulation to objectivism from within evangelicalism see Rodney Clapp, “How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals be Nonfoundationalists?” in Timothy Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (eds), *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1996, pp. 81-92.

tastes at the mall, so also do we find it increasingly unproblematic to combine beliefs from various religious traditions into one faith. Belief in resurrection, reincarnation and soul travel all at the same time? No problem. The result is both the commodification of belief (postmodern culture is, after all, late capitalist culture) and an unparalleled rise in religious promiscuity.²⁶

In this context Christian education simply refuses to play the game. The gospel is not a commodity for sale, it is given away free. And while the school should indeed be a place where students play – both in the school yard *and* in the science lab – as they joyfully investigate creation in community with each other, this play takes place within the context of serious life and death issues. Whether one believes in reincarnation or resurrection will not only have eternal implications for the believer, but will also radically affect how one relates to the world of biological growth, economic structures and personal relationships. Christian educators recognize that such issues of ultimate belief carry ultimate significance for student, teacher, curriculum and the very ethos of the school. In a culture characterized by the undiscerning lightness of the carnival (who needs discernment if it is all a game?), Christian education should be characterized by a discerning weightiness that promotes faithfulness in the face of widespread religious promiscuity.

7. Postmodernity is a culture of fragmentation.

When one is accustomed to toying with a multiplicity of perspectives, identities and worldviews it is not surprising that life starts to feel fragmented. Indeed, in a postmodern culture there is a decided bias against integration because any sense of life being held together in its wholeness is usually dismissed as just another modernist imposition of sameness. In place of the blandness of homogeneity, postmodernists raise a toast to heterogeneity, the celebration of difference. And when that difference is not just experienced “out there in the world”, but deep within our personal lives then a sense of life being fragmented is inevitable. How can a student put together the stories heard in church or Bible class with the multiplicity of images and stories that populate his or her imagination from the popular media? How can we reconcile the biblical call to justice for the poor and stewardship of creation with our consumptive habits? How can I put together my life of faith with my competition in the marketplace? How, at the most basic level, can the various parts of our lives possibly fit together?

Again, Christian faith faces the problems of fragmentation with an audacious vision of wholeness. Confessing that this is the Creator’s world,

²⁶ On the relation of commodified belief in the postmodern carnival to late capitalism see Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, pp. 73-74.

wrought and enveloped in his creative and redemptive love, Christians will not settle for fragmentation. The shalom of the gospel is life redeemed and restored in its integral wholeness. That means, however, that if Christian education is to incarnate this shalom then it must be a place in which integrality is sought in all of life. A pedagogy directed to wholeness will be self-consciously integrated and interdisciplinary, inviting students to experience the world in all of its interrelated multidimensionality. History classes on the Renaissance will be related to discussion of the biblical merits of the Protestant Reformation, the musical developments in the Baroque era, the developing geometry of Newton and the astronomy of Copernicus. Christian curricular development needs to strive for integrality both because of the disintegration of postmodern fragmentation and in order to hear and facilitate the multifaceted praise of the creational orchestra.

8. Postmodern culture is a Cool Whip culture.

There is something unreal (or perhaps “hyperreal”) about much of what we experience in postmodern culture. Whether we are talking about swimming in sanitized water parks, surfing the Internet, taking in the dizzying array of information from the media, eating simulated foods (especially Cool Whip!), engaging in telephone sex, or simply playing around with the omnipresent images available to us via advertising and the packaging of political candidates, there is something vaguely unreal about it all. We are so overwhelmed with images that we begin to wonder whether there is any reality, any substance to all of this.

In a Cool Whip culture of passing images and a preoccupation with “virtual” reality Christian education needs to be driven by a “reality pedagogy” that invites students into an intensely personal relationship with the world in which they live. Such a reality pedagogy is rooted in the extravagant gift-character of the creation. God has given us our very being and placed us in a world that is suffused with his grace. Christian literary critic Roger Lundin has wisely noted that “those who cannot discern grace in the given are unable to express gratitude for what they have received.”²⁷ Christian education must engender precisely such an ethos of gratitude. We receive the world as a gift.

But it is also true that we never receive the world apart from symbols, images and metaphors. And it is precisely the symbolic and metaphoric richness of biblical faith that opens students to discern the grace in the given. We actually have the audacity to teach our students that they live in a world in which trees

²⁷ Ibid, p. 103. Lundin goes on to say, “This ingratitude, and its attendant resentment, are distinguishing attributes of much of contemporary literary and cultural theory.” And he offers essayist and environmentalist Wendell Berry and poet Richard Wilbur as corrective voices that speak of the “grace of the given.”

sing out in joy (Ps. 96.12), stones recognize their Messiah (Lk. 19.40) and witness covenant renewal ceremonies (Josh. 24.27), mountains hear words of prophecy addressed to them (Ezek. 36.1-16), the land has the capacity to vomit out its inhabitants if they follow idols (Lev. 18-24-28), and all of creation can groan in the travails of childbirth awaiting the revealing of the children of God and the final consummation of redemption (Rom. 8.22-23). These are the biblical metaphors that we offer our children in order to give them access to “reality” as it really is! The radical claim of biblical faith, and the very foundation of Christian education, is that a biblical faith opens us to the world and allows us to discern grace in the given.

But if the given is to be the recipient of grace in this terribly broken world, and if our metaphors are more than just romanticized projections unto the non-human world, then we will need a symbolic framework - we will need to inhabit a symbolic universe - that can account for and redemptively address the problem of evil. It is here that the cross of Christ remains central to Christian faith and Christian education. In a world of vague unreality we worship a Saviour who entered into the fray of reality in all of its bloody and deathly brokenness. And in a postmodern world of hyperreal symbols like water parks and virtual reality we rally around a symbol that is quite literally stuck into the soil of our brutal reality. Rather than eating the simulated food of our Cool Whip culture, we are invited to a table with real bread and real wine that feeds our deepest hunger and thirst.

9. Postmodernity seeks to honour the “other.”

This represents the ethical heart of the postmodern shift. While language of “honouring the other” can slip off the postmodern tongue with a boring and superficial predictability, the intention of moving beyond the patterns of the past in its racist, colonial and patriarchal oppression and subjugation of the other needs to be affirmed. And Christians also need to take stock of the way in which we have participated in such oppression and continue to do so today by the way in which our communities are often not really open to people who are not sufficiently “like us.”

This postmodern emphasis on the other is a powerful reminder of the biblical insistence that the protection and care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger be at the heart of communal life. In the context of contracting economies and the breakdown of the welfare state an insurmountable ethical question that western democracies must face is: why should I care for the stranger in the gate?²⁸ Once liberal charity or conservative self-interest no longer motivates such a sense of civic ethical responsibility what compelling reason is left? The

²⁸ I am indebted to Mary-Jo Leddy for this insight. Leddy lives and works at Romero House, a centre for refugee outreach in Toronto.

Christian community responds by again telling the story of a God who helps the helpless, loves the unlovable and offers hospice to the homeless. This story of a loving and redeeming God is the driving force of Christian education *and* fulfills the deepest longings and highest ethical aspirations of the postmodern heart.

A pedagogy that strives to honour the other must be a pedagogy of love. Palmer notes that “the act of knowing *is* an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.” He goes on to contrast such knowing with the dominant pedagogical paradigm of modernity:

Curiosity and control create a knowledge that distances us from each other and the world, allowing us to use what we know as a plaything and to play the game by our own self-serving rules. But a knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability.²⁹

Christian education attempts to overcome the distance of objectivist knowing and the game playing of standard educational practice by raising up world-lovers who will know the world in love and respond to the other with compassion.

An essential characteristic of such a pedagogy of love is the Kingdom virtue of hospitality. “Hospitality means receiving each other ... with openness and care.”³⁰ And this means that we must listen to the voice of the other and “strain to hear what the subject is saying about itself beyond all our interpretations.”³¹ In such a listening pedagogy, hospitality is recognized to be both an ethical and an epistemological virtue. A stance of hospitable curiosity and openness to God’s creation (in all of its strangeness) is only sustainable in an educational context that affirms the inherent goodness of multicultural difference. Such an affirmation will be manifest in the languages learned, the literature taught and the cultural voices that are heard and celebrated.

10. Postmodernity is not “out there,” it is in here.

The danger of a chapter that offers a neat ten things that we need to know about postmodernity is that it might allow readers to think that they have now

²⁹ Palmer, *To Know as we are Known*, pp. 8-9. For further reflection (and debate) on the nature of compassion in a Christian worldview see, Brian Walsh, Hendrik Hart and Robert Vandervennen (eds.), *An Ethos of Compassion and the Integrity of Creation*, Lanham, London and N.Y., University Press of America, 1995.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 73.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 98.

been able to understand a cultural shift taking place around them, but not within them. Or we might be able to somehow conclude that the issue is simply a matter of finding a way to “relate” the unchanging message of the gospel to the changing cultural context. This, in my view, would be a serious mistake. Here too, Leonard Cohen proves to be prophetic. In “The Future” he sings, “the blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold.” Postmodernity is in the air, and Christians breathe the same air as everyone else, we are not immune to the postmodern shift. We do not live in a self-enclosed, hermetically sealed world. The blizzard has crossed the threshold, that is, it has entered our homes. This is quite literally the case every time we turn on the television.

Therefore, if the walls of modernist certainty are indeed crumbling, then a Christian critique of postmodernity and education will do well to avoid any myopic “us/them” polemics in which “they” are postmodern and lost in relativism and “we” are Christian resting secure in the faith of the ages. Such a polemic might seem to be pedagogically necessary lest our students leave the home of faith and join the postmodern carnival. But I am convinced that this polemic is dishonest, unbecoming of the gospel, and a sure route to losing our own children and not attracting those of anyone else. No, we need to practice a more open and a more humble spirituality.³²

This does not mean that we abandon our traditions, our interpretations, our Scriptures. On the contrary, I have repeatedly called us to maintain the radical audacity of the gospel in our postmodern age. But it does mean that we engage in our appraisal and critique of postmodernity from a point of solidarity with our neighbours. We share much of their confusion and anxiety because we share a commonality of brokenness. And with love and humility we tell them the story of Jesus, striving to be his bruised and broken body to a bruised and broken world. If we do that then our schools will be sites of spiritual discernment, funding an alternative imagination and raising up young people who will live Kingdom lives in a postmodern world.³³

Questions for Discussion:³⁴

1. Where do you see numbness and boredom manifest itself in your students? Do you think that this is connected to the postmodern shift? How do you cut through this debilitating emotional condition in your students? Do they listen to

³² This is a spirituality and a pedagogy that Bob Goudzwaard describes as listening, leading and loving in chapter 3 of this book.

³³ On the role of Scripture in “funding” the imagination see Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1993.

³⁴ These questions arose out of a discussion with Hilda Roukema, the principal of John Knox Christian School in Brampton, Ontario, Canada.

bands like The Smashing Pumpkins? Do they identify with their depiction of betrayal? How is that manifest in their attitudes and behaviour at school?

2. What are the pedagogical challenges posed by the postmodern rejection of all grand stories and rational justification of all belief? How do you teach history without breeding cynicism?

3. Where do you see postmodern moral instability in the classroom, in the hallways, in the playground? How does a biblical ethic respond to this cultural collapse?

4. If Christian education is rooted in the biblical story and driven by a passionate love of God and of his creation then how do we best form teachers to indwell that story and experience that passion? And what is pedagogically necessary to animate our students with a biblical imagination and energize them with a Kingdom passion? What hinders such an imagination and passion in the lives of students and teachers?

5. Do we foster a compassionate pedagogy of love that encourages students to be hospitable to the “other”? Or do we still work with a pedagogy that attempts to control the world and the student, thereby forming an inhospitable subculture?

Suggested Reading:

David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1995.

Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983.

Bio line:

Brian Walsh received his B.A. in philosophy and religious studies from the University of Toronto, a MPhil in philosophical theology from the Institute for Christian Studies and the Ph.D. in philosophy of religion from McGill University in Montreal. He is the author of *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time* (1994), *Langdon Gilkey: Theologian for a Culture in Decline* (1992), and co-author with J. Richard Middleton of *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (1984) and *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (1995).

From 1988 to 1995 Dr. Walsh served as the Senior Member in Worldview Studies at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. He is presently the Christian Reformed Chaplain to the University of Toronto. He is married to

Sylvia Keesmaat and they live in Toronto with their children, Jubal and Madeleine.

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid- to late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. The term has been more generally applied to describe a historical era said to follow after modernity and the tendencies of this era. Postmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection toward what it describes as the grand narratives and ideologies associated with modernism, often criticizing Christian theism answers the question of the nature of man by seeing man as a special creation made in the very image of God (compare with Genesis 1:26â€“28; 9:6). In contrast, postmodern secular humanism sees man as a single-celled organism run amuck â€” a glorified ape who has lost most of his hair and gained opposable thumbs, a cosmic accident.Â Both worldviews reject the absolute, objective truth of Godâ€™s Word and, in the case of postmodernism, objective truth in general. Classic secular humanism rejects truth in favor of matter; the postmodern version rejects truth in favor of experience.Â If more education is not the answer, perhaps the solution is to be found in more governance. Really? There are two problems with that kind of thinking.