Douwe Stuurman: Things Present and Things Past

In response to a number of requests (see Letters, this issue) and out of our own regard for his contributions to UC Santa Barbara, we have asked Douwe Stuurman, professor of English, who is retiring this year, for his reflections after 33 years service on the faculty, and he has kindly offered the observations printed below.

Stuurman, a former Rhodes scholar, received his B.Litt. degree from Oxford in philosophy, literature and Greek. He holds an M.A. degree from the University of Oregon and a B.A. degree from Calvin College. Stuurman taught at Reed College for four years before coming to Santa Barbara in 1941.

Winner of a University of California prize in 1956 for his effectiveness in “opening new intellectual and cultural vistas to undergraduate students,” Stuurman was on four different occasions a visiting professor to various universities in Europe, much in the manner of visiting regents lecturers to UCSB. He was also instrumental in bringing his friends Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood to the campus.

Known for his outspoken and highly individual teaching, Stuurman has offered courses in Continental Literature, seminars in the writings of Marcel Proust, and will be especially remembered for his unorthodox and sometimes controversial approach to scripture in “The English Bible as Literature.”
When Mr. Dennis Green, your editor, asked if I would mind being interviewed upon my retirement, I said, “not at all,” but in the back of my mind was the thought, “this man must not know how bitter I am.” You see, the one prize I most desired in life was to be chosen Man of the Year by the Santa Barbara Ministerial Union, but year after year I was passed over. I tried not to let this get me down, but after fifteen years of teaching The Bible as Literature I felt I ought to get some kind of recognition. And when no such recognition came, I ended up becoming paranoic as well as bitter. I was sure that everyone who sat down beside me in the Student Union (with a “do you mind?”) was really a Presbyterian spy, and in the end I felt that there was nothing for it but to retire. I am trying to put a good face on it, “But thou wouldst not think how ill all’s here about my heart.”

We then agreed that what I would do would be to make a few comments or observations on what the campus now is (in contrast with what it once was), on what it is like to teach in a college or university today, and perhaps end with what it feels like to retire from a place and a campus as unique as Santa Barbara.

For Santa Barbara is a unique place, not merely because it neighbors on a territory where they once had a bank burning and where they have more psychedelic dog-crap than anyone could possibly be proud of, but time when students considered it déclassé to indulge in political and religious discussions, for the simple reason that in those areas there is a bad tradition that one has a right to express an opinion without having done anything to earn the right. Prejudice alone often served—and there was a time when students scorned prejudice. Today the bulk of the students, and perhaps more so at Santa Barbara than elsewhere because of our riots four years ago, indulge freely in ill-considered political opinions, and think nothing of carrying on in a most irrational way as Jesus-freaks. Sometimes, in a moment of musing or daydreaming, I wonder where I am.

I have already said enough to make it clear that I should retire. But one can’t retire without having strong feelings and without being forced to review the whole of one’s life, especially if one has been as deeply attached to a campus as I have been to Santa Barbara. I would like to say a few words about that attachment, and to do so by showing how it fits into the larger pattern of my academic life.

When I left home to go away to college, a tableau vivant took place at the railway station which has become a kind of permanent backdrop for everything that has happened in my academic career. The whole family was there, and there was some weeping, and a general sadness in the group as I got into the train and disappeared into one of the cars. I remember watching them surrepti-
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For Santa Barbara is a unique place, not merely because it neighbors on a territory where they once had a bank burning and where they have more psychedelic dog-crap than anyone could possibly be proud of, but because we have changed our name and our function more often than Caesar’s wife. We have a faculty that was hired with at least five different goals in mind, and our faculty meetings sometimes sound like a Pentecostal gathering in which everyone is speaking in tongues. But that is the least of our troubles, and even has a certain crazy charm to it, like a Marx Brothers film.

What bothers us, and particularly those of us devoted to the liberal arts, is that colleges and universities no longer have a clean-cut or precise definition. We used to assume that the function of the liberal arts was to liberate the individual from either ignorance or superstition or both, and there was an end of the matter. The faculty member was expected to be both serious and competent, and the students were evaluated according to the amount of energy and intelligence they dedicated to the enterprise. But no longer. Within the past fortnight I heard a faculty member, who looked like a cross between an elderly hippie and a demented King Lear, complain that we still had chairs in the university with arms on them, and that these arms prevented students from having a sense of each other’s presence. One gathered that the ideal was something along the lines of a basket with a litter of puppies in it. But there are more serious considerations. Our university, perhaps because it is a state university, has been forced to become an agent of social reform. It always had, especially since the second World War, a suspicious, self-serving way of talking about being necessary to the survival of our technological society, but now it is openly committed to bringing about a new social order. Truth, meanwhile, is being allowed to shift for herself, and is lonely as only the neglected know what it is like to be lonely. And as for the language one hears about the campus—perhaps the less said the better. The students likewise seem to have a new and less precise way of identifying themselves. There was a
time when students considered it déclassé to indulge in political and religious discussions, for the simple reason that in those areas there is a bad tradition that one has a right to express an opinion without having done anything to earn the right. Prejudice alone often served—and there was a time when students scorned prejudice. Today the bulk of the students, and perhaps more so at Santa Barbara than elsewhere because of our riots four years ago, indulge freely in ill-considered political opinions, and think nothing of carrying on in a most irrational way as Jesus-freaks. Sometimes, in a moment of musing or daydreaming, I wonder where I am.

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tiously through a window, wishing the train would hurry up and get around the bend hiding them from sight. I was young and eager and cruel and anxious to become a part of the larger world. I can even remember the image in my mind at the time. It was the familiar picture on the tobacco pail that served as my lunch pail to school. My father smoked something called long-distance tobacco, and the wrap-around label on the pail had a picture of a train disappearing around a bend in a mountain. I was on that train at last. Now, at the end of my life, I am going around another bend, only this time there is no group standing in any station, and this time I am doing the weeping. And yet, somehow this too seems right. One of the sad things about the profession of teaching is the permanence of the subject matter and the transience of the audience. Nothing is more ephemeral than the momentary relationship between teacher and student. There is a high tide of students, and one talks one's heart out at them, and then the tide withdraws again into the sea. The teacher is left alone on the shore, with only a few bits of debris and dried seaweed and perhaps an old surfboard to remind him of what had been. The students are out in the world, glad to be on their own, as forgetful of their teachers as I was of my family. Not that I have any regrets about this, for the truth is I now prefer to be alone. I can even understand my mother who once shocked me when I asked whether she wasn't lonely after the last child had left home—she said, "Dad and I couldn't wait. We were glad to be alone again." In brief there is a reality which seems appropriate to each phase of life, and the truest life is the one that responds to the pressure of that reality. The reality at the present time is that I am saying farewell to the teaching profession, that the community of students is disappearing around the bend, and that the tears are all mine.

Another tableau vivant that lingers in my mind, chosen from among many because it most symbolizes my relationship to Santa

Barbara, took place at a cocktail party shortly after I arrived in Santa Barbara as a young teacher. At this party I met one of the older teachers who was auditing one of my classes, and when she came up to greet me she politely said she was enjoying my lectures. In my embarrassment I said, "Oh, you've fallen for my line too?" She didn't allow me to get away with this awkward and obviously inept answer, and leveling her eyes at me said, "Oh, is it a line?" Now I was doubly embarrassed, and could only come up lamely with, "Well, it's not exactly a line." "If it's not a line just exactly what is it?" I finally explained that what I was probably trying to say was that if she really wanted to hear some good lectures she should listen to some of the teachers I had listened to—and I named a few. "Don't you know," she said, "that they are dead, and that you've either taken their place or you haven't. Now which is it?" From that moment on, after telling her that I was trying to take their place, I dedicated myself to becoming a good teacher. She had made me feel the responsibility that goes along with the privilege of being a teacher, and it was this simplicity of purpose, as opposed to the pretentiousness of most institutions of higher learning, which made me glad to be attached to Santa Barbara, and to make my home within it.

I have never, to this day, regretted that decision.

—Douwe Stuurman