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# VIGNETTES OF A VISIONARY: WILLIAM HARRY JELLEMA

*Dewey Hoytenga*

Harry Jellema began his second academic career at GVSC when he became the first professor that I engaged for the new college. He was the reason that we were able to field an unusually good faculty of fifteen to start things going. His presence set the level of quality that I was looking for.<sup>1</sup>

—James Zumberge, First President, Grand Valley State University

Professor Jellema began his first career in 1921 as the founder of the Calvin College Department of Philosophy. Later, he was chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Indiana, but returned to Calvin and stayed until he reached the mandatory retirement age of 70. At an age at which many professors seek the dreams of retirement, Jellema came to Grand Valley with a vision that was shared by others during those early years—a vision of a publicly supported four-year college, unique in that it would be devoted exclusively to teaching, and teaching only undergraduates, and teaching them the liberal arts and sciences. The only professional preparation would be for elementary and high school teachers; but the exception was justified on the ground that these prospective teachers would have the same requirements that other students would have, the same liberal education.

When Professor Jellema invited me to join him in the Philosophy Department in 1965, the third year after Grand Valley opened its doors to students, everyone who had been attracted to join the original faculty and administration was still enthusiastic about this vision for Grand Valley. But soon thereafter, owing to our fear and ambition, the vision gradually lost its guiding, unifying power. The fear was that we could not attract enough students to share with us a vision of higher education so unique; the ambition was that we could modify the vision to provide the many other things modern colleges are expected to provide, not only to their students but also to those constituencies, private or public, who support them. These other things were professional programs, graduate studies, research, services to the community, and more. In what follows, I review the significance of the original vision, as personified in Professor Jellema himself for those who knew him, and as embodied in the original college itself. I also comment on what is left, or not left, of that vision in the institution as we know it today.

**Teaching.** Professor Jellema believed that teaching is the heart of education; he was himself first and foremost a teacher. Frederick Feikema Manfred, the American novelist, described, in the character of Thurs, his own encounter as a student with Professor Jellema in the Calvin College of the 1930s:

Mr. Hobbe had the reputation on campus of being the most brilliant Christian, the best read...the most tolerant. . . . And some there were who felt that Mr. Hobbe was a bad influence on the Christian youth. . . . Mr. Hobbe's defenders. . . claimed that Mr. Hobbe taught one to think. . . . Thurs hadn't been long in Mr. Hobbe's class when he decided that Mr. Hobbe was the truest Christian he had ever known. He decided that was not because Christianity was great but because Mr. Hobbe was a profound man, one who transcended narrow doctrinaire creed, one who was daring enough to accept the notion that there was a God....<sup>2</sup>

—From *The Primitive*

Thus Professor Jellema, as Professor Hobbe, was introduced to the American novel-reading public.

A generation later, Alvin Plantinga, one of Jellema's students who has become one of America's important philosophers, introduced Professor Jellema to the world of professional philosophers:

I first encountered Harry Jellema in the spring of 1951. . . . That spring I was a freshman at Harvard. I returned to Grand Rapids. . . [during a break] to visit my parents. . . [and] took the opportunity to visit some of Jellema's classes. After attending three of his lectures. . . , I decided on the spot to leave Harvard so that I could study philosophy with Jellema. That was one of the best decisions I ever made.

In those days. . . Jellema was at the height of his powers; and he was indeed impressive. He *looked* like a great man—iron-grey hair, handsome, an upright, vigorous bearing bespeaking strength and confidence, a ready smile. And he *sounded* like a great man. Although he had grown up in the United States, there was a trace of European accent—Oxford, I thought, with perhaps a bit of the Continent thrown in. . . .

Many of us came deeply under his spell; had he told us black was white we would have had a genuine intellectual struggle.<sup>3</sup>

—Alvin Plantinga, John O'Brien Professor of Philosophy,  
University of Notre Dame

I was among those students in this later generation who enjoyed coming under Jellema's "spell." Some years afterwards I was honored to find myself one of Jellema's colleagues in the early Philosophy Department at Grand Valley. Busy working at becoming a teacher myself, I found him a fascinating model. The big difference was that I had to work at it, whereas, for Jellema, teaching seemed to be the most natural thing in the world.

Jellema was a born teacher, not made, as most of the rest of us are. He had a keen instinct to communicate, to interest, challenge, and lead us his students from where we were to where we had to be. Patience, congeniality, classroom presence—these were his natural gifts. Every lecture was a living dialogue between him and us—or him and himself if there was no class discussion. I sometimes visited

his large lecture classes in the Introduction to Philosophy at Grand Valley. On two occasions, at least, the students showed their appreciation at the close of the hour with a spontaneous round of applause—something I had not heard of before. Nor have I since.

Our Center for Teaching, established just last Fall and inaugurated with a Conference on Teaching Excellence that attracted nearly 300 participants, is the latest evidence that excellence in teaching is still a high, perhaps even the highest, priority at the University. Professor Jellema would have been pleased.

**Liberal Education.** After teaching, Jellema's highest priority was not writing books or articles in his field ("contributing to his discipline") but advancing the liberal arts curriculum:

Harry Jellema is one college professor who. . . survived without writing a book. . . . He is first and last a teacher, and he obviously has inculcated in those around him a love of teaching. . . . He has confined his writing to articles on curriculum and the liberal arts.<sup>4</sup>

—Gerald Elliott, Journalist, former Adjunct Professor  
in Communications, Grand Valley

Jellema was the architect of Grand Valley's first General Education Program. It required every student to take a "foundation course" in the major disciplines of the arts and sciences, as well as distribution courses beyond one's concentration.

The simplicity and integrity of that first Program has never been surpassed. Its succeeding versions testify to the continued, often intense, interest in general education, but also to the onset of increasing confusion and disagreement about what a general education program should be. A recent issue of the *Grand Valley Review* (Spring 1994), devoted to a critique of the present program, reveals both the interest and the disagreement. There seems to be no visionary thinker among us capable of leading the rest of us to agreement about something so important that it once was called the "Foundation Program" for a baccalaureate degree.

I deeply regret that we failed to unite ourselves in a firm, continued support of that Foundation Program. That Program still seems to me clearly superior to every one of its successors, not only in its simplicity but also in its challenge to keep our focus, and that of our students, on the *basic ideas* in the *main areas* of human knowledge that every educated person ought to know.

**Philosophy.** Great teacher, single-minded advocate of liberal education, and finally, "premier philosopher":

Services for W. Harry Jellema, former chairman of the Philosophy departments at Calvin College and Grand Valley State Colleges, will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at La Grave Christian Reformed Church.

Jellema, 89, who died Sunday at Butterworth Hospital, was considered by his colleagues and former students as one of the premier philosophers in the country.<sup>5</sup>

—*Grand Rapids Press*, May 18, 1982.

Philosophy? That also, I think, was part of Jellema's vision for Grand Valley; but it needs explanation. Of course he wanted a Department for the professional teaching of philosophy. But philosophy for Jellema was a subject, not properly confined to any single department. Indeed, in an important sense, Jellema thought, it was downright improper to confine it to a Department. For that suggests that philosophy is just one more specialized subject, no different really from any other. But Jellema thought it to be *quite* different, because it examines the ultimate beliefs we have about any subject whatever, ultimate beliefs that determine how we think about anything—including how we think about all the special disciplines that make up the arts and sciences.

In short, Jellema believed that everyone has philosophical ideas, and better to realize it than not. And especially better for a college faculty, a community of specialists, to realize it than not. For he believed that these ultimate beliefs will show through our teaching whether we are aware of it or not. For Jellema, in short, a college or a university is a philosophical enterprise.

The idea is not easy to grasp; it is certainly not the popular idea of what a college is for. It is not even the common notion of what education at any level is really all about. But Jellema was a visionary, even about the role of his own "subject," philosophy. One of his former students, and later his colleague for a short time at Grand Valley, tells how, in Jellema's own language, the idea came through to him:

Jellema was one of a kind. . . . His lectures were works of art delivered in riveting prose with an unobtrusive moral authority that transported you out of yourself. . . .

My life was decisively shaped by his teaching and example. I can still hear him saying: "More important than *what* you think is the mind *with which* you think." . . . For the first time, we too began reflecting about the mind with which we thought. Or didn't think.<sup>6</sup>

—John Beversluis, Professor of Philosophy, Butler University

What philosophy should do, then, is move us to examine "the mind *with which* we think."

If we conduct this examination, Jellema believed, we would discover, as we try to form our minds for ourselves, that they are likely to be more or less formed for us by the way we were brought up and educated. Formed by what? By one of what he considered the three main Western philosophical traditions: idealism (that is, Greek humanistic idealism and its heirs today); theism (the Judaeo-Christian idea of God); and modern secular scientific naturalism. In other words, Jellema claimed that we will likely find ourselves more or less disposed individually to one of three ultimate beliefs: the autonomy of human rational and moral ideals, the sovereignty of God, or the ultimacy of nature (of the cosmos, the material world). This is what Jellema meant when he taught that the "mind with which we think" is more important than what we think.

Actually, Jellema meant something more. One of his former students and long-

time colleagues at Calvin College suggests it:

He was an acute and stimulating thinker who, aware of the pedagogic function of philosophy, knew how to elicit mature and viable answers. He did not peddle ideas, nor did he merely commend them; he made them alive and irresistible. . . .

For him, philosophy was there to deepen understanding and to delineate the perspective of faith. [But] the history of philosophy was for him the progressive articulation of competing faiths seeking appropriate understanding.<sup>7</sup>

—Henry Stob, early student of Jellema and later his colleague  
in philosophy for many years at Calvin College

That "something more" is as provocative as it is exciting, and, if it is true, utterly serious. Here it is: Christianity (or any religion) is not the only *faith*. One's ultimate philosophical beliefs constitute one's *faith*, whether these beliefs look like religious beliefs or not. It will follow that the competition, the conflict, between such beliefs might be as deep and significant as religious conflicts themselves.

Jellema, of course, was a Christian theist, one of the visionaries in the development of Calvin College. He realized, of course, that Grand Valley could not be another Calvin College (though some wags in those early days wondered aloud about that, when they referred to the new school in Allendale as "Calvin West"). Still, Jellema hoped, I think, that its faculty might be as self-conscious and open about their quite diverse philosophical beliefs as his colleagues at Calvin College were about their shared Christian beliefs. It would not make the new college a Christian college, of course, but still, it could have been a *philosophical* one. That indeed would have made it unique. But, as I noted earlier, that was an idea pretty hard for most of us in those early days to grasp, let alone implement.

I often wonder what such a university would be like—the entire faculty devoted to their specialized subjects, but also eagerly raising, now and again, in class and committee, in special seminars and public colloquia, the larger philosophical questions that arise from their specialized artistic, scientific, and professional pursuits. And not only raising such questions, but also giving their answers to them; and further, revealing how these answers might affect and be affected by the very subject they teach; and finally, defending their ultimate beliefs against the inevitable challenges of their colleagues who would disagree. When I came to Grand Valley, I thought—much more vaguely than I now express it—I would find out what such a college would be like. But I never did.

Still, could Grand Valley have been more fortunate than it was, that back in 1963, Calvin College retired this visionary thinker—a superb teacher, a premier philosopher, and a devoted advocate of liberal education?

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<sup>1</sup>From a letter to the family on the occasion of Professor Jellema's death. This vignette and the following ones are

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excerpted from longer tributes to Professor Jellema written either during his retirement or upon his death. They are collected, with many others, in a memorial booklet, *In Memory of William Harry Jellema: 1893—1982*, ed. Dewey Hoitenga, published by Grand Valley.

The Philosophy Department has a limited number of copies left, if anybody is interested in obtaining one.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Feikema Manfred, *The Primitive*, New York: Doubleday 1949, pp. 187ff.

<sup>3</sup>"Harry Jellema, 1893-1982," in *The Reformed Journal*, July 1982. For Plantinga's more complete account of Jellema's significance, see *Profiles: Alvin Plantinga*: J. E. Tomberlin and P. Van Inwagen, eds., Boston: D. Reidel, 1985, pp. 9-13; 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>"With Us Today: W. Harry Jellema—Pursuing the Truth," in *The Grand Rapids Press*, Tuesday, Nov. 8, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>"Former Chairman of Philosophy at Calvin, GVSC Dies," in *The Grand Rapids Press*, May 18, 1982.

<sup>6</sup>"In Memoriam—William Harry Jellema," *The Banner*, June 14, 1982.

<sup>7</sup>"W. Harry Jellema: A Former Student Remembers," written for the Memorial Booklet.