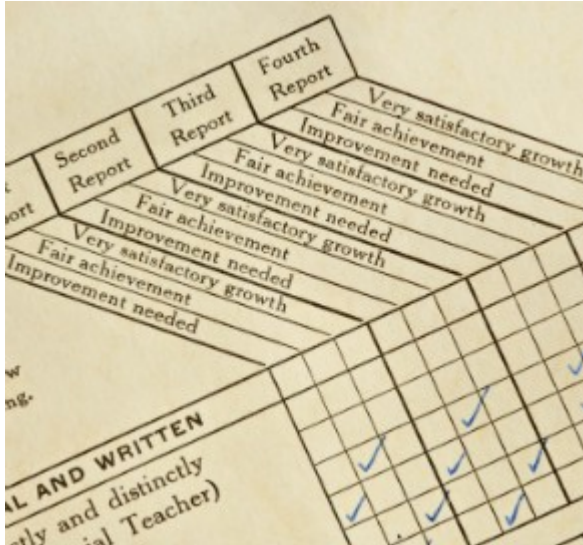


Grading our work

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue



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Six years ago in New Haven, Connecticut, several hundred friends of Yale Divinity School gathered to honor four of the school's distinguished alumni. Nai-Wang Kwok was unfamiliar to most of us in the room. He had flown in from Hong Kong the previous day—his first time back to campus in 45 years.

Kwok, who is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), was on hand to accept the Lux et Veritas, an award given each year to an individual with demonstrated excellence and distinction in ministering with Christlike compassion.

By all accounts, Nai-Wang Kwok is an impressive figure. He has devoted his life to the Christian community in Hong Kong, advocating for human rights, democracy, and justice. In addition to writing or editing more than 20 books, Kwok spent years working in the slums and public housing projects of Hong Kong. He has served as general secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council and founder of the Hong Kong Christian Institute.

After sharing laudatory remarks about Kwok, the dean invited him to respond, and he spoke briefly. A strong Cantonese accent marked his English.

“I see I have come back to receive my report card from my Yale education and experience. I find it is an A-, which means that I have done a number of good things, but clearly I have more work to do. Thank you very much for this honor.” With those three sentences he bowed to the generous applause and sat down.

I have thought a lot about Kwok’s beautiful words that day. This urban servant of significant stature had, in effect, graded himself not only on his accomplishments but also on the large, unfinished work remaining in his life. His humility reminded me of theologian J. I. Packer’s idea that Christians “grow up into Christ by growing down into lowliness.”

The [article on Detroit’s water crisis](#) in this issue is a must read. It is another one of those where-else-are-you-going-to-find-this-kind-of-article-except-in-the-*Century* pieces of writing. I read the story and began wondering what it would be like if city leaders in America graded themselves. Filling out a public report card with deep honesty would require more humility than many officials are up to. What grade would Detroit’s leaders give themselves? What seems clear is the benefit that elected and appointed leaders would receive if they were to take cues from Nai-Wang Kwok.

A year ago, retired U.S. representative John Dingell, who for many years served Michigan’s 12th congressional district, was coaching Wisconsin congressman Ron Kind. “Ron,” said Dingell, “never forget that you’ve got an important job, but you’re not an important person. The second you start thinking that you’re an important person, you start to cut corners and think the rules don’t apply to you.”

One doesn’t have to be a legislator or city bureaucrat to risk losing the distinction between one’s self-importance and the important work one is called to do. Would that we all might pull out a report card and do the sort of reflective work Nai-Wang Kwok managed so beautifully.