

# I heard voices: talking with Christopher Keiser about education, the call, and life

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Christopher Keiser may not graduate anytime soon. He has been in and out of school for the last three years. He was a senior in '94. He is still a senior.

Though he's not currently enrolled, Christopher is a feature of Guilford's landscape. When I walk out onto Founders lawn, I expect to see him: sandaled, loose-legged, rambling, wearing flannel and dreadlocks, walking behind his dog.

So I schedule an interview with Christopher. I plan to investigate his presence. I will ask him, "What the hell are you doing still here?"

As I walk to meet Christopher, I

start to suspect that he may have good reasons for not graduating. Anybody could complete one year of courses in three year's time. Why hasn't he? What's drawn him away from his degree?

He ain't on the four-year plan, that's clear. Has he discovered some alternative plan? Some counter-curriculum? Where has it taken him?

I meet up with Christopher and quickly

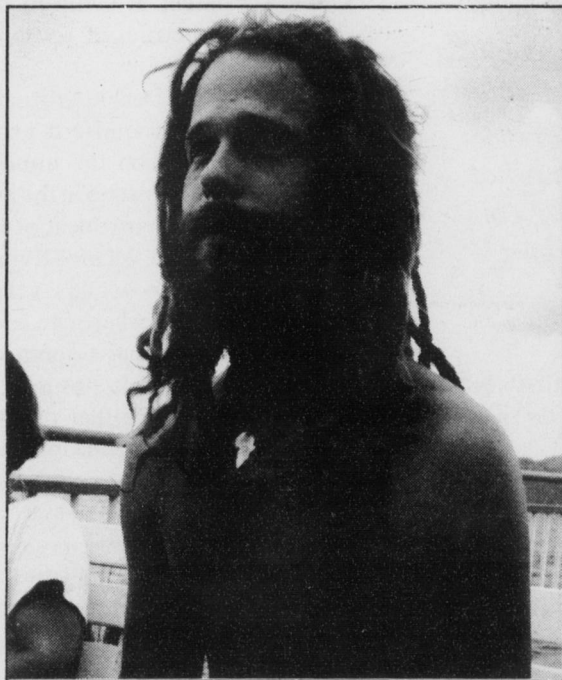


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have my first insight. Christopher Keiser is the first person whom you will ever feel breathe when you hug him.

Most hugs are two people bumping into each other with a quick clasp and squeeze about the shoulders.

But when I meet up with Christopher, I can tell right off that he has something to teach me.

I can tell this from his hug. We embrace, and as I lean in I feel him loose an

easy breath from his belly. He exhales like a monk. Unhurried. As if our rendezvous were a meditation session.

We go walking. I ask Christopher: "Where has your education taken you?"

"I was looking for something," he says. "I felt like I hadn't gotten in touch with what I was supposed to be doing."

"My first senior year at Guilford, I led a Habitat trip during fall break. That led me to

take the next year off and live in Americus, Georgia, building houses with Habitat."

Christopher's beard is red and handsome and comes strong from his chin and neck. The beard's shape and texture contrast with his mane of dreadlocks, which are straight, lighter, multiple. Between them Christopher moves his eyes intentionally. He looks at me, he looks into space. He directs his eyes and does not just glance around.

"While I was there I realized that my strength in serving the world wasn't necessarily with a hammer and a nail. I realized my calling was to relate to people, to learn from people, and also to bring people new perspectives—a real exchange.

"There was a trip going to Jamaica with Habitat, and I felt very called to that—to go for two weeks of building houses and for two weeks of living with the Rastaman. That led me to want to dive deeper into the roots of Rastafarian culture—Africa.

"What manifested was a calling from Jamaica to go to Ghana with Guilford's program there. I followed that calling. I went to Ghana wide open, and within two weeks I found my vision."

"What is your vision?" I ask.

"That vision has to do with how to relate to others, what works to do, what foods to eat, all of it combined. I want to facilitate experiences in Africa for people who are called there. While I was in Ghana, I bought some land. I see a community forming there, becoming a place to survive if—and perhaps when—the system that sucks the life out of people falls.

"I look around me here and I see dead spirits everywhere. Television is killing our spirits. Supermarkets—where we can buy everything we need and never know where it comes from—are killing our spirits.

"Africa is a place where our spirits can be revived. Africa calls us to heal."

His tale zags back and forth—except for this word, calling, which Christopher keeps using. It glints from every episode of his story like a bright stone on sodden earth.

"How has your 'calling' helped you find your vision?" I ask Christopher. "What's a



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calling?"

"A calling's a voice you hear. It's an inner voice, but you don't just hear it talking inside.

"Your calling is inside you, but you have to hear it somewhere else before you can hear it yourself. You hear the voice of your calling in what other people say.

"A calling's something you do to survive. It's like Bob Marley says, 'I and I build the cabin, I and I plant the corn.' He's not talking about earning a salary. He's talking about survival. Bob's philosophy is about how black people, white people, any people, if they follow their callings, can learn to be free.

"If I'm wrong and the system doesn't

fall, I can always come back in 15 years and put on a suit and tie. But I don't think I will."

I work at

imagining Christopher in a gray three-piece. White, starched shirt. Clean-shaven.

No way, I think. Ain't no way that inner voice going to tell Christopher, "Put on a tie."

Leaving him I have the sense that, however long it takes Christopher to graduate, he's walking ahead of me, reading the terrain, finding a new way, and calling back to me over his shoulder about the route.



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