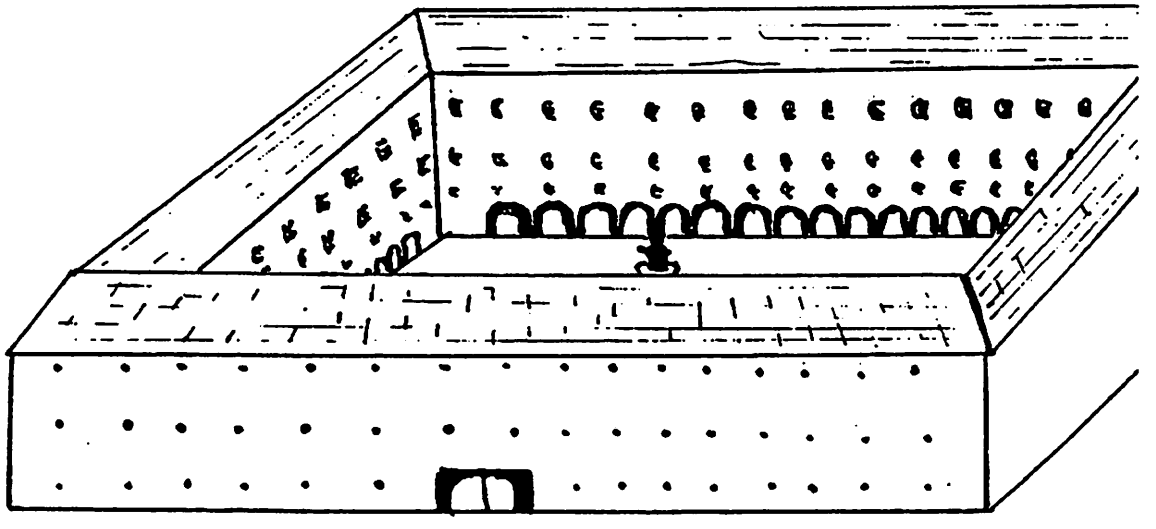
A ROOM WITH A VIEW - WORLD VIEWS AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

by Michael Pearson



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Imagine, if you will, an institution neither quite a prison nor a monastery but rather a sort of asylum, built around a quadrangle or a courtyard. Confined for much of the time to their cells, the inmates lead a solitary life, only occasionally meeting others whose cells lead off the same corridor. Inmates of a similar frame of mind are accommodated on the same corridor. They are never allowed into the quadrangle itself. Their acquaintance with the quadrangle is limited by the view afforded by their window. As their windows cannot be opened, the inmates cannot lean out of them to see the flowers growing immediately below, though they can see the flower-beds on the opposite side of the quadrangle. They can only see two of the four corners of the quadrangle. They cannot see the occasional person walking in the cloister directly below their cell. They are largely unaware of the other inhabitants of the institution.

Those on the south-facing side of the institution enjoy the bright light of the sun in their room but often see the opposite wing in shadow. Those on the north side see the quadrangle bathed in light from the darkness of their cell. Some inmates are awakened by the brightness of early morning sunlight but never see the brilliance of a sunset. The angle of the sun, the incidence of shadow and the quality of the light vary from cell to cell, giving each a different perspective on the quadrangle.

The quadrangle is dominated by a huge bronze sculpture of a human being, situated some way off-centre. Some inmates can only see the rear of the sculpture, hair, back, buttocks, two legs, two arms. Others can only see the sculpture in profile, the nose, one eye, an ear,

one leg and part of another, one arm. Some, however, have a clear view of the front of the statue - two eyes, two ears, the nose, the curve of the mouth, the set of the jaw, the cheekbone, the forehead, the chest, the thighs and legs. The face is sensitively designed, the eyes are looking upwards. The figure is clutching an object of indeterminate shape in one hand; it appears to be standing on something, though again it is not clear what it is. There is no doubting that it is a remarkable work of art.

An official is appointed to guide us around the institution. We move off to examine the first wing of the building; from a stairway window we notice that here the cell windows give a view only of the back of the bronze sculpture. We proceed to a corridor over the entrance to which is a sign saying "The Materialists". According to our guide, they talk about the statue, about the quadrangle but nothing else; they are quite certain that nothing exists beyond the asylum.

In the first cell is one Ludwig Feuerbach who believes that the object held in the hand of the human sculpture is a mirror. He has heard talk of a better world outside the asylum but regards it as nothing more than wishful thinking. He has even heard talk of a strong and free warrior-king, outside the asylum walls, who can liberate them but has concluded that this supposed consciousness of the warrior-king, this demigod, is merely self-consciousness, human nature purified, idealised and projected to infinity. This effort to move beyond the asylum walls, this spiritual quest, is an illusion. Feuerback believes we are flesh, nothing more, nothing less; confined flesh.

In the cell next door is a man by the name of Karl Marx. He is convinced that the sculpture holds in his hand a hammer. He and Feuerbach agree on a great deal, but Marx is encouraged by the sight of the hammer to believe it possible to change things in the institution.

It will be possible to knock down walls, build new wings, and eventually give access to the quadrangle to everybody, not just the favoured few. It will take time but he is devoted to making the asylum a better place to live.

Further along the same corridor is a group of inmates who, from the view afforded by their cell window, are all convinced that the bronze is holding in its hand a measuring rule. As we pass the cell doors we notice some names - Hume, Huxley, Einstein, da Vinci, Harvey, Bacon. They are fascinated by the quadrangle and what goes on in it. They count windows, bricks, paving stones; they estimate distances and dimensions; they calculate angles. They would like to get closer to the quadrangle; they occasionally let their minds stray beyond the walls of the institution and wonder what, if anything, is beyond but they quickly come to themselves, dismiss this as idle day-dreaming. There is plenty of work to be done in the quadrangle; there is no point in being over-ambitious.

Further along still are other cells containing inmates who spend much of their time looking out of their window painting what they can see. Some paint because it is a pleasure, some to fill their time, some to express their anger and frustration at being confined to the asylum. They hang their picturs on the wall; it brightens the place up a little. Some like Dali and Chagall paint pictures which bear little resemblance to the quadrangle.

Further along is an inmate, Green by name, a most likeable and responsible fellow, according to our guide. He has noticed unpleasant smells rising from the drains in the quadrangle. He is also alarmed by the growth of weeds, the amount of litter, and the general decay in the fabric of the building. He sometimes shouts from his window that if so many inmates have to live in such cramped conditions then they had

better take care of what they have, otherwise life will become unbearable. Other inmates used to think him eccentric but lately the smell coming from the drains has encouraged them to listen to his pleas.

One person who is not at all interested in his shouts of protest is a woman inmate. She is just concerned to make her cell as pleasant as possible. She bribes the guards to bring her things, even sometimes things she does not want, just out of pure frustration. Just having new things sometimes relieves the tedium. She thinks the object which the human sculpture is carrying in its hand is a bag. The name on the door of the cell is Jackie Kennedy.

Next door is a man, Heffner by name, who spends most of his days fantasizing. He is convinced the bronze figure is female; it is, he thinks, well-proportioned. Our guide says that the occasions when he meets other human beings he tries to touch them. He seems desperate for affection but can find little companionship.

Next door to him is a man called Ben Johnson. He disturbs his neighbours with his gymnastic activities. He skips, he does weight-training, he does a thousand press-ups a day. He is devoted to building up his muscle structure, he is obsessed by the cult of physical fitness. It is his way of surviving, observes our guide.

We move on from the corridor accommodating the Materialists; it seems an unhappy place. We proceed to the next block of cells; over the entrance is the sign "The Determinists". This group also has cell windows giving onto the back of the sculpture. The atmosphere is somehow quieter here. These people are somehow more resigned to being here.

The first rarely looks out of his cell window at the quadrangle. On one occasion when he did he thought the object in the hand of the bronze sculpture was a rolled newspaper - yesterday's newspaper. He

sits in the far corner from the window and spends much time in introspection. He likes to talk about his confinement, it makes him feel better. He knows why he is here - at least partly. It is a matter of body chemistry, conflict with his parents, difficult experiences in childhood, a society which had very high expectations of him and which laid guilt upon him when he failed to meet those expectations and when he infringed their taboos. He had sought pleasure and been made to feel guilty when he found it. Of all this he is sure, but he can also see a dark forest which is his past. Out of the dark forest come threatening beasts. He dreams about them sometimes, talks about them sometimes - that seems to help. He admits that when he does look out of his window he counts bricks and windows obsessively. In the end his cell is his fate, he is helpless before it. All the other inmates are like it anyway, whether they know it or not. At least he realizes something of what is happening inside him. Some inmates, he thinks, believe that someone is coming to get them out of the asylum. Just wishful thinking; nobody is going to get out. The best he can hope for is to talk about himself, submit to therapy and hope that one day the authorities will judge him mentally healthy enough to walk in the quadrangle, or at least in the cloister. The guide adds that he is a Jew, Sigmund Freud.

Next door is a man who in some ways thinks alike. That he is in this particular cell in this particular institution is, he thinks, inevitable. After all he is an animal, just like the birds nesting in the quadrangle. An animal, more intelligent, it's true - but in the end an animal. He recalls that those scientists, who live in another wing, must oberve the habits of the birds and other living creatures in the quadrangle. If he had a chance to tell them enough about himself they would be able to understand and predict his behaviour too. When some of the inmates from the other side of the quadrangle start shouting

from their cells demands for freedom and dignity, he smiles sadly to himself - they are unattainable goals. Skinner knows that as long as he fits in with the routine and regime of the institution, he will be all right.

Further along the corridor, Konrad Lorenz is not willing to be so submissive. He has a reputation amongst his fellow inmates of being aggressive. His philosophy is that life is a struggle for survival, it is the fittest who manage it. Where there is a limited supply of any commodity he will fight to get his share, he will defend his cell, his territory vigorously. He feels no compunction in so doing - that's just the way things are, just the way I am, he says.

His neighbour, Emile Durkheim, feels quite sanguine about it all. Despite all Lorenz's behaviour, things have a way of settling fairly quickly. Whatever disruptions there may be in the life of the asylum, things have a way of stabilizing fairly quickly. People make adjustments - things even out. "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose."

Further along is Auguste Corete who does not quite agree with his fellow countryman. Things are changing. In all the years he has been in the asylum, things have changed, and changed generally for the better. People seem to be more sensible, more rational these days, much less superstitious and neurotic than they used to be and that makes them generally easier to deal with. The asylum is generally a better place to be.

Another inmate, Eriksson, puts most of the problems of the institution down to the identity crises that are common. For one reason or another people fail to make transitions in maturity as they should, they fail to adjust and start engaging in childish, anti-social, inadequate behaviour.

There are, we are told, many others on the "Determinists" corridor, many of them undistinguished. Some are inclined to quote literary authorities to defend their philosophy of life. "Whatever is, is right." Others sing popular songs, "que sera, sera". Some talk about dying when "their number is up". Others frequently talk of "them" and "us". One of the inmates, a woman called Casandra, will only look out of her cell window at night. She gazes at the stars because she believes their relative positions determine the way people will behave. She claims that today will be a good time for Virgos to do this and for Sagittarians to do something else. And, strangely enough, many people believe her. She thinks that the sculpture is holding a zodiac in its hand.

On a second side of the quadrangle, with a view of the profile of the human bronze, is a corridor with cells occupied by very different people. Far from believing that their fates are determined by causes beyond their control, they believe that they are the ones to control not only their own destiny but that of others too. Over the door in the corridor is the inscription, "The Chosen". They are a mixed bunch. From their angle, the statuesque human appears to be brandishing a sword and trampling another human being into submission. They spend hours looking out of the window planning how they will overcome their guards, persuade others to join them, take control of the main entrances to the quadrangle. They will lay siege to the bronze sculpture, place their flag on it and proceed to run the asylum according to their own set of rules.

They are a mixed bunch, united only by the conviction that their view is the uniquely correct one. They would tolerate no opposition. They are dangerous men: Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Deng Xiaoping, Saladdin, Richard the Lionheart, Ayatollah Khoumeini, Amin, Genghis Khan, Reverend

Moon. Besides these tyrants, there are petty imperialists of all kinds - British, American, Soviet. There are others - nameless but ruthless. Barons of various kinds - of commerce, media - who want to control other inmates but in more subtle ways. They ponder a thousand ways in which they can use their cell as a base for extending their influence and control in the institution. Nobody much likes these people but a number think that the institution might be run better if one of them were in charge.

On the opposite side of the quadrangle from the Chosen, also with a view of the profile of the sculpture, is a very different group of people. Their corridor is labelled "The Humanitarians". They know they are in the asylum to stay and so, they reason, the best thing to do is to make the best of it for all concerned. Albert Schweitzer concerns himself particularly with the health of the imates. He often presses the authorities for better medicines and, on the occasions when the inmates do meet others, he can often be seen doing a brief examination of someone who is ailing. Bob Geldof, on the other hand, is more interested in the diet provided. He regularly complains to the authorities about the food, demands more of it, and sometimes goes without his own so that someone along the corridor who is in need can have it. His song, "Feed the World", rises endlessly from his cell. Andrew Carnegie, meanwhile, is interested in diet of a different kind - intellectual diet. He makes it his business to press the authorities to provide more books in the library, to put some pictures on the walls, to arrange a concert occasionally.

Dag Hammerskjold, however, has a much more difficult task. He knows that people along different corridors are treated differently. Some are given better food, more time out of their cells, more opportunity to talk to others. He is constantly talking to others,

inmates and the authorities, trying to get greater justice and equality. He is sometimes called in by the authorities if a fight breaks out between inmates. He does his best but it is an endless and thankless task, such is the frustration and sense of alienation experienced by many of the inmates. There are others along the corridor who share his concerns. One believes that the black inmates are not treated fairly. He says so quite boldly but at the same time seeks to restrain the exaggerated expression of the demand for justice. He can be heard singing "We Shall Overcome" for hours at a time. Germaine Greer believes that the statue is, in fact, a woman and that the object beneath her feet is a man. She believes that if only the women along the corridors would speak up, the asylum would be a better place. But they are afraid.

They all try in their different ways to make the asylum a better place, and to some extent they succeed.

On opposite sides of the quadrangle and both with quite a good view of the front of the statue are two other groups of people. They are both impressed by the upward tilt of the statue's head and by the eyes which appear to look far beyond the asylum. And yet they react in quite different ways to the sight. "The Subjectivists" object to the sign that has been placed at the entrance to their corridor and have tried to remove it unsuccessfully. Soren Kierkegaard, a Dane, spends long hours looking out of the cell window, agonizing over every decision - when to get up, when to wash, what to read. He is a very intense man, who has the feeling that nobody much likes him. Frederick Nietzsche is an intense and angry man, angry at being in the institution, angry at the authorities, angry at the false hopes of deliverance, angry with himself - so angry in fact that, rumour has it, he has literally gone mad. Arthur Schopenhauer has similar depressive tendencies; the

pendulum of life, he says, swing between pain and boredom. If he sets himself a task to do, it is painful to exert the effort required to accomplish it. When he has accomplished it, there is nothing more to do - boredom sets in. He can only wait until the pendulum comes to rest.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Fyodor Dostoyevsky both agree that there is nothing to contemplate beyond life in the institution, but it has a different effect on them - it seems to make the adrenalin flow. They set themselves little tasks, some apparently pointless, but they seem to enjoy them. "We are condemned to be free," Sartre says; Dostoyevshy responds that within his cell "everything is permitted". It is an approach to life which seems sometimes to elate them, sometimes to depress. They have so much free time on their hands; they wish sometimes for a more structured routine. But . . .

Albert Camus is similar, yet different. He loves to look out of the window at the red geraniums, the deep blue of the sky, the blackness of the night. He loves the warmth of a summer's day reflected by the stone. And yet he is not happy. He looks at the stars at night and wonders what secrets they hold, what the quadrangle would look like from up there. But he can never know and that certainty sometimes makes him consider committing suicide. The whole situation is so absurd. But he draws back from it, seduced by the redness of the geraniums.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believes that all the neurosis, depression, discontent, violence is the fault of the institution. If only they would unlock the cell doors, knock down a few walls, allow everybody free access to the corridors and the quadrangle, everything would be all right. Joseph Fletcher has some sympathy with this view but knows it is not as simple as that. When asked whether inmates should or should not be allowed to meet more freely, to go in the quadrangle and so on, he always says that you can't make a generalisation and that it all depends

on the situation of the particular inmate. It just would not be the loving thing to do to let some of the inmates into the quadrangle - they couldn't handle it.

Across the quadrangle from the Subjectivists and also with quite a good view of the front of the sculpture are the "Idealists". They too are fascinated by the upward gaze of the eyes. They believe that the statue is looking beyond the quadrangle to other quadrangles and even unenclosed spaces.

Plato believes that not only does his cell confine him but his body is another prison. His senses afflict him through pain and the desire to satisfy his drives, sex, hunger and so on. They also limit him because he cannot get beyond his cell, cannot see more than the quadrangle. He desires death because that will be his passport out of the asylum to the real world. His mentor, a previous inmate called Socrates, had in later life even drunk poison to hasten the transition process. Plotinus tries to anticipate the transition by disciplined meditation so that he goes off into ecstatic vision. He denies all earthliness, his parentage, his birthday, to enter the world of the vision.

Many inmates believe in their way that the asylum is not all that there is, that the reality beyond is much fuller and brighter. Hegel, for example, believes that eventually the walls between the cells will be broken down, that the asylum walls will be levelled to the ground and that eventually when the grass has grown over you will not be able to tell the quadrangle from the rest of the plain. Gautama even goes one stage further and believes that this process will apply to the inmates too. There will be no more individuals; they will all be caught up into a delightful world-soul or something of the sort. Boethius is less certain about this and remains content to derive his consolation from philosophizing about the matter in the quietness of his cell.

The guide tells us that along other corridors and high up, hidden away in unseen attics, are many other inmates. The whole of the wing directly facing the statue is occupied by another group. Their corridor bears the name "The Christians".

Now the authorities in the asylum have decided to hold a banquet to celebrate the founding of the institution. All are invited. As you can imagine, the discussion is animated. And, as you will also guess, it revolves around one topic - the quadrangle and, more particularly, the bronze sculpture. There is, after all, nothing else really to talk about. Some are astonished by the ideas which come into other people's minds. Some discover things about the quadrangle which the limited vision from their cell prevented them from knowing.

Discussion continues unabated long into the night. Debate eventually centres around one of the long tables; discussion becomes more intense; more and more people crowd around to hear what is going on. Eventually, one of their number is invited to speak to the whole assembly.

He is introduced to the mass "as Christian". They listen astonished at what he tells them. He says that since their cell windows face directly onto the statue they have had a good view of it; but, more particularly, can see the plaque at the foot of the bronze sculpture. The inscription reads - there is a hush in the hall - "homo sapiens, imagio dei". Furthermore, they have in their possession a set of notes jotted down by the sculptor which explains what various features of the bronze signify. More than that, they have some kind of signalling method which allows them to communicate with places outside the asylum. It is not toally reliable, the message not always clear, but it has allowed them to speak on occasion to the sculptor himself. Last but not least, their cells possess <u>two</u> windows, the one which looks onto the

quadrangle and an extra high, small one which looks onto the outside of the asylum. He can confirm that there is a landscape beyond the asylum walls, though he cannot be too specific since it is often shrouded in mist.

The reaction to Christian's message is mixed. Some do not find it difficult to believe; some simply reject it as a delusion brought about by long confinement. Others are sceptical and want to hear more. Their scepticism grows as Christian goes into some detail and finds himself contradicted by others from the same corridor. They have interpreted the sculptor's notes differently in some places, the signals that he has heard are not the same as the ones they have witnessed. Moreover, his description of the view from the high window does not at all match what they had managed to glimpse. They however agree on the inscription on the plaque on the sculpture. And, remarkably, they agree on one other startling fact: the sculptor had himself once been an inmate in the asylum! He knew what it was like and had left, promising to organize an act of liberation, though the details remained somewhat indistinct.

The disagreement in the account given by Christian and that of some of his fellows is sufficient to drive many of the inmates away. It is late; they are tired now. They have heard too much; they ask to go back to their cells. Others stay to hear more of what Christian has to say. So, speaking with authority above the buzz of conversation, he proceeds.

He says that as he has listened to other inmates speak about the view from their room, he has found it remarkable that there is so much that is true in what they are saying. He finds much that he agrees with; but just as remarkable is the inmates' capacity to distort things - they seem to isolate one or two features of the sculpture and

the quadrangle and focus on them. This is because of the perspective offered from their window, he supposes, but somehow they make everything revolve around the wrong centre. Some of the accounts of what the bronze figure is holding in its hand and what lies at its feet he finds quite extraordinary. It is true he has never viewed the quadrangle from a window in another wing, but he has many times tried to imagine what it looks like.

Somebody asks him what it is that has enabled him to survive so well. There are many things, he replies: the singing of psalms and hymns, each inmate singing from the solitude of his own cell, yet their voices uniting along the corridors. There is helping others in the asylum where possible, though he guesses that there are many inmates in need whom he will never see and many who do not want help. He accepts responsibility for himself, for his cell, and as much as he can for affairs on the corridor. He has refused to shrug his shoulders and blame others or simply claim that there is nothing that can be done to make life in the asylum more tolerable. At the same time, he has refused to make himself too comfortable. He knows that in institutions like this, inmates become so dependent on the system that in the end they have no wish to get out. He cherishes his hope of eventual liberation.

However, the symbol of his hope, he confesses, is the bronze statue. It is so huge, solid and dominates the quadrangle, but the face . . ., the eyes looking upward as if fixed on another location far away. Then there is the view from his window out onto the quadrangle - so clear, so definite, full of straight lines, and the solidity of the buildings. Yet the view from the small high window on the outside gives him fleeting glimpses of a world more rounded, more indistinct but definitely there. All this has taught him to live his life in balance

or, as he puts it, in tension. He has tried to exercise regularly, to eat as best he can on asylum food. He reads a lot without allowing the reality of his books to supplant the reality of his cell and the quadrangle. He knows that using fantasy as an escape route is always a danger during long periods of confinement. It leads in the end to mental ill-health and sometimes madness. He prays, though on bad days he wonders if he is talking to himself and exhibiting the first signs of madness. Sometimes he wants to shout at God, sometimes he gains unutterable comfort from the times of prayer. Sometimes he gets angry and shouts, sometimes he weeps openly, sometimes he laughs out loud. It is important to preserve his emotions in a good state by giving expression to them, though he does worry that he will go to excess. He tries to guard against this by having as much contact as possible with other inmates from along the corridor and, as opportunity allows, with those from other wings.

He lives in tension, he says, tension between the solidity of the statue's thighs and the expectation in its eyes. Tension between the straight lines of the quadrangle and the indistinct roundedness of the landcape outside. He keeps one eye on his cell and the other on the blue heaven, one eye on the dead bars at his cell window, one eye on the red geranium flowering below. He is, he says, "in the asylum but not of it". In his mind he constantly negotiates between the now and the not yet. In his moments of despair he hopes - hopes in the sculptor who had once been an inmate. He hopes in the sculptor who, in his notes, observed that the bronze figure was "his word made flesh".

It is now very late, time for everyone to disperse. Some inmates like Christian, though they find him rather eccentric. Some dismiss all he has to say as fantasy; there is no plaque, no notes, no signals, no extra window. Some conclude he has found an extraordinarily good means of surviving. Others believe him.

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Christian returns to his cell. He ponders the expression "the word made flesh". Could the sculptor simply mean that he has converted an idea in his imagination into the bronze? Is the statue a symbol of the inmate? Could it possibly be a self-portrait? Could it be a massive symbolic pledge to return? He wonders. Soon he falls asleep, content both in his soul and in his cell.

QUESTIONS

1. Do we ever seriously consider that our window might give us a limited view? If so, in what particular respects may our perspective be restricted and should we be ready to alert our students to its limitations?

2. How can we capitalize better on the Adventist idea of wholeness? How might our curricula be made more committed to the principle?

3. How can we prevent our students from regarding the life of a 'yuppie' as being the ideal to attain? Is it desirable that we should?

4. How can we challenge the contemporary assumption that all things are permitted unless there is some physical or legal obstacle in the way?

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