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# TALES FROM THE FRONT: REFLECTIONS OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR ON SPIRITUALITY AND LEADERSHIP

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*Many good books on the theory and practice of the Catholic university have been published. The modest aim here is not to try to outdo or replace them, but only to provide something of an autobiographical account and musings of one who has served as a director of a humanities program at Notre Dame for over 15 years. The hope is that "Tales From the Front" will resonate with some readers, or at least lead them to reflect upon the challenges of their own work in Catholic teaching or administration.*

Recent debate over higher education in America makes it seem as if our colleges and universities are now battlegrounds rather than institutions of teaching and learning. Perhaps the work most responsible for generating the dozens of books that have appeared over the past decade concerning the difficulties in higher learning is Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Bloom suggests that even our most elite universities have failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students. Other recent books have similarly referred to the moral collapse of the university, the university as a place guilty of killing the spirit, and the university in ruins (Readings, 1986; Smith 1990; Wilshire 1990). In a profound series of Gifford lectures, the Catholic philosopher MacIntyre (1990) has written of the moral and philosophical incoherence of the modern university, and elsewhere has traced the problem to what he perceives as a similar incoherence in our culture at large. Perhaps, as Kerr (1963) hinted over 30 years ago, our universities are trying to do too many things, be too many things for too many people, and thus, risk pleasing no one.

As this debate over the university rages, another cultural phenomenon

has appeared, a new yearning among the general public for spirituality which Fordham educational theorist Elias (1991) has called the "Fourth Great Awakening" in American history, a period similar to the awakenings of the desire for God that occurred in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Recently *Newsweek* supported and augmented Elias's analysis when it ran a cover story entitled "Spirituality for Sale?" The article focused on the success of popular "spiritual gurus" such as Chopra and others who have sold millions of books to Americans who perceive "a hole in their soul," a deep spiritual emptiness, and who seek relief. The success on best seller lists by pop gurus such as Chopra, Estes, More, Redfield, and many others raises the following questions: How should educators respond to Elias's awakening? Does its existence provide support for claims made by authors such as Bloom concerning the deficiencies of our educational institutions? Is Bloom right that our schooling impoverishes souls? Can a more intelligent spirituality than that found in the marketplace, one which taps into legitimate religious traditions and resists becoming consumerized, be taught? If so, who should teach it? Is it, at least in part, the job of the college or university to teach it?

These questions should be especially important to those of us who work in, and believe in, the mission of Catholic universities. Teachers and administrators in Catholic schools of all types, including the Catholic university, face special challenges and responsibilities above and beyond those found within secular universities. On the one hand, we must continue to struggle with the kind of challenge raised by authors such as Woolf, who insist that the very idea of a "Catholic university" is a contradiction in terms. Universities, Woolf (1969) argues, should resemble their 19th-century German counterparts in sponsoring research completely unfettered from faith by pure scientific reason. Yet, according to Woolf, Catholicism insists upon a faith commitment to various beliefs and practices. On the other hand, we must pay attention to the lessons that can be found in the work of authors such as the Protestant scholar Marsden, whose magisterial *The Soul of the American University* (1994) demonstrates the way in which, over the course of the last hundred years, the universities we tend to consider our most elite have, with the very best intentions, lost their religious dimension almost entirely in a rush toward 19th-century German professionalism, specialization, and expertise. We must wonder if these latter phenomena are consistent with truly liberal education. As Catholic educators, we should pay close attention to the profound concern for the integrity of "whole" human beings, body, mind, and spirit, expressed by Pope John Paul II in *Ex Cordi Ecclesiae* (1990). Can a university even partially modeled after the classical German research institution foster spirituality?

A number of profound works by Catholic authors have already begun to appear, works that address problems and prospects for the Catholic university from historical, sociological, theological, and philosophical points of view

(Baxter & Bauerschmidt, 1995; Berthold, 1991; Gleason, 1995; O'Brien, 1994). Those looking for the necessary theoretical tools for dealing with what Baxter & Bauerschmidt (1995) have referred to as "the dilemma of Catholics in the academy" should certainly consult these texts. My remarks are not meant to supplant what can be found in them. Rather, my goal is simply to describe the ways in which my own experiences, first as a graduate student and later as a teacher, scholar, and administrator in a Catholic university have shaped my own conception of, and mode of response to, these issues. Perhaps my "tales from the front" will prove instructive for others in similar circumstances, at least stimulating further thought among those in positions similar to mine who face similar problems and questions.

In what immediately follows, however, I preface my personal story and reflections with a description of what I take to be the current cultural and social situation of the university, especially those universities which either are established research institutions or are seeking, as a number of Catholic universities are, to become such. I am aware that my description will appear to some to be a caricature. But even if it is exaggerated, exaggeration sometimes has its purpose in highlighting trends or illuminating at least part of what is going on. I believe that my description of the university and its current cultural situation does have its merits as at least a partly objective account.

## **CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE UNIVERSITY: TECHNOPOLY**

If writers such as the great Christian sociologist Ellul (1968) are on the mark, we live today in an age which Postman (1993) has described as a technopoly. In a technopoly, culture surrenders to technology. Unlike past ages, where our use of technology was kept in its place by various political, moral, and religious traditions, technology now operates independently of, in fact supersedes, tradition. As Ellul states, technique now "absorbs the sacred and has, in fact, become the sacred" (1968, p. 372). It is no longer the case that technology is neither good nor bad, only our use of it makes it so. What, then, does Ellul mean by the word technique as it operates within technopoly? Here one might point to what the philosopher Barrett (1979) has called "the illusion of technique"; the idea that we might find, in education and elsewhere, self-interpreting, error-proof, perhaps values-neutral rules, methods, or recipes that will free us from the constraints of what Aristotle referred to as *phronesis*: fallible, yet unavoidable, human judgment. For now our use of technique prescribes its own value systems, and, in fact, makes it harder and harder to understand other, older systems that might challenge the imperatives of technopoly. For Ellul, in a technopoly, technology humiliates our words (1985). It co-opts older concepts from more traditional ways of think-

ing, making their earlier meanings opaque or meaningless to the modern ear.

How does technopoly operate within educational institutions (Neiman, 1998)? How has it infected our universities? Educational philosopher Noddings (1992) has referred to the error of methodolatry within pre-college and pre-university schooling, but her remarks are not irrelevant to higher education. Noddings describes a number of ways in which schools fall prey to the illusion of technique. For example, much educational research has gone into the search for "teaching programs" that work in such a way to be almost immune to human error, i.e., that avoid the use of *phronesis* on the part of the teacher. The search for teacher-proof methods of schooling, however, can only be taken seriously if intelligence, once symbolic of any number of different forms of artful thought and feeling, becomes understood as the mere ability to follow recipes. Thus, we lose sight of traditional ideas of intelligence as art. But once these traditional educational ideas are gone, along with the traditions in which they once made sense, there is little conceptual space left to oppose the imperatives of the machine and the market. Education becomes the ability to succeed efficiently and economically. To meet the challenge of other nations in the marketplace unconsciously becomes the only sensible objective of schooling about which we can begin to reach a consensus. It begins to sound like the essence of common sense.

Consider an example of educational technique at work within technopoly: Computer technology, Postman (1993) argues, has begun to redefine humans as "information processors," and nature itself as information to be processed. "The fundamental message of the computer is that we are machines" (Postman, 1993, p. 111). At prestigious institutions of learning, the growing demand that teachers in the humanities "do research" leads to the building of high-tech classrooms full of gadgets which are supposed to take over more and more of the teaching load. Moreover, wacky ideas such as "Socrates gone virtual" are taken more and more seriously as legitimate candidates to replace the older, more traditional ideal of the face-to-face, dialogical classroom which was once essential to the idea of liberal education. In a technopoly, it seems that Socrates, as well as his students, can simply stay home and access each other over the Internet! Something important is lost here, something that would be obvious to anyone for whom Socrates' own understanding of words such as teaching and learning still make some sense.

A related example: Consider what the growing rush to professionalism, specialization, and expertise has done to our traditional idea of colleges and universities as communities of learning. Professors residing at the same institution of higher learning have less and less to say to each other concerning the nature of their academic interests. Even for those within the same departments, it becomes harder and harder to understand what one's colleagues are talking about. In fact, the demand for specialized publications

and concomitant desire for promotion and tenure make it less and less enticing or profitable even to try to understand each other. One enters one's faculty office building to find room after room of professors oblivious to one another, hunched over their computers, writing and reading the work which appears in one's own journals, at one's own conferences, almost always work done by and for those outside one's own institution. The trend has been countered, with some success, by the creation of specialized institutes of learning within various institutions, but this does not do much to impede the imperatives of technopoly. As MacIntyre (1988) notes, the possibility that teachers within a university might deal in common with the whole of learning is made to appear less and less sensible every day.

Finally, consider the effect on undergraduate students. How could such a state of affairs yield anything but a curriculum which consists of modules of disconnected information, each consisting of reports of specialized research? Within the major, perhaps, one begins an initiation into the world of research: Courses once taught by well-rounded teacher-learners are replaced by watered-down versions of one's latest book or article, materials that are more or less unintelligible to students who have not given themselves over to the professor's specific area of expertise. Where, then, is the wholeness, the connectedness, of learning that is, at least in part, constitutive of spirituality?

## **ENTRY INTO THE LIFE OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY: A GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

In 1973, I entered the graduate program in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where I now direct our Core Course in the College of Arts and Letters. In retrospect, I realize that my understanding of what I was getting into was simplistic if not naive. As an undergraduate at a non-Catholic, state supported university of very modest means, I had become interested in what philosophers such as Socrates referred to as the love of and quest for wisdom. Works such as the Platonic dialogues had initiated me into a tradition of inquiry partially oriented around liberal education's famous trio of questions: 1) Who am I? 2) How ought I to live? and 3) If I live in such a way, what can I hope for? While I had no sustaining philosophy of life to rely on at the time, I noticed that many around me had managed to become "true believers" in any number of such philosophies. My problem as a philosophy student was that these people, while each quite certain of the truth of their beliefs and practices, disagreed among themselves as to what those truths were.

Thus, I became interested in the skeptical current that runs alongside the philosophical tradition I was studying, alongside those who thought they had found answers to Kant's questions (Hiley, 1988). In graduate school, I found a discipline, theory of knowledge, or epistemology, which seemed to address

the challenge of the skeptics: What is knowledge? What is rationality? What can we know for certain? What do we have a right to believe? Are there any beliefs, any types of faith, we can trust in with confidence? In my doctoral studies I examined both skepticism and those who had responded to it. In the course of my work I came across, almost in spite of myself, some of St. Augustine's writings which anticipated and responded to the type of skeptical challenge most famously raised in Descartes' *Meditations* (1963). These works included Augustine's *Confessions* (1975), his treatise against skeptical doubt, *Against the Academics* (1951), as well as his work on "the ethics of belief," *On the Utility of Believing* (1948).

But, alas, this was as yet an almost purely theoretical, intellectual quest. It was some time before I began to understand how to put this theory into personal, educational practice. As I now see it, my life as an apprentice to the craft of professional philosophy existed in a severe tension with my life as, to use the phrase of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, "an existing individual." In retrospect, it now seems to me that technopoly in the academy all too often pushes issues of life and death, issues that provide the real motivation for all inquiry, to the background, making these existential concerns transparent or unconscious, so that the very point of it all gets lost. What begins as a search for truth, for God, becomes a romance with technique, the methods and jargon of one's expertise.

## INITIATION INTO THE CORE COURSE

Among the greatest blessings of my academic life was an offer I received in the summer of 1979 to participate in the founding of our College's Core Course. Core, as newly mandated by the College Council, was to be a year-long, interdisciplinary course, with a syllabus studied in common by all of our sophomores in seminars of 18 or fewer students. The syllabus was to be divided into sections on nature and society in the fall semester, the self and God in the spring. The objectives of the course, according to our mandate, were four: 1) introduction to formative works and ideas; 2) introduction to the learning resources of the College; 3) consideration of important value questions; 4) consideration of the various ways of knowing available within the University. For me, the last objective has been most important and in many ways encompasses the first three. This aspect of the course has helped me break free from a number of disabilities which I believe were fostered by my apprenticeship into the professional life of philosophy.

In investigating this objective, I was most impressed by the remark of a wise colleague. Core, he said, would serve to "inoculate" sophomores, before they choose their majors, against the "hubris" of specialization. When I heard this remark, I was, happily enough, reading Newman's classic work *The Idea of a University* (1982) and moving away from epistemology as a field of study to the philosophy of education. In his book, Newman spoke of a sec-

ond kind of philosophy for which my previous study had hardly prepared me, a “habit of mind” which aimed at the integration of the various, sometimes disjointed, disciplinary points of view with which university students are confronted. This was a way of thinking that, as it turned out, powerfully and intentionally cut against the increasingly narrow, jargon-ridden imperatives of my own graduate training, as well as at least most other graduate apprenticeships in the modern research university.

In order to get a clearer sense of how Newman's philosophy works, I now look at Core as it is presently constituted. I want to indicate how, at least as I teach it, the syllabus helps with the inoculation my colleague spoke of. I write “at least as I teach it” because in a course as large as ours, now enrolling over 700 students a year in approximately 40 sections, meant somehow to represent an entire College composed of 18 departments in the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences, the meaning and purpose of what we do must constantly be renegotiated among those who teach the course, members of our yearly curriculum committees, the higher administration, and faculty, as well as students as a whole. Even a director of a course like this cannot force teachers to stress one or several possible objectives over others. But he can teach the course as he wishes and learn from it accordingly.

So, the section on nature encourages discussion of 1) an anthropological account of the nature myths of a pre-agricultural society; 2) Genesis; 3) Aristotle's concept of teleology in natural objects as well as artifacts; 4) Darwin's theory of evolution; 5) transcendentalist and romantic literary reactions to the modern scientific worldview; and 6) ways in which visual art has represented the natural world throughout time. Thus, a number of “ways of knowing” nature, different in form and result, are inevitably compared and contrasted, with similarities and tensions brought to the fore. Do the perspectives of myth, theology, science, art, poetry, etc., taken as a whole, provide a clearer, or more confusing, picture of the natural world than any one area by itself? If confusions arise, how can they be overcome? Moreover, in considering “questions of value,” e.g., cloning, technology, the environmental crisis, we inevitably consider how economic and other social and cultural contexts affect our view of, and activity within, the world around us. Perhaps the ultimate lesson of the section is that no one viewpoint that one might cultivate within an academic major can do justice to the phenomena in question. Hence, an inoculation has occurred.

Core is not always enacted with ease. Core is a course that cannot successfully be taught from the perspective of any one scholar's expertise. Thus, the course cannot be one in which the knowledge of “one who knows” is simply transmitted into the minds of students. For students used to judging courses according to the quality of their lecture notes, the experience of Core can come as quite a shock and can be quite frustrating. But once these students are led to understand the value of such frustration, the point of the



course at which one which begins, rather than ends, the search for knowledge and encourages students to educate each other through questioning and dialogue, Core often becomes a high point of course work in the College.

Faculty, as well as students, are often surprised and frustrated by their initial experiences with Core. Often they are eventually "liberated" from their own technical expertise. Especially valuable in this regard are our Friday faculty seminars, where the staff members hold their own discussions of the materials they will take up with students the following week. I vividly remember my initial experiences in these seminars, how I, imbued with the "hubris" of analytic philosophy, came to the shocking realization that I might have something to learn about nature, society, the self, and God from theologians, English teachers, artists and art professors, social scientists, and even philosophers from fields other than the theory of knowledge. As director of the course, I have since watched a similar process occur in other often less obstinate but nonetheless well-specialized teachers. Any number of our current and past faculty will attest that the experience of Core opened up a new world to them. Or perhaps it is an old world that technopoly had previously hidden from their view!

Earlier I spoke about the way technopoly has changed our understanding of the idea of universities as communities of learning. I owe Core, my work with similarly committed faculty, as well as my students, a great debt for making a more traditional and venerable notion of such communities come alive for me. It is not that more specialized communities, research communities, even Internet communities are, in themselves, unwelcome or evil. Rather, my point is that the growing hegemony of these latter communities must not be allowed to wipe out communities such as I have found within Core. For these, I believe, point the way toward the heart and soul of a great and ancient tradition of liberal education which is in danger of becoming unintelligible, that tradition which Bloom describes, admittedly in an unnecessarily polemical and anti-democratic manner, as composed of "those who seek the truth, of the men (sic) who desire to know...the true friends" (Bloom 1987, p. 381). Here perhaps wisdom is a better word for modern ears than truth, in order to clarify what is being sought within these Core-inspired groups of ours.

## **BEYOND CORE?**

In a paper entitled "Learning to Live" the Trappist monk Merton (1992) suggests, in perhaps his only paper devoted entirely and systematically to education, that the university has, at its best, a monastic quality. The classical tradition and wisdom of monasticism is no longer easily intelligible to us, perhaps due to the imperatives of technopoly. In any event, through ongoing visits with the Trappist community at New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa,

and related reading, research, and practice, I have begun to wonder if, beyond the imperatives of “Scholasticism,” “Platonism,” and “Pragmatism” as philosophies of education and even beyond what Newman’s vision can do for those of us who seek unity within the university, monastic tradition provides a salutary model.

I have already suggested how Newman’s philosophy provides something of a spiritual component insofar as it encourages connection rather than disparity, a unified rather than fragmented vision, a sort of wisdom rather than mere knowledge. Still I wonder if it sufficiently addresses the concerns about the university that I have been discussing. In this regard, a major issue has to do with the way we view intelligence in higher learning. Does not even Newman’s philosophical habit of mind falsely oppose the head to the heart, place reason over feeling, knowledge over desire? Are not both ends of these supposed dichotomies equally important? Can Newman’s ideas by themselves allow educators to explode these false dualisms? In monastic tradition, a model of intelligence and inquiry is proposed that attempts to merge these extremes; the model is based in part on Augustine’s “I believe in order to understand” but also on the Cistercian formula “I believe in order to experience.” First, I, not just a disembodied mind but a flesh and blood creature, cannot but believe if I am to understand. In Book VI, 5 of *Confessions*, Augustine states this point beautifully.

Thus, O Lord, you laid your gentle most merciful finger on my heart and set my thoughts in order, for I began to realize that I believed countless things which I had never seen or which had taken place when I was not there to see—so many events in the history of the world, so many facts about places and towns which I had never seen, and so much that I believed on the word of friends or doctors or various other people. Unless we took these things on trust, we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life. Most of all it came home to me how firm and unshakeable was the faith which told me who my parents were, because I could never have known this unless I believed what I was told. (Augustine, 1975, pp. 116-117)

Kuhn (1962), the distinguished philosopher and historian of science, has recently made a similar point when he notes that all teaching and learning, even in supposedly so rational a field as natural science, proceeds within “paradigms.” If Kuhn is right, our very understanding of reason must be reconceptualized to allow for faith (Neiman, 1984).

This is at least part of what St. Bernard had in mind in providing one of the greatest acts of spiritual leadership we know of, fostering in the 12th century, according to Jean LeClercq (1964), a culture which stressed both the love of learning and the desire for God. Bernard is sometimes portrayed in his dispute with the scholastic theologian Peter Abelard as a reactionary zealot. Occasionally, this view is stretched to the point that Bernard’s Abelard

is made to look something like Galileo's grandfather, a martyr in pursuit of logic, reason, and truth, hounded by monastics who, instead, favored irrationality and unbridled emotion. Historian Ferrulo (1985), however, has painted a far different view. Could it not be that it was not reason itself that Bernard opposed in Abelard, and in Scholastic Theology at the University of Paris, but a certain model of reason that could all too easily be co-opted in later centuries by Descartes and others in the service of heartless technique?

Norris (1997), in her recent book *The Cloister Walk*, presents a wonderfully wise yet accessible delimitation of "monastic reason," a way of thinking and living that merges cult and grammar in such a way as to counteract the growing literalism inherent in our ways of thinking, seeing, and feeling. For Norris, monasticism incorporates a number of spiritual disciplines or exercises which make us more poetic, more open to metaphor as a mode of knowing, more humble, attentive, and serene in the face of the miracle and mystery of existence. Scholarship today too often evacuates the world of mystery. Norris's monks, LeClercq's monastic culture, and Merton's education for life all teach us that reason, properly employed, is compatible with both mystery and reverence. Monastic spiritual exercises, according to Norris, also help us see time as a friend rather than an enemy; they may be of benefit to those of us who believe that what the contemporary university often really teaches its students, beyond the illusion of technique, is that the modern "rat race" is perfectly normal and acceptable, that the inability to live and thrive in the race is a sign of weakness rather than strength. They might also provide, when coupled with the kind of learning fostered by Newman's philosophy, a kind of "spiritual intelligence" that would both awaken the heart's desire and point it beyond the simplistic gurus of the marketplace.

In "Learning to Live" and elsewhere, Merton suggests that he received his first taste of the ancient discipline of monastic "lectio" or spiritual reading, meditation, and contemplation not in the monastery but in the English classes of Mark Van Doren, his teacher at Columbia. There are still professors at my institution who resemble Van Doren in their teaching and mode of relating to their students, but they were typically trained and hired long ago. One wonders if these teachers would receive tenure now at our elite universities, or even be hired. One wonders how many Van Dorens are to be found in the new and upcoming generations of the professorate.

There are those who would claim that whatever wisdom or serenity monastic disciplines provide should be obtained outside the university classroom, perhaps in dorms, in the Mass, or through campus ministry. But this answer fails to take into account the fact that monastic learning is meant to reconcile reason and faith within one unified life of inquiry: *credo ut intelligam, credo ut expectari*. Within the monastic tradition this means: I believe in the imperatives of the heart and mind, and I believe that the teaching and learning which truly incorporate faith cannot help but, with the grace of God,

obtain what the human person desires above all else. If Newman's philosophy teaches the integration of the academic disciplines, monasticism suggests a mode of learning, within the Catholic university at least, that brings cult, the poetry of the liturgy, somehow into the classroom, and classroom learning outside into the cult. If writers such as Pieper, as well as Norris and LeClercq, are right, only an academic education immersed and intrinsically related to the very center of religious ritual and worship can activate the whole learner, body, mind, and spirit, in search of a wisdom much more profound than the disconnected information technopoly provides (Pieper, 1964). But, once again, such an education would supersede Newman's in its depth and rationale.

This leaves us with the question of how one might instantiate not only Newman's vision more fully into the university, but also the monastic doctrine of belief and experience. Let us grant that Aquinas has taught the Church and its educators how to inquire in a faith-filled manner. But how might aspects of monastic spiritual discipline be taught and not just spoken about? How might an education whose aim is not simply faith as belief or understanding, but also experience, to be taught and learned? Palmer, among others, has taken us some part of the way in this regard. Palmer's (1983) ecumenical use of a curriculum in which "we know as we are known" is a real contribution toward answering this question. But if MacIntyre (1988) is right about inquiry, true mastery is best taught within the various classical religious traditions, and not through some secularized version that inevitably waters down the production of true spiritual mastery. Surely there are difficult issues of church and state here for universities that wish to avoid the adjective Catholic. But this is not our worry.

Faced with technopoly and a century of unprecedented horrors, we need a Catholic university which fearlessly connects to its past, but also faces the needs of the time as well as the future. As Newman taught us in his *On the Development of Doctrine* (1992), all traditions must evolve, and the Catholic tradition is no exception. The Catholic tradition is still faced, over 30 years after Vatican II, with the task of dealing with democracy and its issues of justice as well as science, technology, genocide, and the Holocaust. What I especially like about Norris's book is the manner in which she provides educators with a sense of how important aspects of this reconstruction might work. In the midst of a society that thrives on the literal, she reminds us of the role of metaphor and mystery not simply in monastic learning, but in any true learning at all. Through metaphor, evolution of doctrine begins to appear more natural.

Our tradition must evolve not simply by adapting to the surrounding culture; it must, in the spirit of St. Augustine and St. Bernard, Merton and Newman, Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa, bear witness against what is wrong in our midst as well as bear witness for what is right. However, to do

this, our educators must have the confidence and courage, as well as the humility, compassion and fear of God, necessary to swim against the tide where not doing so may mean shipwreck.

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