William Blake Karl Marx Friedrich Nietzsche

A Heaven In a Wildflower

The compulsion to impart knowledge is the basic trait in the personality that produces a great teacher. Imagine then that a select group of university professors, renowned for their classroom charisma, each are confronted with the prospect of delivering but one final lecture, one last chance to challenge the young mind, one remaining opportunity to expand the horizons of learning. This scenario has been presented to a succession of University of Oklahoma faculty members on a number of occasions over the years, and several of their responses, in the form of public lectures, have been passed along to *Sooner Magazine* readers in this series of "Last Lectures."

Most recently, *Sooner Magazine* has featured OU historian Vivian W. Ng on "Knowledge and Responsibility: the Chinese Tradition," followed by philosopher Tom Boyd's "Connections." This issue's last lecturer, David Gross, approaches his assignment in "typical English teacher fashion," illustrating his perception of truth with a collection of aphorisms from his favorite writers.

I thank the people who provide this opportunity, though I must admit I find the whole concept rather daunting. "The last lecture." I get whiffs of mortality and the feeling that I'll either become soon deceased or leave, and I'm really hoping to do neither. So I hope this *isn't* my last lecture, and yet I've taken seriously the idea that somehow if I had to sum it up in a nut shell, this is it, right here. This says who I really am, what I really think is most important. Even so, the talk that I've prepared is largely a collection of quotations or aphorisms, what I think are striking ways of putting important concepts. In other words, "who I really am" isn't a private dream, but consists of concepts which are not solely "mine," a kind of collective vision.

Starting in typical English teacher fashion, I went to the dictionary and looked up the word "aphorism." I discovered aphorism comes from the same root as "horizon" or "boundary," which is interesting because I think some of these aphorisms quite precisely violate all boundaries or horizons. The definition of aphorism in the dictionary is: "a concise statement of principle or terse formulation of truth or sentiment." I'm going to give you a string of aphorisms, loosely connected by my own words, and I hope you'll find them stimulating.

William Blake, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are the main sources for today's aphorisms. All three thinkers were "radical." Marx says of radical: "To be radical is to grasp things by the root; but for man the root is man himself." The humble etymological relation to radical is radish: root — radish; a root crop. The radical vision embodied in people like Blake, Marx and Nietzsche — who were very, very different — is the sense of life as being something radically different than what it is, of a regeneration of human existence at the root.

Let me just say a word or two about my three 19th century writers. William Blake, the poet, painter and visionary who did most of his major work between 1789 and 1820, is the one I will spend the most time with, and I will just throw out one aphorism from his work to begin.

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, then man would see the world as it is, infinite."

Karl Marx, who wrote most of his works between 1840 and 1880, was a writer of political tracts, essays in political economy and historical studies. I feel I have to stop now and do a disclaimer on the word "Marxist" as signifier. The word "Marx" — and then "Marxist" — has been used and misused by so many people in this century that it would be good if we could get rid of it, just not even use the word anymore and find another word. It is a real shame if we don't read and consider the specific writings of this real individual human being, Karl Marx. We are too hung up on all the ideological coating and all the assumptions we make about what is going to be there before we read his works.

"A Heaven in a Wild Flower"

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
—William Blake,
"Auguries of Innocence"

Let me start with this one:

"The ghost of all past generations weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living."

That's Karl Marx.

My third source is Frederich Nietzsche, who wrote most of his works between 1872 and 1890. Essayist, philosopher. The one I'll choose from him as my epigraph to begin with is:

"I love the great despisers, for they are the great adorers and arrows of longing for the other shore."

With Blake's first important work starting in 1789 and Nietzsche ending his writing career in about 1890, these three writers span almost a 100-year period, from the time of the French Revolution in 1789 through the late 19th century.

Then I want to mention someone else, someone who can help tie these three together, Marx's own aphoristic "source," Hegel. It is a simple little thought, but it blew my mind when I learned it in about 1965. If there is one aphorism that has affected my life more than any other, it is this one:

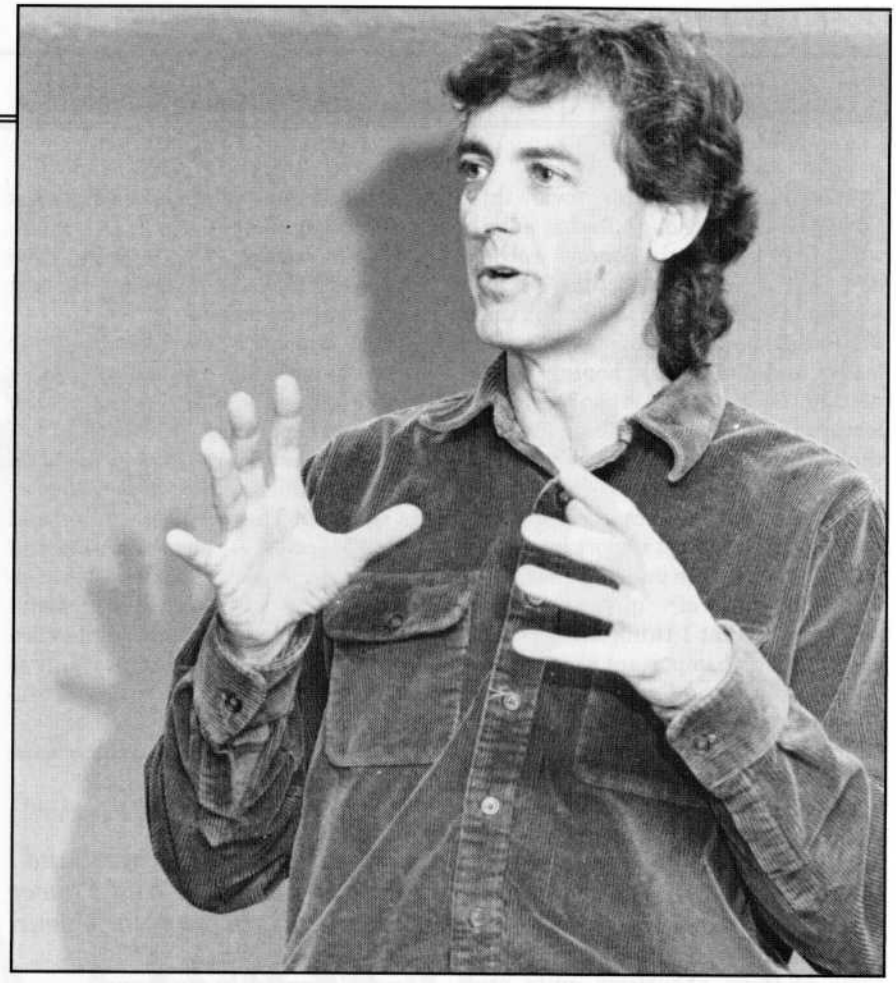
Hegel: *"The truth is the whole."*

Everything is connected. Everything that matters is connected to everything else that matters. Hegel's is a statement of the holistic nature of reality and of truth. Poets and visionaries help us to see the whole, because for various reasons, we concentrate on a detail instead of the whole. This is why Blake calls on us to "cleanse the doors of perception" so that we can see the whole, as it is in fact, infinite.

To see it all as connected is crucial in trying to answer or even to consider the key question which is at the heart of what we call the humanities: "What does it *mean* to be human?" Not what it *is* to be human — that's what the social sciences investigate — but the question of meaning. What does it mean to be human? I would suggest almost immediately that we consider this thing called history.

History: what we are; what we have been before. Once you try to understand what it means to be human, you look back and discover that being human has meant very different things at different times. For example, the role of women: If you trace the role of women in different societies at different moments for the last couple of thousand years, you discover that it has had a very different meaning for different societies. We have to expand our question into a set of questions. What are we? What have we been? What might we become? These questions are "radical," at the root: to accept that our social organizations, how we live our lives, the way we live, what we do in being human, might be different; to defeat the tyranny of that which is, the status quo.

These are the kinds of questions, I'm



suggesting, that the aphorisms of Blake, Marx and Nietzsche (and many others) can help us to deal with. Let me consider one difficult thought from William Blake, my favorite poet, in which he talks about the need for expanded vision, four-fold vision: *"May God us keep from single vision and Newton's sleep."*

This needs a little explanation. Blake's principal enemy — a sort of symbolic, ideological enemy — was Isaac Newton. For Blake, Newton means science, rationality and theoretical reasoning, the whole mode that too often is taught to students as all there is to thinking. 2 + 2 = 4. If you can weigh it and measure it, it's real. Blake called such a thought process single vision, and he admitted we need it; after all, the truth is the whole and includes single vision. Otherwise we can't build bridges that stand up instead of falling down. Still, Blake called single vision Reason with a capital R, or "ratio," simply what the senses perceive, and then what you do with that using logic and reason. He deliberately reverses common sense and says that what seems like wakefulness — all that explanatory way of looking at the universe—is actually "sleep."

Blake doesn't say to get rid of reason; he says add to reason all these other modes of perception, since the truth is whole. The lines of poetry at the beginning of this lecture illustrate what Blake means by four-fold vision, this expanded vision that is able to see a heaven — not heaven, but *a* heaven — in a wildflower.

Such four-fold vision insists on seeing things "whole," even when the whole seemingly entails contradiction. Thus any country parson could agree with this aphorism: *"Without friendship and brotherhood, man is nothing."* Simple enough. But right next to that he says, *"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom!"* Elsewhere he says, *"Life delights in life, and everything that lives is holy"* — the wonder and pleasure and joy of life, of existence, but at the same time the sense that meaning and the value of life is distorted and even destroyed by what modern thinkers might term institutional obstacles.

What institutional obstacles? Well, for one thing, social injustice. Blake's main metaphor for this is the chimney sweeper, child labor. His famous poems about the chimney sweeper evoke such terrible statistics and details. The average life expectancy of a chimney sweeper was 12-15; the average age was 9; they worked 10-to-15 hour days. This is an extreme case, obviously, but for Blake it is a metaphor, a synecdoche, when a small part stands for the whole of the way human beings treat other human beings in a society that calls itself Christian.

So, says Blake, life can be wonderful and beautiful; the four-fold vision can show you heaven in a wildflower, can teach you to see that there's nothing more splendid and wonderful than the simple fact of being alive. But, at the same time, the same expanded vision, the same heightened consciousness, the same cleansed doors of perception, show how awful life is when, in the midst of this splendor and wonder and beauty, organized religion, state, social oppression, the rigid models of sexual roles, distort and destroy or poison the very wellsprings of life. Then beauty becomes something terrible and ugly.

We are taught, according to Blake, to accept all this bad stuff as necessary or inevitable, as the evidence of the evil nature of human nature, all the negative and depressing answers to the question of what it means to be human. Blake holds that this is a false view, a matter of culture and consciousness that we can change. He says, *"The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water and breeds reptiles of the mind."*

We need vision — what we call imagination — more than just reason or science. Poetic genius he calls the spirit of prophecy. *"Would that all the Lord's children were prophets."* Blake, like so many great poets, is a visionary; religion or spiritual views of Christianity are very important to him, but he is a foe of organized religion. To him the church is an enemy of religion, an enemy of these views that he thinks are so important in

Christ and in the New Testament. He feels that we could all become prophets, meaning that we could all allow our poetic genius to think of the world beyond reason, beyond the ratio of what we know. He says very simply at one point, *"The ratio of all we know will not be the same when we know more."*

For Blake this means that his vocation is to help build the world, which is like what Jesus called the kingdom of God, a world of brotherhood and shared humanity and kindness and love, a different mode of social organization here on earth. He says in another simple statement, *"I believe that men can be happy on this earth."* That's a great statement of faith, not just in some other realm but here, here on this earth.

In the famous last few lines of the "Preface" to "Milton" he says, *"I shall not cease from mental fight/ nor shall my sword sleep in my hand/ till we have built Jerusalem,/ In England's green and pleasant land."* Till we — not *they* but *we,* we've got to do it; nobody else is going to do it for us — have built Jerusalem, have learned how to live together in love, in England's green and pleasant land.

Now I'm going to move to Karl Marx, who says: *"In the place of existing society with its competitive antagonisms, we shall have a cooperative association, where the free development of each is the precondition for the free development of all."* One of the things the opponents of Marx assert is that he is against "individualism," but what could recognize the value of the individual more than that statement? But, like Blake, Marx recognizes that the individual exists within a *social* whole.

This is why when Marx speaks of his vision, he speaks of the world as a whole: *"The world has long been dreaming of something it can acquire if only it awakes and becomes conscious of it."* What is that something? A decent world of equality and freedom, which we can acquire if only we can wake up and become conscious of the dream.

This brings us back to my original quote from Marx; it's from the first page of a wonderful document called *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon,* where he also says, *"Men make their own history."* That's one side of the dialectic, the whole idea that Sartre and existentialism pick up. *"Men make their own history, but"* (here's the other side) *"they do not do it just as they choose. They do it under conditions inherited from the past. The ghost of all past generations weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living."*

So man has long been dreaming of something which he can acquire, but also there's that nightmare. The dream of love and kindness and mutual aid and a world of cooperation, a cooperative association; the nightmare of century after century of grinding toil and exploitation and oppression. They're both real, and Marx says that the great obstacle to change, to real change for the better, is this nightmare.

"Men make their own history, but they do not do it just as they choose . . . The ghost of all past generations weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living."

The nightmare is the reality of the social and cultural constitution of the self, of reality, the determination of consciousness and belief by social existence. That's Marx's scandalous assertion that our being ourselves, our consciousness, what we believe, is not some mysterious thing that drops from heaven but is a result of determinate causes, our social existence. Consciousness is determined by life, rather than the other way around, he says in a famous passage.

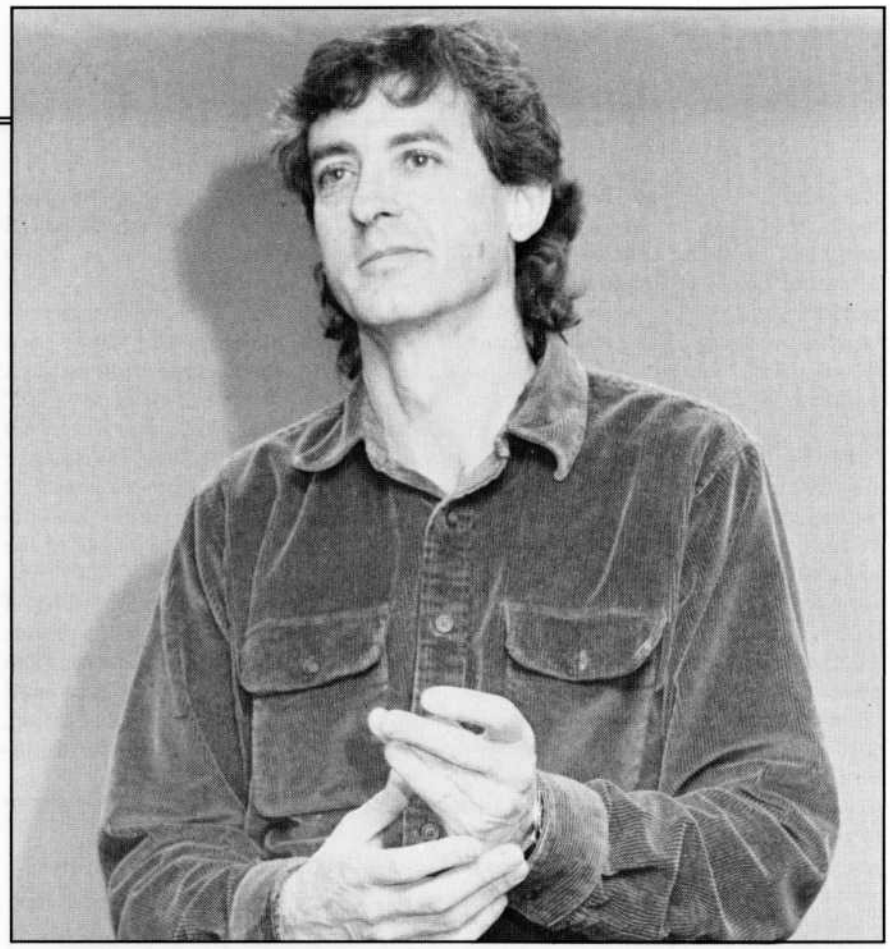
Centuries and centuries and centuries of pattern and belief in living are very hard to change, but then we have Marx's famous 11th thesis: *"Up to now philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, the point instead is to change it."* And that's like Blake too. It's one thing to interpret, to contemplate, to see, but like Kant's famous ethical imperative, the idea is that if you're human, and if you see this condition, then there's an absolute imperative to do what you can to change it. To try to change what's wrong, that unity of theory and practice is what Marx calls *praxis.*

Marx's analysis then of the question of human meaning and value brings him always to what he calls "species being." He says that we get our meaning from our social existence, that what gives meaning to individual human existence is "purposeful activity." So, he says, it's a crime against humanity when the great majority of people sell their labor power, their purposeful activity, to somebody else in order to exist. Thus, he says, *"They live in order to exist rather than existing in order to live."*

Our work we think of as something we sell so that we can get to be ourselves. When are we ourselves, asks Marx? *"At the public house, at the table, and in bed, eating, drinking, sleeping, procreating."* But we don't think we are ourselves when we are at our work. What should be most human in us, our purposeful activity, by and large most people sell that to somebody else in order to exist.

Thoreau, who reflects this tradition in many ways, says in "Life Without Principle," *"The great mass of men lead lives in quiet desperation."* Marx and Thoreau were extremely close on this particular issue. Given this state of affairs, for both Marx and Thoreau, but in Marx's words, *"The categorical imperative is to overthrow all those conditions in which man is a debased and enslaved, abandoned and contemptible being."*

My final source is Nietzsche, and Nietzsche doesn't seem to fit. Marx and Blake are leftist, left arrows, and progressive radicals in the political code; they seek change; they're democrats. Blake and Marx share Christian ideals. Nietzsche was a proud aristocrat who had contempt for Christianity.



He called it a herd religion, slave religion, and so forth. But Nietzsche complements the vision of Blake and Marx with a negative orientation. He articulates the need to do what a whole school of modern philosophy built on Nietzsche calls to "deconstruct" the existing positive view. To shake it up, to disrupt it, to cleanse the doors of perception, to see the world with new eyes is a form of radical critique, skeptical scrutiny of the existing order, of all human values, which Nietzsche adds to Blake's and Marx's positive visions.

Thus the absolute value for Nietzsche of doubt and uncertainty. There is too much positivity and lack of doubt in the dominant discourse, unexamined values. Positivism and empiricism, Blake's "Reason," also Stalinist version of Marxism, this instrumental view of humans, a totally managed or administrated society, with everything in its place, rigid. Where the revolt has been allowed to congeal, the whole concept of efficiency, or "scientific management," i.e. Frederick Taylor. It is Neitzsche's project to deconstruct all that, subject it to radical critique of "the great despisers," "philosophers of the perilous perhaps." As he says, *"I tell you, you must have chaos in you, if you would give birth to a dancing star."*

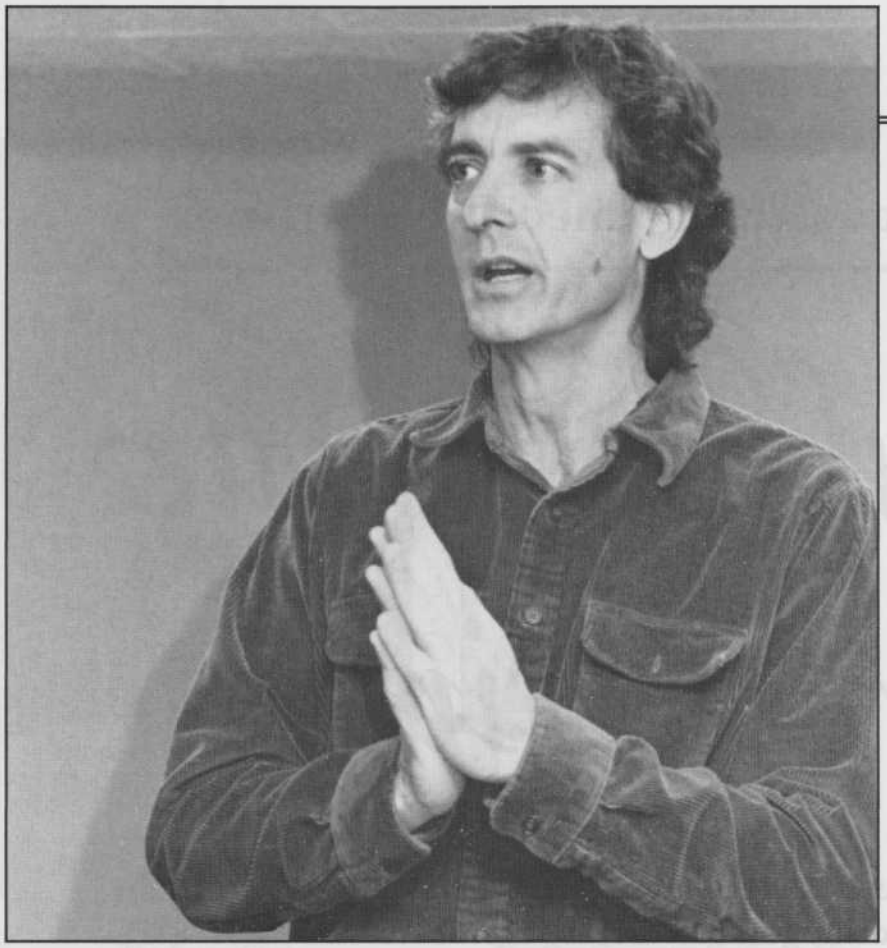
Nietzsche's radical critique, the deconstruction of so-called normal meanings or accepted values, from common sense to unthinking assumptions that we already have achieved a society of democracy and freedom, so there's no need for change. Every philosophy, he says, is a foreground philosophy. Nietzsche and deconstruction provide the intellectual tools to see that all this philosophy that seems so secure and stable, all the legal systems and values of our society, is a mere foreground. It is not inevitable; it is created by humans and is thus subject, potentially, to human change.

It takes a tremendous effort to counter the hegemony of that which is — the cynical pessimism or realism which says, "Oh, that's just human nature; the status quo is inevitable; what you see is what you get." From deconstruction, then, we get "relentless criticism," though that actually is a quote from Marx. In fact, Marx says, *"Our business is not to provide blueprints for the future, it is, instead, relentless criticism of all existing conditions."*

But what is that relentless criticism based on, that negative? I'm arguing for the power of the negative, to assert the negative, but what then is the positive? Well, the positive is the vision of a better world, based on an empathetic imagination and on a vision of caritas, caring, love. Even in our century, others have pursued the vision. Ghandi: *"There can be no happiness for any of us till happiness is won for all of us."* Or Eugene Debs: *"Not long ago I learned to recognize my kinship with all human beings, and I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."* Or, of course, the vision of Martin Luther King in the "I have a dream" speech.

And finally, this is my little spiel on countering pessimism. People say: "Oh, that's all well and good, but it's a dream; it's totally impossible; don't you see the way humans are?" I want to argue against that, using the concept of "deep time." I take the phrase from Carl Sagan. He argues this way: The planet's been in existence for what, several billion years? And life on the planet, a human-like species, the same species we are? They've been pushing that date back and back and back, over a million, but let's be real conservative and say half a million years. Just think what that is; put the zeros there in your head — five hundred thousand years.

How old is the project of human freedom then? Maybe two thousand years, let's say since Christ, the social ideal of love and kindness. "All your old rules I replace with one rule, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' " How old is culture and consciousness? The earliest evidence of culture and consciousness is six thousand years, out of a species life-span of five hundred thousand or a million. So it's a new project, and we're not good at it. We haven't figured out how to do it; we keep screwing up.



Nobody's got a formula; we're looking for it; we're trying.

How old is the project of human emancipation, freedom, democracy and self-rule as a political project — not Christ's spiritual vision but the actual political project? Two hundred and fifty years tops! I mean by that the French Revolution and the American Revolution, and those ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity — people running their own lives instead of having somebody else do it.

So you don't convince me with your pessimism: "Ah, we've been trying that forever, and we still screw up." We've just figured out what we want to do. Conscience and consciousness and that whole cultural thing are new. We're not good at it; what we're good at is hunter-gatherer, protecting our turf, all those reptilian instincts. We've been doing that for millennia, but this other stuff — being kind and nice to each other — is new. We keep screwing up, because "the ghost of all past generations weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living." So poets and visionaries keep the dream alive. They foster the dream, both enlarged perception and wonder, "heaven in a wildflower," what Wallace Stevens calls "unsubdued elations when the forest blooms."

I just think that line is so important. Two examples: If you're driving in southwest Texas, and those bluebonnets are blooming, and the whole roadside is alive with blue, it gives you chills. You just can't believe it can be so beautiful. One time I was driving on the Blueridge Parkway, behind the Shenandoah Mountains in North Carolina and Virginia. It was May, and I looked out, and there were rhododendrons and azaleas as far as the eye could see. I thought, "Boy, they've done a lot of planting." Then I realized they were wildflowers, and it just blew my mind. I couldn't believe the beauty.

"Unsubdued elations when the forest blooms." The poet and the visionary show us all that, but at the same time and intimately connected to it, the Faustian divine discontent and dissatisfaction with what is. Theirs is a dialectical vision, which leads in the direction of joy and wonder and beauty and love. Wordsworth says, *"The best portions of a good man's life,/ His little unremembered acts of kindness and love."*

The more we expand in that direction, the more this visionary imagination refuses to accept things as they are and responds with indignation to poverty, injustice and degradation. Poets insist on telling us that "late and soon,/ getting and spending we lay waste our powers." Which powers? The powers of visionary imagination.

Blake, in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," asks the prophet Ezekiel why he ate dung (yes, that is actually in the Bible). *"I asked Ezekiel why he ate dung and lay so long on his right and left side; he answered, 'The desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite.' "* To cleanse the doors, to see the infinite. It does not mean passivity or mere contemplation, but the urgent necessity to change, to realize the dream, the dream of becoming fully human.

John Lennon said, *"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one; perhaps one day you will join us, and the world will become as one."* And finally, my last quote, from William Morris, one of my favorite writers. At the end of his long Utopian novel called *News from Nowhere,* which is about a wonderful world that doesn't exist, he says: *"You will say it is all a dream, but if others have seen as I have seen, then perhaps it is a vision rather than a dream."*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: An OU faculty member since 1973, David Gross is currently associate professor of English and assistant director of the Honors Program. He has received both the Regents' Award for Excellence in Teaching and the OU student government's award as the Outstanding Teacher in the College of Arts and Sciences. His articles on French and British literature have appeared in numerous scholarly journals. He has two book manuscripts in progress, one on Gustave Flaubert and the French Revolution, the other on modern literary and cultural theory. A graduate of Wesleyan University, he received a master's and Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Iowa.