“God is subtle, but he is not malicious.”
—Albert Einstein

In the beginning they were all beginners; no one was advanced. Little by little they learned that Nature favors the firstborn, but God prefers the second; so they had to learn deception. Though the serpent was more subtle than any of the creatures God had made, God had made him; he was Yahweh’s protégé, the world’s first teacher, and Eve’s first lesson after trees was God’s predilection for flocks over fruits and Abel over Cain. Though not the reason why—or was it whim?—Sibling rivalry was couching at the door.

And God said: ‘I will have a people of my own.’ At first the covenant was fragile, so the fathers built a fence for its survival; then as now, the last line of defense was dissimulation. Abel had to say that Sarai was his sister, and they lived well in Egypt so long as she was Pharaoh’s wife. As Abraham of the promise, he fancied the younger boy to Ishmael, Sarah easily won the boon for Isaac; who in turn played his dad’s Old trick in Gerar: ‘Lost I did because of her.’

His own Rebekah tested him, scheming to secure the blessing for her favorite son, who can fault her, for didn’t the Lord ordain: ‘The elder shall serve the younger’? But who can forget Isaac’s exceedingly great and bitter cry: ‘Bless me, even me also, O my father’? Didn’t Isaac tremble, and then see again, that blind old man, the shadow of the knife? Upraised so long and sorrow for Jacob who would follow him. Along the twisted way of Chosenness to the mad land of Moab,? Lost to his mother, who called the curse upon herself, wily Jacob fled the springing beast to Paddan-aram; from Bethel of the dream he woke and went to Haran, where he found his kinsmen at the Well and loved at sight Rachel, the younger girl; the seven years he worked for her went swifter than a week.

But Uncle Laban was a schemer like his sister and had a ruse for putting Leah in his rightful place as first wife in his nephew’s bed. Even so, Jacob in his disguise forgot where favoritism lied, and loved Best of all his sons the dreamer, Joseph, who strutted in his pretty coat. The envy of his brothers was the beast that drenched his robe in blood. Yet the promise proved efficacious through doing fathers, meddling Mothers, family strike and reconciliation; deception begot deception. Unto the fourth generation; the burden of the blessing was the root of Jacob’s limp, until Israel laid the right hand on the wrong grandson, then blessed them all and gathered up his feet into his bed.

At the end of the beginning the patriarchs and matriarchs must have known the truth of what the mystics say: “Nothing” is one of the Names of God, and nothing resides to exist at the moment of creation. Meaning that creatures must then, for good or ill, make something. Of the world. Reading Genesis, one wonders whether it matters To God that the Covenant came to fruition by so much mendacity. So many miles, and whether without guile the saving story could unfold, Much less have been retold. So many wiles, and whether without guile the saving story could unfold, To God that the Covenant came to fruition by so much mendacity, Meaning that creatures must then, for good or ill, make something

Known the truth of what the mystics say: ‘Nothing’ is one of the Things of our common passions. Not surprisingly, the VDS students who traveled to the prison were interested in discussing justice, sexism, racism, and violence within our society. These issues provoke emotional responses and challenge all participants to reconsider the structure of oppressive institutions and to consider how one’s participation in these systems may contribute to violence towards another one.

In order to elicit discussions, our assignments included reading challenging theological texts. Just as the professors promised, the words of the theological texts acquire different meanings inside the prison. The words of Paul’s friend, Dorothy Day, Will Campbell, and Walter Wink take on new life while reading them with the Riverbend residents who are reconsidering their identities, their experiences of the world, and their understandings of the divine. I am forced to reshape my own perspective.

In contrast to other programs at the prison, we did not travel to the prison to offer Bible studies, to counsel inmates, or to preside at worship services. Our journey, however, does include a hope for transformation.

After spending eighteen years of my life in Texas, one would think I would know about prisons. But to me, prisons were merely plots of land marked by water leaves and tall fences rising from the Texas Gulf coast plans.

The Houston nightly local news often reported executions that had occurred that week in Huntsville by displaying a mug shot, name, and crime. As children, we were not permitted to play outside when an inmate had escaped from one of the six prisons located in Brazoria County. Despite the significant presence of prisons in our community, discussions relating to penal institutions, inmates, or the criminal justice system were absent from conversations in the community, in the classroom, at the dinner table, or at church. I was able to escape any conversations relating to prisons throughout my undergraduate and post-graduate career. While working in the affordable housing industry in Washington, D.C., I heard many discussions about the need for affordable housing for the developmentally handicapped, physically handicapped, or homeless individuals. The community development professionals were silent when it came to matters relating to potential communal responsibility for housing or programs for individuals exiting prisons.

Fortunately, Vanderbilt University Divinity School refuses to perpetuate the silence present in most communities. In my second semester of my program of studies for the master of divinity degree, I had the opportunity to register for a class taught at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the local state prison. The course invited residents of Riverbend and VDS students to begin an exploration of theology inside the walls of the prison.

Similar to the other students from VDS, I had never been inside a prison. In fact, I did not even know where to go to find a prison in Tennessee without a visible water tower and tall fence emerging from the horizon. I initially questioned the rationale for traveling the distance to the prison to engage in theological discussions with individuals who were not students in a divinity school, but the professors’ enthusiasm quieted my hesitations and drew me to the fence surrounding Riverbend.

I encountered many fences designed to separate me from my classmates at Riverbend. I was not wearing the “blues.” I did not share the standardized shoes or assigned job descriptions. After leaving the prison, I could choose my own dinner and leave my lights on as late as I wanted. I could receive phone calls from loved ones anytime of the day.

In our first class, my mind wandered into imagining the life inside the walls of the prison. To bring me back to the present, the professors asked each of us to introduce ourselves with our name. The task seemed simple, but to the men at Riverbend the task was liberating. The inmates were not asked to frame themselves by the crimes they had committed or the lengths of their sentences. Instead, a name would suffice for entrance into the discussions of theology that have continued for six semesters. It is common to acknowledge and affirm difference and diversity at VDS, but, in comparison to the diversity found in the Riverbend classroom, VDS students are quite homogeneous. Instead of focusing on the inherent differences present inside the walls of the Riverbend classroom, our professors invited each of us into a dialogue centered on our common passions. Not surprisingly, the VDS students who traveled to the prison were interested in discussing justice, sexism, racism, and violence within our society. These issues provoke emotional responses and challenge all participants to reconsider the structure of oppressive institutions and to consider how one’s participation in these systems may contribute to violence towards another one.

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of one another. Unexpectedly, some VDS stu-
dents and Riverbend residents, who had
rejected belonging to a faith tradition in the
past, now called the Riverbend class "church." 
After encountering the prison, it has
become impossible for me to ignore the the-
eoretical and practical connections between my
theological convictions and the structure of the
criminal justice system. In all courses, the
VDS professors encourage students to inte-
grate the words of texts we are studying with our
experiences in our practice of ministry.
Not only is this task necessary, but it is
unavoidable. As one Riverbend resident pro-
cclaimed quite cogently, "If you take these
texts seriously, this is a hard place to be."
Regardless of social location, if one adopts
serious theology and its practical implications seri-
ously, living in the world and practicing the
art of ministry will challenge one everyday.
My four-quarter apprenticeship at River-
bend constantly shapes my other course work
at the Divinity School. While attending classes
at the prison, I was also exploring political
theology in the course "Communities, Tradi-
tions, and Differences" with Mary McClintock
Fulkerson, PhD'86, the visiting E. Rhodes
and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Theology.
Here we examined the religious and political
traditions that govern communities by explor-
ingen the scholarship of John Rawls, Donald
Dokecki, PhD'68, professor of psychology at
Development Professionals(" taught by Paul
Edward Farley, and John Howard Yoder.
In all communities, we adopt certain tra-
ditions and practices to reinforce community
values. Specifically, my experience in the prison
raised questions concerning the boundaries of
community, as well as a community's responsibili-
ties to individuals. While the human voices from Riverbend suggest that
those inside the walls of the prison are no
longer members of the community, the the-
ologists we encountered insist that the razor
fences do not absolve "free worlders" from
responsibility to "the other." Our discussions
about the cycle of violence and the moral
implications of the criminal justice system often are these ideals used in governing deci-
sions regarding prisons? The theoretical
texts I have encountered at VDS propose that
individuals in prison, despite one's trans-
gressions, are still members of the community
and children of God.
I encountered many fences designed to separate
me from my classmates at Riverbend.
In the dense haze of January, I sit frozen as the
brick kilauea winds send shivers up the spines of xeris
and cost-effectiveness. In practice, intentional
decisions are made to disrupt the formation of
community or friendships among the men.
I am at a loss to find the theological texts to
support decisions that do not support the
development of humans and community.

From the experience of the residents of
Riverbend, decisions are based upon safety
and cost-effectiveness. In practice, intentional
decisions are made to disrupt the formation of
community or friendships among the men.
I am at a loss to find the theological texts to
support decisions that do not support the
development of humans and community.

Similar to my course in political theology
and professional ethics, my experience at
Riverbend inspires my studies of feminist
process theology with Visiting Professor
Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki this fall semester.
Her book, The Fall to Violence, suggests that
sin is the use of unnecessary violence, a prac-
tice which demonstrates a "rebellion against
creation's well-being." From her under-
standing of original sin, in light of feminist
theology, it follows that each person is
responsible for enhancing the well-being of
any victim and violator in order to stop the
cycle of violence defined as sin. From her
perspective, transformation of this cycle
does not occur from "feelings of love" or
"acceptance of the other," but transformation
entails a "matter of intellect." Transforma-
tion and forgiveness arise from the practice
of "sensing the well-being of victim(s) and
violator(s) in the context of the fullest possible
knowledge of the nature of the violation."
Since I have become acquainted with residents
of Riverbend, Suchocki's words resound with
the pain of victims and violators I encounter
inside and outside the walls of the prison.
Suchocki's argument of solidarity and inter-
dependence challenges all to become more
involved in practices of communal transfor-
mation and self-transcendence.
Fortunately, these classes, authors, and
men at Riverbend offer me a new voice in
public discussions and private conversa-
tions. My experience inside the fence of the
prison enables me to engage individuals,
evaluate ethical arguments, and question
criminal justice policies in the social world.
Marked by my identity as a free-worlder
Tennesseean, native Texan, and student of
theology, I can no longer participate in the
silence that pervades our communities and
churches. Mistakenly, debates relating to
prisons become centered on the funding,
construction, and location of prisons. But, as individ-
uals whose theological education at Vanderbilt
Divinity School has endorsed an ethic of care,
we should expand these debates to discus-
sions of communal responsibility to victim
and violator. The prison, an institution once
only identified by fences and water towers,
has now become a community of individuals
with needs and resources to share with me.

The course currently taught at Riverbend Maxi-
imum Security Institution is titled "Where We
Stand: The Impact of Social Location on Biblical
Interpretation in the Southern United States" and
is coordinated by alumni/ae Janet Lynn
Wolf, MDiv'88, director of public policy and
community outreach for Religious Leaders for a
More Just and Compassionate Drug Policy.
Harmon Wray, MAThEd, executive director for
the National Association of Sentencing Advocates;
and Richard Goode, PhD'97, associate professor
of history and senior faculty fellow in the Center
for International Peace and Justice at David
Lipson University.

A native of Lake Jackson, Texas, Megan was
educated at Davidson College where she earned a baccalaureate in mathematics.

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I received the gift of these stories through chance encounters on the beach, conversations
in patients' rooms, nurses' stations, and especially through the hours spent in the office of my
CPE preceptor, Gail, a local Hawaiian woman (residents of Hawaii reserve the term “local” to
signify those born and reared on the islands), has served as the chaplain at Kapi'olani Med-
Fall 2004

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THE SPIRE

monument marking the landing site of the
U.S. takeover of a “friendly monarchy” as
a date that will live in infamy.” Heard on
occasional southern sun
rivate simply followed
my way when pregnancies becamed
complicated. My first C-Section caught me
by surprise. As I entered the room, the
young husband arose from his chair. When
I introduced myself as the chaplain, he apolo-
getically snapped to attention. I was shocked
and slightly embarrassed. Though I could
see he was a few years my junior, I could not
explain the formalities of this private. The
child of a former submariner, I at least pulled
myself together enough to say “at ease,” but
somehow knew “resting on the shell” was what
I was trying to say. A fellow C-Section student
and retired naval chap-
lain explained that chaplains are always mil-
tary in the army, and as such have no need to
be a pastor to their patients. He then showed
me into church. I told her my CPE program, the
words reminded her of the times her
mother made her attend church, but the tra-
sition from Judaism to Hawai’i appeared
challenging. Though painful in part, the reli-
igious appeal is more convoluted…Hawai’i appears
more Buddhist than Christian. Such a
paradox was what I had been working to
understand. In Kawaiaho Church (one of
over a hundred United Church of Christ con-
gregations on the islands) midway through
the summer. Prominently situated near the
state capitol and the former royal palace, this
old stone church is Hawai’i’s mother church—
the first permanent church building on Oahu. Though James Michener’s depiction
of the early missionaries in his book Hawai’i
appears to be historically inaccurate, the
scholar argues that “[t]he missionaries were
hosted at a place that was at once a holy
sanctuary and oriented toward human
awe.” Indeed, the Calvinism of the first mission
in the Sandwich Islands was matched by the
business interests of the islands would serve
as an appropriate example for Max Weber’s
Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.
We were introduced to the church where she
had been unable to find a fitting teacher.
She found instead several Christian friends
who helped her understand the ways of Buddhism during her early
years, but eventually she turned to
Christianity, and joined a Full Gospel church. While nei-
ther the Buddhist teachers she sometimes
herself, she began to seek a spiritual life that was in the
middle of the summer. Prominently situated near the
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We were introduced to the church where she
had been unable to find a fitting teacher. This
friend who learned about her teaching
experience, her understanding of any society, including our
own, through the stock of stories that constitute its essential dramatic resources.” Similarly, religious historian Martin Marty
mirrors political columnist Max Lerner’s
statement about symbols: “People possess
stories, but stories possess people.” “Acade-
mic giddiness over the power of story, how-
ever, often misses a particular story’s rich-
ness. The Hawaiian tale is far richer than I
would have expected. Any tale of my ex-
erience, the stories I witnessed, and the lives
that shaped my own. Though my appren-
ticeship in “talking story” lasted only one
week, I hope I can convey both the pain of innocence lost through the collision of cul-
tures and the sense of the spiritual maturity
gained through these internal conflicts.

I began my relationship with Hawaii a month before the 14th anniversary of the
attack on Pearl Harbor. I went to search Amazon.com for books to help me
understand better the local culture. I soon
learned of the cultural significance of the Hawaiian experience as well as my reading
of the country’s history. I visited the first
mosque on the islands (midway through the
summer). Prominently situated near the
state capitol and the former royal palace, this
old stone church is Hawai’i’s mother church—
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tures and the sense of the spiritual maturity
As God’s representative in the room, I was as silent as the God to
whom she had prayed. . . . Her voice was God’s voice teaching me to
guard against my arrogant desire to solve her problem—God’s voice
whispering the wisdom of soulful silence—God’s voice illuminating
the pain of the world and calming me enough to sit in its midst.

this,” she said. “You just need to tell me about Jesus and heaven and hell, right?”
If that were my task, I had many of the usual questions about the
meaning of life, the nature of God, and so on. She was very
determined to have a talk with the church and I
profuse apologies offered me something to
bear (a bath, a nurse, or a friend) and joined her in her search for
beauty. An older woman made her attend church, but the
transitional Hawaiian blessing with Te leaves
and saltwater stirred deeper memories of her
grandmother’s life. She was a woman caught
in between two religious worlds, but among three.
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over a hundred United Church of Christ con-
gregations on the islands) midway through
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middle-school-aged girl had lost her baby sixteen weeks into the pregnancy. She spoke very little, and I, wiser after several disasters earlier in the summer, spoke less. She did not like the middle-aged father, and everyone told her the loss was for the best—now she could finish school. She, however, had prayed that God would save the baby because she wanted a child to love.

“I tried praying,” she said, “but now I’m done talking to God.”

I could only sit with her in the silence. I had no answers to offer. As God’s representa- tive in the room, I was as silent as the God to whom she had prayed. I cannot say how God worked in that young girl’s life, but she worked in mine. Her voice was God’s voice teaching me to guard against my arrogant desire to solve her problem—God’s voice whispering the wisdom of soulful silence—God’s voice illuminating the pain of the world and calming me enough to sit in its midst. She helped me see that I can know no answers to her story or the Hawaiian story, no midwifery of the deep. She helped me see that I can know no answers to her story or the Hawaiian story, but I can stop, and I can sit, and I can listen. The maturity of her struggle ultimately revealed the pain of my innocence escaping.

As I read Dag Hammarskjold’s book Markings, one musing leapt at me after a par- ticularly long day of snorkeling on the infra- mous North Shore: “Sun and stillness. Look- ing through the jade-green water, you see the monsters of the deep playing on the reef. Is this a reason to be afraid? Do you feel safer when scudding waves hide what lies beneath the water?”

Growing up a white male on the bluffs of the Missouri river, the deep brown streams of my life have hidden the monstrous truths far better than Hawaii’s clear blue bays. At home I could snorkel all day and never glimpse the structures of power, money, and religious privilege just beyond the end of my nose. In Hawaii these structures remain hidden by the sun’s brill- iant reflection off the water, but a dip below the surface reveals the immensity of struggle shielded from view. In Hawaii I began learn- ing to see and swim among these monsters of the deep.

One cannot deny the pain brought through the loss of a child or the necessity of a hysterectomy, but many patients I visited also gave voice to the emotional and spiritual pain inflicted by Hawaii’s cultural milieu. Hawaii and her people taught me a new way to see my life and my place in the world. Many there have endured hardships, but they retain a spirit of generosity and kindness.

While builders long ago etched Jesus’ command to “Go and make disciples of all nations” into the cornerstone of my home church, Pidgin: the plantation language of the Hawaiian people, gives this imperative a new meaning:

Den Jesus go near dem and say, “God won give me all da power, so now I in charge a everything all ov da world an inside da sky. So you go, all ov da world and teach all da differen peoples, so dey can learn bout me and come my guys. Boy, and God’s Good an Sposho Spirit. Teach um how fo do everything I tell you guys fo do. An you know sef? I gain stick wit you guys all da way, till da world goin pau.”

I now go, not to impose my story and my language, but to listen, to engage, and to grow in the language of others so that together we might construct anew the narra- tives of our lives. Perhaps Hawaii’s innocence was not the only one lost; perhaps the loss of innocence engenders drops of maturity.

The course is graduated in 2005 from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth where he earned a baccalaureate in economics and an min region. A Carpenter Scholar at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Bliss will receive the master of divinity degree in May 2005.


“Na’au – Nā Mea Hāna Nui – Nā Mea Hāna ‘Aina.”

“See Kamehameha’s Hawaiian Story by Henry’s Queen (Boston: Truth, 1910).”


Kent, 28.

“Judul Pidgin: Hilo’s, Hilo, and Hilo’s, Hilo.”


Kam, 28.

During the 2004 spring semester, Bryan Ben- nington Bliss anticipated two commences—graduation from the Divinity School and brotherhood. He and his wife, Michelle, became the proud parents of Eleanor Grace (Erie), who had the distinction of being the youngest guest at the Divinity School’s exercis- es. Bliss received the master of theological stud- io degree and also served as field education intern for this issue of The Spire.

Camilla Clay Andrews, MTS’05, is congratulated by Bettye Goah and John G. W. Goah following the act of worship in Benton Chapel. As laity in the Black church, the Goahs were recognized during Commencement 2004 for fulfilling the requirements for the Kelly Miller Smith Institute Certificate Program in Black Church Studies.
Incense and the Mere Christian

After Robert Odd Wyatt II earned a baccalaureate degree in English from the University of the South, he decided to take the alicyclic setting of Semevian mountain and mount to Eustratius, Illinois, where he would enroll in Seward-Western Theological Seminary. But before he completed the first year of his theological education, he found himself preparing to move again—across the street in the English department of Northwestern University—after he ran afoul of the seminary dean on the subject of incense.

The very reverend dean was a Virginia gentleman who wore French cuffs and hailed from the Old School, and he was extremely rigid about the liturgies he would permit in our chapel,” recalls Wyatt. “He decreed that incense was forbidden in any service because he did not want to offend those who preferred lower church practices. But in a fit of generosity, he told the vicar that they could assume the responsibilities for planning their commencement services. When the seminarians elected to use incense in the act of worship, the dean immediately withdrew his permission and informed the students that he would prescribe the liturgy for their graduation exercises.”

Upon learning of the strident comments Wyatt had exchanged during a campus protest about the dean’s domineering character, the gentleman of the Old School summoned the seminarians from Tennessee to his office and suggested Wyatt might be happier matriculating at the University of Chicago Divinity School or walking across the street and introducing himself to the English faculty at Northwestern.

“Tasteful with my consumption of the Holy Spirit, I was going to be a Christian who relates to people across cultural lines, I had to become, in the words of C. S. Lewis, a mere Christian who endeavors to understand the cultures of others on their terms and to understand my culture differently: To my great surprise, when I took the general ordination examination, my highest score was not in church history but in pastoral theology.”

Ordained as a transitional deacon on June 20, Wyatt has accepted a call as curate, or associate priest, for Making Excellent Disciples, an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment for the Church of the Transfiguration in the Diocese of Chicago. “I have always felt called to return to Chicago, and theologically and liturgically Chicago is a better setting for me than Tennessee,” says Wyatt, who describes himself as “High Church, socially liberal, and rather theologically conservative.” Prior to his ordination to the priesthood in December, he will return to India, at the request of his bishop, to participate in a study to support free expression and democratic values within the country and to establish ties with the Church of South India.
Confessions of a Half-Mad Divinity School Student

BY BRYAN BENNINGTON BLISS, MTS ’04

There should be a disclaimer in every divinity school bulletin. Something like: “While (Inset name of institution here) is pleased to publish a selection from Dordal’s field education portfolio titled Community and a Growing Debt of Student Affairs, I am left with an aching sense of weariness. I haven’t been so lucky. I was not affiliated with any school of religion. The last person who asked me to subscribe was a woman who is not affiliated with any school of religion. She might as well have patted me on my back, and grunted the words: soteriology—pronounced something other.

There is no better inoculation for intellectual arrogance than graduate education, especially theological training. If you had asked, before graduate school, my opinion on the Bible, I would have waxed poetically typing on my laptop when my wife asked me what I was researching. Wild-eyed, I looked up at her, and grinned the words: soteriology—pronounced something other.

A constructive Christian theology paper quickly muddies the water, and truth once again becomes nothing more than a tall tale. Third-year divinity school students speak about their bashed voices, first-year students at their feet.

This, however, isn’t an acceptable answer for most people. The worst question a divinity student confronts is: “What are you going to do when you graduate?” There are varieties of this question such as: “What are you going to do with that degree?” For some, the choice is easy. They will be ordained ministers, and go straight into a church. For others, the choice isn’t so clear. When confronted with the question of vocations, I generally smile, shrug my shoulders, and give a very profound, theological answer: “I have no idea.”

People, of course, do not want to hear this. They want to know why you left your job to go to school, and your wife, husband, or partner is equally mystified. Luckily, you are in divinity school—surrounded by people who not only understand but also are living in the same ambiguity. And this is the beauty of divinity school, it is a community of wanderlusters, the weary travelers who have no other place to go—or who majored in philosophy as undergraduates.

Somehow, in the shadowy corners of my head, a voice is screaming for me to stay in divinity school as long as I can. A recent graduate professed this advice: “It’s tough out here, stay.” And, he probably is right. The world is not like divinity school. Not everyone is going to care when your wife is sick, and I do not envision conversations about theology by the office water cooler. But ultimately, you have to graduate and face the real world. I find myself frightened close to this reality. And, even though I do not know what I am going to do when I finish, or even why I came to divinity school—I abide. At least I wasn’t committed.

The co-aptant serves as youth minister at the First United Methodist Church in Salisbury, North Carolina.

Leccion de Geografía

Dr. Lida Dordal, MDiv, a research coordinator for the Center for Global Education at Vanderbilt University, offers this insight into her time as an immigrant Mexican student at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

Dr. Lida Dordal

Dordal, MDiv3, a research coordinator for the Center for Global Education at Vanderbilt University Divinity School—students and Trudy Strong, associate director of field education, traveled to Mexico for a field education immersion experience in the social, political, and economic circumstances affecting the country’s population. The cross-cultural course was designed to bring the Center for Global Education at Augustsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Upon returning to Nashville, Lisa Dordal, MDiv, a research coordinator for the Center for Mental Health Policy at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, composed a series of poems in which she reflects upon the questions inspired by the trip. “Twenty-three million Mexicans, approximately twenty percent of the population, live in the United States, and the reason so many Mexicans make the perilous journey across the border is because there are so few economic opportunities in Mexico,” explains Dordal. “I learned that poverty is worse than at any other time in the past fifty years, seventy-five percent of the population lives in economic poverty that may be attributed to insufficient policies set forth by the Mexican government, grossly unbalanced corporations, and grossly unjust trade agreements with the United States. Amid the poverty, however, there is hope to be found in the work and activism of Base Christian Communities, of nongovernmental organizations, and of dedicated individuals.”

The Sprig is pleased to publish a selection from Dordal’s field education portfolio titled Text Shots of Cuernavaca.

Where is Mexico?

She is here—washing our dishes, picking our strawberries, building our houses.

Living, working, and dreaming.

Mexico on the move.

Where is the church?

She is here—in the country palm of my hand, the hand holding the bread I wish to share with you, my neighbor, across a whole new border.

—LIDA DORDAL (1964 – )

Geography Lesson

Where is Mexico?

She is here—washing our dishes, picking our strawberries, building our houses.

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Mexico on the move.

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A House Built on Partnership
Celebrating Seventy-Five Years of Disciples at VDS

BY BRANDON L. GILVIN, MDIV’02

A

lumni, faculty, administrators, and friends of Vanderbilt Divinity School gathered for dinner at Nashville’s Woodmont Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, on November 17, 2003, to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of a place dear to them—the Disciples Divinity House. An important institution in the histo-
ry of VDS, the Disciples House has supported over five hundred Disciple students and has been home to students from other faith traditions as well.

Foraged in 1927 under the leadership of George Mayhew, professor of history and religion at the Vanderbilt School of Religion, the Disciples House began as the Disciples Foundation. Since the beginning of the Disciples movement, education for ministry had been a priority, and Mayhew envisioned a fairly ideal new in the South—that Disciples could best obtain higher education for ministry from a faculty in an ecclesiastical, universi-
ty-based setting while maintaining a lively Disciple community. Vine Stroot, a local Disciples congregation, embraced the vision and provided early support and leadership in the Foundation’s establishment.

The first Disciples House was purchased in 1931 and was home to the first group of Board of Trustees and their spouses. In 1950, the Board of Higher Education of the Disciples of Christ recognized Vanderbilt Divinity School as one of its approved theological institutions, and an increasing number of Disciples moved to Nashville, making a new and larger, Disciples Divinity House necessary. The present building was completed in 1958 and has housed numerous Disciples in its forty-five years.

Former residents of the Disciples House will tell you that living there proved to be an integral part of their education at Vanderbilt, by providing a unique sense of community and helping them to develop leadership, college relations, and the art of living in so many ways by this community,” says alumni and current student Kara Kleinschmidt, MDiv’03.

A three-story apartment building located at 2005 Grand Avenue and dedicated on February 26, 1942, served as the original Disciples House, which had affiliated with Vanderbilt University Divinity School for seventy-five years. The building was sold to the Methodists in 1957 and the current Disciples House was erected.

“A significant element of the celebration actually began several days before the celebration dinner. As part of an initiative on “Transition into Ministry” funded by the Lilly Endowment, current Disciple students and recent alumnus/alumna gathered at the House for a workshop on Practical Theology and the Practice of Ministry conducted by Don Browning, the Alexander Campbell Professor of Ethics and the Social Sciences, emeritus, at the University of Chicago Divinity School. After examining the practical uses of theological discourse and reflection in the life of communities of faith, participants explored Browning’s case study model as a way for contextualizing instances in congregational life into a theological schema.”

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A house famed for its home to students from other faith traditions, a recovery community in Nashville for mothers with addictions and for their children, and C. Roy Stauffer, MDIV’71, DMD’72, senior minister at Lin-
denwood Christian Church, Memphis, Ten-
nessee. Sunny Beth Buchanan, MDIV’94, and current resident Nathan Brown, MDIV’03, spoke on their experiences in the Disciples House community. Alumni/alumna from past decades of the House’s existence, ministers and church members from Tennessee, friends and trustees of the House from all over the coun-
try, and faculty members whose careers span the history of the House attended the anniversary celebration. For longtime friends of the House, however, there was one conspicuous absence, at least in the physical sense—Herman Norton, BD’49, MA’51, PhD’56, dean of the House through its formative years of 1951-1986. Norton died in 1992, but his influence on the trajectory of the Disciples House, as well as on the lives of the students who lived there, was commemorat-
ed in stories shared over dinner, not only by the featured speakers, but in casual conver-
sations.

Our gathering at Woodmont Christian Church was coordinated also because it sup-
ported the mission of the House, was not merely a time to revel in the glories of the past. As Brown remarked, the anniversary was also a time to keep in mind DH’s con-
tributions to the future work of the church. “We find importance in the Disciples Divin-
ity House at Vanderbilt because of the quality of leadership it produces for God’s ministry on earth,” explained Brown. “I find God’s promise in the Disci-
ples Divinity House at Vanderbilt because I find hope in the ministries that are repre-

sented in this room, the ministries that are continuing to flourish for God’s kingdom and for the ministries that are created by institutions such as the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt that will allow God’s church to exist in the future.”

Disciple students have a long history of leadership in the Divinity School, including key roles in student government and other campus organizations, strong participation in programs such as the recent grant in theologi-

cal education in a global context, and providing leadership for the annual Antoinette Brown Lecture. Currently, there are twenty-five students in the Disciple com-

munity at Vanderbilt Divinity School, eight-

teen of whom live in the House. They are all involved in a variety of activities at the Divinity School and in the greater Nashville community, making the House an exciting place filled with activity, often operating at a frenetic pace, but it is a pace that supports an energetic ministry for providing leadership for the future church.

Perhaps Mark Miller-McLemore, dean of the Disciples Divinity School, describes most accurately the occasion of our seventy-fifth anniversary: “Disciples House has been through some challenging times in the last decade, so it was great to celebrate all the good—for the Christian Church and for the Divinity School—that has emerged in this unique partnership.” The event gave testimony to the School’s influence on the more than five hundred Disciple graduates of Vanderbilt and the quality of ministers in congregations and the larger church—as teachers and as forces for shalom in our communities. And the significant presence of Disciple students and faculty continues to affirm the impor-
tance the House’s role and vision of its place in American Protestantism and in Nashville. It is a relationship that has been fruitful.”

The essayist recently served as minister-in-resi-
dency at Central Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and has accepted an appointment in Nairobi, Kenya, with the Overseas Ministries of the Disciples of Christ.

Practical Writer
The life of the Reverend Doctor Perry H. Biddle, MDIV’73, exempli-

fies Vanderbilt University Divinity School’s commitment to educate ministers as theologians. Perry H. Biddle, MDIV’73, author of eighteen books for clergy and laity, has donated a cit-
ty of humorous and profound publications to the archives of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library.

The Reverend Doctor Perry H. Biddle, MDIV’73, recipient of eighteen books for clergy and laity, has donated a city of humorous and profound publications to the archives of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library.

The leadership of Herman Norton, MDIV’73, at the Disciples Divinity House of Vanderbilt University was acknowledged during the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt Foundation. Norton began his studies at Vanderbilt School of Religion in 1947 and for thirty-five years, (1947-1983) served as dean of the House.

I

n the three decades since earning his doctorate in min-
istry from the Disciples School, Biddle has written eighteen books for clergy and lay including a practical theological treatise, the lectionary, conducting weddings and funerals, hospital visitation, and coping with suicide. He has also written a devotional book for newlyweds and another volume relat-
ing humor with healing.

As a gesture of appreciation for the Disciples School’s contributions to his theological education, Biddle has donated a signed collection of his books published by William B. Eerdmans, Westminster/ John Knox Press, Abingdon Press, Upper Room, Children’s Service Resource (now CSS), Desert Ministries, and Smyth & Helwys to the University’s special collections and archives department of the Jean and Alex-

ander Heard Library.

During his retirement years, Biddle continues to audit courses at the Divinity School and remains active in the Academy of Parish Clergy. The North American Academy of Liturgy and the Presbyterian Writers Guild.

The essayist recently served as minister-in-resi-
dency at Central Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and has accepted an appointment in Nairobi, Kenya, with the Overseas Ministries of the Disciples of Christ.
Reflections on the Consecration of a Bishop

BY THE REVEREND TERRY RANDOLPH PANNELL, MTSoI

The state of New Hampshire traditionally makes the national news only during presidential election years. Accustomed to an invasion of politicians and journalists during the primary season, these hearty, independent-minded New Englanders found themselves in the spotlight again in 2003 when another election was conducted—not a presidential primary—but the election of a bishop for a diocese in the Episcopal Church.

Growing up in the South, I must admit I did not spend much time thinking about New Hampshire. All I knew was that it was one of those tiny states wedged somewhere into that mythical land known as New England. The only person I was ever to associate with New Hampshire was that it was one of those tiny states that could be accommodated in the area occupied by the state of New Hampshire. All I knew was that it was one of those tiny states wedged somewhere into that mythical land known as New England. The only person I was ever to associate with New Hampshire was the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York State. The freshman classmate at The University of the South’s School of Theology in Sewanee, Susan, and I were candidates for holy orders, and after we were graduated, neither of us really expected to see each other again. But when Gene Robinson was elected to be our bishop—we were graduated, neither of us really expected to see each other again. But when Gene Robinson was elected to be our bishop, I decided to board a plane for Manchester, New Hampshire. I was not sure what to expect upon my arrival. The November weather was as cold and damp as the mood of Episcopalians who opposed Gene Robinson’s election. Passionate is not an adjective that immediately comes to mind when one describes Episcopalians who are known as the “frozen chosen.” The New Hampshire election, however, stirred up a hornet’s nest, to employ a cliché, and suddenly Bible thumping Episcopalians who are known as the “frozen chosen” became scurrying about the land and were screening carefully the crowd to accommodate the crowd. When we arrived, the arena on the day of Gene’s consecration was cordoned off on each side to contain the crowd to accommodate the crowd. When we arrived, the arena on the day of Gene’s consecration was scheduled to fly in from Kansas. On the way to Manchester, I thought about the protesters who would be there and tried to rationalize why people would have such visceral reactions to people they do not even know. I replayed in my mind the time, when by accident, my sister and I were stranded in downtown Tupelo, Mississippi, during a Ku Klux Klan parade. Sharpsuiters with rifles, riot police, and a police helicopter were on the scene to keep circumstances from getting out of control. I remembered seeing men dressed in white hoods and hearing them deliver a litany of racist slogans. It was frightening to witness hate so clearly, and as the plane landed in Manchester, I could not help but wonder if the fear I experienced in Tupelo would be resurrected during the protests of Gene’s consecration.

The rite was to be held at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, and the diocese had rented the university’s sports arena to accommodate the crowd. When we arrived for the services, there was a long line and many people waiting to enter the arena. SWAT teams with binoculars and walkie-talkies were located on top of the buildings and were screening carefully the crowd below for signs of trouble. Diálogo y Una View was a bizarre image—armed police watching over people who had come to pray together, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to witness the consecration of a bishop.

I learned later that plain-clothed police officers also were stationed at several locations inside the building. Both Gene Robinson and Frank Griswold, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, were wearing bulletproof vests under their robes. Unbeknownst but to a select few was a man who was seated in a white aisle and was sitting behind Gene Robinson during the entire worship service. As it turned out, the man was the Chief of Police for the University of New Hampshire, and his role was to shield the new bishop-elect should there be an attempt on his life. The chief was nicknamed affectionately “Bishop of Durham.”

The sidewalk leading to the arena had been cordoned off on each side to contain the protesters. There were approximately two hundred people on one side who braved the weather to lend their support to New Hampshire’s newest bishop-elect. On the other side, there were twelve representatives from the Phelps group carrying large placards with proclamations denouncing gays, the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion. They were opposed to Gene’s election because it was time for us to acknowledge and respect the reality of diversity in God’s creation reflects our institutional dishonesty.

It was a long journey to New Hampshire for someone who started out with the odds stacked against him. Gene Robinson had been injured severely at birth by physicians attending his mother during his delivery. Because he was paralyzed for weeks as an infant, the family made plans for his funeral. He recovered from the paralysis and grew up in a poor family of sharecroppers in rural Kentucky. His early formation as a Christian came through the auspices of the Disciples of Christ Church, known as an Episcopalian. I was proud that my church respects its members enough to make room for voices of dissent to be heard.

After being thanked for their statements, the small group perfunctorily left the building, and following a pastoral response from the presiding bishop, the service continued as he asked the question, “Is it your will that we ordain Gene Robinson a bishop?”

With a thumbs-up voice, thousands of people in unison said, “It is our will.”

That massive sound wave of affirmation washed away the objections made earlier and lifted everyone’s spirits.

All stood in silence as Gene knelt before the presiding bishop. Moving forward and encircling Gene, over forty bishops of the church—including the theologian and former Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl—laid hands upon Gene as the presiding bishop spoke the words, “Father, make Gene a bishop in your Church. Pour out upon him the power of your spirit.”

New Hampshire had a new bishop, and the Episcopal Church had made history. By all measures, Bishop Robinson has conducted himself with exceptional dignity and grace as he continues to perform the duties of his office. Though his election and consecration have generated negative reactions from some within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, the actions also have revealed the church’s discomfort when addressing human sexuality and religion. A long history of ecclesial suppression of minority voices, the condemnation of homosexuality, and the unwillingness to acknowledge and respect the reality of diversity in God’s creation reflects our institutional dishonesty.

If his book titled This Far by Grace, Neal Alexander, the Bishop of Atlanta recounts a meeting at the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in Minneapolis during the summer of 2003. Bishops were debating whether or not to give their consent, which is required by the church’s canons, to Gene’s election. One conservative bishop, who thought Gene was a gifted and experienced priest suitable for the office of bishop, suggested that Gene and his relationship with Mark Andrew—a gay man who was the subject of the election—be examined more closely. Gene was to be consecrated a bishop. Gene was to be consecrated a bishop. Gene was to be consecrated a bishop.

The student obviously knows the truth. The young man held up a sign with the inscription “God is Love.”

The student obviously knows the truth.

Pannell, an Episcopal priest, resides in Shreveport, Louisiana.
Alumni/ae Class Notes

Please Note: Class Notes appear only in the printed version of this publication.
an interest in the discipline of bioethics and was instrumental in advancing the study of the relationship among medical ethics, genetics, and theology and in promoting ethical and religious guidelines on cloning in conjunction with the National Institutes of Health. In 1985, Nelson accepted an appointment as director of the Institute of Religion at the Texas Medical Center.

He served on the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and was acknowledged during his life as an ecumenist whose interest in theological education was characterized by encouraging different denominations to talk constructively about the path to unity.

In 1985, Nelson was appointed president of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is remembered as an outstanding preacher whose sermons were known for their clear theology and humor; he expressed his passion for justice during the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and throughout his life in active support of the oppressed and suffering. The author of Education for Ministry, Professor: Minister; Putting It Together in the Parish, and The Art of Spiritual Snake Handling and Other Sermons, Glasse was developing two manuscripts, Reformed Professional Ministry and Ministry in the Interior, prior to his illness. He was honored for his contributions to theological education by honorary doctorates from Occidental, Union, Elizabeth, Davidson, and Dickinson Colleges.

Following his resignation from the University, Nelson served the academy as a professor and later as dean of Boston University, where he received a doctorate in theology. He served on the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and was acknowledged during his life as an ecumenist whose interest in theological education was characterized by encouraging different denominations to talk constructively about the path to unity.

Nelson’s tenure at the University, however, was not without controversy. When James Lawson, D71, was expelled from the University in 1960 for his participation in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s efforts in desegregation, Nelson protected the expulsion and eventually resigned from the University. Upon learning of Nelson’s passing, Lawson told the Associated Press, “Robert Nelson was at the center of the crisis at Vanderbilt. He handled the crisis with poise, Christian strength, and character.”

Former Vanderbilt University Divinity School Professor James Daniel Glasse died on July 11, 2004, at his home in Orinda, California, at the age of 80, from the effects of cancer. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), he served at the Divinity School from 1956-1969 in the roles of associate dean and professor of practical theology and field work. Following his tenure at VDS, he was appointed president of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is remembered as an outstanding preacher whose sermons were known for their clear theology and humor; he expressed his passion for justice during the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and throughout his life in active support of the oppressed and suffering. The author of Education for Ministry, Professor: Minister; Putting It Together in the Parish, and The Art of Spiritual Snake Handling and Other Sermons, Glasse was developing two manuscripts, Reformed Professional Ministry and Ministry in the Interior, prior to his illness. He was honored for his contributions to theological education by honorary doctorates from Occidental, Union, Elizabeth, Davidson, and Dickinson Colleges.

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For congregations who wish to support the theological education of our next generation of religious, community, and academic leaders, Vanderbilt University Divinity School announces the establishment of the Mills-Buttrick Society.

The Mills-Buttrick Society commemorates the legacies of Liston Mills (1928-2002), the Oberlin Professor of Pastoral Theology and Counseling, emeritus, and David Buttrick, the Drucilla Moore Buffington Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics, emeritus. By transforming the standards of the practice of pastoral care and of preaching within the academic community, Professors Mills and Buttrick contributed significantly to the Divinity School’s mission of educating ministers as theologians. While Liston Mills defined ministry within the framework of pastoral theology and psychology, David Buttrick encouraged students to discover their prophetic voices.

We celebrate the service of these two distinguished and beloved professors by naming, in honor of their commitment to the ethos of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, a donor society for congregations. For information regarding membership in the Mills-Buttrick Society, please contact Kitty Norton Jones in the Office of Development and Alumni/ae Relations by calling 615/322-4205 or writing her at kitty.a.norton@vanderbilt.edu.